

**Military ceremonies of the war dead; soldiers are entitled to take leave of their comrades killed in action in a dignified manner; implications - both internally and externally; implications for military junior staff by Lieutenant Colonel Christoph Auer of the German Bundeswehr**

## **Bravery and Honoring the Ultimate Sacrifice**

Every nation, and all of its citizens, expect their soldiers to fulfill the tasks bestowed upon them with bravery, i.e., to overcome their personal fears and, as a last consequence, to sacrifice their own lives. For German soldiers, this is a basic duty laid down in the Legal Status of Military Personnel Act. It is also what sets off military service from the police service in Germany.

Since the Bundeswehr was established in 1955, about 3,200 military and civilian Bundeswehr members have lost their lives while performing their official duties. Since 1992, the Bundeswehr has been involved in international conflict prevention and crisis management operations on a regular basis. Over the past twenty years, tens of thousands of our fellow citizens have been deployed to foreign countries to serve in military operations.

*Einblenden Folie 1 -slide human losses-*

Since 1992, 99 of our servicemembers have been killed in action abroad. 36 soldiers fell by enemy fire, nearly all of them due to attacks and assaults committed by opposing forces in Afghanistan.

The violent death of soldiers in missions compels the public to stop and think for a moment. A citizen committed to unswerving allegiance made the supreme sacrifice while serving their country. We owe the fallen soldiers honor and respect; the soldiers' families deserve our heartfelt sympathy and support.

It was not easy for Germany, though, to find appropriate words and a suitable format. Long and controversial semantics debates revolved around the mere question if a soldier killed by enemy action during a deployment was actually to be called "fallen", i.e., a "war dead". It was not until October 2008, on the occasion of a funeral service held for two soldiers killed in action in Afghanistan, that Germany's federal minister of defense referred to them as *Gefallene*, or fallen soldiers, instead of simply using the term "casualties".

The soldiers' particular duty to loyalty and bravery in service to the nation goes hand in hand with the Bundeswehr's special duty to pay them respect and to care for them on the basis of their service. And this responsibility does not end with the soldier's death.

## **PRINCIPLES**

**governing the treatment of fallen soldiers and their families**

The remains of servicemembers killed in action abroad are repatriated to Germany.

The dead receive military honors. These formal honors illustrate the bonds that tie all Bundeswehr soldiers to the deceased and the bereaved family.

Their principal intention is to commemorate the deceased with dignity.

The family's sorrow and suffering and their wishes are always at the forefront.

Nothing will be done against their will. This is the yardstick determining the kind and

conduct of all procedures arranged by the Bundeswehr to honor and commemorate those killed in action. Public involvement, to include the media's interest in covering the events, has to step back behind the family's wishes. In case of doubt, public interest is secondary.

## SPIRIT and PURPOSE of official funeral services

### Public awareness of missions, mourning and sympathy

Funeral services held for fallen soldiers, however, are Bundeswehr funeral services. They are neither internal events hosted by military elements or formations nor private ceremonies held by the mourning family in a Bundeswehr setting.

So, what is made public?

- The violent death of a citizen in uniform who risked his own life for his country in a specific mission,
- and hence, the kind of reality soldiers are faced with in this specific mission,
- the mourning of his family and relatives,
- the mourning of his comrades and their sympathy with the relatives.

Creating this public awareness is important since a soldier's violent death is not a "merely private death". It would not have occurred, and it is inconceivable without the special commitment the soldier has made to his country. Seen in this light, his death also has a political dimension.

It is "political" because the specific mission that resulted in the soldier's death was based on a political decision regularly approved by the plenary assembly of the German parliament, the Bundestag.

For this reason, procedures for public funeral services for fallen soldiers have been developed over the past years. These procedures

- respect the family's wishes for public or private mourning,
- allow fellow soldiers to bid farewell to the deceased and express their grief,
- give the Federal Minister of Defense and other political representatives the opportunity to demonstrate and accept responsibility.

## Formal procedures after a loss in theater up to the final resting place

Please let me now illustrate the sequence of procedures if a soldier is killed in the field, starting with the vigil in theater to the private burial ceremony.

### 1. In theater

The remains of the deceased are placed in a coffin, and then stored in a refrigerated container. Honor guards are posted in front of this temporary mortuary to keep vigil over the coffin until it is repatriated to Germany.

Usually, before the coffins are loaded aboard the aircraft, a final roll call is held to pay tribute to the fallen soldiers. In parallel with this memorial ceremony in theater, a (usually internal) roll call may be held at those military installations/garrisons in Germany where those killed in action were stationed. These events conducted simultaneously in Germany and Afghanistan ensure the participants in both countries can join in an emotional bond.

In theater, this ceremony provides the comrades with the only opportunity to bid farewell to their deceased brothers in arms. This is the moment when each and every soldier on parade is faced with the ultimate consequence involved in fulfilling their

military duties. Yet, it is also the moment when the focus is on the men and women who risk their lives every day to fulfill their dangerous mission outside the camp. This recognition is a source of great pride for them; frequently enough, they have to stand second in line behind their headquarters concentrated on their own work and its implications for the political arena.

*Bilderstrecke Trauerappell – Konvoi der Särge – Spalier – Verladung der Särge in die Transall*

## 2. Arrival in Germany

Immediately after the coffins of the fallen have arrived in Germany, usually at the military section of the Cologne/Bonn Airport, they are given an “honorable reception” in the form of a short ceremony to welcome them home.

The relatives of the deceased are free to attend this event if they so wish. In this deeply upsetting situation, the families are given the fullest consideration possible. It is particularly for this reason that the press is not allowed access.

The fallen are received in silence and dignity, and with a small delegation of the bereaved units/elements/agencies present. The pallbearers carry the coffins between the ranks of the honor cordon. Other than that, there is no other formal military ceremony (e.g. with drummers, buglers). This is meant to avoid putting too much emotional burden on the families.

Then, usually at the place of reception, i.e. Cologne-Wahn, Germany, the fallen soldiers' families are afforded their first opportunity to mourn beside the coffin, far away from the public eye. To this end, the coffins are usually placed in the chapel of the Cologne-Wahn Air Force Installation, providing a separate space to grieve. This first opportunity for the families to mourn beside the coffin takes priority over any other activities that are part of the procedures associated with the honorable reception of the deceased. The Bundeswehr provides military chaplains, psychologists, and high-ranking military representatives to offer comfort and support to the families and relatives.

## 3. FORMAT of the central funeral service

### **Focus on honoring the fallen soldiers and on the grieving family**

The public “central” funeral service attended by the minister of defense, or a deputy, is prepared in coordination with the family, and usually held at the garrison where the fallen soldier’s military element or agency is stationed.

Immediately prior to the funeral service, the next of kin are given the opportunity to talk to the federal minister of defense and the German chief of defense. This will only happen if the relatives so wish.

The funeral service is comprised of a religious and a secular part. The main responsibility for the liturgical rites of the religious part rests with the military chaplaincy in coordination with the local cleric (parish priest, or imam, if applicable) of the relevant denomination. During the secular part, the federal minister of defense usually delivers a eulogy; further eulogies (presented by the mayor/the county district commissioner, or the chancellor, if applicable) may follow in coordination with the ministry of defense.

Honor guards are posted beside the coffins as a special expression of paying military tribute. The focus is on the grief of the families and relatives, and on commemorating the soldiers killed in action.

This focus is reflected by the seating arrangements. The front rows are reserved for the fallen soldiers' family members and relatives before all other participants. Beside

them, only the federal minister of defense and, if attending, the federal president and the chancellor are seated in the first row.

TV cameras are positioned so that the mourning relatives are out of sight as a way to respect and protect their privacy at all times.

The funeral service is concluded with a cortege to the waiting hearses. When the coffins have been placed in the hearses, a solo bugler plays the song of the "Good Comrade" (*Der gute Kamerad*).

*Bilderstrecke Zentrale Gedenkfeier April 2010*

#### 4. Burial

##### **Hometown burial attended by family and friends of the deceased**

The actual interment is privately arranged by the family of the deceased. Members of the Bundeswehr, especially fellow soldiers of those fallen, [only] attend the burial if the family so wish.

Burial expenses are borne by the Bundeswehr. If, upon the family's approval, a so-called *Ehrengrab*, or grave of honor, is established, the Bundeswehr also bears the cost of establishing the grave (installing the grave curb surrounds and headstone including a foundation in the local style) and grave maintenance service over the entire tenure.

*Einzelbild Ehrengrab*

##### **SUMMARY and CONCLUSIONS on internal and external impact**

The procedures to honor the memory of the fallen soldiers were updated in July of last year. They have been developed to make sure that

- the relatives and families of the fallen are given room and opportunity to mourn,
- the public can become aware of the reality behind the risks of Bundeswehr missions and their repercussions on society, and
- to provide an opportunity to demonstrate and accept political responsibility for deploying soldiers to life-threatening missions.

The procedures and ceremonies performed to honor and commemorate the fallen, the forms of sympathy and (shared) grief need to be complemented by continuing efforts to provide help and support beyond the funeral. Only this will let the bereaved feel that they are not left alone.

To this end, the bereaved have the option to seek long-term counseling and support. Since mid-July 2010, the Federal Ministry of Defense has maintained a point of contact for the bereaved. Establishing this element, the Federal Ministry of Defense provides an up-to-date overview of all measures available in support of the bereaved and coordinates their concerns.

This Survivors Focal Point provides particular support by promptly addressing the needs of the bereaved. The staff will stay in contact with them for an indefinite period of time. Experience has shown that it is also important to organize special events for the bereaved where they can socialize and network with each other.

All in all, the Bundeswehr has established procedures for the preparation and conduct of memorial ceremonies by building on what have unfortunately been many years of experience. In this process, we identified new and open questions, and answered them in the way I illustrated.

We are rather satisfied with the internal impact, about what happens within the Bundeswehr. There is no stricter judge than the one who could be lying in that coffin instead. And the comrades, especially those in theater, have responded positively to the format and conduct of the ceremony.

When it comes to external publicity, we feel that we have struck a sound compromise between achieving public political awareness and protecting the families' privacy.

Although, based on the experience of World War I and World War II, the German public takes a much more critical attitude towards soldiers than people in other countries, it has displayed an enormous amount of solidarity to its soldiers on such occasions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention. I will, of course, be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

Enclosure

Schedule for the central funeral service

Religious part:

Ringling of church bells

Organ prelude

Welcoming address/votum

Church hymn/music recital

Prayer

Lesson and sermon

Church hymn/music recital

Prayers of intercession and Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Church hymn/music recital

Secular part:

Opportunity for eulogies as directed by the Federal Ministry of Defense

National anthem

Organ postlude/music recital

Cortege

(Escort of the coffins by the families, military chaplaincy staff/civilian parish priests and secular representatives to the hearses)

Drum roll

Bugler plays the "Good Comrade"