

Funeral chapel, USAF general meet (The News Journal)

Military brass get tour of crematorium at center of controversy over human, animal remains

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U.S. military officials and directors from a Dover funeral chapel met Saturday amid controversy and concern over the handling of service members' cremations by a facility that also does pet cremations.

Gary Wallick, funeral director at Torbert Funeral Chapel, said he and other staffers took military officials on a tour of the facility, showing them their procedures and answering questions.

"They seemed very satisfied with the way that we do things," Wallick said.

After questions were raised by an Army soldier visiting Dover, the Air Force on Friday ordered a halt to the use of the off-site crematory and said bases should use only crematoriums located at licensed funeral homes.

Torbert's cremation facility is about two miles from its main funeral home.

Pet cremations are conducted in a separate area of the building, away from human remains.

"We're very sensitive and respectful of the military," Wallick said. "We're honored to play a part in that, and I hope that continues."

The Pentagon also ordered a review of its cremation policies and practices.

There

have been no complaints or accusations that the funeral chapel mixed up or commingled human and animal remains. The military said the issue arose when a service member reported a sign at the crematorium about the "Friends Forever" pet cremations.

The issue went all the way to the top, with a spokesman for Defense Secretary Robert Gates saying the perception of a possible mixup was "inappropriate for the dignified treatment of our fallen."

U.S. Sen. John McCain, the presumptive GOP presidential nominee, also said he was concerned about the issue.

Top officials with the Delaware American Legion said Saturday that while they could not speak for the organization, they personally were not troubled about the chapel handling human and animal remains as long as they were not mixed.

"If they don't have facilities up at the base, they don't have any place else to do it," said Larry Marcouillier of Harrington, the state department's second vice commander. "What else are you going to do?"

State Commander Lyman Brenner of Wilmington and Chaplain Charles Singman of Bridgeville agreed.

"I don't think the fact there's two facilities in one building is any sign of disrespect," Singman said.

Pentagon spokeswoman Eileen Lainez confirmed the meeting between the funeral chapel officials and Lt. Gen. Frank Klotz, the Air Force's assistant vice chief of staff, but said there would be no immediate Department of Defense statement.

"They're going to report back," she said.

Dover Air Force Base spokeswoman Lt. Chris Sukach said the base would have no comment on the meeting, but reiterated the base's high standards and

respect for those who have fallen.

The base's mortuary, where all troops' remains arrive, does not have its own crematorium and contracts with Torbert, as well as Pippens Funeral Home, also in Dover. Pippens' crematorium is at the funeral home and is used only for human remains.

The base's mortuary has processed 4,608 remains, but officials were not able to say how many were cremations, or how many were handled by the Dover facilities. Wallick said Torbert cremates five to 10 service members' remains a month.

There are three incinerators at the facility, two used solely for human remains and one for pets.

Wallick, a Navy veteran, said he was pleased to have an opportunity to show the cremation operations to the Air Force brass.

"My feeling is that we were very well received," he said. "It's better to be able to tell your story to people in the decision-making loop -- to have them have firsthand information and not rely on somebody else's observation."

Wallick said while his company's main funeral business is advertised and "out front," he sees the military cremations as more of a private service.

"We really don't like to draw a lot of attention to it because it's a personal thing," he said. "We're helping the military or helping another funeral director help the family. ... In that respect, we really prefer to be more in the background."

Wallick said in the day since the controversy broke, he hasn't received any negative calls, but has gotten welcome calls and e-mails from friends and local business owners. "Everyone that I've spoken with has been very positive, and very much in support of us," he said.

Representatives

for U.S. Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., and Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., said Saturday the lawmakers had no comment on the issue.