

LINE-OF-DUTY HONORS AND FUNERALS IN A TIME OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

While we all hope and pray the topics discussed herein are merely academic, we also know the reality is that, even during this extraordinary time, heroes will fall. Whether they fall because of the pandemic or simply during it, the challenges of honoring will be the same.

When a first responder falls in the line-of-duty – meaning that the individual’s life has been cut short as a direct result of his service, he/she deserves to be honored at the highest level according to the traditions of his/her profession. But, unfortunately, in a time of social distancing, some aspects of traditional honors are not appropriate.

Some will argue that the line-of-duty death (LODD) of a first responder is an extraordinary circumstance that warrants exceptions to restrictions on public gatherings. But the virus does not make exceptions because individuals gather to honor a fallen hero. And it would be dangerous for Public Safety or community leaders to suggest that it does. We must follow the same guidelines imposed on those we serve.

But it is possible to adhere to the restrictions and still render some degree of appropriate honors – not ultimate honors, but appropriate honors under exceptional circumstances.

While full honors would be inappropriate, so would a complete abandonment of honors. Adaptations could and should be made that would maintain a degree of symbolism, tradition, and honor while adhering to appropriate guidelines for the health and well-being of everyone.

Also, with the permission of the family, the funeral, committal service, and any honors rendered could be live-streamed. The stream could be open for everyone or, if the family so chooses, restricted to only the viewers they select – such as other immediate family members or members of the hero’s agency.

PROCESSION

Consider the power of a typical LODD funeral procession involving a large number of emergency vehicles with flashing lights as it escorts a fallen hero to his/her final place of rest. It is a powerful demonstration of solidarity, honor and respect that is typically met by citizens lining the route holding signs, flags, and more. It is a show of respect and honor for the fallen hero and his/her family, but the community component is also a show of respect and appreciation for all who serve. It is a very powerful display that is beneficial for all who witness it or participate, as well as healing for the community.

But just because a LODD funeral procession is typically associated with a mass gathering at the beginning and end does not mean that the practice must cease completely. Depending on the degree of local restrictions at the time, citizens could still line the route but maintain separation or remain in their vehicles, and the procession could continue past the cemetery with only the hearse and limited family vehicles entering.

It is also worth considering a practice that is standard for LODD funerals in some areas but unheard of in others: putting all emergency vehicles at the front of the procession with the hearse followed by the family at the rear – but with tail-cars to ensure no one passes. Symbolically, brother and sister first responders lead the way and escort the fallen hero to his/her final place of rest – as opposed to simply following. Some oppose this practice, but it has many practical benefits and is indeed very honoring. In this situation where other first responders can only go as far as the cemetery; it has additional practicality.

FORMATION

Instead of a mass formation outside a funeral venue, first responders could stage in their vehicles with lights flashing as a fallen hero is brought out to the hearse. While not the same as a 'sea of blue,' it would still be representative of solidarity and create a powerful presence – all while maintaining appropriate social distancing.

FLAG DISPLAY

It is quite common to raise a garrison or other large flag and have it displayed at a strategic location or hanging over a roadway for the procession to pass beneath. Unless restrictions are in place to prohibit it, this is something that could still occur – even if all other honors are withheld.

GRAVESIDE HONORS

In some locations, only a limited number of mourners can enter a cemetery, and no one is permitted to exit their vehicle. But even in those instances, it might be possible to render the following modified honors with family members watching from their vehicles.

SINGLE BAGPIPER

A single piper could be used in lieu of a full band or multiple musicians. Since pipers maintain distance from the family and other funeral components even under normal conditions, a single piper should not add to the count of individuals clustering.

BUGLER PLAYING "TAPS"

The playing of "Taps" is another single-person activity where the bugler takes a position, even under normal conditions, away from the family and other participants. So, this is another component that could be maintained without adding to the number of individuals congregating.

LAST CALL

Since this does not involve any additional personnel other than someone to cue the dispatcher – which could be handled by another participant or someone observing from nearby, it should still be possible to perform this traditional honor.

FLYOVER

If this is an appropriate honor, it could still occur as it requires no additional personnel in the proximity of others on the ground.

BELL CEREMONY (FIRE SERVICE)

Regardless of whether the ceremony is performed inside during the funeral service or graveside for the committal service, the narrator and bell-ringer are both typically positioned away from the family. In the current climate, the ceremony could be performed at an appropriate distance graveside with one person serving in both roles.

THREE-VOLLEY SALUTE (LAW ENFORCEMENT)

While many believe the three-volley salute requires seven rifles, there is really no such requirement – it is simply common practice. (A three-volley salute is actually quite different from a '21-Gun Salute.')

The salute could be appropriately performed with a team of four (including a commander) or fewer with

participants standing 6' apart. Also, since it is customary for a firing party to be positioned approximately 50' from the casket, this also should not add to the concern about the number of individuals congregating.

FLAG-FOLD

While larger flag-folding teams are typical, two-person teams are also not uncommon. The point is that the number can be reduced, and modifications could be employed to maintain extra distance – such as using outstretched arms in the final stages. However, it is worth noting that of all the typical graveside honors, this is the only one that would necessitate violation of the recommended 6' of separation. Masks could be worn as well as medical gloves under white gloves as an additional precaution, and the folded flag could even be held for later presentation. The important thing is that the flag covered the hero and that it is eventually in possession of the family.

CONCLUSION

While the specifics of what can and cannot be done will vary according to community directives – which will vary over time and from place to place, dictates of the funeral director, venue and cemetery restrictions, as well as the wishes of the family and agency, there are reasonable alternatives to traditional honors that are worthy of consideration and discussion.

As with the rendering of honors in normal conditions, effective planning and excellent communication are crucial – especially with those who would be quick to deny honors altogether without understanding their importance or considering how they could be modified to fit within appropriate guidelines.

This is not intended as a comprehensive list but merely food for thought and an assertion that there are alternatives that could and should be considered – again, not for the rendering of ultimate honors, but appropriate honors under exceptional circumstances.