

From: Mr. William D. Zwicharowski

Response to Report provided by the Secretary of the Air Force

I would first like to take the opportunity to thank everyone involved for their dedication and focus on the investigation of these solemn allegations. More importantly the continual effort in halting what was a spiraling decline in the sacred care of our fallen over the past few years.

In my opinion the decline occurred when senior leadership assigned, appointed, or named unqualified personnel to key positions in AFMAO and the port mortuary. It is stated several times in the report, in so many words, that the mission at the Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs is unique and unlike any funeral home or mortuary in the world. Yet, the personnel selected to lead, supervise, and ensure the level of care was provided our fallen had very little or no experience in this extremely demanding, challenging, "zero defect" mission. They had neither Mass Fatality experience nor experience with the receiving, tracking, storage, and accountability of remains. In a relatively short period of time, after new leadership had taken over, not one but two portions of human remains were lost or misplaced, a bone was sawn off of an arm so that remains would fit in a uniform or casket, and practices were questionable at best. It is my belief that no one intentionally did harm; they simply did not have the knowledge and experience required for such responsible positions. The problems compounded, though, when management would not heed the advice of the people who did have the knowledge and experience. In fact they began to show disfavor on said employees to the point of retaliation with disciplinary action, placing an employee on 8 months administrative leave, and attempted removal of two individuals.

In regards to the issue of the arm, all evidence that I read would lead me, as a licensed funeral director/embalmer in two states, one of which is Delaware, with over 25 years of experience, 12 in the port mortuary, to determine that at a minimum the mortuary specialist and in turn the branch of service liaison should have requested permission from the family to remove a major bone from the body for any reason. All indications and witness descriptions lead me to believe the bone was the humerus; it extends from the shoulder joint to the elbow. We ask for permission to remove a beard or a mustache; why would we not request permission to remove a major bone? Moreover, for Mr. Keel to order someone to perform such an unorthodox task could have emotional ill effects on that individual for the rest of his or her life.

The two individuals who were dead set against the arm being removed, Mr. Vance, the most experienced mortuary specialist on staff at the time, and Mr. Parsons, who flatly refused to remove the arm, were the two individuals who were eventually fired and escorted out of the mortuary by security forces. They were called back two days later after intervention from an outside organization.

Throughout the report, the investigating officer refers to the highest standards in the funeral industry. That being said, the level of care at the port mortuary should be the highest standard of any of the 50 states. If sawing off of an arm is considered mutilation of a corpse in any state, then, in my opinion, it is that level of care that the young men and women who gave their lives for their country deserve.

Missing Portions- We as human beings will make mistakes. I for one have certainly made my share; however, it is our solemn responsibility to the families that we serve to be fair and honest with them when we fall short.

Whether a family chooses to have subsequent portions returned to them, or they ask that we dispose of them in a respectful, professional manner, if we lose them, we do neither. In my opinion, they should know that we failed. Trust me, the families will understand.

In the past, under prior leadership, we faced our shortfalls, we fixed them immediately, and then we did everything in our power to ensure that they never happened again.

With the first missing portion, the Commander had his executive officer, a Captain O-3, conduct the Command Directed Investigation. Although guidance on CDIs is vague, it is my understanding that they should be conducted by an impartial officer equal to or higher than the AFMAO commander from outside the organization. When I questioned the fact that the commander's executive officer who worked directly for him was conducting the CDI, retribution began.

The second missing portion had shown as being located in autopsy section for months, not hours, days, or weeks-months, and no action or admission of fault was enacted. The only thing in there was an empty bag.

Leadership clearly avoided responsibility by not addressing the issue, and it was as if they were hoping it would go away. It did not go away

In the case of the second missing portion, there was no investigation.

To my knowledge, in the 55 year history of the Dover Port Mortuary, there had never been a body or portion of a human being lost. In six months under AFMAO leadership, two were lost and integrity in admitting their mistake was non-existent.

Regarding the second missing portion:

I noted that the OPS officer stated that he only had responsibility of remains and portions up to the FBI fingerprinting station, which is absolutely not true. The OPS officer has responsibility to autopsy. He should have taken some responsibility for the second missing portion. That particular officer was later selected to a GS-13 position in the AFMAO organization.

I certainly appreciate the fact that leadership (Col Joyce) is doing everything he can to get the port mortuary back to the world class organization that it has always been, however the senior civilian leadership in the organization is still not, in my opinion moving forward, and still not admitting wrongdoing. Until they do, morale in the organization will continue to decline.

I have a philosophy that I have lived by for the past ten years. When in question, I ask myself if I would do this if Mom and Dad were looking over one shoulder, and CNN had a camera over the other.

I would again like to thank everyone for the support of our fallen, and their families.