

Psychological Stress in Mortuary Affairs Operations

Brian W. Flynn, EdD, RADM, USPHS (Ret.)

James E. McCarroll, PhD, COL, USA (Ret.)

Quinn M. Biggs, PhD, MPH

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences
Bethesda, MD 20814

brian.flynn@usuhs.edu

james.mccarroll.ctr@usuhs.edu

quinn.biggs.ctr@usuhs.edu



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Disclaimer

Ideas, attitudes, and opinions expressed herein are ours and do not necessarily reflect those of the USUHS, the DOD, or other branches of the US government.

Be Aware

Some descriptions by mortuary affairs workers may evoke strong emotions.



History of Mortuary Affairs in War

(Often spotty and undocumented)



American War Burials

Revolutionary War – People buried where they died or in private cemeteries

Civil War – 1862 – National Cemeteries Act – Beginning of repatriation

Spanish-American War – 1899 Quartermaster Burial Corps - Remains could be returned to US if family so desired

World War I – Graves Registration Service established in 1917

Korean War – Concurrent return policy established. All remains brought home pending family decision upon site of burial

1991 Army Mortuary Affairs (new terminology replaces Graves Registration Service)



How Many US War Dead?

Wars ranked by total number of US military deaths

- Civil War	625,000
- World War II	405,399
- World War I	116,516
- Vietnam War	58,209
- Korean War	54,246
- American Revolution	25,000
- War of 1812	15,000
- Mexican-American War	13,283
- War on Terror	6,829
Grand total, all US wars	1,319,482



Army Mortuary Affairs Soldiers (Active Duty)



54th Quartermaster Company
(Mortuary Affairs), Fort Lee, VA

111th Quartermaster Company
(Mortuary Affairs), Fort Lee, VA



Mortuary Affairs Operational Units

Mortuary Affairs part of Army Quartermasters

Active duty Army – 54th and 111th Companies
(Fort Lee, Virginia)

Army Reserve – 246th and 311th Companies
(Aguadilla, Puerto Rico)

Four Army Reserve detachments in US and Pacific
Region

Total Army mortuary affairs force structure = 1,500



Army Mortuary Affairs Soldier Training



Advanced Individual Training (AIT)
for MOS 92M at Fort Lee, VA, 8 weeks

- Includes visit to Richmond, VA, morgue and
- Dover Air Force Base Port Mortuary, Dover, DE



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

What Do Mortuary Affairs Soldiers Do?

Care and disposition of deceased personnel, including personal effects, from battlefield.

- Receive deceased from military unit at collection point
- Search and document personal effects
- Perform tentative identification
- Prepare for shipment to evacuation point
- Includes personnel from other nations and local nationals under US operational control



What Happens at Dover Air Force Base Port Mortuary?

- Autopsy
- Positive identification
- Preparation for burial
- Visit by family of deceased
- Assignment of escorts
- Shipment of remains



Collection and Evacuation Points in Middle East



Stress and Resilience in Military Mortuary Workers: Care of the Dead from Battlefield to Home*

***"We carry the dead. That's what we do.
For the rest of our lives, we're carrying that with us."***



*Flynn BW, McCarroll JE, & Biggs QM. (2015) *Death Studies*; 39(2): 92-98



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Study Description

- Semi-structured interviews - 34 civilian and military mortuary workers
- Locations - Dover Air Force Base Port Mortuary, DE; Mortuary Affairs companies and Joint Mortuary Affairs Center and School, Fort Lee, VA
- Work experiences - Active duty military service and veterans, forensics, anthropology, funeral direction, law enforcement, and chaplaincy
- Looked at both stresses and rewards
- The power of their own words



Preparation For Mortuary Affairs Work

“Gradual exposure, Baby steps. You expose them to it, but not all at once.”

“Dover is good experience, but different from down range. Nothing can compare to the actual job.”

“We had one in Afghanistan. You open up the bag and it is just parts. It’s like all the world’s hate poured onto this kid. Nothing like we trained for.”



Psychological Stress in Mortuary Affairs Operations

Stress Points in Battlefield Mortuary Affairs Operations

Physical characteristics of remains

Emotional involvement (“humanizes” the remains)

Personal safety (combat, disease, injury)



Stress Factors

Novelty - “Every single day you see something and tomorrow I’ll see something new. The conditions are just horrific.”

Physical characteristics – “Burned, decomposed, mutilated, dismembered, intact and lifelike.”

Sight - “It never really hit home for me until I walked out and they have all the name tags for the uniforms. All laid out there on a table, all 248 of them. And it’s now like ‘That’s real’. I still see that.”



Sensory Stimuli - Smell

“My husband fixed ribs a few months ago and he accidentally burned them on the grill. I was like, ‘You’re gonna have to get it out of the house. I can’t smell it.’ ”

“You smell it in your clothes. You smell it when you’re away from it. You smell it in your hair.”

“Just the smell and just looking at them. I always had a sense of not being clean. I just felt dirty.”



Emotional Involvement “Humanizes” the Remains

Handling personal effects

Learning history of deceased through obtaining
or preparing personal documents

Contact with unit members

Media reports



Emotional Involvement Contact with Unit Members



Emotional Involvement Handling Personal Effects

“For me, personal effects. I do not like working with personal effects. Remains, I can kind of compartmentalize that. Portions, I can compartmentalize it. When I’m working with personal effects, for me, I’m knee deep in somebody’s life... You’re looking at pictures, letters. There’s no way of keeping it at arm’s distance anymore.”



Emotional Involvement with the Remains

“So seeing your uniform there and seeing our tags laying there and picking the dog tag chain out of somebody’s chest—it’s a lot different. Seeing your uniform, it’s a lot different, seeing how they come back it’s a lot different. Being downrange and seeing your uniform laying there and they have the rucksack, and it’s the same exact gear we all have. It’s a big difference.”

Field Training Exercise



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

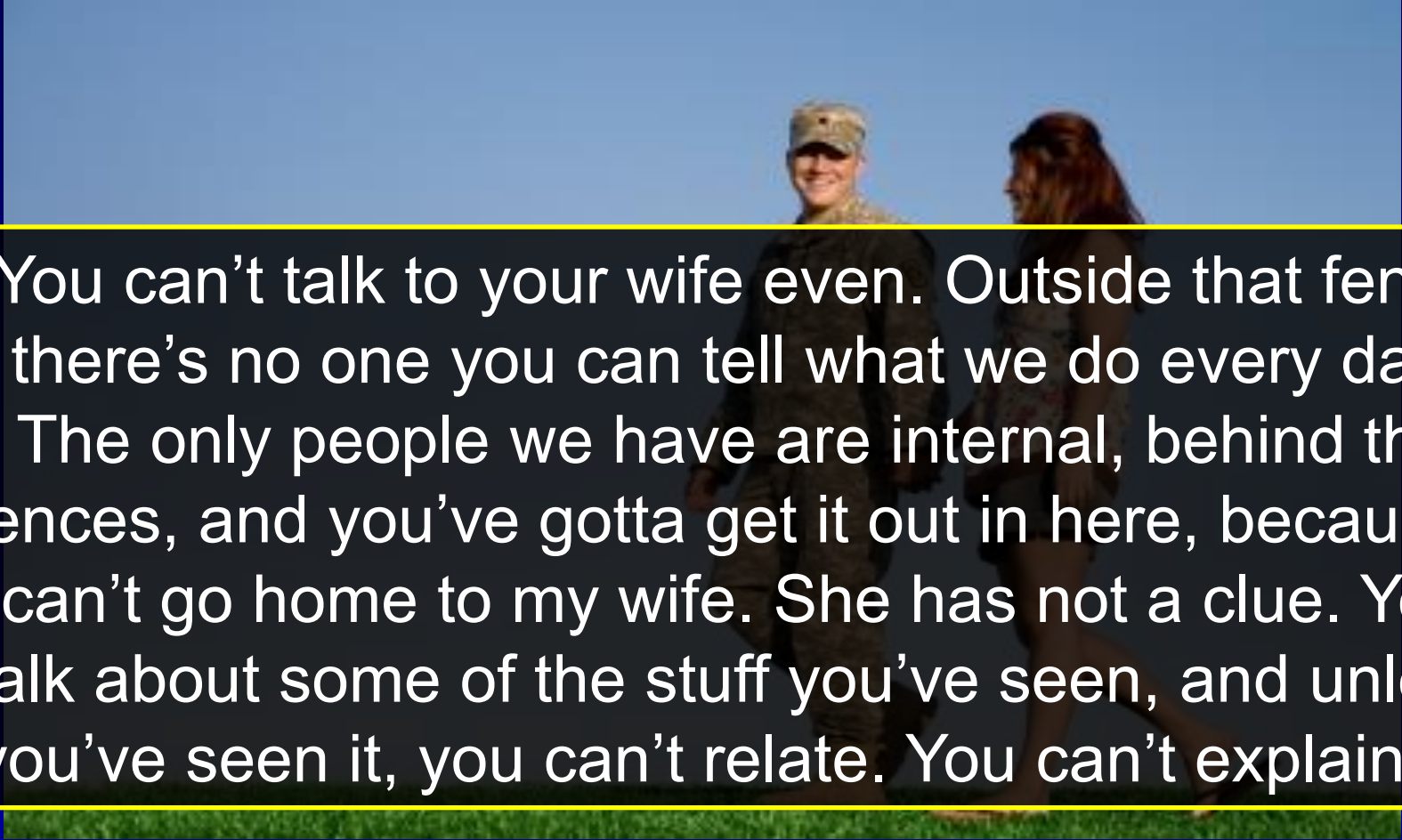
Interacting with Families of the Deceased



“I’ve seen a six year old kid hug her teddy bear and look at her mom and say ‘When’s daddy coming home?’ Well, Daddy just came home in a transfer case. It’s hard not letting your emotions get into this, especially being the parent of a two year old child.”



Relationships with One's Own Family



“You can’t talk to your wife even. Outside that fence, there’s no one you can tell what we do every day. The only people we have are internal, behind the fences, and you’ve gotta get it out in here, because I can’t go home to my wife. She has not a clue. You talk about some of the stuff you’ve seen, and unless you’ve seen it, you can’t relate. You can’t explain it.”



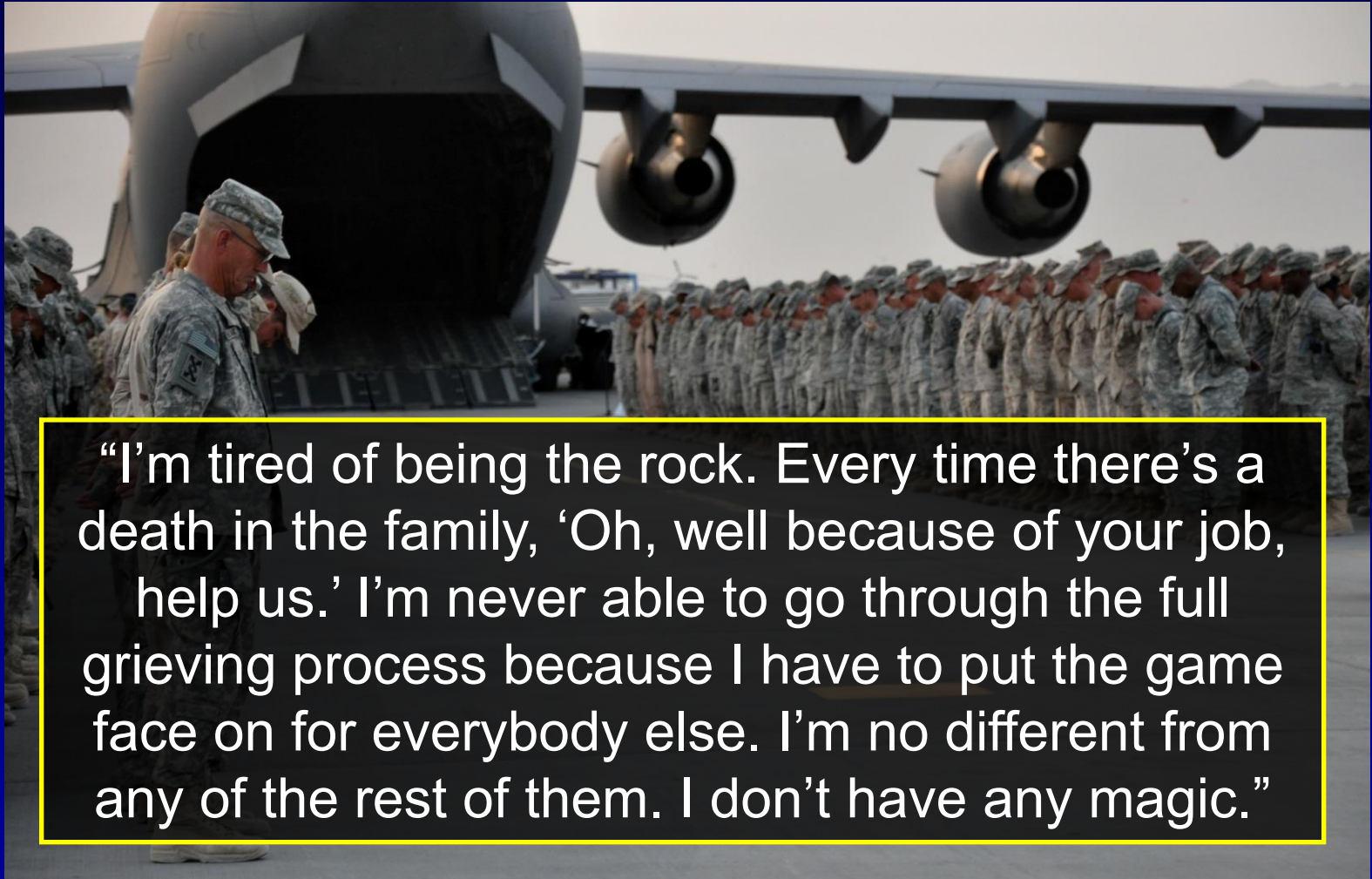
Disenfranchised Grief

When the individual does not openly acknowledge the loss and society does not recognize that the worker has a right to grieve and receive support.

“You just never ever get a chance to grieve, ever. It’s like, ‘When do I get a chance to feel this?’ Maybe I’ll never actually get to really fully grieve it the way I’m supposed to.”



Disenfranchised Grief



“I’m tired of being the rock. Every time there’s a death in the family, ‘Oh, well because of your job, help us.’ I’m never able to go through the full grieving process because I have to put the game face on for everybody else. I’m no different from any of the rest of them. I don’t have any magic.”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Valuing the experience/pride in the work

“This work makes me a want to be soldier. People ask me ‘What do you do?’ I say ‘I’m in the Army.’ [They ask], ‘What do you do?’ ‘I process human remains and portions.’ Straight up. [They ask], ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Exactly what I said; I process human remains and portions.’ ‘How do you do it?’ ‘Because I love my job and I wouldn’t trade it for the world.’ ”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Sharing/using group for support (families are not typically not used as a primary support)

“We talk about it every day. As soon as we see something, we just talk about it. We talk about it all day and don’t even realize it. It helps us...it releases a lot of stress. I know he’s seeing the same thing that I’m seeing, touching the same thing I’m touching. At the end of the day, he went through what I went through. Sometimes I feel like I don’t need to tell him anything because he knows what I’m going through.”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Individual coping

“For me, it’s writing it down. Nobody reads it. It’s just a good way to vent it off for me. There are individuals that I know that work out like a fiend. That’s their vent. One of them told me, ‘When I’m working out I’m thinking about it.’ The energy that they’re expending kind of releases it.”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Chaplains and Mental Health Professionals

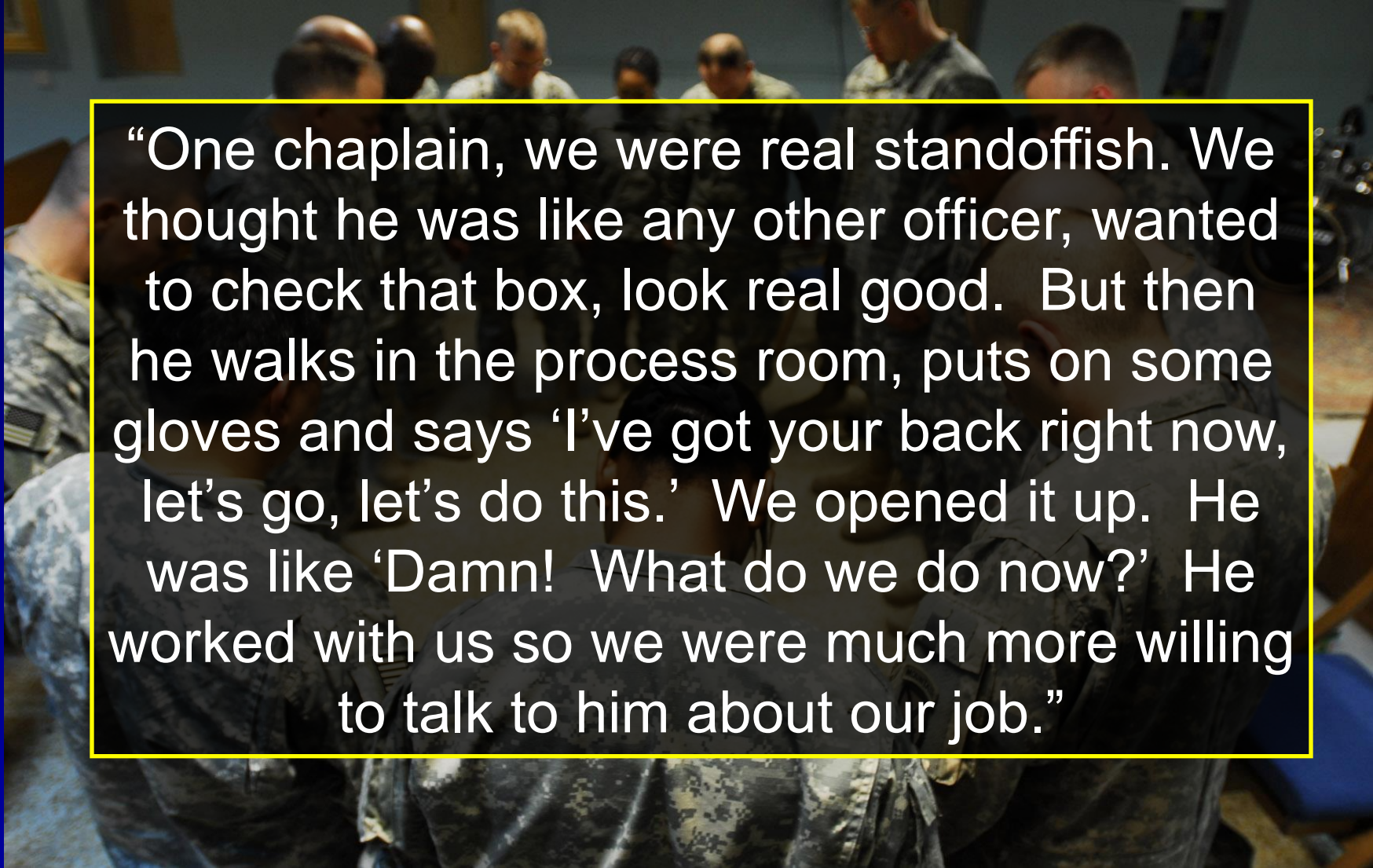
“Combat Stress came just to chill. They love chilling there with our AC and goodies in the fridge. You actually get to know the guy as opposed to the chaplain who’s coming in just talking about our job.”

“At first they started bringing SFC Zeke [dog]. We all knew Zeke, he’d come by, it was so cool. Then they started bringing the bomb sniffing dogs, they saw that it was doing good and they came by often. They’d stop by maybe 30 minutes to an hour and that really got your mind off things it.”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Chaplains and Mental Health Professionals



“One chaplain, we were real standoffish. We thought he was like any other officer, wanted to check that box, look real good. But then he walks in the process room, puts on some gloves and says ‘I’ve got your back right now, let’s go, let’s do this.’ We opened it up. He was like ‘Damn! What do we do now?’ He worked with us so we were much more willing to talk to him about our job.”

Strategies to Manage Stress

Supervision and leadership

“It’s always good to have a leader you can talk to because a lot of us are really young when we go on these deployments. When you have a leader that after the work is done comes over and talks to you, sits and smokes with you and just asks ‘How’s your day going?’ That makes you feel a lot better.”

“Every week I talk to all of them and we have a good communication. I always ask how the guys doing, are you taking care of your troops. I feel that it should be in the leadership. Leadership should look down and always visit our sites to make sure our soldier was taken care of in all aspects.”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Support for Each Other

“Soldiers, we stick with ourselves. If I have a problem, I go to my buddy. He’s going to see it with the same eyes I have. When that moment comes, there’s a buddy that says, ‘Come on, sit down’ and listens to you. If he cannot understand you, he listens to you.”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Rewards

“I did have times when I went to Dover that I just broke down. I just broke down in front of everybody because I was only turning 18 and I’d never seen a dead body before I went to the morgue, and I had never dealt with the types of things that I dealt with when I came to this MOS. I’m glad I stayed in this MOS because I would never have been able to say that I have done the things that I have done and I have such an appreciation for life the way that I do now. Those are the good things that I take away.”



Strategies to Manage Stress

Rewards



“When I was deployed I made sure every flag was perfect. I think we all work directly for the families.”



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Strategies to Manage Stress

Rewards

“We don’t make people happy, but if we can take away this much [gesture indicating a pinch] pain from them, then we’ve won. It’s frustrating sometimes, but it is extremely rewarding.”



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Biggest reward is coming home



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Strategies to Manage Stress

Memories

“As bad as they are, they are a part of me. To take away a memory would be to take away a part of me”

“I love my memories, from good to bad. If it were not for every single memory that I’ve had, I wouldn’t be who I am today.”

“Memories make me a person.”

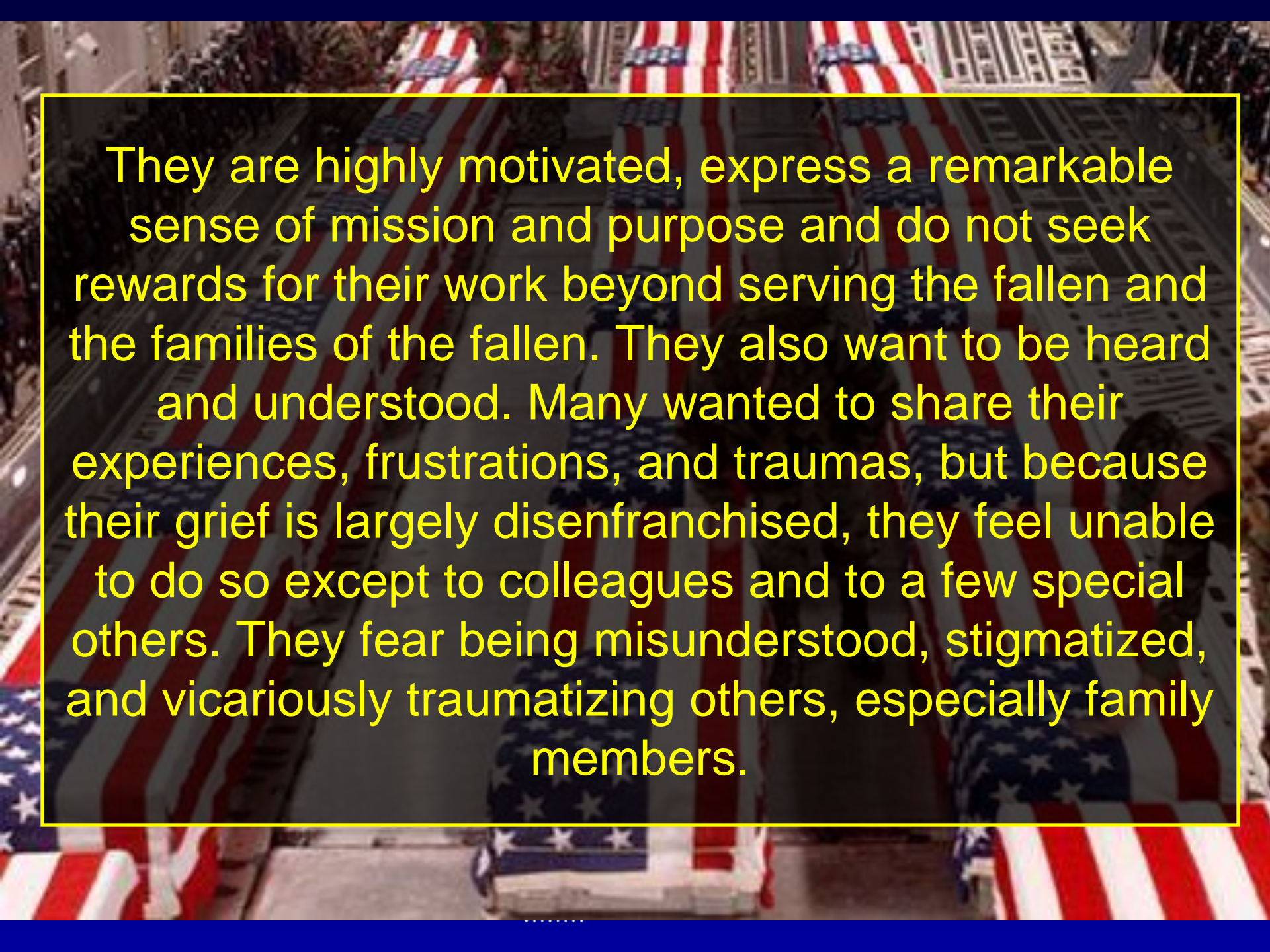
“They are mine and this helped mold me. Memories make me more appreciative of what time I have being a mom and a wife. It makes me appreciate that everything can be taken away in a second.”

Strategies to Manage Stress

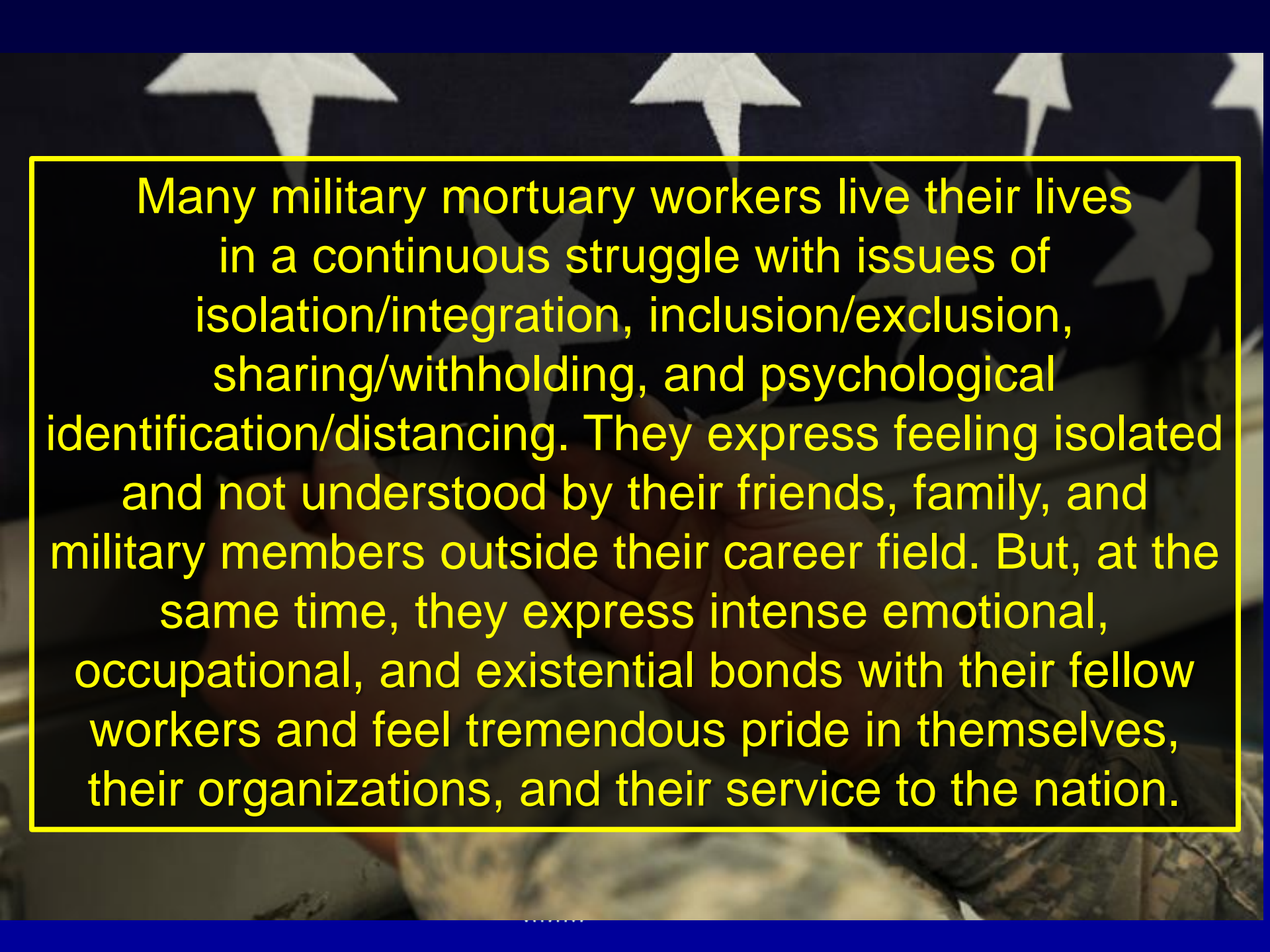
The Future

“My coping skills are a lot better and I know if I leave the military whatever job I go to, I’m going to work my way up just like I did here. If you take somebody my age who has not been in the military, I guarantee you I’ll do it better and faster because I have been in the military.”



An aerial photograph of a city street, likely in Washington D.C., where the sidewalks and parts of the road are covered with numerous American flags. The flags are arranged in a grid-like pattern, creating a strong visual rhythm of red, white, and blue. The perspective is from directly above, looking down the length of the street.

They are highly motivated, express a remarkable sense of mission and purpose and do not seek rewards for their work beyond serving the fallen and the families of the fallen. They also want to be heard and understood. Many wanted to share their experiences, frustrations, and traumas, but because their grief is largely disenfranchised, they feel unable to do so except to colleagues and to a few special others. They fear being misunderstood, stigmatized, and vicariously traumatizing others, especially family members.



Many military mortuary workers live their lives in a continuous struggle with issues of isolation/integration, inclusion/exclusion, sharing/withholding, and psychological identification/distancing. They express feeling isolated and not understood by their friends, family, and military members outside their career field. But, at the same time, they express intense emotional, occupational, and existential bonds with their fellow workers and feel tremendous pride in themselves, their organizations, and their service to the nation.

Unanticipated Value

“... I’m glad that you are here for whatever purpose you are here...regardless of you’re doing research... I’m glad because you’re allowing my fellow soldiers to speak.

I know that soldiers, we don’t get much of an opportunity to speak our minds. Not because we are not allowed to, simply because we are soldiers that have ACU’s and boots and we have a soldier mentality.

It’s good that somebody listens to us, for whatever reason, whether it amounts to something or it doesn’t. At least the soldier had an opportunity to speak, and I feel that is good.”

Lessons Learned

- Avoid/reduce emotional involvement. Objectification of remains is a means of emotional survival
- Reduce strong sensory exposure as much as possible
- Pair experienced and inexperienced workers
- Distress is not avoidable - preparation, leadership, organizational support, culture of support are keys
- Provide a range of professional support options
- Sense of mission, pride and desire to help the family of the deceased are the primary rewards



What Does This All Mean to You?

- What has been your experience with military or civilian mortuary/morgue workers? How do you approach them? What has worked and not worked?
- How do the findings of this study apply to work you do? What is transferable? What is not?
- Does the experience of Military Mortuary Affairs workers seem at all similar to your work?
- What are the implications of this study for training and education?



Thank You!

Reference

Flynn BW, McCarroll JE, Biggs QM. (2015)
"Carrying the Dead of War: Stress and Resilience in
Caring for the Dead from the Battlefield to Home",
Death Studies, 39(2), 92-98.



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Questions?



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress