

*Bereaved military families lose far more than a beloved parent, spouse or child; they may lose their home, their social networks, their 'military family' and, for children, the only way of life they have ever known. Liz Rolls and Gillian Chowns explore the unique experience of bereavement following a military death, whether in combat or from accident or disease. Over time, military spouses, parents, siblings and children may seek bereavement counselling and the counsellor needs to be aware of the unique culture and context in which the death occurred. Some families will have to cope with the glare of publicity as their loved one's body is returned from Afghanistan or other site of active service. Children, accustomed to the frequent absence of their parent, may struggle to realise that this time he or she is not ever coming back. Families will have to move from service to civilian accommodation. Children will lose friends and change schools, experiencing still further disruption and losses at a time of greatest loss. Enabling a client to recognise the enormity of this disruption alongside their loss can validate their experience and support their efforts to create a new life*

## • **What makes military bereavement different?**

- **by**

- **Liz Rolls**

- **Gillian Chowns**

- Since the beginning of the conflicts in 2002, there have been 626 military fatalities in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> However, 'hostile action' is not the only cause of death among service men and women; between 2001 and 2012 a further 1,355 members of the UK regular Armed Forces have died as a result of injury and poisoning (accidents, violence, suicide and open verdicts), from disease (cancer, diseases of the circulatory system and other diseases) or from causes that are 'not currently available' (that is, awaiting an inquest verdict).<sup>2</sup> As a result, a considerable number of spouses, partners, parents, siblings, children, other family members and friends will have been left bereaved of relatively young people – and many will have sought support from civilian support services, including counsellors.

Is the experience of people who have been bereaved through a military death different and, if so, in what ways? And what are the implications for those who provide bereavement support?

This article draws on a scoping study that explored the work of organisations who provide support to people bereaved through military death.<sup>3</sup> It considers some of the specific features that make this form of bereavement different and how counsellors can address this group's particular needs.

**What are the differences?**

The experience of bereavement following a military death is shaped by the 'cultural script of military life':<sup>4</sup> the impact of deployment prior to the death; the nature and timing of the death; those who have died and those who have been left behind; media coverage; the military culture and personal identity and additional losses and changes.

#### *The impact of deployment prior to the death*

Although no two experiences of deployment are alike – in terms of length, frequency, exposure to combat and levels of risk – military families are used to the service person being absent for periods of time, including deployment in theatres of conflict. Deployment may have been a prompt for marriage, even when the strength of the relationship was unclear. For partners, deployment constitutes varying degrees of loss in companionship and intimacy, as well as emotional and instrumental support, especially in relation to childcare. A number of studies note the association of deployment with spousal depression, anger, sleep disturbance and physical symptoms, significant increases in parenting distress, disruption in parenting rules and expectations for children, and increased rates of child abuse and intimate partner violence.<sup>5</sup>

The routine of deployment can engender a military-specific problem for the bereaved. Being used to frequent separations can make the bereavement task of 'accepting the "reality" of the death'<sup>6</sup> – that the person really isn't coming back this time – more difficult. While seeing the body can be useful in helping relatives accept this reality, there may be no opportunity for them to do so where the person has been deployed overseas. Indeed – because of the circumstances of the death – it may not be desirable.

#### *Nature and timing of the death*

The majority of military deaths are 'crisis' deaths and, even though they are in some ways anticipated, nevertheless they are frequently sudden. Further issues arise from where – and when – the death occurred. In the case of a military death outside the UK, families have to face more procedures than their civilian counterparts, many of which are outside their control. First, the repatriation of the body is a military process rather than a private family occasion.<sup>7</sup> If the death occurred in a conflict zone, it is unlikely that the relatives will be able to visit the place of death. For some families, the repatriation ceremony (an enforced ritual) appears to be helpful, but for others it may not be.

Second, an inquest is an essential process in *any* death overseas, and military casualties outside the UK are subject to a coroner's investigation. This can result in a number of difficulties. Funeral arrangements will need to be delayed until the body is released by the coroner. If the death occurred during deployment, and especially as a result of combat, there may be uncertainty for the family – and especially for the children – about what has happened, and barriers to finding out. Families often say that knowing what has happened is an important part of the grieving process,<sup>8</sup> but some of the issues or parts of the story may only emerge during the investigation process or at the inquest; indeed, full disclosure of all the information surrounding the death may never be released. Nevertheless, the coroner's inquest is where families can ask questions and get some details of what happened. While this is upsetting, it has often helped families in the longer term, and enabled them to contribute to preventing future fatalities by challenging aspects of policy or safety that led to this death.

For service personnel who are seriously injured on active service and then die in the UK, there is very little media coverage and no public repatriation ceremony for the family to attend. These families may feel their loved one's death seems less important because it does not receive the public recognition that this ceremony confers. Similarly, the grief of military families whose relative dies through illness or accident is often 'disenfranchised';<sup>9</sup> such deaths may seem less important than those that occur on active combat duty.

#### *Those who have died and those left behind*

Those who die a 'military' death are relatively young<sup>7</sup> and leave behind an unknown number of young peer group and older bereaved people – their partners, parents, siblings and children. There may be consequences when relationships between the bereaved (particularly between parents and partners) have been poor. Some branches of the Armed Forces undertake a family briefing before deployment to avoid ambiguity over issues such as who is the designated next of kin.

Following the death, the main focus may be on the partner. However, many of the members of the Armed Forces are only just out of childhood and may have relatively young parents who, as they do

not live on base and may not be considered the main 'military family', can feel neglected and isolated. In either case, whether they are partner or parent, the presence of children places considerable psychological strain on the bereaved adult.<sup>10</sup>

Military children have always faced a unique set of challenges<sup>11</sup> as a result of the combat deployment of their parents. However, military children may be 'overlooked casualties'<sup>12</sup> as bereavement through military death is likely to have an additional impact on them. First, young children are particularly vulnerable; they may not have been born or were very young at the time of the death and, therefore, have little or no memories of the deceased. Young children – because of their emotional and cognitive immaturity, their reliance on magical thinking and their dependence on their parents for healthy development – can be especially burdened.<sup>11</sup> Second, military families and children are more frequently exposed to parental separations, and feelings of anxiety and distress that existed during these separations may be exacerbated if a parent dies. Last, the grieving process for children and surviving spouses may be further complicated by the unknowns surrounding war-related deaths, subsequent lifestyle changes and moving home, changing school etc.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Media coverage*

Every time a member of the Armed Forces dies it is national news and information about the death immediately becomes very public. This has a number of consequences. Media coverage gives recognition to the service person and to the bereaved, and the family may want the death to be properly honoured. However, media attention may be ongoing; images of the deceased – or those deceased in similar circumstances – may be republished or broadcast on other occasions and, although one study has shown that the majority (86 per cent) of Army families feel the 'running total should be announced each time there is a death',<sup>14</sup> these images and pieces of information can be experienced as intrusive, and especially difficult for children. The use of webcams to film military engagements makes the moments of death much more visible, and coroners use Google Maps to help families visualise the circumstances leading up to the death. While these may be comforting for some, they may distress others – and these images may revive traumatic thoughts about how the person died. In addition, there has been a worrying trend for increasingly intrusive photographs to be taken of children and young people at repatriation ceremonies and funerals.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Military culture and personal identity*

Military culture 'has its own language, social norms, and attitudes' of which 'stress, trauma and loss are normative parts'.<sup>15</sup> Military bereaved families, including children, appear to have more of their identity bound up with the Armed Forces – and with supporting the service family member in their job – than their civilian counterparts. Bereaved military families may be grieving for the loss not just of a family member but also of their military identity.

There are cultural differences between the respective Armed Forces that impact on families – some branches have a strong identity as a 'family' but increasingly service families live off-base and have a more civilian lifestyle. This raises questions about how the bereaved family manages to maintain close relationships with military friends and colleagues who understand while turning towards the civilian society in which they will be making their future life.

Nor are the military bereaved a homogeneous group in relation to their feelings towards the 'military' aspect of the death; finding meaning in the death<sup>16</sup> may be challenging. For some families, the death may be considered an 'honourable' one in which the deceased was fighting for a just cause. But for others who have been critical or ambivalent about the conflict, the death may be seen as a 'wasted' life, and they may have more in common with those bereaved by sudden, violent deaths such as manslaughter and murder. Suicide is particularly problematic in that, while clearly not a death in combat, it may be a consequence of the experiences of it.

#### *Additional losses and changes*

For military families bereavement is further complicated by a significant 'domino effect of changes'.<sup>15</sup> For children, these 'secondary adversities'<sup>15</sup> make the bereavement task of adjustment<sup>4</sup> a most challenging one. While the association of childhood bereavement with long-term disadvantage remains uncertain, growing up in a disrupted family has been associated with a number of poor outcomes, including lower educational achievement and risk of depression in adult life.<sup>17</sup> In military families, children are both bereaved and disrupted.

The death of the service person means the loss of all that being in the military has entailed, including high levels of practical support.<sup>18, 19</sup> The family has to make – at a time of great sorrow and uncertainty – a considerable number of important decisions, as well as learn to cope with the practical issues of single parenting and civilian life outwith the military. Families are now able to remain in their service accommodation for longer following the death, but they will eventually have to move to civilian accommodation, and leave behind the military life to which they are accustomed and the supportive relationships it has provided. The education of the children may be disrupted; the surviving partner's work, if it has been on or near the base, may have to be relinquished, and the close links with the military base and their friends will be weakened.

More poignantly, it is not always clear to families where to bury their relative.

In the immediate aftermath, parents (and siblings) who are the designated next of kin get the same support from the Armed Forces as partners. However, while the changes may be less intense and their civilian life style less disturbed, parental bereavement creates a significant vulnerability, and over time parents – and siblings – may be also less visible and their needs neglected.

Over the past decade, the Ministry of Defence and the respective Armed Forces have put in place a number of initiatives to support the immediate family bereaved through military death. These include the system of visiting officers to support bereaved families and the relaxation of rules about leaving service accommodation. Bereaved families are treated with care and concern and have access to good levels of emotional and practical support.

However, bereavement is a long haul. Like their civilian counterparts, military families grieve the loss of their relative in the context of a unique set of relationships and social world; but they have to withstand the additional psychosocial disruption to their assumptive world<sup>20</sup> that leaving the wider military family entails, and to grapple with maintaining a continuing bond<sup>21</sup> with their deceased relative while at the same time relinquishing the bond and their identification with the military life. Furthermore, they may need very particular support in trying to make meaning of certain aspects relating to the death<sup>16</sup> and in accepting its reality,<sup>6</sup> in order to foreground the actual rather than the fantasised aspects of the death.

While all families need to address, and oscillate between, both grief-focused and restoration-focused work,<sup>22</sup> the very practical aspects of the latter that are required to generate a new, civilian life outwith the supportive environment of the military can be more demanding and overwhelming, and sometimes unbearably so. Once families leave the military orbit and return to civilian life, some of these additional losses are likely to come to the fore, and family members may well seek practical support from civilian organisations such as the Royal British Legion ([www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk)), the War Widows Association ([www.warwidowsassociation.org.uk](http://www.warwidowsassociation.org.uk)), and Forces Support ([www.forcessupport.org.uk](http://www.forcessupport.org.uk)).

Immediate and wider family members, including parents and siblings, may be – or may become over time – less visible to these support structures and their grief may lead them to seek bereavement counselling. Counsellors need to hold in mind the significance and possible impact of the potentially disenfranchising<sup>9</sup> context of military death and bereavement. Enabling the client to articulate and recognise the enormity of the disruption in their lives and the ambiguity of their loss can validate their experience and their efforts to create a new life and identity while maintaining meaningful connections to their dead.

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## Hello Bill

You could say something about the paper arising out of the earlier study that was funded by you (rather than carried out by you - subtle difference in ensuring objectivity, but which highlights your commitment to finding things out!)

It highlights what might be differences for families bereaved through a military death.

It is directed at counsellors and highlights the benefits of practical as well as emotional support

It points counsellors in directions for support, including FS.

There is no other similar UK paper like it.