

Press Release  
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Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum Casualty Assistance Center assists with military burial honors for Vietnam veteran

FORT DRUM, N.Y. – Jerome Walker South, a Vietnam War veteran, died last summer in Ottawa, Canada, from natural causes.

And that could have been the end of his story.

When no next of kin or relatives could be identified, South was likely to be buried in an unmarked grave without any recognition of his service as an American Soldier.

“We were not willing to let that happen,” said Robert Ormsbee, Fort Drum Casualty Assistance Center chief.

Ormsbee and his team were notified about the situation through a congressional inquiry in late November after government officials searched for living relatives and verified the deceased as a U.S. citizen and Army veteran.

This set in motion a coordinated effort from multiple state and federal agencies so that South could receive the proper and dignified military burial he deserved.

“Everyone in this office is either a veteran or married to a Soldier,” Ormsbee said. “If we didn’t help this veteran, he was going to be placed in a pauper’s grave without any honors and forgotten. We couldn’t accept that answer. And we were willing to do whatever we could to make sure that didn’t happen.”

Ormsbee said the Fort Drum Casualty Assistance Center processes roughly 12,000 military funeral honors annually, and their support covers nearly the entire Northeast of the U.S., including seven states, along with six Canadian provinces and Greenland.

“We have the largest geographical area of any casualty assistance center in the continental U.S.,” he said. “We’re responsible for all the military funeral honors, casualty notifications, and casualty assistance in this region. It’s a large footprint.

“And this is something we haven’t seen before,” Ormsbee continued. “I’ve been here since June 2008, and in that time, we have never received a case like this where there was no next of kin.”

Ormsbee said the support for military funeral honors provided by the Casualty Assistance Center does not include transportation or the funding for movement of a service member’s remains unless they are on active duty. The request for assistance comes at the bequest of the

deceased's next of kin – most often through the funeral director – who can furnish documentation of military service.

Even in repatriation cases involving World War II and Korean War service members returning home from a foreign location, Ormsbee said there was always at least one person identified as a family member – even if that person never knew his or her relation to the Soldier.

“And that person becomes the one who takes charge of how we bring the Soldier home,” he said. “So, this case was unique in that no one had assumed that responsibility, and we had a veteran that we normally wouldn't be able to support. But we reached out to people who could, and it became a situation where a lot of people were working back and forth trying to bring this veteran home.”

Ormsbee said they made contacts with the U.S. State Department, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs offices in Buffalo and Pittsburgh, the U.S. Embassy in Canada, and the Ottawa Coroner's Office.

“We don't normally work with the State Department, and until now I never knew there was an indigent veterans unit in the VA,” Ormsbee said. “They did a lot of the heavy lifting and were the ones that found the funding for everything. There were so many people in so many departments that I couldn't list them all.”

William Stowe, indigent veteran unclaimed remains coordinator in the VA Buffalo Regional Office, said that among his responsibilities is confirming that the remains of a deceased veteran is unclaimed and that the veteran's estate cannot cover funeral and burial expenses.

“We process all requests for burial to include verification of veteran status and serve as a subject-matter-expert in terms of arrangement in communication with the Veterans Health Administration and National Cemetery Administration,” he said.

His office covers roughly 32 counties within upstate New York, and they work with county coroners, Social Services, and funeral homes to ensure qualifying veterans can be placed in national or state cemeteries.

“In this case, the veteran was in Canada, so we acted more as a liaison role with the Pittsburgh regional office,” Stowe said. “Once Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and the VA Central Office were informed of the situation, proper contacts were made to get the approval Fort Drum needed to transport Mr. South's remains.”

Carmen Smith, from the VA Pittsburgh Regional Office, serves as the indigent veteran and unclaimed remains outreach coordinator. She was instrumental in finding a veterans organization that could provide the funding for the cremation and burial.

“The first organization that came to mind was the Veterans Leadership Program, which we work with on many outreach events,” she said.

Smith worked with the VLP chief executive officer, who she said was eager to support such a worthy effort. They contacted the National Cemetery Administration’s scheduling office to arrange for the burial.

“This has truly been an honor to be able to assist with Mr. South having the proper military burial he deserves,” she said. “I have been with the VA for over 30 years now, and this was one of the highlights of my career. When things come together like this, it makes my job worth it!”

On Jan. 24, Ormsbee and members of his team attended the ceremony at the Western New York Cemetery in Corfu.

“We have a responsibility to ensure that our funeral honors teams are providing the service in a manner that represents the U.S military,” Ormsbee said. “So, at times we go out more as a check than anything else.”

In other instances, there are special circumstances that need more attention. In this case, they wanted to be there for South.

“We have a veteran who served this country, and we wanted to bring him home,” Ormsbee said. “That was the whole thing. I worked to bring this Soldier home, and I wanted to be at his funeral, and that’s really all there is to it.”

Members of the Western New York National Cemetery Honor Guard Inc., the Watertown chapter of the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, and a two-Soldier team from the New York National Guard supported the burial honors at the cemetery. Also, the Carthage Veterans of Foreign Wars furnished the urn for South’s remains.

Karen Secord, one of South’s friends, traveled from Ottawa to pay her respects. She said that she first met South when he fell outside and needed medical attention. Secord helped him get to the hospital, and that began a friendship that lasted nearly 20 years.

“He was older than me, and I kind of watched over him after that,” she said.

She said South enjoyed football and jazz, never married or had children, but he made friends easily.

“He was an incredibly popular man,” she said. “Being alone in a hospital bed ... that’s not him at all. I think he would have been really honored by this, that people cared.”

A photo of South and another friend, Jo Ruttan, was placed by his urn during the service.

“Jay and I had a long friendship – over 30 years,” she said. “He was in contact with me every day or night for the last four or five years, as we were both aging. He was a good friend, and I truly miss him.”

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Media with questions regarding this press release should contact Fort Drum Public Affairs, Katie Wright, 315-772-9043 or [katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil](mailto:katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil)

Photo Captions –

South Funeral 1: New York National Guard Soldiers fold the American flag during the military burial honors for Jerome South, a Vietnam War veteran, Jan. 24, at the Western New York National Cemetery in Corfu. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

South Funeral 2: Robert Ormsbee, Fort Drum Casualty Assistance Center chief, summarizes the efforts that were made over the past few months that brought everyone to the Western New York National Cemetery in Corfu on Jan. 24 for the military burial honors for Jerome South, a Vietnam War veteran. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

South Funeral 3: Jo Ruttan and Jerome South, a Vietnam veteran, were close friends for many years until his recent death. The Fort Drum Casualty assistance Center staff worked with multiple agencies to ensure South received the military burial honors he deserved. (Courtesy Photo)