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**STATEMENT OF**

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**(MANPOWER, PERSONNEL, TRAINING & EDUCATION)**

**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL**

**OF THE**

**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**REVIEW OF THE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES REGARDING**

**THE NOTIFICATION OF NEXT OF KIN OF WOUNDED AND**

**DECEASED SERVICE MEMBERS**

**JUNE 27, 2007**

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Chairman Snyder, Ranking Member McHugh, and distinguished members of the Military Personnel Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Navy Casualty Assistance Program, and in particular, to discuss our next of kin notification policies and procedures.

Our commitment to support and assist Sailors and their families, especially in times of crisis, is a sacred trust. When our men and women go in harm's way, they must do so confident in the knowledge that Navy will sustain their loved ones should tragedy befall them.

When a Sailor is reported Deceased, Duty Status Whereabouts Unknown (DUSTWUN) or seriously ill or injured, our top priority is to initiate prompt and compassionate notification to the next of kin followed by sustained assistance and support. This is accomplished through our dedicated, worldwide, casualty assistance network. We accomplished this very effectively following the bombing of USS COLE, the interception of an EP-3E reconnaissance aircraft by China and subsequent detainment of the crew, and again following the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon. But we also accomplish the same timely and compassionate notification and assistance to families hundreds of times each year in much less visible circumstances. Navy's procedures for casualty reporting, notification and assistance are carried out in a consistent manner regardless of the member's geographic location or whether the casualty occurred as a result of hostile or non-hostile action, or whether friendly fire may have been involved. Our Casualty Assistance Calls Program is designed to ensure timely initial notification to

the member's family, that we provide follow-on information as soon as it becomes available and that we provide comfort, support and assistance as long as it is needed and desired.

Our three-tiered casualty assistance program consists of a 25-member staff at Navy Personnel Command headquarters, in Millington, Tennessee, that can be augmented on short notice by a trained and capable 30-member Reserve unit. Additionally, there are five regional casualty assistance coordinator staffs within the continental United States and others assigned to naval regions around the world. Headquarters and regional staffs provide training, guidance, support and oversight for approximately 2,000 casualty assistance calls officers (CACOs) who provide direct and very personalized assistance to families of our casualties.

When major crises arise, such as mass casualty incidents or the ravages of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, casualty assistance efforts are quickly augmented by activating our Emergency Coordination Center (ECC), to respond to the significant volume of incoming phone calls that such a situation inevitably produces. The ECC is staffed by active and reserve military personnel and federal civilian employees who respond on a moment's notice upon the center's activation. Beyond the support our reserve unit provides in Millington, it can also deploy two specially trained three-person teams to bolster efforts at the port mortuary at Dover Air Force Base and to reinforce an affected casualty region, if required.

Reporting, notification and assistance policies and procedures for the Navy Casualty Assistance Calls Program fully comply with Department of Defense (DoD) policy guidance and are promulgated in Navy directives. To supplement detailed publications, each CACO uses a convenient, pocket-sized, handbook that provides a detailed, step-by-step, ready reference to assist them in carrying out their duties.

When a casualty occurs, the Sailor's commanding officer transmits an initial personnel casualty report (PCR) that includes the member's name, rank, casualty status, and the date and time of the casualty, as well as the cause and circumstances, if known. As additional information becomes available, the commanding officer may submit supplemental reports. These reports are simultaneously transmitted via E-mail to all commands and departments involved, including the Casualty Assistance Branch at Navy Personnel Command and appropriate regional casualty assistance coordinators, who provide them to trained CACOs specifically assigned to share this information with the family during the initial casualty notification visit.

Upon receipt of a PCR at the Casualty Assistance Branch, for a deceased or DUSTWUN member, branch personnel verify next of kin information against the member's Record of Emergency Data. Upon verification, the appropriate regional casualty assistance coordinator assigns an officer or senior enlisted CACO and requests a chaplain to accompany them in notifying the next of kin. During the initial visit, the CACO provides, in a concerned and empathetic manner, a forthright account of the details surrounding the incident as described in the PCR. The CACO also renders

whatever immediate assistance the family may require and advises them that more information concerning the cause and circumstances of the casualty will be forthcoming.

When death occurs from other than a previously known medical condition, or due to hostile action, a Line of Duty Determination must be conducted, as required by law, to determine eligibility for a Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuity. The CACO advises the family that they are entitled to a copy of the Line of Duty Investigation and at an appropriate time, typically during a subsequent visit, assists them in preparing a standardized written request, if the family desires the report.

There are circumstances in which a commanding officer, or higher authority, may also direct an investigation into the death of a Sailor. The CACO advises the family that they are also entitled to a copy of this report and assists them with preparing and submitting a request for the completed report. Upon receipt of a request for this report by the appropriate Staff Judge Advocate (SJA), periodic written interim replies are sent to keep the family apprised of the status of the investigation. Advance copies of death investigations will be provided to next of kin, upon request, after completion of the first flag officer review. In cases involving potential adverse findings, Public Law, promulgated in DoD and Navy regulation, requires that the first General Court Martial Convening Authority provide a copy of the report to the family and allow them the opportunity to present information for consideration.

Upon completion of the initial visit with the next of kin, the CACO provides the family with contact information which includes the CACO's name and telephone number as well as the Casualty Assistance Branch toll free telephone number, at the Navy Personnel Command, which is staffed 24 hours a day. After next of kin have been notified, the area coordinator ensures that a message is sent to the member's command and Navy headquarters identifying the assigned CACO and confirming the time and date of notification.

Procedures for casualty notification in the case of seriously ill and injured personnel are somewhat different given the nature of the casualty. Notification for seriously ill or injured Sailors is accomplished by the most rapid means of communication available. So, most often, telephonic notification is accomplished not only to provide the timeliest means of notification, but to assist the family with traveling to the bedside of the ill or injured Sailor when deemed medically necessary for the welfare of the member. We contact family members 24 hours a day, and as required, assign courtesy CACOs to assist them at their point of departure, at intermediate stops and upon arrival in the city of the medical treatment facility in which the member is hospitalized. At the destination, the courtesy CACO coordinates with a Sailor Advocate assigned to Navy's SAFE HARBOR Program, an initiative to provide ongoing non-medical support and assistance to seriously ill or injured Sailors and their family members.

In closing, I would like to reemphasize the solemn and compassionate approach we take toward our inherent casualty assistance responsibilities for our Sailors and their families. We constantly evaluate our program to identify areas upon which we can improve. For example, nearly three years ago we developed and fielded a comprehensive survey for surviving family members to help solicit their ideas, recommendations and concerns about how we could improve our Casualty Assistance Program. This survey has been adopted as the DoD standard and, with some modifications, will soon be used across the uniformed services as a means of further improving support to surviving families. We also developed a similar survey for CACOs to help us understand, through their feedback, how we can better assist them in delivering the best possible support to surviving family members. We are also in the process of enhancing an already extensive casualty assistance training curriculum that we deliver to all commands bearing casualty assistance responsibilities.

The bottom line – our Sailors are placing their lives on the line; in the event of a casualty we owe them and their families honest, complete and straightforward disclosure of circumstances surrounding the casualty incident, coupled with the very best, compassionate and empathetic support and assistance to see them through such difficult circumstances for as long as they may require our help.