

[Home](#) > [News Room](#) > [Backgrounders](#) > Repatriation of Fallen Canadian Forces Personnel

Backgrounder

Repatriation of Fallen Canadian Forces Personnel

BG - 09.012 - March 24, 2009

Fallen Canadian Forces (CF) personnel are treated with the utmost care and respect from the time of death until they are laid to rest. Ceremonies of repatriation (meaning "return to the country of origin") and burials are conducted with all the honour and dignity that circumstances permit. The families of CF personnel should know that their loved one has been honoured in death; this is also essential to the morale of those who must carry on.

Notification

When an injury in theatre proves to be fatal, a doctor confirms the death, and the process of notifying the next of kin begins. At home in Canada, a team led by the Commanding Officer (CO) of the fallen member, accompanied by a chaplain, notifies the emergency contact that was designated by the member prior to his or her deployment. If the fallen member's family live far away from the member's home unit, appropriate military members from the area perform the notification. Other loved ones are informed as appropriate. Once the notification process has been completed, a public announcement is made. It is out of respect for the fallen member's family that this announcement is kept until last.

Repatriation of the deceased is overseen by the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM), the appropriate Environmental command (Army, Navy, Air Force or Support) and the unit CO. The CF's interfaith Chaplain Branch participates in every stage of the process, honouring the dead and supporting those who grieve.

The journey home

Deceased personnel are returned to Canada aboard military aircraft. In a "ramp ceremony," a CF chaplain conducts prayers at the airfield (if the security environment permits this) as the deceased is carried onto the aircraft by representatives from his or her unit. An escort, typically a comrade from the deployed unit, is assigned to accompany the deceased from the theatre and through to the final destination.

Following the return flight, the aircraft carrying the deceased lands at 8 Wing/CFB Trenton. In a "repatriation ceremony," the domestic counterpart to the ramp ceremony, a CF chaplain offers up silent prayers as an honour guard conducts the deceased from the aircraft. Whenever possible, the honour guard and bearer party (pallbearers) are made up of members of the deceased's unit – from the "rear party," or personnel in the unit who did not deploy. If the member was killed in action, a Minister of the Government or his or her representative will be present. The family of the deceased may also be present, and great care is taken to respect their dignity and privacy. Family may choose to travel with the hearse, which makes a journey of 172 km on Highway 401, following a route which has become known as the Highway of Heroes. All personnel who die in theatre undergo an autopsy at the Ontario Coroner's Office in Toronto.

Once in Canada, it is normal practice – as it is with civilian deaths – to use commercial air to transport the deceased. A CF chaplain is usually present at the final destination to receive the body and conduct prayers. The family of the deceased are often in attendance at this point, and again, care is taken to respect their needs.

An Assisting Officer (AO) appointed by the CO is the vital link between the CF and the family of the deceased. The AO will be available to the family 24 hours a day. The AO's primary responsibility will be to assist in administrative matters, thereby easing the burden on loved ones during this difficult period. The AO will assist with funeral planning, transportation and details related to the member's estate such as will, insurance and pension. The AO and the appropriate CF chaplain will remain closely involved with the family from the time of notification, through to the funeral service, and beyond to significant anniversary dates. They will also help during any boards of inquiry or investigations.

Military personnel do not technically own the equipment and clothing that they are issued through the

supply system. When a member dies in theatre, their equipment and clothing is returned to the supply system in accordance with the initial loan agreement. Personal belongings are returned to the member's family through appropriate channels.

Funerals and memorials

Final arrangements are made in accordance with the wishes of the next of kin or executor. All serving and honourably released members of the CF, from both the Regular and Reserve Forces, are eligible for interment in the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces, a part of Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa. The family may, of course, elect to have the fallen member buried closer to home.

The allotment for funeral, burial and memorial expenses is reviewed and adjusted annually by the Department of National Defence (DND).¹ It is rare that the wishes of the bereaved can not be met by the allotment; in instances where this does occur, ministerial approval for additional expenses may be sought. Expenses paid by the Government of Canada include transportation of the deceased and immediate family, the casket or urn, funeral director's fees, vehicle rental for the funeral procession, rental of church or other place of worship, burial plot or niche in a columbarium or scattering of ashes, interment, headstone or marker, musicians, flowers, register books and photos, and public notices such as bulletins and obituaries.

A Memory Box will usually be compiled within two months, and given to the family. Every Memory Box is slightly different, but they will almost always include condolence letters, a condolence book, photos from memorial ceremonies and a Commander's Coin (an exclusive recognition).

The Memorial Cross is an additional memento granted to the loved ones of CF personnel who die as a result of military service.

Assisting the bereaved

The next of kin may qualify for income assistance through Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). If the deceased member invested in the Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP), benefits will be paid based on the premium that was chosen by the member. The bereaved may also be eligible for a survivor pension under the Pension Act, a survivor benefit under the Canadian Forces Superannuation Act, a death benefit under the Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Reestablishment and Compensation Act, and Supplementary Death Benefits. The family of the fallen member may qualify for post-secondary education assistance under the Children of Deceased Veterans Education Act, and for reimbursement of expenses for a move within Canada.

There are social support networks in place to aid the loved ones of the fallen member. A Bereavement Peer Support group, also known as H.O.P.E. (Helping Others by Providing Empathy), makes volunteer spouses or parents of deceased personnel available to the newly bereaved. The Member Assistance Program offers a series of crisis counselling sessions to immediate family of the fallen member. VAC's Pastoral Outreach Program² can provide a swift response and high-quality care in various crisis situations.

¹ The current allotment is just over \$13,000.00.

² The Pastoral Outreach Program provides clergy to CF veterans and their families to help them deal with "end of life" issues. For more information, call 1-800-883-6094 or visit <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/cen/ps/vpo-psp/index-eng.asp>.

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Date Modified: 2009-03-24