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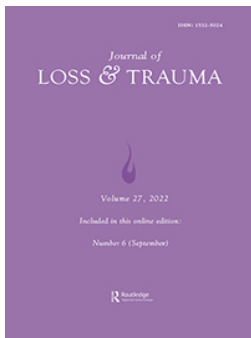
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“Knock on the Door” – Exploration of Casualty Notification and the Long-Term Impact on Military Families in the UK

Gill McGill, Gemma Wilson-Menzfeld, Mary Moreland, and Matthew Donal Kiernan

ABSTRACT

Receiving the news following death in service is widely referred to among the Armed Forces population as the “knock on the door”. This research uniquely considered how casualty notification is undertaken when reporting the death of a member of the UK Armed Forces and the impact of this on the family and/or significant other. For this study, 15 individuals (spouses, parents, and children) participated in semi-structured interviews and this data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis. Many participants could not remember what they were told and could not remember who told them. In particular, misunderstanding and confusion arose about the roles and responsibilities of the notification officers as well as responsibility for informing other family members, including children. Media intrusion was also highlighted as a significant issue. Results also indicated that the long-term impact of loss affected participants in a variety of ways—from dealing with unexpected “triggers” to an accumulation of feelings of regret, uncertainty, and guilt resulting in a loss of control. The impact on physical and mental health is problematic without support to address this. Results also indicated a lack of access to psychological support for bereaved adults and for young children. The study findings illustrated key issues with the notification itself, short-term procedures and provisions, and the long-term impact. However, these were diverse, multi-faceted issues across the cohort and were not homogenous. Fundamentally, the information and support provided when delivering the notification of death needs to be re-addressed, as well as the longer-term support provided for bereaved families.

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Introduction

Due to the nature of service in the Armed Forces, there is increased risk of personnel being exposed to serious and often unsafe situations that may result in untimely death. The risk includes the possibility of death

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occurring in traumatic circumstances and by enemy action (Cawkill, 2009). However, hostile action is not the only cause, and other causes of death in service may be attributed to training accidents, acute illness, and suicide—to name a few. Regardless of the cause or circumstance, there are often multiple and complex factors to take into account when considering death in military service (Cawkill, 2009). There is also increased likelihood that the families left behind are young. All of these factors, added to death often being sudden and in the public eye with significant media intrusion, make for complex circumstances. In addition, Seamon-Lahiff et al. (2021), suggest that grief can be more complicated following a military death. The key factors associated with complex grief include aspects of Armed Forces life that pre-dispose families to high levels of stress, such as dispersal and separation, the potential for exposure to loss as a result of conflict (Delaney et al., 2017). The environment in which the death and bereavement occurs is an important variable that impacts on the way in which support needs are recognized and responded to (Rolls & Harper, 2016). Nevertheless, for families and significant others bereaved through the death of a loved one, the impact is primarily a personal experience.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) determines the process in which bereaved families are notified of the loss of a member of the Armed Forces. The reporting of a death and the notification process is co-ordinated by the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Center (JCCC). As soon as the name of a casualty is confirmed, the Casualty Notification Officers (CNO) will try to “*notify the deceased’s emergency contact or next of kin as soon as possible*” (Cawkill, 2009).

Following notification, the role of the CNO is replaced by the Visiting Officer (VO) who is responsible for helping with funeral arrangements and aftercare (Ministry of Defence, 2015). The VO plays a vital role, particularly during the period immediately following the death of a loved one when the bereaved are faced with a huge number of administrative tasks and decision making (Lester, 2019). Recent studies have shown that military regulations, processes and procedures may be at odds with the needs of the bereaved. The perceived lack of control felt by the family can intensify when there is a struggle to exercise preferences, especially when faced with making decisions about viewing the body and recovering personal effects (Rolls & Harper, 2016).

In the military context, death can be the ultimate consequence of service, however, the specific circumstances can be multiple and rarely predicted. Working in a military environment undoubtedly increases the risk of potential hazards, particularly during operational deployments where life-changing injuries and fatalities have become familiar aspects of conflict reported by the media (Green and Cawkill, 2012). This increased risk

means that death is an occupational hazard of military service and, as such, the response and management of death can be planned for by the MoD. But, despite the increased risk associated with military service, and plans that are in place to respond, many families believe that it will never happen to them and no matter how prepared, the loss of a loved one will always be unexpected. To bridge this gap the UK MoD has well established policies and procedures to assist the families (Ministry of Defence, 2015). The “Joint Casualty and Compassionate Policy and Procedures Vol 2”, revised by the MoD in 2015, is the most recent, updated report of the MoD’s policies and procedures relating to death in military service and outlines the process of casualty notification, funeral arrangements, and the role of the JCC, CNO and VO. The document outlines the MoD’s duty to ensure that any loss of life is reported as quickly and as sensitively as possible (Ministry of Defence, 2015) and also identifies the likelihood of media interest in relation to incidents or accidents which result in the death of service personnel, especially those that occur during military operations (Ministry of Defence, 2015).

Whilst there is a comprehensive policy in place for the UK military, there is a dearth of research exploring casualty notification and the impact of bereavement on Armed Forces families after casualty notification, with most recent research being carried out in the US. Prior research from the US, highlighted that the sudden and violent nature of military deaths can lead surviving family members to experience traumatic bereavement, which is associated with enduring symptoms of both trauma and grief (Cozza et al., 2017).

Literature on bereavement support in the UK identified that families bereaved by death in the context of military service require a distinct level of understanding and sensitivity (Hewison et al., 2020; Lester, 2019) and empirical research carried out by Rolls and Harper (2016) investigated the impact of practical support on bereaved parents—outlining certain features following death in military service that make bereavement particularly challenging.

More typically, where academic material does exist, this has largely focused on political aspects of military loss and repatriation. For example, Lester (2019) considered the experience of bereaved military families in the Coroner’s Court; whereas research carried out by Cawkill (2009) gives a brief overview of the casualty notification process and subsequent bereavement support offered by the military, together with some recent developments in the Army, and the significance of collaboration with external bereavement agencies.

However, there is a paucity of research into the impact of bereavement on significant others after casualty notification in the UK Armed Forces.

As part of the Defence Select Committee inquiry into the Armed Forces Covenant in 2018, the Chair of the War Widow's Association (WWA) clearly articulated that there remains an absence of research into the experiences of families that lose loved ones in service. In particular, the WWA highlighted the need for an investigation into how bereaved families are notified and, subsequently cared for (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2018).

The aims of this empirical research study were to examine the impact of casualty notification through the lens of the narratives as told by the bereaved, with specific consideration to how it was undertaken, and long-term impact on the surviving family.

Materials and methods

This paper used a qualitative method, specifically applied social policy methodology (Cresswell, 2017). This methodological approach is useful when seeking to understand and develop policy as it provides insight, explanations, and theories of social behavior, and concentrates on finding solutions. (Spencer & Ritchie, 2002). The study was granted ethical approval from Northumbria University's ethical approval system. The recruitment process was supported by the War Widows' Association (WWA). The WWA is unique and is recognized as the United Kingdom's leading representative organization of military widows, with the membership of the War Widows' Association covering all three services, the Royal Navy/Royal Marines, the Army, and the Royal Air Force. Membership is irrespective of age, rank, or service of the deceased.

Widows and bereaved family members expressed their views and experiences on the impact that the death of their loved one had on the surviving family. Specifically, the interviews focused on how casualty notification was undertaken, and the impact that the process had on the long-term well-being of the family.

Fifteen participants were recruited to participate in this study. Participants were eligible to take part if:

1. They had lost a family member (spouse, partner, child, or parent) and the death was either during service or attributable to service (but not necessarily due to warfare).
2. The death occurred in U.K. military service; and if the participant was over 18 years old.

A peer-led approach was used to recruit participants. A peer researcher, who was a member of WWA and the research team (MM), used their

expert knowledge and experience to effectively recruit all participants involved in the study. The role of the peer-researcher was to disseminate study information to potential participants, answer questions about involvement in the study, and to act as a bridge between the research team and potential participants. This “insider’s perspective” was particularly beneficial in the recruitment process itself. The shared experiences and shared understanding between peer researcher and potential participants were perceived as a positive influence on recruitment, in that it provided reassurance and reduced/removed barriers. The peer researcher was also central to data collection, data analysis, and dissemination.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the participants in their own homes. The interview schedule was developed from an initial “pilot” utilizing open-ended interviews carried out with two military widows. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. A flexible, semi-structured approach was taken to allow sufficient freedom for participants to talk about their own personal experiences as they wished, in the order that felt right for them. It also allowed for collection of valuable, multifaceted stories from participants about how they lived their lives after notification.

The participant interviews were transcribed verbatim. NVIVO software was used to aid the analysis of the textual data, enabling the application of complex coding to large amounts of text, facilitating both depth and accuracy of analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the first phase of analysis, the research team were immersed in the data to familiarize themselves with the depth and breadth of the content of the interview transcripts. Initial codes and then themes were generated and reviewed. Themes were defined and named before producing a narrative. Direct quotes from participants are used as an essential component to aid understanding of specific points of interpretation and demonstrate the prevalence of the themes. These extracts from the participant interviews go beyond a description of the data and provide validity and merit of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This paper is based on Phase One of an exploratory sequential mixed method research project that comprised two distinct parts. Finding from Phase One were analyzed separately to inform the development of a survey distributed to all members of the War Widows’ Association, RNRM Widows’ Association, Army Widows’ Association, and the RAF Widows’ Association.

TABLE 1. Participant characteristics.

Participant Characteristics
Gender (Participants)
Female (<i>n</i> = 13)
Male (<i>n</i> = 2)
Service (Casualty)
Royal Navy/Royal Marines (<i>n</i> = 3)
Army (<i>n</i> = 7)
Royal Air Force (<i>n</i> = 5)
Relationship (to deceased)
Spouse (<i>n</i> = 11)
Parent (<i>n</i> = 3)
Child (<i>n</i> = 1)
Nature of death
Killed in action (<i>n</i> = 7)
Accident (<i>n</i> = 6)
Disablement through service/hastened by service (<i>n</i> = 2)

TABLE 2. Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Summary of themes and sub-themes	
Overarching theme	Sub-theme
"Knock on the Door"	Receiving the news Role of the Padre
Falling through the Gaps	Alerted before the official notification Informing significant others Honesty
Aftermath	Media Intrusion Practical and Emotional Support Widow status and changing relationships Closure/triggers

Results

Participants were recruited from across the United Kingdom. The sample consisted of 13 females and 2 males (see Table 1), and participants represented all three branches of military service. The relationship to the deceased included eleven spouses, three parents, and one child. Seven participants reported the nature of death as “killed in action,” six were accidental deaths, and two were related to ill-health. These details are not reported alongside the quotes to retain anonymity.

Three overarching themes were generated from participant interviews: “Knock on the Door,” Falling through the Gaps, and Aftermath (Table 2).

“Knock on the door”

As soon as the military is notified of a fatality, casualty notification policies and procedures come into operation. This notification is referred to by the participants as the “knock on the door,” however this knock on

the door is not always literal. Participants described their recollection of the notification of death, as well as the role of the Padre in this notification.

Receiving the news

In most cases participants recall the “knock on the door” as being a “blur”:

I don't know whether they introduced themselves, I haven't a notion ... I can remember the secretary making tea ... **(Participant 1)**

So, from what I remember the guy who came round was a Flight Lieutenant, he had been (spouse) boss ... I had never met him ... I don't remember there being anybody in uniform. **(Participant 12)**

However, for others the incidental details remain very clear, regardless of the time that has elapsed:

I remember exactly what I was wearing **(Participant 2)**

So when the knock came at ... and I opened the door and there were two guys in uniform, I thought I was in trouble. I mean, I know how ridiculous. **(Participant 13)**

I will never forget the knock on the door. **(Participant 15)**

... I wouldn't normally go and answer the door if the children were in the bath. I would be there with them, but this hammering was so insistent I thought, I've got to go and answer that. **(Participant 11)**

For most participants, the MoD support they received was confusing, or lacking:

They tried to treat me like a silly, unintelligent little girl which I wasn't and they came to my house and tried to bully me and I wouldn't have it and my mum just said, 'You think that you are talking to a silly squaddies wife, you're not'. **(Participant 3)**

Of the small number of participants who described a positive experience, this was more so relating to the longer-term support offered by the Visiting Officer, and the ongoing relationship they had with this person:

I never felt like I was completely without anyone to contact. **(Participant 15)**

With the people I had dealing with me and the way everything just seemed to sort of go through smoothly, because I know some people have a horrendous time ... We're still friends. He and his wife were staying here last weekend. **(Participant 11)**

Role of the padre

Most participants described being introduced to the Padre during notification but were often confused about the role and the purpose and timing of the visit:

I remember the Padre being sat in the car ... they came in, told me, they said do I mind if the padre came in rather than leave him sat in the car. Because apparently the Padre is not allowed to be there when they tell you. (**Participant 2**)

Then I think at some ridiculous hour in the morning ... there was another knock on the door and the Padre had appeared ... to see if I wanted to talk to him and I said, 'No I don't. Go away' ... (**Participant 12**)

The positive support received from the Padre was typically linked to funeral arrangements and religious affiliation. One participant described finding comfort from receiving visitors, including the Padre, in the immediate aftermath:

I can't remember whether it was the following day that the Padre came as well ... It just seemed like a constant stream of people in and out which was wonderful for us ... (**Participant 7**)

Falling through the gaps

Based on their own, personal experiences, participants perceived there to be limited guidance on how to inform family members or significant others about the sudden death of a loved one. Some participants felt that the experience of sharing the news themselves was a highly stressful situation. For others, there was concern that family members and friends found out about the death via the news or social media. Some participants told their young children and, on occasions, reflecting on this led to feelings of guilt and worry that they got this wrong:

Alerted before the official notification

The risk of media coverage of tragic consequences that occur in UK military is inevitable. For some participants, receiving the news before being officially told raised concern and caused a significant degree of distress at the time and on reflection. Participants described their own experiences but also talked about their concern that close family members and/or friends may find out about the death via media:

So obviously they told me what happened. They thought that I might have heard something because apparently, I think it had been on the news around lunch time when it happened that there had been an accident, because it was such a huge thing. (**Participant 13**)

... of course with Facebook and social media she had been contacted by a friend that said, 'Something has happened. There has been a crash in the (service)' (**Participant 7**)

I got a phone call from my mother in law during the day to say, 'Have you heard from (anonymised)? It's on the radio that there is an aircraft crashed' (**Participant 10**)

Aside from the media interest, participants also recalled feeling generally anxious and concerned about others finding out about their loss before they, themselves, had been informed:

So while the accident happened about (in the morning), I didn't know until (xx) at night and knowing what the military is, there would have been a grapevine, so you can bet that by 5 o'clock everybody in his regiment in (xx) knew he was dead. **(Participant 5)**

Informing significant others

Participants described the burden of responsibility with regard to informing significant others and the disruption and upset this caused. All the participants who took part in the study described the impact of informing family members of the death, recounting an array of emotional reactions:

Someone gave me some sleeping pills... but it was still all the trying to contact other people... then it all got really confused. **(Participant 10)**

I phoned his dad ... I remember stood on the steps thinking I don't want to make this phone call. **(Participant 2)**

Some participants talked about how they told their young children and, on occasion, reflecting on this led to feelings of guilt and worry that they got this wrong:

... poor child, at two... his world was turned upside down and I was trying to tell him his daddy was dead, you know, it was awful **(Participant 3)**

I then had to go up, because of course they (the children) wanted to know what the banging on the door is all about. So I had to go up and tell them. **(Participant 11)**

I realised after how selfish I've been. I was so busy with my own grief that I didn't realise what they (children) had lost. **(Participant 5)**

This notification subjected participants to much burden and lasting impact of worrying about whether they did this in the right way or not.

Honesty

Participants discussed the need to know exactly what happened to the person that died. For those that had the option, making the decision to see the body varied. Some participants felt they should have been able to see the body and—because this was not always possible or advised—this led to a sense of denial and unreality:

It's one of those things you know if somebody tells you your husbands been shot, well they can't tell you much else and it's not going to be worse. (**Participant 1**)

I hadn't thought about this beforehand, but when they carried him into the church the coffin was significantly shorter than he was tall (**Participant 10**)

We didn't know who the heck was in those coffins. (**Participant 13**)

Aftermath

Participants described accounts of the aftermath—from receiving the news to the long-term impact of the loss and grief. For some of the participants who took part in this study, there were “triggers” long after the death which had negative consequences with some “haunted” by the trauma of the circumstances of the death. The circumstances were also often played out in the media over a long period of time, activating reminders of the loss. For many, the immediate media intrusion was a significant factor to deal with for some time after the death. Whilst some participants felt that they had practical support in arranging the funeral and with administrative tasks, others felt a complete lack of control. Widows particularly described their changing status from a married military spouse to a widow as having a significant long-term impact on their life. Each aspect outlined here is explained in further detail below:

Media intrusion

When recalling media intrusion, a small number of participants felt that being “behind the wire” helped and, as such, the attention from newspapers and television reports were described as less intrusive when compared with the experiences of the majority of the participants.

Most participants described unwelcome media attention and press intrusion following notification and, because this interest was often in relation to events that led to the sudden death and the funeral arrangements, it had a significant impact on the bereaved families. This period was described by the participants as a time when they and family members were experiencing grief the most. In this regard, participants described feeling a loss of control because of media intrusion:

I think the worst bit for me was the press were there and I remember seeing them taking photos as we went into church...I did initially get quite harassed by the press...In fact somebody from the local paper came to the front door. (**Participant 12**)

So we had three months of speculation and all these stories ... that got into the press ... they just blew things up and there was children involved (**Participant 13**)

There was an article that appeared in the newspaper that gave far too much information for my liking because it gave my address. (**Participant 1**)

So that's why it became big news so quickly I guess because it was a really public and inhabited area that they had crashed on to a village, on the very edge of the village (**Participant 10**)

Practical and emotional support

Participants discussed receiving practical support regarding finance and administration. This aspect of aftercare was described by participants in positive terms with a significant level of appreciation :

He was very helpful with filling in the forms and dealing with the military side of things. I didn't know where to start. (**Participant 11**)

[My Visiting Officer] was very good at form filling. She knew what benefits we were entitled to. What lump sums we were entitled to and how to claim them and we were sort of just signing on the dotted line (**Participant 13**)

Practical support was also provided with funeral arrangements. The relief felt by participants receiving support to arrange and pay for the funeral was clearly articulated during most interviews. Furthermore, in the main, participants welcomed the taking away of responsibility for arranging the funeral, as some felt it was too much to deal with. However, for others, feeling that the funeral arrangements were out of their control was not welcome.

Interestingly, the military funeral was understood more by spouses who had themselves served in the Armed Forces:

I'd done some military funerals for people, so I knew... I'd carried one of our lads that got killed. So I knew about the whole military funeral side of things. I think just having a greater understanding of the funeral side of things. I think just having a great understanding of the whole military system. (**Participant 2**)

I think it made it easier for them to talk to me... because I understood that if I asked for a military funeral that no civilian would get to touch the coffin... I think you understand the language more and you understood what was happening more. (**Participant 1**)

For other participants, understanding the "ritual" of a military funeral was less straight-forward:

So, immediately I butted heads with them when I said... I said I wanted a military funeral and the first thing they said was ... 'he can't have a Union Jack on his coffin'. I was sort of 'what do you mean?' ... 'Well if it's non-military personnel bringing in his coffin into the church, you can't have a flag on it. We will put a flag on it while it's in the church...'. (**Participant 3**)

One participant described being advised against a military funeral and feeling, on reflection, that the wrong decision had been made:

... I was advised against a military funeral... and he should have had a military funeral, but I realise now that they didn't want to organise it. On Remembrance Sunday just past there ... I thought, I wished I'd known because it would have been great because he would have been with his mates. **(Participant 14)**

The *Joint Casualty and Compassion Policy and Procedures, Vol 2* outlines the financial benefits offered to support the bereaved with the funeral and states that upgrading the coffin, for example, is over and above what the grant is expected to be used for. In this regard, one participant talked about feeling confused about this:

The problems I had, I seemed to get conflicting advice or conflicting things like, I spent a whole morning choosing a coffin, actually to be told because he was having a military funeral, he couldn't have actually have that coffin at the time. **(Participant 9)**

Common to most of the participants was the lack of access to formal psychological support and the fact this had not been offered as an option. Most participants did say that they would have benefited from emotional support:

... no emotional support from the (service)...there was nothing for us at all, nothing **(Participant 12)**

This was not only in relation to the spouses themselves. Participants believed the access to psychological support would have been beneficial for their children:

I couldn't get any counselling for the children at all. So they have had no counselling **(Participant 9)**

... my daughter and I have been stuck because we never grieved properly and I've spent an absolute fortune in counselling for both of us **(Participant 14)**

Widow status and changing relationships

The enduring process of grieving undoubtedly disrupted participants' relationships with families and friends. Coming to terms with loss affected relationship dynamics both immediately after notification and also longer-term. Participants expressed feelings relating to reshaping family connections and relationships:

But yes, it's amazing just how many people just don't ever contact you again and people that you considered friends. **(Participant 6)**

So I think that things have always been slightly strained with my in laws really since it happened. **(Participant 12)**

The identity change from military wife to widow was described by participants who had lost their husbands as being a further change in their everyday lives which affected the attitudes of others toward them:

‘Are you a widow?’ ... that was the end of the conversation, that nobody really wanted to speak to me and that was another shocking thing. **(Participant 9)**

... women are not your friend when you are a young, reasonably pretty widow. They’re not your friend and it’s the women that... You know the men always take on this protective role, but women don’t, they think hmm danger here, you know. So and I have spoken to other wives who have been widowed and they’ve said exactly the same. **(Participant 5)**

I wasn’t a very popular person because everybody knew why I had been put in this quarter, that I was a war widow and it’s not really the person that you want around when the regiment is deploying. So there was quite a bit of tension **(Participant 6)**

Closure/triggers

The term “closure” is ambiguous but is discussed by participants in relation to viewing the body and, therefore, accepting the reality of the death. Some participants stated that they had been left with a sense of unreality years after their loss and, on an emotional level, had difficulty believing that their loved one is dead:

I used to feel and occasionally still do think, I’m standing in the kitchen and there’s the back fence. He’s probably just behind the back fence. **(Participant 10)**

All I can assume from the report, is that there were just bits of body everywhere ... All she had was a telegram (anonymised) believed dead at sea ... I didn’t know my dad was dead ... my next door neighbour told me. **(Participant 4)**

You’ve got a coffin, he’s in there, it’s not until later ... that you think, how much is there? What is there? Is there anything? **(Participant 13)**

I don’t know if we were ever actually asked if we wanted to see him ... I don’t think I sort of accepted it...it was just this thing about how did they find him. **(Participant 7)**

For those that took part in this study, bereavement still (in the present) affected their overall wellbeing. Participants described how family and friends have often returned to their own lives, expecting that the initial stages of grief and loss have passed and that the bereaved have recovered from the death and are able to manage. Key issues arose for the participants in relation to “triggers,” emotional/psychological support and “closure”.

The consequences of loss were described as far reaching. Remembrance services, or specific aspects relating to past remembrance services, often triggered memories of distress:

At that time of year and I can’t stand it, see that smell or chrysanthemums that were all funeral flowers. I can’t stand... I will actually start of go ... [wretches] **(Participant 3)**

But it ... it's funny things that trigger years later. ^(umm) We were at (*anonymised*) on Saturday, and this chap came across, he'd been in the parade ... And he said 'I didn't realize who you were' he said 'Your battles never over!' And it was ... I was glad I had my sunglasses on because that really hit me ... I was thinking you know this was (xx) years later, why should something like that hit me? You know and it's ... and it's all those questions that are there that you probably will never get answered. ^(umm) And whether ... they should have been answered or could have been answered (xx) years ago I don't know. ^(umm) Whether that would have made any difference ... **(Participant 1)**

When recalling the early days after receiving the news, some participants reflected on events that triggered strong negative emotions during the interview process:

When it came to the funeral, they arranged the funeral. Well they made all of the arrangements ... I didn't want a big military funeral ... We did have a flag on the coffin and yeah, that was one of the most difficulty things really, I still find it difficult now ... I hadn't really thought about this beforehand but the coffin was significantly shorter than he was tall. **(Participant 10)**

So we went to this undertakers which I now have to walk past every Friday going to work and every Friday I can smell it. It's awful. It never leaves you ... **(Participant 3)**

Discussion

It is widely accepted that those who serve in the Armed Forces are employed, at times, in a hazardous occupation, placed in environments which involve risk to life and exposure to potential traumatic incidents (Cawkill & Smith, 2013). This study explored the experiences of those who received a notification of death with a particular focus on bereavement, receiving the news, life after notification, long-term impact and media intrusion.

Research on bereavement support highlights the importance of accurate, timely and comprehensive information and assistance (Hewison et al., 2020). Following notification of the death, participants recalled being provided with instructions and information from the Notification Officer about the circumstances of death and, later, from the Visiting Officer about administration, financial support and the funeral arrangements. The *Joint Casualty and Compassion Policy and Procedures Vol 2* guidance is clear with regard to role of the Visiting Officer and Notification Officer and outlines associated responsibility. For example, it states that it is not the role of the Notification Officer to discuss funerals or finance matters as the Visiting Officer is the person who will support the bereaved with decisions about funeral arrangements. However, participants felt that the trauma and shock prevented them from fully understanding the role and responsibility

of the respective officers, what was happening and/or what they needed to do. Many participants could not remember what they were told by the Notification Officer or the Visiting Officer in the days following notification, or even who told them. This led to confusion and participants expressed anxiety about this long afterwards.

This confusion extended to the role of the Padre at the notification of death. When a death occurs, chaplains will be involved from all three branches of the Armed Forces and they are called upon both to support the Notifying Officer and in due course, the Visiting Officer, in the context of pastoral care (Cawkill & Smith, 2013; Ministry of Defence, 2014). For participants who took part in this study, there was discrepancy between what the *Joint Casualty and Compassion Policy and Procedures Vol 2* outlines as the MoD's duty to provide pastoral care and consideration with regard to the preferences of the bereaved. This raises the question of whether in an ever-increasing secular society, there is a role for religion, or a member of a religious faith, in the notification process. It might be that service personnel, as part of their next of kin declaration, record whether their next of kin would want a military chaplain present in the event of a death notification having to be delivered.

Recent studies have explored the experiences of newly bereaved partners who are often not sure of how they can, and should, navigate both the initial and long term feelings of bereavement with their child or children (Schonfeld et al., 2016). In addition, despite the fact that the child/children may well show a willingness to be part of events, such as the funeral, family members are often protective and may well exclude them from taking part in any decision making (Silverman, 2013). Research has found that, for children who are excluded from decision making, that long-term psychological damage can occur and those children have the potential to demonstrate anger, regret or hurt and frustration in later years (Holland, 2004; Paul, 2013).

The subject of media intrusion is extremely prevalent throughout the participant narratives. Notwithstanding best efforts to protect the grieving family from this intrusion, there are many examples provided as part of the participant interviews of newspaper and television reporters invading privacy. In addition, there is most certainly a need to recognize the ease at which members of the public and people who may witness an accident can share this via social media. It is accepted that this is difficult to manage, but there is a need to consider further protection for the families, particularly with regard to the risk of the bereaved hearing the news before official notification.

This study is the first of its kind and is strengthened by the inclusion of a peer researcher in aiding participant recruitment, data collection, and

data analysis. There are, of course, some limitations to this study. It is important to note that the *Joint Casualty and Compassion Policy and Procedures Vol 2* was most recently updated in January 2015 and it is acknowledged that this revised version was published after the date of death and the life-changing events described by all of the participants who took part in this study. The MoD Policy and Procedure manual (2015) is comprehensive, and whilst the 2015 version precedes the experiences discussed and described by the participants in this study, the findings illustrate that there are fundamental issues that may still be prevalent and need to be addressed. Furthermore, whilst this study included parents and children, these numbers were small. It is recognized that the experiences of spouses, children, parents, and other family members may differ considerably, and further research must be conducted with other family members.

Every participant who took part in this study described highly personal and individual narratives of loss. However, despite this, themes and sub-themes generated from the data analysis illustrate common experiences of the notification process, the aftermath and the long-term impact of loss.

It is important to also note that this study includes a “second phase” that will build on the findings from narrative interviews and develop into a far-reaching survey to explore the findings discussed in this paper. This second phase will also address the limitations of this study by including single service associations in the distribution of the survey. The results from both phase one and phase two will culminate in a comprehensive set of recommendations.

Conclusion

The results from this study provide a valuable insight into the lived experiences of military widows and bereaved families—through their narratives of personal experiences and reflection on the support and guidance offered following notification by the MoD, the challenges brought about as a result of receiving the news, the aftermath and the long-term impact. Studying these narratives of military widows helps to understand the impact of the “knock on the door,” their lives and the lives of significant others as they unfolded over time and the ability to understand grief at different stages of the life-course. It is hoped that the outcomes of this study will be a valuable guide for further research and, equipped with experiences of the bereaved, inform the future provision of military and combat related bereavement support.

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