

Meg Falk, advocate for Pentagon families after 9/11 attacks, dies at 71

By [Emily Langer](#)

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Meg Falk, the director of the Office of Family Policy at the Pentagon, was about to begin a daily staff meeting the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the building. Evacuated to a parking lot, she and her colleagues saw smoke rising from the building and watched triage begin for victims of the terrorist attack.

“Based on what we do for military families, we knew we were going to have some responsibilities,” recalled Mark Ward, a retired Marine Corps major who worked under Ms. Falk on casualties, mortuary affairs and military honors.

By the next morning, at a nearby Sheraton hotel, Ms. Falk had opened an assistance center for victims’ families. For the next month, she led a round-the-clock operation providing daily briefings as well as food, shelter, child care, legal and financial assistance, and religious, counseling and other services.

Ms. Falk, 71, died March 2 at a hospital in Fairfax County. The cause was complications from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, said her husband, Jim Bryant.

A former schoolteacher, Ms. Falk came to Washington in 1980 through the Presidential Management Fellows Program. She spent a decade with the Navy’s family support program before joining the office of the secretary of defense in 1991 to oversee family policy for all military branches. Her portfolio included housing, child care and employment aid for military spouses, as well as services for families of veterans on their death.

Ms. Falk faced her most acute crisis after the 9/11 attacks, which claimed about 3,000 lives when hijacked planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon and a field near Shanksville, Pa. At the Pentagon, 184 victims were killed.

Mrs. Falk recalled one of the first people to visit the family assistance center.

“She was just so distraught because she could not locate her sister, who she had seen probably 10 to 15 minutes before the plane slammed into the Pentagon,” Ms. Falk later told The Washington Post. “I just sat down with her and let her tell me what had happened and did the best I could in terms of listening.”

Besides assisting with practical needs, the staff provided maps of the sprawling Pentagon complex so that families could understand where their loved ones were at the time of the attacks. Some relatives complained that authorities had granted reporters, but not families, permission to view the disaster site. Ms. Falk helped arrange buses to the Pentagon for those who wished to see it.

“She was totally focused on taking care of families,” Ward said. “Unless there was a law or something saying we couldn’t do something, the thrust was to try to accommodate every desire, every request a family member might have.”

Mary Margaret Falk was born on Oct. 7, 1944, in Detroit, where she received a bachelor’s degree in history from Marygrove College in 1967. She taught in Detroit and with the Defense Department’s overseas schools before receiving a

master’s degree in public administration from Wayne State University in 1980.

By the time Ms. Falk joined the office of the secretary of defense, personnel reductions had strained the military’s ability to provide the traditional funeral honors, including the folding and presentation of the flag and the sounding of taps, for all honorably discharged veterans. With more than 1,000 World War II and other veterans dying every day, the military was unable to offer a live bugler to every family that requested one.

A common substitute, which Ms. Falk found insufficient, was an audio recording of taps. On her initiative, her office engaged an electronics expert who designed a ceremonial bugle with a device, housed in the bell of its horn, that played the mournful call. As many as 25,000 of the instruments are in circulation today, according to Ward.

“A live bugler is preferred,” he said. “But absent a live bugler,” he continued, the ceremonial instrument Ms. Ward envisioned allowed the military to offer families the option of a “visual image” of the time-honored military tradition.

During the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Ms. Falk helped standardize the policy that names of military casualties would not be released to the public until at least 24 hours after their families were notified. Family members also were permitted to witness the arrival of their fallen service members’ remains at Dover Air Force Base.

Ms. Falk received numerous awards recognizing her service to military families and retired from the Pentagon in 2005.

Survivors include her husband of 30 years, a retired Navy commander, of Falls Church, Va.; three stepsons, Scott Bryant of Wake Forest, N.C., Greg Bryant of Jarrettsville, Md., and Steven Bryant of Los Angeles; and seven grandchildren.

Among the family members Ms. Falk assisted after 9/11 was Jim Laychak, who lost his brother David, a civilian Army budget analyst, at the Pentagon.

“I’m sure every family member has stories of Meg helping them,” said Jim Laychak, who, on Ms. Falk’s suggestion, later led the fund that established the Pentagon Memorial dedicated in 2008. “She had a sense about her to know who needed what comforting and when. . . . She was always there, always helping out.”

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