

Guide for Military Families on Dealing with the Media After a Tragedy

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Distributed by Steppingstone LLC, www.SteppingstoneLLC.com

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Introduction

Often when military families are contacted by the media, it is during some of the worst moments of their lives – after the death or serious injury of a loved one in action. When they are least able to cope, families are thrust into the wholly unfamiliar media spotlight and expected to make decisions about their participation that will both honor their loved one and protect their privacy.

Why do these tragedies attract so much attention? First, the entire community is concerned when something like this happens. Your loved one's duty was to go into harm's way on behalf of all of us, so the community is naturally interested. People want to know about your loved one, how your family is coping, and how they can help. Second, to be blunt, a local death or serious injury brings home the reality of the war. It localizes the national story of the war, and makes it very real to a hometown.

During a tragedy, dealing with the media can seem overwhelming and frustrating. It can also honor your loved one's duty and sacrifice, and serve as a source of information to the many family members and friends whom you are unable to maintain contact with personally. The purpose of this guide is to provide advice and help for families as they interact with news media after a tragedy.

I started writing this guide after my brother, Christopher Neiberger, was killed in Iraq in August 2007. As a seasoned media relations professional, it seemed natural that I would manage media on behalf of my family in the days following his death. For me, talking to reporters was something I had done for ten years. I knew what to do – or so I thought.

During a two-week period we organized a hometown memorial service attended by 900 people, and we attended Chris' burial with military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. But even for me, it was challenging. When I heard my voice on the radio doing an interview, I didn't even recognize myself. The stress of dealing with the loss of

my brother took its toll. Like many survivors, I struggled to rest and sleep. Yet somehow, I got through those first few horrible days, and you will too.

Today I do media relations work for TAPS, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (<http://www.taps.org>). I work with many surviving families who have lost loved ones in military service, offering advice and support as they talk to reporters about their loved ones and the work that TAPS does to help grieving families. I hope you find this guide helpful.

The Media's Perspective: We're in the Story Business

We're in the story business. Whether they write for a newspaper, record audio for radio, draft a blog for the Internet, or shoot video for television, their job is to find and produce stories that touch readers and viewers. Their goal is telling a story in a way that commands attention and sets them apart from others who are telling the same story.

Rush, rush, rush. Newsrooms today are short-staffed and driven by tight deadlines. Reporters are expected to crank out stories that are factual and compelling. In larger metros, news outlets "compete" to get stories on the air quickly, and to be the first to broadcast breaking news. Most reporters are working on daily deadlines. Some even file multiple stories in a day or write additional content for a website, in addition to another publication or broadcast.

You should have no expectation of privacy. When a soldier is killed, the Department of Defense issues a news release after the family is notified. It contains the service person's name and hometown, and provides a few details about the death. Sometimes reporters get this information even before a news release is officially issued, and will call families right away. Reporters often will immediately begin assembling a story. With online community phonebooks and other information available on the internet, reporters can look up family members nationwide. They will start dialing to get information as soon as possible..

Your blog or social networking site is free game if it's public. Social networking websites maintained by family members are in the public domain if they are set on a "public" setting. So family members cannot expect for postings to a Myspace, Facebook, Livejournal Xanga, or another social networking site to remain private, especially if the settings are set to public. Media may use photographs and postings made by family and friends on social networking sites without contacting them for permission. At the same time, these sites can also be a place for family friends to post tributes, share stories, and honor your loved one. Many families have set up sites like this specifically to honor their loved one, or to share information with friends and family.

Visuals can make or break a story. Newspapers are always seeking good photos, while television stations want video footage. Blogs and news media websites can use both video and photos. Even though cell phone video captures and home-grown footage is seen on television more often, most stations and newspapers prefer to shoot

footage and photos themselves for a major news event – and the burial of someone lost in a war qualifies. TV stations may seek footage at a memorial service of the family. They may film the family as they arrive for the memorial service, especially if the family will pass in front of or near protesters. They may film you in your car, or people walking to and from their cars and up to your front door with casseroles who want to pay their respects to your family. A camera crew may even ambush you at your front door. If assembling a story about your loved one's life, they might ask your family to share some photographs with them. These usually need to be digital images scanned at a minimum of 300 dots per inch.

Story placement may not be predictable. Many factors influence news coverage – timeliness, newsworthiness, similarity to other stories, and the number of other “big” stories happening that particular day. Unfortunately, some of the factors that most influence a story's placement, are completely out of anyone's control and can't be predicted. For example, a death notification early in the week might attract more media attention than one on the weekend, when newsrooms have fewer staff available. A death that might have been front page news one week might be sidelined to page 6 another week, simply because of national events or other activities in the community. Even reporters often won't know where the story will be placed in the newspaper or the newscast, because they don't personally control the layout or story lineup.

Real people = real and compelling stories. Media want to talk to the real people affected by a major event. If a soldier has died or been injured, the reporters will want to talk to immediate family members if possible. If family members won't talk and they're on deadline, reporters will still write a story. It may or may not be one you like. By not providing quotes and not steering reporters to people who will speak on behalf of your family, you are trusting the reporter's research skills and abilities. With the hectic pace of today's newsrooms – that's a fearful thing. The reality is that reporters rely heavily on their sources for both comments and context. They need background information, and a family member or family friend is the best person to provide that information. If your family is not up to being interviewed, consider designating someone else. A family friend, a relative outside your immediate family, or someone your family knows and trusts, could function as the news media representative.

Pro vs. con – the love affair that can overwhelm the story about your loved one. Reporters are trained to get all sides to a story, and unfortunately a few pick up a trite and easy formula for making a news story – pro vs. con. They will interview people on opposite ends of the opinion spectrum, and try to make every story an argument. This works well on the political beat, but sometimes it means that the nuances to a story are not examined, or the reporter focuses so narrowly on a disagreement in the community, that the bigger picture is lost completely from the story. Unfortunately, a reliance on this formula can mean that reporters might try to couch the loss of your loved one, within the context of the political debate about the war. Political statements can be divisive to a family, especially when a family is hurting and grieving. So if a reporter goes there, choose your words carefully. If a story “goes political,” it can be painful to watch, because the sacrifice your loved one has made for our nation, transcends politics.

Reporters are real people – some good, some bad. Just like with everything else, there are great reporters and terrible ones. Most reporters care passionately about their jobs and want to tell accurate stories. Most reporters want to do a good job and are not trying to intentionally hurt your family. It's not reasonable or appropriate for a reporter to badger, harass, or upset a family with insensitive questions or poor timing. If there's a real problem with a reporter, you can call him or her on it – appeal to their sense of human decency, or their ethics as a journalist. If the reporter is truly awful, call their editor or news director and explain your concerns over the phone.

The Family's Perspective: Honor our Loved One

Why won't people leave us alone? For many military families, the news of a sudden death or a battlefield injury catapults them from anonymity to sudden (and unwanted) fame. Reporters may call your home or knock on your front door. They might talk to your neighbors, co-workers, and friends. Satellite trucks could even pull onto your street or into your driveway. It can feel very intrusive, and almost like you are under siege or being attacked by a school of piranha.

There are already a lot of people in my house and I have so much to deal with. Now I have to talk to the media too? Your friends, neighbors and loved ones want to show their support for you. They begin calling, stopping by, sending flowers, and dropping off food. There are few things people feel they can do during a tragedy, and while their gestures of concern can be very touching, it can also add to the feeling of being overwhelmed, especially if you have a lot of media calling too. Do your best to spend time with your close friends and loved ones. You need their support now more than ever. Station someone you trust near the phone to take messages, and write down the names and numbers of the people (and media) who are calling and what they need. Then ask someone in your family to respond to these messages.

We want our loved one treated with dignity and respect. Our memories of our loved one are even more precious to us now. Seeing complete strangers talk about him or her on the news can be difficult and painful for us. It makes the tragedy look even more real. If the story is presented well, it can also make us feel proud, even though it might also make us feel sad. We want to know that the stories told about our loved one are accurate, and honor the sacrifices our loved one and our family have made.

We've never dealt with the media before, and it's scary! For many people, dealing with the media is not something they've ever done before and it can be downright terrifying. We worry that we will say the wrong thing, be mis-quoted, or that our loved one will not be treated with dignity.

When Media Call: What to Do

Take a deep breath. Remember – it is your choice to talk to the media. Now there is a reporter on the phone, wanting to talk to you when your pain is raw, and your

emotions are running high. Always remember that it is your choice to permit media access to your family. You are in control of what is said to the media, and to what degree you interact with the media.

Talk to your family about how they want to handle media attention. The family's wishes are very important and should guide how you handle talking with reporters. It can be awkward to ask how the family feels about media requests. But having a strategy can make handling it a little easier.

Here's a script to help you talk with your family:

- It's possible there will be some reporters calling because of what's happened. I think it's important we talk now about how we want to handle that. The media can help us honor the memories of our loved one, but they can also be intrusive. We can set some limits to what we are willing to do, if we need to, but we need to do that up front. It may be difficult to talk about, but I'd like for us to talk now, if we can, about how we are going to handle media requests.
- How do we want to approach handling the media? Do we want to talk to them?
- Who in our family, or among our friends, will talk to the media?
- Do we want to provide 3 or 4 family photos to the media for them to use in media reports? This means these photos could be printed in the newspaper, shown on television, or placed on a website by a news outlet.
- What events are we organizing to honor our loved one, and what type of media access do we want to allow at those events?
- Are we comfortable conducting media interviews in our home if requested?
- When reporters call, who is going to write down the information about their request?
- Who is going to be our designated family spokesperson to deal with the media, if we want to talk to them?

The reporters will still do their stories – whether or not you cooperate. Yes, the reporters will still put together their stories, whether or not your family cooperates with the media or grants interviews. So instead of your favorite family photo they might broadcast a fuzzy high school yearbook picture – the one you always hated. They may mispronounce your family's name, because no one has told them how to pronounce it correctly. They may interview the teacher your loved one never liked, or the family friend who hasn't been close to you for years. Not cooperating can mean that the reporters will cast about looking for whatever shred of information they can dredge up about your loved one or your family. And you will have to live with it. Even if you do cooperate, they can still get the story wrong or mis-pronounce your name, but you are increasing your family's ability to influence the end result.

You are in control and do not have to accept every interview request you receive. Do not allow yourself to be bullied or to feel like you have to accept every request for an interview. You don't have to do it if you are not up to it, or if you have other things that need your attention. You can steer requests for interviews to someone else, or let the media do what they want (just be prepared for what they may come up with on their

own, and yes, they probably will report on the air that your family declined to comment when they called). In their desire to schedule an interview, some reporters may even say things to you that will sound insensitive. Most won't – but a handful might. They are under pressure to get a story on the air ahead of their competitors, and that makes them say and do crazy things sometimes.

Pick a spokesperson. Depending on your emotional state and the number of other details that need your attention, it may be helpful to designate one person to deal with the media. This could be a family member, or a close family friend. Just because a spokesperson is selected does not mean that other family members won't do interviews. But this is the person who will make sure that the media requests are reviewed, a decision is made about responding to them, and that the reporters are communicated with in a consistent and speedy fashion. This is not a task for someone who is easily emotional, someone who forgets details, or someone who does not like reporters or the press in general. Identify a spokesperson who has the time, who is not easily ruffled, and who has talked with you about what details your family is and is not comfortable with having shared.

Write it down - get basic information from the reporter. Grief is a strange thing. Often surviving families dealing with tragedy are in a state of shock for the first few months. You may feel like you are walking around in a fog. Things that you used to remember so easily, may not come easily now. Keep a pad of paper and a pen next to the phone.

Ask the Reporter:

- What is your name? (you may need to ask them to spell it)
- What media outlet are you with? (e.g. TV station with channel, newspaper, radio show, etc.)
- What is your phone number? (repeat it back to them to make sure it's correct)
- What type of story are you trying to do?
- Who would you like to talk to?
- What is your deadline?

I've included a sample "Media Request" sheet at the end of this guide that you can use to record this information if you like. If your designated media spokesperson is not the person answering the phone, make sure that whoever does answer the phone relays the media requests immediately to the designated family spokesperson, so a decision can be made about how to respond. It's perfectly okay to tell a reporter that someone will get right back to them. Even if they begin asking questions or requesting information, you are under no obligation to talk with them at that moment. Be firm and tell the reporter that someone will get back to him/her before their deadline.

Decide if you want to participate in the story. Often, you will be able to decide over the phone if you want to participate. For example, if the reporter calling seems reasonable and is from your hometown newspaper, which you know all of your friends read, you might want to agree to an interview. If the reporter calling is from a television

station known for sensationalism and you think your family is going to be treated like grief-stricken people on display, decline the request for an on-camera interview. Listen to your gut. You have the right to grant an interview to some media outlets and to refuse others.

Make the scheduling work for you. Some reporters will want to do an interview over the phone immediately. Others may want to bring a camera and come to your home (you can say yes or no). Others may want for you to come to the station for an interview in their studio, or just want some background information to inform a story.

Take the time to gather your thoughts before an interview, if you need to. If you are not sure you are ok to do an interview immediately, ask for 30 minutes to calm your nerves, write some notes, and get yourself prepared. When the 30 minutes is up, call the reporter back.

Keep the phone numbers for family friends and others who could talk to reporters nearby. The perspective and memories of others who knew your loved one can add depth and richness to the media coverage. Family members, friends, people who coached or taught your loved one, the family's minister – all could do media interviews. Recommending some of these people to a reporter also takes some of the pressure off your family to do interviews.

Finalize memorial details and ceremonies as quickly as possible. The sooner you have this information, the better. The funeral or memorial service attendance will often be quite large, especially if these events are open to the public. Determine if the service will be open to the public and to the media, and what policies you will set for the media at the event. Your funeral director and casualty affairs officer can often help you set guidelines for these events..

Consider asking the community to help honor your loved one. Many surviving families are inundated with flowers and food after a tragedy. These are some of the few ways people can think to help – and they show that many people care about your family. Another idea is to ask the community to contribute to a charity or cause that your loved one supported or admired. Often the media will gladly publicize how the community can contribute to honor your loved one.

Consolidate by issuing a press statement, holding a press conference or setting up a media pool. Issuing a written statement on behalf of the family that offers quotes and background information can be an efficient way to deal with reporters. However, many reporters, unless explicitly told not to, will still request interviews, and television stations will still seek to get video footage. If you have a lot of media interest, you may want to set up one interview time and location for all of the media outlets. This is essentially a press conference. You can give all of the reporters the same information at one time. Carefully plan the press conference. This is not something to throw together. You could also request that media “pool” their resources and that your family do interviews with a limited number of reporters, who will then share the information with all

of the requesting outlets. For this to work effectively, the different media outlets must agree to share footage among themselves. Setting up a “media pool” can be complicated to negotiate and manage. If you decide to issue a written statement, stage a press conference, or set up a media pool, I recommend doing these activities with the assistance of a media relations professional or a public affairs officer.

Ask for help from media relations professionals. Your casualty resource officer will ask if your family would like the assistance of a public affairs officer. If you are not comfortable dealing with media and would like the military’s assistance, ask for it. Another option is you could contact a family friend who works with the media, or a local association of public relations professionals and request help. Ask if they can provide someone on a volunteer basis to help your family manage media requests. To find a local public relations association, contact the [Public Relations Society of America](#) or the [Florida Public Relations Association](#).

Your home – creating a privacy zone. Because public phonebooks are available online, media may show up at your home. This can be a shock. You open your front door expecting Aunt Margaret with a casserole, and instead get a reporter with a camera pointed in your face. Remember – whatever they film – they can and (very likely) will broadcast. So be polite. You will have to think on your feet and decide whether you want to do an interview now, later, or never. You could say, “I will talk with you, but I would like for you to come in and for us to sit down.” You could also say, “The person you need to talk to is not here, but I can have them call you in the next hour to set up an interview.” For your family’s privacy, you may want to ask media to not broadcast photos or video showing the outside of your home. If you think a news crew got video footage of your home, you can call the station and ask him or her not to broadcast it. They may still do it anyway, but often they will respect the family’s wishes.

What to wear for an interview. Often people wonder what they should wear for a media interview. It really depends on you and the image you want to present. Solid colors are usually best. A shirt with a collar often looks better than a shirt without one. If you have a special piece of jewelry that reminds you of your loved one, you may want to wear it and talk about it during the interview. For women, makeup is fine, just try to stick with classic colors and don’t overdo it. Often families will wear dark colors for interviews because they are in mourning, and it’s okay to do that if that’s how you feel.

The living room interview for television – what to set up and expect logistically. The camera crew will likely include at least a reporter and a videographer (camera person). Sometimes a sound person will tag along so it can get crowded pretty quickly. The crew’s biggest concern will be framing the shot and getting good light. Quite often a cozy armchair is a good place to do an interview, with a photograph of your loved one in a classic frame nearby. You may want to ask your other family members to sit nearby or around you. If they are there, the reporter may try to talk to them. Consider what the camera will capture besides you – you may want to look at the room and make some modifications, but try to keep the space you are using for the interview comfortable rather than staged.

Where to sit for an interview and dealing with sound equipment. For some people, a standing interview is more comfortable. But if you're nervous and shift around, your head and body will bob on camera. Try to stand still, but not rigid. Sitting on a stool forces you to sit up straight but an armchair or chair with a low back may keep you more grounded. Whether you are standing or sitting, if you are uncomfortable, tell the crew and see what can be done to make it better. They want this interview to look and sound good too. The reporter may hold a microphone and will tip it in your direction when it's time for you to talk. Don't try to take the microphone into your own hand. You may be asked to wear a microphone with a wire that runs to a battery pack. This may require a member of the crew to help run a wire under your clothes or to otherwise touch you or your clothing. You're still in charge; don't allow them to touch you if you are not ready or you would prefer that someone else help you with the equipment. The camera crew will turn on a very bright light and shine it in your face and they may ask that you talk for a moment while they adjust the sound.

Write yourself notes. You may want to write down a few dates and details, just to make sure you are clear on them and don't stumble in the interview. List the year your loved one was born, major accomplishments and graduations, the year they joined the military, and information about their deployments. Think of your favorite memories and funny moments. Consider what you would like to share with the media and the entire community.

What to say in a media interview. It's okay to ask the reporter ahead of time what types of questions he or she will ask. This lets you think about how to respond. It's okay to tell stories about your loved one and to talk about the things you cherish and remember about your loved one. Remember that anything you say in an interview can appear in the media. Nothing is ever "off-the-record." Use your natural speaking voice.

Dealing with questions about the war and politics. Most reporters will focus their stories around your loved one. Many will be genuinely sympathetic to your family and will work hard to make the story one that pleases you and honors your loved one. However, some reporters will also take the opportunity to try and get your opinion on the political aspect of your loved one's death. Whether or not you want to comment on the war, the administration or some political angle is up to you but think about how you want to handle such questions in advance. Consider whether or not your family is united in its political beliefs and to the degree that you're comfortable with the focus of the story moving away from your loved one and into the political arena. Personally, I found it best to keep discussions with reporters centered around my brother's life and his love for the military. If you get asked a politically-motivated question and choose not to answer, you still have to say something. Do not say "no comment." You can say "I think the real point is that my loved one cared deeply about his career in the military and..." They can't quote you on something you never said, so don't take the bait.

It's okay to set limits on the media. You can set ground rules for your family's interaction with the media, and standards for how you expect reporters to behave. You

can also permit free and open access by the media to your family and any ceremonies to honor your loved one. I have found that most families are more comfortable with some limits, but each family is different. Your family needs to make its own choices about what it will allow. In our case, my mother was not comfortable with any of our immediate family doing on-camera interviews in the two weeks immediately after my brother died. So we didn't do any on-camera interviews. There were still TV stories – but the reporters got information by interviewing me over the phone, using some of our family photographs, and talking to family friends.

Requesting a correction. You talked to the reporter, and the story ran. But a critical detail about your loved one's life is wrong. Now what? Should you request a correction? Take a deep breath, and consider if you want to request one. If it's something that will be repeated, or is something that is egregiously wrong, then yes, you probably do want to ask for a correction. Reporters don't like to get things wrong. They prefer for their stories to be accurate. So call the reporter you originally dealt with (generally immediately calling their boss or the station manager is not necessary and only results in hostility), and let them know. Do it right away. This is not a call to make if you are feeling emotional or upset. If the story is on television, local stations will frequently "cycle" stories to run for three newscasts – evening, morning, and noon. So if the story is wrong on the evening newscast and just ran for the first time, there may be time for the station to fix the story before it runs again on the morning or noon newscasts the following day. If the reporter you are dealing with at the television station is not available, talk to the producer. Most newspapers will print their corrections policy, so check the paper and follow the instructions. Corrections should be done for factual inaccuracies. If you don't like the way the story was phrased or handled, or thought your story should have been first in the newscast and not third and want to complain about it, then you don't have a case for a correction. Calling the station or newspaper to complain about a reporter's writing style or the story order, will earn you a reputation – and probably not one you want to have.

Talk with your minister, religious advisor, funeral home director, or venue manager about how media will be handled on-site during a ceremony or funeral. Some venues, such as a large church or national cemetery, may have their own policies in place about media. Some locations and ceremonies may not allow media at all, or will restrict their access. Talk with your family's contact at the venue about how media will be handled. If you tell camera crews that it's okay to film from the back of the room during a memorial service, and the ushers throw them out of the building, that will be on the news. So make sure everyone knows the plan ahead of time.

Determine who will talk to media before or after a funeral or memorial service. It's also important to discuss who will talk to media before or after a funeral. It's quite possible that the person who has serving as the family spokesperson will need to grieve, talk to family friends, and otherwise not be accessible at this time. You may want to appoint someone else to be the point of contact for reporters on-site at a funeral. Or you may want to tell reporters that someone will be available after the event in a particular location.

Funeral and Memorial Services: Things to Consider if Allowing Media Access

- You may want to limit media access to family members so they have time to grieve during the service. Indicate to media that they can get quotes from someone else such as the family spokesperson, a friend, minister, or someone else. Realize that if you don't designate someone (and even if you do), reporters may find a random person to interview.
- Some families don't mind being photographed during a service, others do. You can ask photographers covering a funeral or memorial service to not "be in the faces" of your family members. Because of telephoto lenses, photographers can often be fairly far away from your family and still get close-up photos. If you really don't want your family photographed, you need to say that very clearly ahead of time.
- Keep reporters and television camera crews in the back of a room or to the side, where they can get a clear view of the proceedings, but not disrupt the experience of the attendees. To make sure this happens the way you intend, the ushers or staff at the event need to know this, and they can direct media where to go. You may want to designate a media area at the back of the room, where camera crews are allowed to set up. Photographers can often get very good photos from a balcony.
- You can also ask media to do interviews outside the building, or in a designated room. Your family may have a receiving line to talk to guests, host a reception, or be busy talking with family friends, and not want the pressure of camera crews nearby.
- You can ask reporters not to talk to funeral attendees until after the service is finished, and even ask them to not talk to anyone in attendance. Sometimes families will request that media not approach anyone entering the service, but allow them to talk to people as they leave.

Four Things You Should Never Say to a Reporter	What You Could Say Instead	Why This is Better
No comment	We're not able to talk right now with the media and our family would like some privacy. We know you are working on a story, so if you'd like to talk to someone, here's a name and phone number...	Regardless of the circumstances, anyone who says "no comment" looks guilty and like they are hiding something.
I want to get publicity for...	We're trying to honor my son who was killed in Iraq, by inviting the community to donate to...	Meeting the needs of the reporter increases the likelihood of a favorable story. The reporter thinks – I'm not in the publicity business, I am in the story business.

		This is a heart-warming community interest story about a family reaching beyond their pain to help others...
You media people are all the same, I already talked to (their competitor)	I've talked to a lot of people today. I can talk with you for a few minutes.	The reporter realizes that he/she has a limited amount of time to get the information, and that some information may be available from other media outlets (which this reporter may or may not be able to use). They will hopefully keep the interview short.
We might call you back in a couple of days or next week	Someone will call you back in an hour.	The reporter is on a deadline and is going to write a story, often today. Saying "in an hour" assures the reporter that information is coming, and gives you time to prepare or catch your breath. Calling the reporter back in a couple of days is not an option, unless they are working on a long-range story.

Reporters and Children

Children who have lost a parent in military service, or who are now dealing with the fact that their loved one is injured, are particularly vulnerable. Parents should carefully consider any media request to talk to a child. It is completely reasonable for you not to allow your child to talk to media, especially immediately after a loss.

Reporters are often interested in photographing children, because their viewers and readers are interested in them, and children provide a poignant way for the public to understand the family's loss. Consider the iconic image from President John F. Kennedy's funeral of his tiny son saluting the casket, or the picture of a widow holding a baby and the folded flag. Images like these are sought by media, because they are connected to the larger American story of honor, duty, and sacrifice.

Some media may try to photograph children during a funeral or at a gravesite. If you don't want your child photographed, you need to say so, very clearly, to the media directly. You may opt to allow media to photograph your children, but not talk to them.

For some children, a media interview, even one that goes well, can be traumatic, even if the child wants to tell their story. Personally, I have supervised media interviews for families with children who had lost a parent in military service. However, in these cases, the children had had several months, or even a couple of years, with their grief. Their loss was not fresh and new to them. They were moving interviews, because the children were able to talk about their loved one, their loss, and how they were coping. These interviews were not conducted just before a funeral or in the immediate days after a death notification. People will understand if your family decides that your children will not talk to media.

If you allow your child to be interviewed, the parent should be present. You can ask to see all questions that will be asked of the child ahead of time. I would also recommend that when agreeing to an interview with a child, the family ask the reporter and the family to review [the tip sheet issued by the Dart Center on Journalism and Trauma, which offers advice on interviewing child trauma victims.](#)

Dealing with Protestors: What Now?

Unfortunately, there is a group that travels the country specifically to protest at funerals and memorial services for soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. This happens to many families who are dealing with the loss of a loved one in the military. This happened to my family, and I know how painful and hurtful their presence can be. The arrival of protesters adds another dimension that you have to consider.

In our case, our family pastor told us that a group with a political agenda had announced its intentions to travel to our hometown to protest at my brother's memorial service. I could tell when he said the words that it pained him to have to tell our family this. Our casualty resource officer was also there, and she also had some information about this group and how they operate.

We learned that this group often says things that are terribly hurtful to survivor families. They have a website, and they issue news releases. They will gladly talk to reporters. Police can move them away from cemeteries and places of worship, but what they say and their right to gather is protected under the Bill of Rights. The protest group had already contacted the police department and requested that the police be on hand to protect them. Now their arrival was a matter of public record.

In response, another group contacted our family, the Patriot Guard Riders. They're a group of veterans with motorcycles. They wanted to block the protestors with their motorcycles and signs. Essentially they were proposing a counter-demonstration.

I knew as a public relations professional who has dealt with protestors before, what could happen. The police would likely try to keep the two groups apart, so "blocking" the

protestors would probably not happen. Rather we would have two distinct groups near the church, both attracting attention.

The protest group was there for themselves – not our family. The Patriot Guard wanted to help our family and do what they could, and wanted to honor our family's wishes. I worried that media, with their love affair of pro-con sides and controversy, would focus on the protestors and the counter-demonstrators. For our family, the guiding concern was holding a memorial service that honored my brother's life and allowed our family and friends to grieve with us.

A handful of protestors with signs was one thing. A handful of protestors, facing off against fifty people on motorcycles, was a circus. It was not the atmosphere we wanted. Instead, we asked the Patriot Guard Riders to join us in the church for the memorial service, and not to stage a counter-demonstration. There must have been fifty leather-clad bikers in attendance. Since the church ran out of seating when 900 people came to pay their respects, the bikers filled the choir loft. I'm sure it's an image that my brother, Christopher, would have chuckled over and enjoyed. They also attended my brother's funeral at Arlington National Cemetery, which was very meaningful to our family, especially because several Patriot Guard riders traveled a great distance to participate.

As a family member, yes, it was painful to see people outside the church holding hate-filled signs. But there were four of them. Not a lot. And our feeling was that my brother died in part to protect their right to express those opinions, as hurtful as they were. The police were on-site and worked with the church staff to ensure that things went smoothly. We saw them, but we couldn't hear them. They were placed very far away from the church.

When I picked up the newspaper the day after the memorial service, what I saw front and center, were photos from the memorial service. The story focused entirely on the service and my brother's life. The protestors weren't even mentioned. Our local television station led their evening newscast with a story about the memorial service, and sidelined the protestors into a separate short story. The other television station didn't mention them at all. I believe that our family's willingness to be open with the media in the days before the memorial service influenced how the coverage turned out. By permitting some access to media, I think the reporters understood us a little better, and considered carefully where the protestors would fit into their coverage.

A few months later, I saw a news report in Seattle about a soldier's funeral where a protest and counter-demonstration occurred. The same groups were involved there too. The television station's story about the funeral focused mostly on the protestors and the counter-demonstrators. The only mention of the soldier in the report was his name and a brief picture at the beginning of the story. Nothing was said about his service in Afghanistan, how he died, or what he accomplished in life. The story was focused entirely around the protestors and the counter-demonstrators.

For our family, we felt our choices honored our loved one and created the best atmosphere we could have given the circumstances, to honor my brother. If you have to face this situation, you need to make the choices that you feel honor your family's wishes, and honor your loved one. They are not easy choices.

It's possible that things will change and that more grieving families will not have to go through this. An \$11.5 million dollar judgment was levied in October 2007 against the protest group by a court in Baltimore, after a grieving family sued them. Family members said that their presence disrupted their ability to grieve and caused them emotional distress. Whether they will collect, and the protest group is forced into bankruptcy, remains to be seen.

After the Story Runs: Preserving Memories

For many families, seeing the news casts and reading the articles engenders pride, but it can also be distressing. The hardest for me was the graphic created by one of the television stations with the years of Christopher's birth and death. That was hard. Seeing in print or on television that your loved one is critically injured or has died makes it seem so much more real.

Many families want to save the newspaper clippings and video footage about their loved one for their family, even though it may be hard to look at. Twenty years from now, you may want to look at it, or want to show it to a child who has grown up. Your memories right now may be so painful that it's hard to recall details. Your system has had to process a lot. Keeping the pictures and news stories may be helpful to you.

Local newspapers are easy to find and inexpensive to purchase. Many family members may want copies of the news stories and the obituary, so you may need to buy several copies. Newsprint yellows very quickly so you may want to take articles to a copy center and create color copies of the stories. Your local office supply store or scrapbook center will carry archival quality protectors and sleeves that will protect paper products and photos.

Stories about soldiers will often be picked up by wire agencies like the Associated Press or Reuters, and carried in newspapers around the country. The New York Times and many other newspapers regularly run a list of soldiers recently killed in combat. The Washington Post and other newspapers periodically publish a section called "Faces of the Fallen," which shows pictures of soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq. If you don't live where these newspapers are published, you may need to look for them on the internet. Time magazine runs an annual listing of soldiers who have died.

You can run online searches to find news stories about your loved one. Try to run these searches within 30 days, as news stories tend to be archived after about a month. A couple of good sites to use are <http://news.google.com> or <http://news.yahoo.com>. For my brother, I searched for "Chris Neiberger," which brought up stories that contained his name. I also searched for stories about "Christopher Neiberger" and our family's last name. You also may want to check <http://www.youtube.com>, as some television stations

post their stories on this popular video-sharing site. For radio, check the station's site directly. Many stations are now streaming stories live, and even creating online archives of audio content. For blog postings, which often include news articles, run a search using your loved one's name on <http://www.technorati.com> or the blog search function available through google, <http://blogsearch.google.com>.

Many media outlets also have online articles – whether they are newspapers, radio stations, or television outlets. If you want to print out the story, look on the page for a “printer-friendly” button, or a “print this article” link. If you want to save the story to your computer – in Microsoft Internet Explorer go to file, save as, and then save it. Some websites will not allow you to save a web page using this method. If the information is on multiple web pages, you will need to save each page as a separate file with a different name. And it may download a lot of junky looking graphics too. Another option is to create a pdf version of the article, if you have Adobe software installed on your computer. You could also use screen capture software to store images of the stories on your computer.

Remember all those people who said to call if there was anything they could do to help? Creating an archive of media material related to your loved one's death would be a wonderful task for one or more of your tech-savvy friends who wants to help you with something.

The best way to get photographs is to contact the photographers or the paper's photo desk directly. You will need to call each news agency separately. If your family decided to hold a burial out of town, your hometown paper may ask a wire service to attend the burial and get a photograph for them to publish. If you hold it at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. and permit news coverage, there may be photographers there from the Associated Press, Getty Images, the European Press Agency, the Washington Post, or Reuters. All of these agencies have websites and photo databases you can search online. You can also search news photos online by going to <http://news.yahoo.com>, and searching just news photos.

Photographers especially, are often very appreciative that your family permitted them to take pictures. If asked they may email high-resolution photos to you, and then you can order prints for your family. One agency provided our family with complimentary 8x10 prints. Our hometown newspaper gave our family a CD containing all of the images taken by their photographer at the memorial service, not just the ones they published. On rare occasions, media may charge families for the photographs. The Washington Post charges \$50 per published image. Generally, these photos are provided for personal use only. If you want to post them on a website, or give them to another media agency, you will need to contact the original photographer or news agency for permission.

To get copies of television coverage, you will probably need to contact the station directly. Some stations will provide footage to you for free. Others may charge a fee. Sometimes footage is only kept on file for a limited amount of time, so contact them

within 30 days of the broadcast. If television footage has been added to YouTube, you may be able to copy a piece of code provided by YouTube and place a link directly from your blog or social networking site.

When you allow news agencies access, the photographs or footage they take are copyrighted by the news agencies. That means that anyone with a credit card can go to their website, pay money and download photos – even images from your loved one’s funeral.

In a few instances, images from military funerals have been by groups and agencies with their own political agenda. Often these groups are small and likely did not purchase the rights to the images they are using but just copied them from a website or a news story in violation of copyright. If you learn that your loved one’s image or images from the funeral are being used in a way that you do not approve, first contact the news agency directly, indicate that your family granted them access to the funeral (which you didn’t have to do), that this group is violating the copyright on this image, and that it is upsetting to the family. Sometimes the news agency will contact the group directly and ask them to remove the photo by threatening legal action for a copyright breach. If the news agency declines to take action, or if the group has paid for the rights to the images, there is nothing you can do legally to stop them from using it. In that case appeal to the organization directly, and ask them, out of respect for your family, to remove the photograph. They may cooperate to avoid negative publicity or they may simply not have realized that the images they were using represent the real grief of a real family.

Conclusion

Dealing with the media, especially when you are grieving the loss of a loved one, can be very difficult. The media can also be a valuable tool to honor your loved one and the sacrifice that he or she has made. They can also help you communicate with family members, friends, and the entire community, at a time when you may feel overwhelmed. Even though some of the lessons I learned from working with media after my brother Christopher’s death can be applied to other situations, each family’s media situation is unique. I am sorry for your loss, and that you are in a position where you have to read this. I hope that this guide will provide you with some help and options, as you try to navigate the media, protect your family, and honor your loved one.

Online Resources & Articles

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, <http://www.dartcenter.org>

Offers helpful advice for reporters on talking with trauma victims, including tip sheets, workshops, and support materials.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, <http://www.taps.org>

Provides a peer support network for families grieving the loss of a loved one serving in the military. Offers regional and national seminars, a good grief camp for children, support groups, trauma recovery resources, and a quarterly magazine.

News Coverage Monitoring

Google Blog Search <http://blogsearch.google.com>

Google News <http://news.google.com>

Technorati <http://www.technorati.com>

Yahoo News <http://yahoo.google.com>

YouTube <http://www.youtube.com>

Public Relations Associations

Florida Public Relations Association <http://www.fpra.org>

Public Relations Society of America <http://www.prsa.org>

Additional Articles About Journalists Covering Military Funerals

[Covering a Serviceperson's Death](#)

An article issued by the Committee of Concerned Journalists, exploring the ethical issues around covering a military death. Reporters are advised to use sensitivity and discretion.

[Department of Defense Guidelines on Embedded Journalists](#)

The embedded journalist program has earned accolades from the media. The Department of Defense issues strict guidelines for this program. The guidelines give you a sense of their approach taken to media relations. When interviewing wounded soldiers, reporters are required to get "informed consent" from the patient, so if a reporter wants to photograph your loved one in the hospital, remember that this is a requirement.

[Love and Honor: How do you find your way when the crisis is your family's tragedy?](#)

An article written by Ami Neiberger-Miller in *Tactics*, discussing how she handled media relations in the days immediately after her brother Christopher, was killed in Iraq. *Tactics* is published by the Public Relations Society of America.

[Photographing Grief at Military Funerals](#)

A blog entry by News Sentinel editor Jack McElroy, explaining the newspaper's decision to publish a photograph showing a grieving family. The newspaper received criticism from the Patriot Guard Riders and some of the public about their decision to publish the photograph. The family had requested that close-up photos not be taken.

[Reporting the Death of a Soldier](#)

Information from the American Press Institute for journalists about the death notification process. Recommends that media form a pool of interested outlets so grieving families only deal with the media pool and are minimally disrupted by media coverage.

About the Author

Ami Neiberger-Miller is accredited in public relations and owns Steppingstone LLC (www.SteppingstoneLLC.com), a design and public relations firm located in northern

Virginia near Washington, D.C. Suggestions and comments about this guide can be emailed to ami@steppingstonellc.com.

Media Request

Reporter's Name:

Media Outlet:

Phone Number:

Story Plan:

Who do they want to talk to?

What is your deadline?

Notes:

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