



United States Air Force

CSAF opening statement on AFMAO

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Good afternoon,

The mission at Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations (AFMAO) is to provide reverence, dignity, honor and respect to the fallen and care, service and support to their families. The professionals whose privilege it is to perform this solemn duty take great pride in that responsibility to care for America's fallen. Concerns raised by those professionals have brought us here today.

Allegations of problems at AFMAO, commonly known as Dover Port Mortuary, came to the Air Force through a number of sources, including, in late 2009, the Delaware Congressional delegation, individual complainants, and the Office of Special Counsel (OSC). The OSC allegations were sent to the Secretary of Defense, who delegated the responsibility to investigate to the Secretary of the Air Force. Consistent with that delegation, the Secretary of the Air Force submitted a Report of Investigation to OSC on May 11, 2011.

Factual investigations and/or inquiries were undertaken by the Air Force Inspector General (IG), the Army IG, and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (OSI), each of which prepared a report. Information from these investigations was combined to prepare the (separate) report of investigation that went to OSC. The investigations concluded that remains of our fallen warriors have been handled with reverence, dignity, honor and respect.

The OSC report addressed four areas of concern; the inspector general's report addressed these and several others.

Though the findings concluded remains of our fallen were handled with reverence, dignity, honor and respect, the investigations resulted in a determination that three senior supervisors' actions and inactions, though not willful, constituted "gross mismanagement" for failing to respond appropriately to clear indications that procedures were inadequate to prevent loss of accountability of disassociated remains (referred to as portions) at the Dover Port Mortuary. "Gross mismanagement" is an action or inaction that is blatant and creates a substantial risk or significant adverse impact on the agency's ability to accomplish its mission. This did not constitute a finding that AFMAO was mismanaged as a general matter, but was limited to the leadership's failure to respond appropriately to specific accountability issues related to portions.

There were, in fact, two occasions, affecting three families, where the Air Force lost accountability of portions of the remains of service members. Although the affected service members' remains were returned to their families with reverence, dignity, honor and respect, we were unable to demonstrate that the portions in question, which were separate from the remains, were disposed of in the specific manner directed by the families. These losses of accountability did not meet an appropriate standard of care. On one of these occasions, the loss of accountability prevented identification of a portion recovered from a military mishap. While it is likely that disposition of the portions of remains was by an appropriate means, it could not definitively be shown to be the case. There was no evidence, however, that the disposition was accomplished by any method inconsistent with established practice. And, while lack of accountability of these disassociated portions is not acceptable, it is important to understand that even in these cases service members' remains were returned to their families.

The investigation found that preparations of other remains that were the subject of the investigation were appropriate under the unique circumstances involving the results of combat.

In addition, the shipping and cremations of five fetal remains that were the subject of the investigation were appropriate, although documentation supporting the cremations at issue was deficient. There were also deficiencies in administrative procedures and in other required documentation, and inaccuracies in some electronic record keeping. Public health was not endangered.

While many allegations were not substantiated, the investigation concluded that a number of the underlying practices were less than desirable and could be improved. In one particular instance, the remains of a Marine who was killed by an IED were prepared to be viewed in military uniform as requested by the family, but required a bone that was in an unnatural position be removed to do so. While the investigating officer concluded that this was not inappropriate under the circumstances, the action was taken without the best coordination, including formal opportunity for the Marine Corps to determine whether it would have been helpful to contact the family about the necessity to remove the arm bone. New procedures are in place for AFMAO to formally coordinate with the Service involved to determine whether permission from the family should be sought in extraordinary cases like this one.

Air Force involvement in this investigation from the beginning enabled corrective action to be undertaken even before the investigation was fully completed. A substantial number of institutional corrective actions have been taken. The commander during these events was previously reassigned as part of a planned personnel rotation. The current commander is providing proactive leadership for the organization. A Memorandum of Understanding and a Joint Standard Operating Procedure between AFME and AFMAO resolves accountability seams between these two organizations; there is improved coordination among the Services; the Port Mortuary environmental control plan has been improved, as have shipping procedures from overseas mortuaries to Dover, and from Dover overseas. Security, training, documentation and information technology procedures have been improved among others.

Individual corrective measures have been taken for all three supervisors. The former commander has received a letter of reprimand. Only one of the three supervisors remains at AFMAO, but is no longer in a senior leadership position. The other civilian serves in a non-supervisory position outside of AFMAO.

The Air Force has contacted the four families whose service members' remains were directly affected. In addition, we have kept the Office of the Secretary of Defense and appropriate members of Congress and committees apprised of the investigation. I am working with my service counterparts to ensure their service equities are respected. The services operate a total of 6 mortuaries of various sizes around the world, and the Air Force will provide the results of the investigation and corrective actions to our service counterparts to ensure best practices are applied as appropriate. Further, an independent panel of the Defense Health Board has been tasked to review the adequacy of current operations and to recommend any further improvements to policies, procedures, or operation of the Dover mortuary.

AFMAO's staff is made up of all branches of the services including civilians, guard and reserve components. The staff includes mortuary affairs specialists, morticians and other technical experts. Since 2003, AFMAO has prepared more than 6,300 individual fallen for return to their loved ones. They operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week and are routinely responding to the trauma of war, working to return the remains of our fallen warriors to their families under challenging circumstances that are rarely encountered outside Port Mortuary.

The employees who brought forward their concerns gave the Air Force an opportunity to make the operation at the Port Mortuary better and stronger. Their initiative allowed the Air Force to bring corrective actions and long-term improvements to the management of AFMAO.

The AFMAO professionals responsible for this solemn duty take great pride in their important mission. They take that responsibility seriously and consider it a privilege to care for America's fallen. The Air Force will continue to aggressively ensure the highest standards are

met to provide reverence, care, dignity, honor and respect to the fallen, care, service and support to the families.