



“On Behalf of a Grateful Nation”



ELIZABETH FRASER

A Marine presents a folded flag from the casket of Col Jaime Sabater to his son, Jared Sabater, in Section 55 of Arlington National Cemetery, Nov. 6, 2019.

15 Things the Marine Corps’ Funeral Honors Section Wants Veterans and Retirees to Know

By Sara W. Bock

Once earned, the title “Marine” becomes deeply ingrained in a person’s identity even decades after putting away the uniform. And for many, it’s of the utmost importance that upon their death, the Marines are there to take care of their own by rendering honors on behalf of a grateful nation.

Whether they served for two years or 40; were a private first class or the Commandant; are being buried at Arlington National Cemetery or in a small town in middle America, all veteran and retired Marines who

received an honorable or general discharge are entitled to receive funeral honors performed by the Marine Corps if requested by their surviving family members. At a minimum, the presence of two uniformed Marines, the folding and presentation of the American flag and the sounding of “Taps” are required by law and are considered a “sacred duty, honor and privilege” for the Marine Corps, according to Gunnery Sergeant Jason Attema, staff noncommissioned officer in charge of funeral honors, a section of Headquarters

Marine Corps Casualty Assistance which oversees all requests for Marine Corps funeral honors for veteran and retired Marines interred outside the confines of Arlington National Cemetery.

“We keep up with the tradition of honor, courage and commitment,” said Attema. “These men and women had the courage and commitment to fight for our country, and we have the honor of being able to provide these honors for them and honor the servicemember and their families for their sacrifice and for their service, and we will always do that, past and present. It’s our final demonstration to the family of how grateful of a nation we are, that their loved one served in the Marine Corps.”

It’s not always a comfortable topic, but *Leatherneck* regularly fields questions from our veteran readers or their surviving family members regarding funeral honors, so we reached out to the HQMC funeral honors section to help demystify the process of requesting honors, explain what honors veteran and retired Marines rate, and clear up some common misconceptions. Based on an interview with GySgt Attema, we came up with the following list of 15 things veterans and retirees should know about funeral honors:

1. Six Marines are assigned to the HQMC funeral honors section and are responsible for fielding all requests for honors across the nation, processing them and “tasking them out” to the nearest unit. According to Attema, HQMC has a funeral honors database that lists every Marine Corps installation and unit nationwide including reserve units, schoolhouses and Marine Corps detachments all the way from Alaska to Puerto Rico. Units that are geographically closest to the funeral service or burial receive a “tasker” email which includes the pertinent information about the service and the unit must verify receipt of the tasker by close of business that same day. Once the request is received, the local unit assigns Marines to serve on the funeral detail.

2. In 1999, Congress passed a law requiring the military services to provide funeral honors for eligible veterans. But, according to Attema, the Marine Corps was already doing so. “We have always found that duty to be sacred. We were doing that prior to it becoming mandatory, so [the legislation] didn’t really affect us as much,” he said. Since

Right: Cpl Kyle Menz, a bugler with “The Commandant’s Own” United States Marine Corps Drum and Bugle Corps, plays “Taps” during the funeral of Sgt Julian Kevianne at Arlington National Cemetery, Aug. 3, 2017.



CPL ROBERT KNAPP, USM



A Marine prepares to present a folded flag to the father of SSgt Benjamin Hines at Arlington National Cemetery, May 10, 2019. (Photo by Elizabeth Fraser)

being assigned to his current billet in 2017, Attema has coordinated funeral honors for two Marines who died during the Vietnam War era and did not receive honors at the time due to lack of available personnel stateside. In one of the instances, they coordinated a detail of Marines from the nearest unit, traveled to where the Marine was interred and presented the flag to the Marine’s granddaughter, who was his closest living relative at that point. “If we find that there was one that wasn’t done, and there’s an inkling of proof or doubt that it wasn’t done, we’ll task a unit to go do it,” he added.

3. Every Marine rates the same honors. It’s a common misconception, Attema said, that the term “full military honors” means more than the standard two uniformed servicemembers, the folding and presentation of the flag and the sounding of “Taps.” But according to the Department of Defense order, these are full honors and all Marines are entitled to them regardless of rank or retired status. Families of veteran and retired Marines can request rifle details, pallbearers or military chaplains, but the Marine Corps is unable to guarantee that these requests will be fulfilled due to manpower and unit availability. “If the unit has it, they’ll do whatever they can to support it,” Attema emphasized. The funeral honors section occasionally receives requests for aircraft flyovers, but the Department of the Navy has very strict requirements for who can qualify for those: active-duty pilots or servicemembers who died in an aviation mishap, valor award recipients, or dignitaries of the Armed Forces and federal government.



SGT ESDRAS RUANO, USMC

4. Whenever possible, the Marine Corps sends more than the minimum two uniformed servicemembers.

“We send as many as we can,” said Attema. It all comes down to the size and capability of the unit that is assigned to provide honors. A rifle detail requires between three and seven Marines and a commander of troops, in addition to the two who fold and present the flag. “Some units only have four or five Marines, so there’s no way they can do the rifle detail,” Attema said. Sometimes, a unit has multiple funeral services to attend in a day, which further limits the number of Marines they are able to provide.

5. The majority of requests for honors—nine out of 10 times—come from funeral directors. “That’s part of the funeral home’s job,” said Attema. “The family shouldn’t have to do anything.” However, next-of-kin family members are welcome to contact HQMC directly to request honors. The requesting party can

Marines from Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, S.C., serve as the honor guard during the burial of SSgt LaSalle Vaughn Jr., one of the original Montford Point Marines, at the Beaufort National Cemetery, Sept. 26, 2012.

expect, on average, three to four phone calls—once when the request is received by HQMC to acknowledge receipt as well as ask for additional documentation, including the social security number and military discharge paperwork of the deceased; again by the unit when the request is received by the unit; and at least once more prior to the service to verify that the details haven’t changed.

6. It is against the law for a funeral home to charge families for requesting military honors. Attema said that occasionally he is made aware that a funeral home has added a charge—often hundreds of dollars—to a funeral bill for requesting military honors. This is not legal, he said, and should be reported. “It is a free service,” he emphasized.

7. The process of requesting Marine Corps funeral honors can easily be done online. At <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Agencies/Casualty-MFPC/Funeral-Honors/>, under “How to Request Honors,” there are two options: an online request form and a fill and print form which can be scanned and emailed or faxed. The funeral honors section can also be reached at funeral.honors@usmc.mil or by phone at (866) 826-3628. The online submission form provides HQMC with everything they need to know to begin processing the request. The requester will receive a confirmation email that their request has been received, but should expect, on average, to allow 48 to 72 hours for processing. “If you haven’t heard back, call us,” said Attema. “We don’t want to have any missed services.”

Below: The color guard from Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., prepares to march during a funeral procession at Arlington National Cemetery, June 8, 2017.



CPL ROBERT KNAPP, USMC

8. HQMC receives next-day funeral support requests on a daily basis. While they ask that all requests are submitted at least a week prior to the ceremony, it doesn't always happen that way for various reasons. Attema and his team strive to make sure that all requests are fulfilled whenever possible. Requests aren't typically handled on a first-come, first-served basis for that reason, but are sorted and assigned based on the date of the service. "If someone calls and says their husband's going to be buried at Riverside National in three months, we may not get to that one as quickly as the one that's in two days," said Attema. "It's all dependent on the date the actual service is going to occur."

9. Even if you don't have or can't find the required military discharge paperwork, you can still request funeral honors. Anyone requesting funeral honors on behalf of a deceased veteran is required to furnish a DD-214 or a NAVMAC 78PD if the veteran was discharged prior to Jan. 1, 1950. But if you can't find it, don't panic. Contact the Marine Corps anyway. Attema and his Marines understand that sometimes these get misplaced or lost and can work with the National Personnel Records Center to have requests for discharge papers fulfilled in as few as 1 to 3 days—a process that generally takes six months to a year. A letter of good standing from the Department of Veterans Affairs may also suffice.

10. The funeral honors section verifies honorable service prior to approving honors. Not all who served in the Marine Corps are eligible to receive funeral honors. "You can have a discharge characterization of honorable through general," said Attema. "If it's bad conduct, other-than-honorable or dishonorable, we are unable to render honors." Attema also added that if an individual "tarnishes" his or her honorable service after they are discharged, such as by committing a state or federal capital crime, the Deputy Commandant, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) can

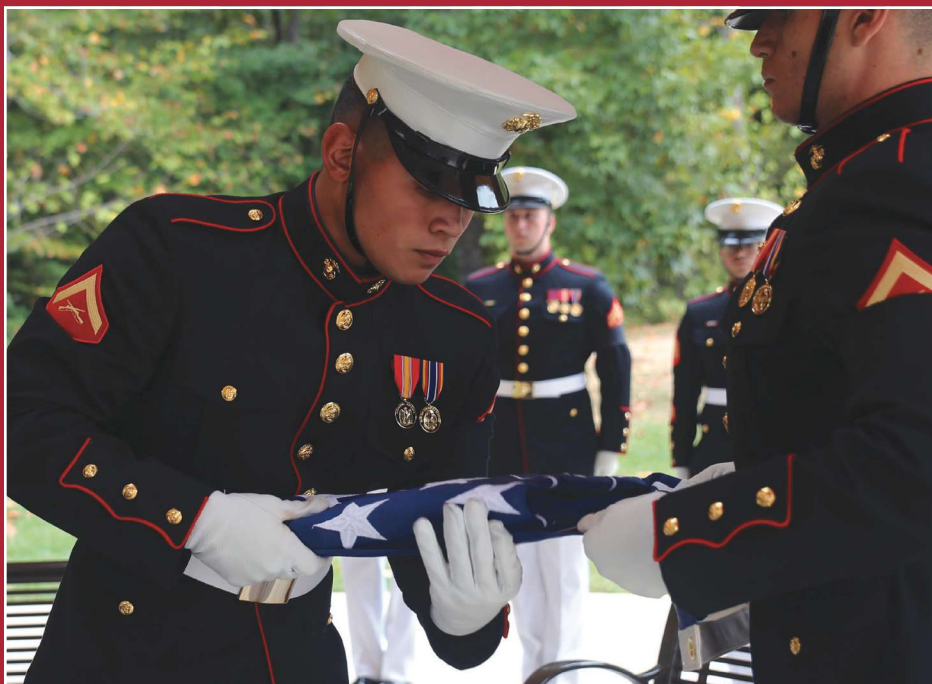
Marines from Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., lower a casket during a funeral at Arlington National Cemetery, June 8, 2017.



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elect to deny honors. If the death occurred under nefarious circumstances—a police shootout, for instance—Attema contacts the local authorities where the incident happened to collect information and compiles a denial package that is then sent up to the Deputy Commandant. “If rendering honors would tarnish the reputation of the Marine Corps, then DC, M&RA can decide to withhold rendering of honors for that veteran or retiree even,” Attema said.

11. The motto of Marine Corps Casualty Assistance is “taking care of our own,” and extends far beyond providing funeral honors. Funeral honors is just one of the numerous sections that comprise the multifaceted Casualty Assistance Program. “If you served, if you put on our uniform and fought to the left and right of us, we will always be there to take care of you and take care of your family, no matter what,” said Attema. Within casualty assistance, the operations section notifies next of kin of wounded, ill and injured active-duty Marines by



SGT MACKENZIE GIBSON, USMC

Marines with the Quantico Ceremonial Platoon fire a rifle volley during a funeral at Quantico National Cemetery in Triangle, Va., Oct. 8, 2019.



Left: LCpl Shawn DeLeon, a member of the Quantico Ceremonial Platoon, folds a flag during a funeral at Quantico National Cemetery in Triangle, Va., Oct. 8, 2019. (Photo by Sgt Mackenzie Gibson, USMC)

Below: Marines fold the flag during a funeral ceremony for LtGen Martin L. Brandtner, USMC (Ret), at the Northern Nevada Veterans Memorial Cemetery, Fernley, Nev., Jan. 19, 2017.



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active-duty servicemembers even decades after their death. The repatriation (POW/MIA) program ensures that recovered and identified remains of Marines from past conflicts are escorted by a uniformed Marine to their final resting place. Three Navy morticians work in the Marine Corps casualty assistance program as well, assisting with the transportation, storage of remains and burial fees for Marines who have died on active duty.

12. All commanders are responsible for ensuring that their Marines are properly trained and conduct training periodically on funeral honors to keep up that “muscle memory.” Marine Corps Order 3040.4 outlines requirements for funeral honors, how to properly fold the burial flag and what is required, said Attema. “You have to know what to do at all times because you never know when you’re going to get a funeral honors tasker,” he said. “This is the last thing that that family’s going to see of their loved one, so you want to make it as perfect as you

13. A rifle detail performs a “rifle volley,” not a 21-gun salute. This is a common misconception, said Attema, and one that he has to clear up for people quite frequently. “It’s three to seven Marines that come up and fire three shots simultaneously,” he said of the rifle volley, adding that gun salutes are fired by cannon, not rifles, and are rare—an honor reserved only for high-ranking dignitaries and officials.

14. COVID-19 restrictions have presented some challenges for rendering funeral honors, but the Marine Corps has and will continue to rise to the occasion. It’s been largely dependent on location, but Attema said that for a period of time in 2020, most national cemeteries were shut down and uniformed personnel were not permitted on their grounds to render honors. Since then, restrictions have eased, but many still place a limit on the number of individuals who can attend a service, which in turn limits the number of Marines who can provide honors. The units provide as many Marines as they can without violating the national cemetery statutes and restrictions, he said. “They are still required to wear masks, maintain social distancing, so we’ve had to kind of alter the presentation of the flag a little bit,” he said. In some instances, the Marine presenting the flag will place it on a podium and the next of kin will then walk up and retrieve the flag.

15. The Marine Corps remains ready and prepared to handle any and all requests for funeral honors that come in from locations across the country. The number of services requested continues to rise each year as veterans from the Korean War and Vietnam War eras begin to pass away in greater numbers. In 2020, the Marine Corps coordinated and completed funeral honors for nearly 22,000 veterans and retirees. Attema insists that they are up to the task: “If we receive a funeral honors request, one thing’s for sure, and that’s that the Marines will always be there. We will do everything in our power to make sure that our fallen Marines are honored, and their families know that we understand, recognize and are appreciative of their loved ones and their sacrifice for our country.” 🇺🇸

phone and coordinates casualty assistance calls officer (CACO) assignments for in person notifications and provides support for the next of kin of Marines who die while serving on active duty. The administrative section, in turn, handles the logistics of arranging and funding family members’ travel to the bedside of the wounded, ill and injured. There’s also a long-term assistance program, which provides support for survivors of fallen

can.” Many bases and installations have a quarterly rotation for funeral honors duty; at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., there is a dedicated ceremonial platoon that handles all burials at Quantico National Cemetery. In reserve units, the inspector & instructor staff generally are tasked with providing honors, but even Marines in the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) can be asked to assist units that are lacking in manpower.