

ARMED FORCES MEDICAL EXAMINERS (AFME)

The Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner operates under the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, based at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in northern Washington, D.C. The AFME are responsible for determining the cause and manner of death of members of the Armed Forces on active duty. The AFME is also responsible for identifying bodies of military personnel.

There was no formal notification that the AFME would be called upon, but by watching events on television, they saw they would be needed. Beginning shortly after September 11, teams of pathologists began examining victims' remains. Operations were fully underway by September 13. Working largely at Dover Air Force Base (AFB), Dover, DE, the teams brought together all the armed services to identify their fallen comrades. "Our staff represented every branch of the service. We also received tremendous support from the doctors, nurses, and technicians stationed at Dover who participated in the investigation." Due to short staffing at the AFME headquarters, personnel had to be called in from around the country. Military personnel were identified largely through dental and DNA (deoxyribo nucleic acid) records kept on file. Dental, medical, and X-ray examinations were used. Employees at the DNA laboratory worked twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week to support the mission, while pathologists were also working twelve-hour shifts.

The examiners also determined causes of death. There were frequent requests for information from higher headquarters, to the point that the requests interfered with operations. At the same time, higher headquarters were not accustomed to handling information from medical examiners, and sometimes misinterpreted data, which required further efforts from the AFME to explain.

With tremendous public interest in the recovery effort, AFME received a tremendous number of enquiries from the media. Personnel at Dover AFB focused on their work, and interview requests were channeled away from Dover.

While identification information on military personnel is stored and centrally available, information on the 64 civilians on Flight 77 took weeks to arrive. By November 16, 2001, all but five sets of remains had been identified prior to mortuary specialists taking care of them before release to next-of-kin. "Because of the combined effort of all three services and the FBI" the process worked quickly. It was "the most comprehensive forensic investigation in U.S. history."

Personnel from the AFME supported, including acting as team leader, the identification of remains from United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in Somerset, PA. All but one of the passengers and crew were identified. Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory personnel were crucial in identifying victims.

This summary of operations was based on the AFME after-action report and Army News Service articles.