

# National Guard conducts fewer funeral honors in 2020 due to pandemic

**READMEDIA**

Pandemic restrictions on funeral services resulted in New York Army and Air National Guard honor guard teams providing over 2,000 fewer military funeral services in 2020 than in 2019.

The honor guard soldiers and airmen expected to conduct 8,835 military honors at veteran's funerals by the end of 2020.

In 2019, the New York Army and Air National Guard provided military honors for 11,006 families.

The New York Army and Air National Guard provided military burial honors 11,326 times in 2018 and 11,170 times in 2017.

A 2000 federal law mandates former members of the U.S. military who served on active duty or the reserves and who did not receive a dishonorable discharge are eligible for military funeral honors.

All former service members' funerals must include the folding and presenting of an American flag to his or her survivors and the playing of taps. The two-person teams usually use an electronic bugle – a bugle with a sound system and speaker inside.

The New York Army National Guard provides funeral honors through a centralized program.

The New York Air National Guard

Spc. Austin Dycha and Sgt. Nikole Clark drape the flag over the casket of U.S. Army Air Force Cpl. Raymond Kegler at his May 14, funeral in Lackawanna.

maintains honor guards at its five airbases and the Eastern Air Defense Sector headquarters in Rome.

Restrictions on the number of people who could be present at funerals early in the pandemic and many families deciding to not hold a formal burial, or funeral, drove the decline in numbers, said Peter Moran, the coordinator for the New York Army National Guard's military funeral honors program.

A Veterans Administration decision to discontinue graveside services and military funeral honors at national cemeteries for part of the year also drove the decline in funeral missions, Moran said.

Air National Guard Tech Sgt. Anthony Villalon, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the honor guard for the 106th Rescue Wing at Gabreski Air National Guard Base, said his teams also were invited to fewer funerals: "We saw a significant decline in the months of March, April and May. These months are usually are busiest months, I believe the lockdowns and the overall impact of COVID



risk caused the decline."

Funeral homes were conducting funerals quickly and not requesting honors, although funeral directors said they expected to request military honors at later memorial services, according to Master Sgt. Sara Pastorello, the public affairs superintendent for the 105th Airlift Wing at Stewart Air National Guard Base in the Hudson Valley.

"We just stopped receiving requests," said Master Sgt. Ryan Snyder,

who heads the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station Base Honor Guard.

While the COVID-19 pandemic played a significant part in this, Snyder said he thinks many families put off services until their loved one could be interred in a new veterans cemetery that opened on Dec. 18.

The Niagara Falls honor guard is a joint function of the Air National Guard's 107th Attack Wing and the Air Force Reserve's 914th Air Refueling Wing.

The New York Army National Guard's eight military funeral honors offices normally conduct 700 funerals each month, Moran said. In March, April and June 2020, those numbers dropped.

In March, there were 513 funeral missions, which went down to 229 in April, 337 in May and 511 in June before climbing back up to the average when restrictions on funeral attendance were loosened, Moran said.

New York, and especially New York City and its suburbs, were hit early by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The New York Army National Guard has honor guard offices in the Bronx, Queens, Long Island, Latham, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Horseheads.

As of Dec. 23, New York Army National Guard military funeral teams had provided honors for 7,005 families. It was expected the funeral teams would conduct 145 more funerals by Dec. 31, for a total of 7,190, Moran said.

The New York Army National Guard provides honors for those who served in the Army or, in the case of World War II veterans, the Army Air Forces.

The teams in upstate New York performed 3,415 military funeral honors in 2019. In 2020, they provided honors 2,880 times.

Families who decided to forgo military honors can apply for them to be conducted later through their funeral director, Moran said.

There are 40 soldiers who work full-time providing military funeral honors and another 50 who can be called upon on a part-time basis when required, according to Moran.

In 2020, New York Air National Guard honor teams took part in 1,639 funeral services (as of Dec. 23), and expected to provide honors 46 more times before Jan. 1, for a total of 1,685. In 2019, the New York Air National Guard conducted 2,403 military funeral honors services.

Both Army and Air Guard honor's teams had to change the way they do things to cope with the pandemic. The Army National Guard honor guard soldiers immediately began wearing masks, Moran said. They also practiced staying 6 feet away from mourners.

Air Guard honor guard teams also began wearing masks and practicing social distancing. At Niagara Falls, Snyder's wife sewed face masks for the team when the supply system could not provide white masks.

The most significant change was during the presentation of the flag to the veteran's family, Moran said.

Traditionally, the leader of the team kneels and presents the flag to a family member on "behalf of a grateful nation."

Instead, the flag was folded and placed on the coffin or behind a cremains urn and the soldier made their remarks from 6 feet away, he said.

The Air Guard made this change too and it was tough, Villalon said. "It was a learning curve not being able to be as social with the mourners as possible. It has been a unique challenge for us, because we are a people person function of the Air Force."

Funeral honors by office and Air Base for 2020 and 2019:

- √ New York Army National Guard.
- Buffalo: 830 in 2020, 963 in 2019
- √ New York Air National Guard
- 107th Attack Wing/914th Airlift Wing, Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station, Niagara Falls: 361 in 2020 and 412 in 2019

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