Paying Homage to Unsung Heroes: Understanding and Honoring Military Service at the End of Life (FR453)

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Objectives

- Recognize the meaning behind military awards and decorations (medals and ribbons).
- Utilize that understanding to gain insight to the psychosocial impact of the military experience.
- Describe a variety of ways to honor military service at the end of life.

Ninety-six percent of dying veterans are cared for outside of the VA Healthcare System. One way to understand military service is to understand the significance of military awards and decorations (medals and ribbons). There is a hierarchy of awards and decorations for each branch of the service as well as some that represent joint service. Understanding medals will allow you to ask insightful questions, facilitating trust and providing an opportunity for the veteran to share, while you gain insight into the psychosocial impact of the military experience. There are a variety of ways to help veterans process their experiences and their impacts at the end of life. Furthermore, by thanking veterans for their service and finding creative ways to recognize and honor their service, you may create a legacy for their families for generations to come.

Being able to reframe the military experience around valor rather than trauma will help highlight the courageous rather than the tragic and may help elucidate survivor guilt. Each veteran has a personal story, as well as a collective memory. Military medals are often very important at the end of life for the patient and family. Understanding them improves end-of-life care though life review and legacy making. There are a variety of ways to honor military service. We will share the VA tradition of the final salute and flag ceremony as well as rituals done in civilian hospices.

Everyone deserves to have their life celebrated. Veterans have unique experiences that may provide for unique opportunities to honor them. This session will highlight the significance of military awards and decorations and how that understanding can lead to creative ways to honor veterans. While the session is specific to veterans, some of the psychological support tools and ways to honor them are universal.