

Honor the Fallen by Caring for the Family

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The purpose of this article is to share advice and ideas for future casualty assistance officers (CAOs) to enhance their performance and enrich the experience for the families involved and themselves. In September 2006, I was selected to serve as a CAO in response to the combat death of Master Sergeant (MSG) Robb Needham, an activated reservist serving on a military transition team in Iraq. MSG Needham was assigned to the 191st Infantry Brigade (BDE) (at the time, 4th BDE, 91st Division [DIV]) at Fort Lewis, WA. He is survived by his wife, two adult children, two grandchildren, his mother, and two brothers. I had no training or experience with this responsibility; however, within six hours I would study a three-inch binder of information provided by the Fort Lewis Casualty Assistance Center (CAC), pack my bags, drive three hours to a hotel, and arrive at the home of the Family I would assist over the next ten days. [Analyst's Note: Currently, CAOs are required to be trained at the local installation before performing their duties.] Every CAO's mission is guided by requirements provided by the installation CAC and Army Regulation 600-8-1, *Army Casualty Program*. But the true mission goes well beyond processing documents according to a checklist and requires more implied than specified tasks. CAOs must complete a mission analysis that is flexible enough to meet the needs of the Family and update that plan as required.

The CAO Must Focus on the Family

I immediately put myself in the mindset of the sole Army representative to the Family. If they wanted something done or had a question, it was my responsibility to deliver. I also believed that the Family had given their husband, father, grandfather, son, and brother for the benefit of the Nation, and therefore, no request would go without action and no effort would be spared to take care of them. The surviving Family was my number one (and only) concern. Although only the widow and children were financial and benefit beneficiaries, I also gave my attention to the extended Family.

The CAO Must Prepare for Deployment

My orders stated this mission could take up to 30 days away from home. With only a few hours notice, it was key to pack for full functionality away from the office. My packing list included a laptop, printer, printer paper, extra printer ink, stapler, folders, digital camera, and briefcase. I secured a hotel room via the Internet, located a nearby business with reproduction and fax capabilities, an office supply store to replenish supplies as needed, a car wash to keep the government sedan impeccable, and a dry cleaner for my uniforms. I would highly recommend a government-supplied cell phone (I used 1,600 minutes on my personal cell phone over a period of ten days). I also carried a generous stock of business cards to distribute to the 47 contacts I would establish.

Use the Local Public Affairs Office

Establish a media plan and adapt it to the Family's wishes and level of media attention. The Army contacted the widow's employer to locate Mrs. Needham, and the employer immediately contacted the media. Because of the employer's action, reporters started calling the Needham's home within two hours. The Family had no desire to speak with the media, and the Department of Defense had not publicly released official by-name notification; consequently, all reporters were redirected to me as the CAO. Over the next week, the media increased its pressure for details and interviews, so I enlisted the support of the Fort Lewis Public Affairs Office (PAO). I

ensured a PAO representative would be present at the church and cemetery services because at least three television stations and two newspaper reporters were at the cemetery service, but none were able to approach the Family. This was a prudent and proactive measure.

Network of Support

Military personnel and civilians will provide extraordinary assistance for a fallen Soldier's Family. Forty-seven people or organizations with a connection to the Needham Family offered assistance. Because of the volume of support and the corresponding network of contacts, a personal digital assistant or other device is essential for managing information and having it readily available. Figure 1 is the web of coordination I developed as the Needham Family's CAO.

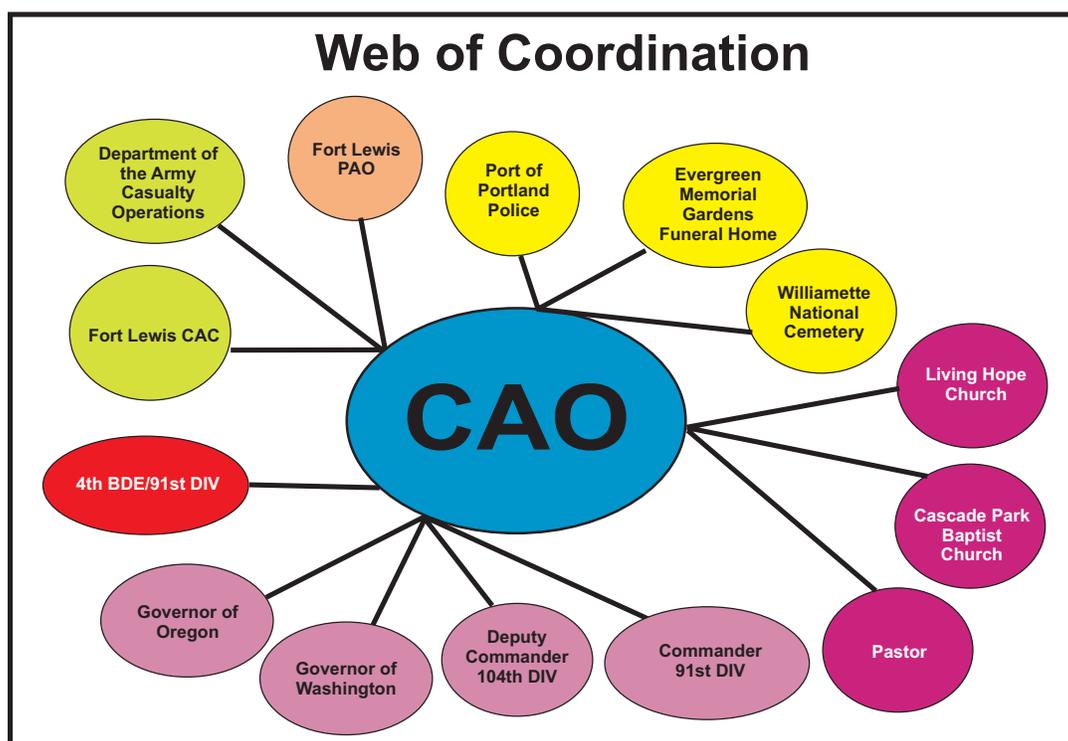


Figure 1

Very Important Persons

The presence of very important persons (VIPs), especially elected officials, provides these leaders an opportunity to express their gratitude for a constituent's service and sacrifice and may be important for the Family. At least one VIP will be present at the funeral because a general officer is required to present the flag to the Family of the deceased Soldier if the Soldier's death was in theater. The commanding general of the 91st DIV attended the service for MSG Needham. The deputy commander of the 104th DIV also attended since MSG Needham previously served with that unit based at Vancouver Barracks. Additionally, I invited the governor of Oregon, since MSG Needham was being buried at Willamette National Cemetery just outside Portland, OR, and the governor of Washington, since MSG Needham was a resident

of the state. In an attempt to avoid the bureaucracy of a military protocol office in my effort to secure the attendance by two state governors at a funeral only five days away, I used the governors' Websites and clicked on the "Send a Question to the Governor" link. I provided as much detail as the electronic form would allow, and I received calls from both offices within 48 hours. The governor of Washington was the first person to greet the Family at the cemetery and presented them with formal letters of condolence and a Washington State flag.



Figure 2

Reconnaissance

When conducting a tactical operation, it is good to know where you are going during the upcoming actions on contact. As the Family selected a funeral home, cemetery, and key churches, I conducted my reconnaissance. I drove to each location and met with whomever was in charge, exchanged business cards, and discussed who was doing what. I contacted each organization at least once daily with any applicable updates. I conducted reconnaissance of the cemetery on three occasions and visited the funeral home and each church. I also went to the airport with the police to receive the casket. The face-to-face contact during each reconnaissance and coordination ensured everything went smoothly throughout my mission.

Uniform Preparation

Based on my experience, casualty operations at Dover Air Force Base (AFB) do a phenomenal job. I had regular contact with a liaison that assisted with documents, awards, and transit information for MSG Needham. However, awards were a challenge. MSG Needham's enlisted record brief was largely accurate, but to ensure nothing was missing, I asked Mrs. Needham to provide any Army documentation kept at home. I reviewed several stacks of papers to verify no award was missed. Ultimately, I purchased and rebuilt MSG Needham's commendation bars for his uniform. At the funeral director's advice, I also used super glue to add the combat stripes to the right sleeve. Performing these uniform corrections consumed a disproportionately large amount of time; however, I wanted to honor this Soldier as I hoped I would be honored if I were in his place. If a CAO is not near a military installation, purchasing accouterments may be problematic. I relied on Dover AFB to ship awards overnight to the funeral home. For these reasons, I strongly recommend a prompt review of the deceased's records to ensure the commendations are accurately reflected on his or her uniform.

Reports and Communications

The only reporting requirement was to complete Department of the Army Form 1594, *Daily Staff Journal*. Using a PureEdge form was not feasible, since it is not easy to manipulate and does not accommodate extensive details. Instead, I opted for a simple Microsoft Word document for each day containing a chronology of activities. I included every conceivable detail such as phone calls, contact information, coordination, and assistance needed. This informal report took two hours every night to complete and proofread before emailing it to those requiring the information. Additionally, every day I would update a separate agenda for distribution to the Family notifying them where they needed to be and when they needed to be there. I never provided the Family the detailed report; it was not necessary to burden them with details that were my responsibility. When it came time to synchronize the Willamette military ceremony, I built a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation using aerial screen shots from Google Earth, overlaid with graphics to show key positions (including locations for the bugler, the firing team, VIP seating, parking, and media area) and added digital photos. This graphic significantly assisted the 191st BDE's ability to prepare at the cemetery while I was with the Family.

Willamette National Cemetary

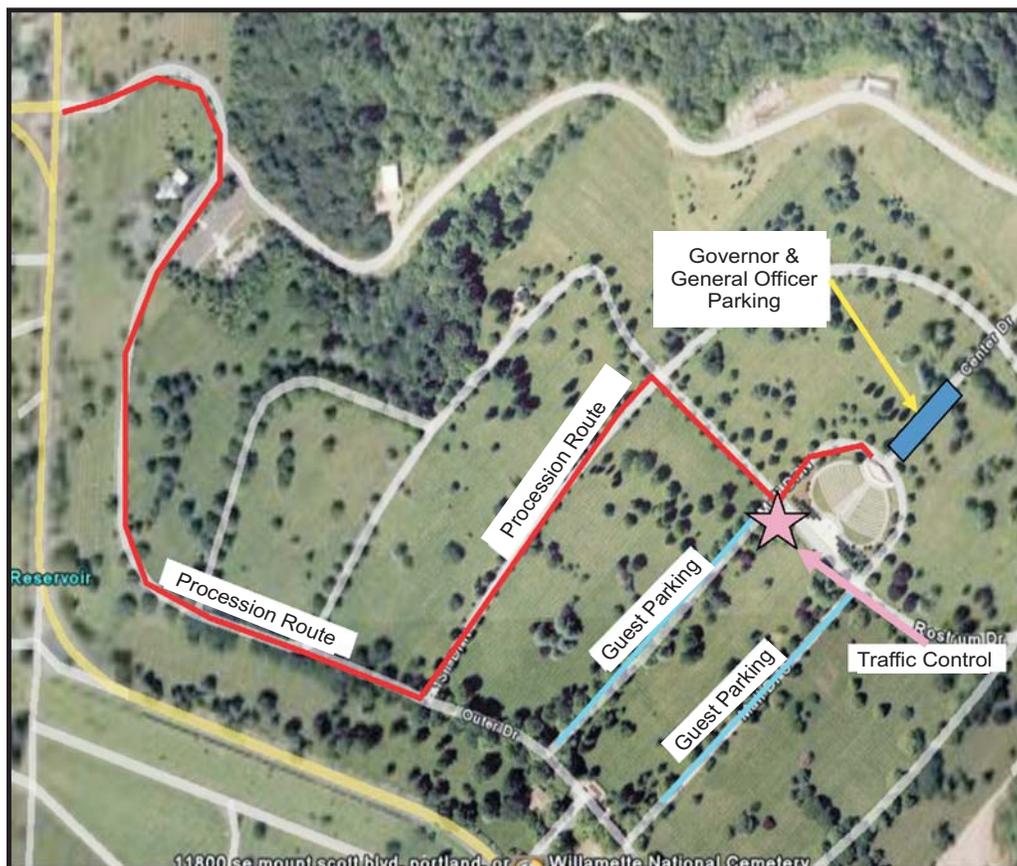


Figure 3

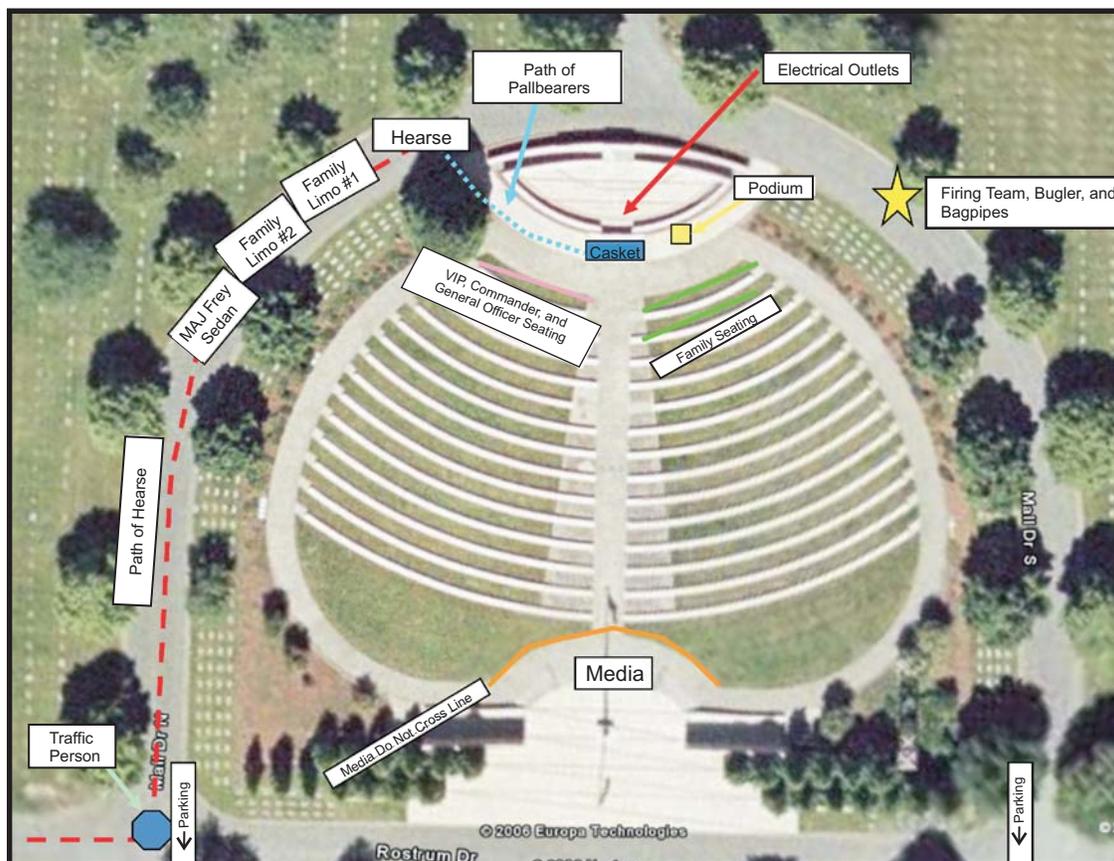


Figure 4

Magnitude of the Event

Despite the work and coordination I performed, I did not anticipate the scope of attention given to MSG Needham and his Family at the church memorial service and subsequent burial service at Willamette National Cemetery. At the church and cemetery, a county sheriff honor team rendered honors to MSG Needham and his Family. In the parking lot, there was a ladder truck fully extended with the national colors. There were over 700 people inside the church who were overflowing the seats with standing room only against the walls. The county sheriff blocked traffic on Interstate 5 to accommodate the five-miles-long procession to the cemetery. A fire truck with firemen rendering honors were positioned on every overpass that we drove underneath. Two complimentary limousines were provided to transport the Family. At Willamette National Cemetery, the Family was greeted by a state governor and two general officers. Media from Washington and Oregon hovered in the background, producing two newspaper front pages and that evening's top news story in Portland and Seattle. The collaborative effort of hundreds of Soldiers and civilians succeeded in rendering the best possible honors to MSG Needham.



Figure 5

Epilogue

I thought my duties as CAO ended a couple of weeks later following the military memorial service at Fort Lewis. I had completed all documents and submitted an after-action review, and the Family had received the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance benefit and personal effects. However, two and half years later, I am still the CAO for Catherine Needham and the relatives of MSG Needham, and I feel this is entirely appropriate. In fact, I believe it is worth reconsidering Army policy to assign CAOs with an indefinite end date (or at least for multiple years) to reaffirm the Army's commitment to caring for Families of the fallen. I am in contact with Mrs. Needham about once a month to answer questions, or she simply updates me on her life. A year ago, she delivered the sad news of her son's suicide, partly attributable to his continued struggles with depression over the loss of his father. Yet, her daughter is in college and doing well. I have provided career advice for MSG Needham's nephew who has since entered the Army as a medic. Currently, the 91st DIV is considering dedicating a new headquarters building in the honor of MSG Needham, and I have continued to work as the Family's primary liaison to coordinate their attendance at this fall 2009 event. The continued contact with the Family tells me they were pleased with my performance and the care the Army provided following MSG Needham's death. I suggest to other CAOs to expect responsibilities to last for years, not just the 30 days advertised when you are tasked to be a CAO.

Should you be assigned as a CAO, consider this task an honor and a chance to serve not only the Army, but also a Family. It is a challenging opportunity to serve a fallen Soldier's Family. You can never provide enough service to replace their loss—a humbling thought, but you must try anyway. The only reward is a sense of honor and pride, but it is enough.

Author's Note: Catherine Needham, widow of MSG Robb Needham, and Mark Needham, one of his brothers, reviewed this article for content and gave their approval. Both provided additional commentary and suggestions that were incorporated into this article.