Casualty Operation
Vignettes
Vignette #1
“Dear John”
WASHINGTON (CNN) -- The U.S. Army is apologizing to thousands of Army families who received letters beginning “Dear John Doe” after losing a loved one in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Some 7,000 letters were sent in late December to notify families of services or gifts surviving family members can receive from nonprofit organizations that help families of fallen soldiers, according to an Army statement Wednesday.

The letters also had improper address information at the top of the correspondence. Instead of the receiving family’s name and home address, the letters said “Army Long Term Case Management.”

The letters were printed by a contracting company and sent by the U.S. Army Human Resources Command's Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Center in Alexandria, Virginia. The center issued a formal apology Wednesday, according to the statement.

"There are no words to adequately apologize for this mistake or for the hurt it may have caused," Brig. Gen. Reuben D. Jones, Army adjutant general, said in the statement. "It is important the original intent of the letter is not lost. The organizations mentioned are dedicated to honoring loved ones and recognizing their sacrifice and commitment," the apology continued.

Merrilee Carlson, president of the veterans and family support group Families United, was told by the Army that families would be receiving one of these improperly addressed letters within the next few days.

"We want to let people know these letters are coming so they are not surprised when they open them," she said.

Carlson is the mother of Sgt. Michael Carlson, who was killed in Iraq in 2005. She said the Army told her she was among those who would receive a letter on Wednesday.

"This was a tragic mistake, but I believe it was not done maliciously," she said. "The Army would not do this intentionally to people."

While there have not been 7,000 soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army often sends letters to primary and secondary family members.

(Copy of the original letter follows on the next page).
Dear John Doe:

The Army has worked with private organizations that want to offer gifts to Families of Soldiers who have died in the Global War on Terrorism. While these organizations have already done a great deal to assist the Families of our fallen Soldiers, many of them have approached us recently in an attempt to do more. The Army recognizes the significant contributions that non-Governmental organizations make in assisting our Survivors and in demonstrating American citizens' support of our Soldiers. We want to ensure our Survivors have the opportunity to benefit from the programs, gifts and offerings that are available to them.

When your Soldier died, you were asked to complete an Authorization for Disclosure of Information. If you agreed to let the Army disclose your name and address to these private organizations, we provided your contact information to them so that they could contact you directly with their gifts or offerings. Many Survivors have already had the opportunity to work with these organizations or to take advantage of the services or gifts they provide.

In order to ensure that all Families of fallen Soldiers from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom know about the various organizations, I am enclosing a list of those that have approached us for assistance and been cleared through the Army Human Resources Command for information sharing. The list we include is not an exhaustive list of all the philanthropic organizations that support our Survivors, but is rather a list of those that have specifically requested the Army's support in contacting eligible Survivors. In exchange for receiving the contact information of those who have authorized us to release it, the organizations have agreed not to release the information they receive to any third parties. We are providing you this consolidated list to ensure you are afforded the opportunity to contact them and take advantage of their services if you so choose.

The Army's Long Term Family Case Management office will continue to update the attached list of private organizations that desire to offer gifts to you and your Family. Our team will include the updated listing of organizations in subsequent Newsletters and on their website at www.alkfcm.army.mil.

I want to assure you that the Army remains committed to supporting you for the long term and this is just one way that we believe we can help you remain aware of organizations across this great country who recognize the sacrifices of both our Soldiers and the Family members who survive them. Should you have any immediate questions and concerns, you may contact us toll-free at

Sincerely,

Carl M. Johnson
Colonel, U.S. Army
Director, Casualty and Mortuary Affairs
Vignette #2
“Army Sorry”
BUFFALO, New York — An Army unit is reviewing how it delivers information to families after a call to a western New York couple led them to believe their son had been killed in combat.

Ray Jasper of Niagara Falls said he, his wife, Robin, and their extended family spent four hours Sunday mourning their son, Sgt. Jesse Jasper, before learning from his girlfriend that he was alive.

The 26-year-old soldier called his father from Afghanistan to prove it after hearing about the mix-up.

“Dad what's going on?” Jesse Jasper asked.

"I said, 'Oh my God you're alive, I love you, I love you, you're alive,'” Ray Jasper, 49, said Tuesday.

An Army spokesman with Jasper's unit said officials may revise the written scripts used by volunteer liaisons to inform all families of any deaths within the unit to avoid similar misunderstandings in the future.

The nightmare started about 2 p.m. Sunday when Ray Jasper, while on a family camping trip, got an urgent message from a family liaison from his son's unit in the 82nd Airborne Division, based in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. When he reached the liaison — the wife of a soldier deployed with Jasper's son — she told him she had a "red line message" that she needed to read to him verbatim.

"She said, 'I'm sorry to inform you that on Sept. 12, that Sgt. Judin and Sgt. Jesse Jasper were killed in Afghanistan,'” Ray Jasper recounted.

"My wife was talking to me at the time and I said, 'say that again,' and she said the same thing over again. I couldn't do any more. I hit the floor," he said.

Jasper knew the military's policy is to notify families in person when a soldier has been killed, but after being away all weekend, he thought someone might have called after finding no one home.

The Jaspers were given a number to call for details but decided they would not dial it until after making the trip home and assembling other family members. As family and friends gathered, others posted condolence messages on Facebook. Jasper's girlfriend in North Carolina saw the postings and called the Jaspers.

"She was screaming to me, 'He's not dead! He's not dead!'” Jasper said. "I said, 'How do you know this?' She said, 'I just got off the phone with him.'

Their son called soon after.

A spokesman for the 82nd Airborne Division said Jasper's unit, through its family readiness group, notifies all families of deaths within the unit to prevent undue worry and misinformation. Maj. Brian Fickel said callers are instructed to read from a written script to prevent misinterpretation.

"I can't speculate on how it was transmitted or how it was received," Fickel said, "but during that process the results speak for themselves. The family believed their son was killed."

The family liaison said she was not able to read the complete message before the call to the Jaspers was terminated, according to Fickel.

"I don't know why they would tell us about someone else's tragedy," said Ray Jasper.

Fickel said the unit is considering starting the scripts with "your son or daughter is fine." Internal jargon like "red line message" will probably go, he said.
Vignette #3
CPL Tillman
CPL Tillman Investigation

On April 22, 2004, CPL Pat Tillman died as a result of friendly fire while deployed to Afghanistan. CPL Tillman was already a well known public figure who drew national attention when he left a promising NFL career to enlist, and later become an Army Ranger. Issues regarding casualty reporting, family notification and assistance, awards processing, and the mishandling of multiple investigations led to significant public relations problems for the Army.

The following is an excerpt from the opening of a DOD Inspector General Report on their review of the events following CPL Tillman’s death:

Our review found that Corporal Tillman’s chain of command made critical errors in reporting Corporal Tillman’s death and in assigning investigative jurisdiction in the days following his death, and bears ultimate responsibility for the inaccuracies, misunderstanding, and perceptions of concealment that led to our review. Those errors, in part, contributed to omissions and inadequacies in the three investigations that followed Corporal Tillman’s death. Additionally, we concluded that Army officials failed to properly update family members when an investigation was initiated into Corporal Tillman’s death and that the justification for his Silver Star contained inaccuracies.

Following the DODIG investigation, Acting Army Secretary Peter Geren apologized for the Army's mistakes by saying: "We as an Army failed in our duty to the Tillman family, the duty we owe to all the families of our fallen soldiers: Give them the truth, the best we know it, as fast as we can. Our failure in fulfilling this duty brought discredit to the Army and compounded the grief suffered by the Tillman family."

The full DODIG report of the CPL Tillman case is provided as a student resource for self development. After reviewing the case, take a look at the summary of change listed in the 30 April 2007 version of AR 600-8-1. How many of the updates listed do you think were influenced by lessons learned from this case? What role do you think the S-1 played in this situation? If it was you, what could you do to influence the situation for a better outcome?
Vignette #4
Investigating Investigations
Investigating Investigations

When looking for an answer to a question, do not take the first answer you find without at least trying to verify the information. This should be common sense advice, particularly in a digital world full of tremendous amounts of data being created by unknown sources. Nevertheless here is an example for your review.

The Army has on multiple occasions reiterated to units the importance of properly conducting investigations related to casualty events. To that end, ALARACT 142/2006 provided guidance on compliance with investigations for hostile deaths that was intended to help clarify common problems seen in previous investigations. The problem was that the ALARACT contained an error (found in paragraph 3A). Hostile deaths can be investigated either formally or informally, and because informal investigations can normally be carried out by battalion commanders serving as the summary court martial convening authority (SCMCA), the message assumed that battalion commanders could appoint the investigating officer. The message went on to say that the appointing authority was also the approving authority (This is true as long as you have determined the appropriate appointing authority).

The problem with the message is that when a death occurs, determining the type of investigation and appointing the investigating officer is the responsibility of the general court martial convening authority (GCMCA), who is typically the first general officer in the casualty’s chain of command. There is an exception to this however, in that the GCMCA can delegate this responsibility to the appropriate Special Court Martial Convening Authority (SPCMCA) in the case of hostile deaths. This responsibility cannot be delegated further (hence the error).

This error was quickly caught and the message was corrected and reproduced as ALARACT 150/2006. The new paragraph 3A notes that any case involving a death must be appointed (even when informal) by a GCMCA. This clears up the problem with the previous ALARACT stating battalion commanders could perform this action. However, the new ALARACT still has two problems. First, it does not mention that in the case of hostile deaths, the GCMCA may delegate appointing authority to a SPCMCA. Considering that hostile death investigations is the subject of the message, this is an important omission. Second, the original ALARACT, now several years old, is still listed as active, meaning that a well-intentioned person researching the issue could find the old message and assume they had found an answer to a key issue.

When possible, take information gathered in research and compare with source documents (regulations in this case). If there is a discrepancy, find out why.