

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL REUBEN JONES,
U.S. ARMY ADJUTANT GENERAL SUBJECT: U.S. ARMY APOLOGY FOR "JOHN DOE" LETTERS
SENT TO RELATIVES OF WAR DEAD VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 2:34 P.M. EST DATE:
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LINDY KYZER (U.S. Army Public Affairs): This is Lindy Kyzer with Army
Public Affairs. We'll go ahead and get started. Thank you all so much for
being here with us.

Today we have with us Brigadier General Reuben Jones. He's the Army
Adjutant General. The U.S. Army is apologizing in correcting a printing error
that resulted in approximately 7,000 letters being sent to family members who
lost a soldier in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

So with that, I'll go ahead and turn it over to Brigadier General
Reuben Jones for opening remarks. GEN. JONES: Happy New Year to everyone.
First of all, just let me start out by thanking you all, for being here and your
interest in this, because it is, from where I sit, my number-one priority.

And as I look at this situation, the thing that always gets to me is
that there are never any words that I could say, to a family, that would ever
adequately apologize for this horrible, horrible error that has occurred and the
hurt that it causes, by causing family members to revisit an event that has
occurred. They are a very, very special part of the Army, as we go through, you
know, the healing process with them.

So again the big point that I'd just like to start off with is that
even though this horrible error has occurred, I don't want the families to lose
sight of the intent behind those great Americans that I have, working for me,
that have a very, very special relationship with our families. And that intent
is to provide them with support that they desire, for as long as they desire and
whenever they are ready to have that support.

And that was our intent. That -- (inaudible word) -- and that
commitment remains firm.

For the Army leadership, for every commander out there who has had a
fallen warrior in his unit, very special relationships form and they never end.
And this is just, again, another effort on our part to stay connected as we
exercise our survivor support initiative -- outreach services initiative with
our families.

And now I'll take any questions that you have.

MS. KYZER: Okay. We'll start out with Wolf with Blackfive. Did you have a question?

Q Can you come back to me, Lindy, please?

MS. KYZER: Yeah, absolutely.

Chuck Simmins, North Shore Journal, did you have a question?

Q Yes. Good afternoon, General. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. I'd like to ask about the contractor involved. Have you used this contractor for other mailings? And what -- is it a no-bid contract? Are there penalties for such an error? Will there be any repercussions to the contractor or to military personnel involved in the process?

GEN. JONES: Chuck, just let me start by saying right now the Army's focus is on reconnecting with our families to ensure that they know that -- what our intent was behind this and that a horrible error occurs. We're reviewing all the facets of this case and we -- you know, right now, our priority is on families. The who shot John part of it -- you know, that will take time for us to review it.

We aren't a part of that contracting arm in this level, but we are the part that connects with families. And that's what we're focused on right now.

Q Can you tell us -- if I understand right, you sent out a second mailing explaining the first mailing?

GEN. JONES: No. What we're in the process of doing now is to send out a letter explaining our deep hurt for making this error. And we're -- we assume all responsibility for it. So that's what we're doing -- in the process of doing right now as we speak. We have basically engaged every leg of this organization in order to get those 7,000-plus mailings back out to those families and, again, to let them know our intent was to provide them with information on organizations that want to help them. And they want this information, and we want to get it to them.

Q All right. Thank you.

MS. KYZER: Jason Sigger with Armchair Generalist, did you have a question?

Q I actually have no question, but I just want to thank you, sir, for reaching out so quickly to explain and offer these condolences or explanations to what's going on. So thank you. No question.

GEN. JONES: Thank you very much. And that's -- that's reassuring.

And I can tell you I know our pain isn't what our family members' pain is about receiving this, but I have a team of dedicated young Americans who are on a first-name basis with many of these survivors, and they feel this hurt just as bad. But they are marching on because they know that their intent was to connect with them and provide them information on the generosity that our nation has come to the Army and said, "We want to help."

So, thank you for that comment. And again, we are working to reestablish and let those families know that we are here for them, in spite of this horrible, horrible error. And we wanted to come quickly because we didn't want one family to get this without us making an attempt to connect to them.

MS. KYZER: Bryant Jordan with military.com, do you have a question?

Q Yes, I do.

Thank you very much, General.

GEN. JONES: Hey, Bryant.

Q Hi. Question is, the letters obviously reached these people, so was the "Dear John Doe" part just on the letter itself or was that also on the address on the envelope? GEN. JONES: It was on the letter itself. Just as you would do a draft to put a placeholder on a letter, that mistakenly was -- you know, the quality control just wasn't there, and it occurred. So that's what it was. And some of our family members were so excited to get the information, they went straight to the information. And a few of them have come back and said, "Well, you know, I went back and looked at the letter and I saw "Dear John." And that's where the hurt starts.

Q But these (letter itself ?) that the letter arrived in had the correct family name and all that.

GEN. JONES: That information is correct.

Q Okay.

GEN. JONES: And nothing is 100 percent perfect, but the letters were addressed to our last-known address that we have with our family members.

Q Very good. Thank you, General.

GEN. JONES: Thank you.

Q Matt Byrne (sp) with Blackfive, did you have a question?

Q Yeah. I just wondered -- I know that -- and thanks for spending time with us, General Jones. Appreciate it.

One of the things that I was wondering about was that we know 7,000 letters went out; do we think they have all been delivered by now?

GEN. JONES: Oh, I think when you look at the season that we're in, the things that families do during this season, I think it would be safe to say that many of them have not been received and not opened yet. Families may be vacationing, with the holiday mailing season that we're just coming out of. I think a good portion of those may be sitting in a mailbox waiting for that loved one to get that letter.

Q Okay. And a follow-up would be that if we're going to post about this to try to help get the message out that the mistake was made and those kind of things, is there a way that, maybe through Lindy, we could get the list of private organizations that were listed in the letter -- I'm not asking for a copy of the letter --

GEN. JONES: Yeah.

Q -- so that we could also put that information out?

GEN. JONES: Absolutely. I think if you would go to our website, www.altfcm.army.mil, you'll find that listing there.

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

GEN. JONES: And if you have any trouble getting to that site -- it's under Support Programs in that website -- just come back to us and we'll make sure that we -- you get that information. We'd be glad to share it with you. I don't think -- (inaudible) -- given any prohibitions against you seeing them, because we have great Americans, again, that have been coming to us, wanting to give back. And they have done a marvelous job in answering our nation's call, answering our families' call, because a lot of them are still in great need of support, of connecting. And that's, again -- and when we look at our covenant that we have with our families, keeping them connected and ensuring that we exercise our Survivor Outreach Services initiative, which has been approved and funded by our great Army, this is just one part of it.

And you know, again, we're just so sorry that -- that this has happened, but we do not want to lose sight that -- of what the intent was. And again, that is to share with our families the overflowing of generosity that America is showing to our soldiers and our families who have given so, so much to the service of our country.

MS. KYZER: And this is Lindy with Army Public Affairs. I'll send you all an e-mail following this with a list of support groups and network sites. If you have any follow-up questions, everyone over here is really kind in answering those, so definitely follow up with questions like that following the roundtable.

Andi Hurley with SpouseBUZZ, did you have a question?

Q Yes. General Jones, thanks for giving us some time today. You touched on this in response to Bryant's question, but I was curious as to the reaction of the families, both to the letter and the apology, if you'd like to expand on that.

GEN. JONES: I will, but I ask that you not press me for their names.

Q Oh, no, absolutely not.

GEN. JONES: But it has ranged the gamut, from very -- very disappointed family members to those who have thought it was rather humorous. However, it is not humorous to us. We work so hard to build trust and a relationship with our families, so that they know that they're still part of this Army team, because they have been strong families for this strong Army. And this is just a small way for them to come back. And we have accepted, both pro and con, all of their -- their comments.

But one of the really striking things, if you'll allow me to share with you: One of our family members wrote me shortly -- a little bit ago, and her concern was with my team. That just shows you the kind of family that we're dealing with. They know they got a letter. They may have been hurt by it. But

they know the intent, and they know the people within the office that executes this mission for our Army. And they know that there's no way, no how that they would even come close to allowing something like this to happen.

So again, the responses have ranged the gamut, but they completely -- those that we've communicated with completely understand what our intent was, and they have vowed to continue to work with us. They know that they're on this team. They know that their Army wouldn't do anything to harm or disrespect the service of their loved one, of their fallen warrior.

So again, range the gamut, but, I mean, by and large -- by huge margins, they understand that things sometimes happen no matter how many safeguards we put in place. But again, they know where our intent was. They know what we were attempting to do and were anxiously awaiting this correspondence.

MS. KYZER: I think we'll go back around and ask any follow-up questions. Wolf, did you have a question?

Q No, Lindy. I'm good, thank you very much. Appreciate it, General.

GEN. JONES: Thank you.

MS. KYZER: And Chuck Simmins, did you have another question?

Q No. I appreciate your time, General.

GEN. JONES: Thank you.

MS. KYZER: And Jason Sigger, did you have a question?

Q No, I don't. Thanks.

MS. KYZER: And Bryant Jordan, did you have a question?

Q Just one issue that -- I caught something. Right now, there's no discussion about consequences to this -- (inaudible). That's not part of this --

GEN. JONES: That's not part of the effort that we're under right now.

Q Yeah. Is somebody else looking at that?

GEN. JONES: Again, please?

Q Somebody else is looking at that? GEN. JONES: I'm sure that there are others who are reviewing this as well as we. But again, our purpose at this point in time is to get out the 7,000-plus letters of apology --

Q Sir --

GEN. JONES: -- that will go to the primary next of kin and the secondary next of kin who were mailed the initial letter. And I mean, I sit here and I'm -- I think everyone in this organization still is, oh, we let a soldier down by what has happened.

Q Yeah.

GEN. JONES: It's like a blow to the midsection to all of us who work so very hard to connect with our families, our families who try very hard to be supportive of our family -- of our Army, and they are. This is -- this has been one of those terrible events that you work hard every day for it not to happen.

Q Yeah.

GEN. JONES: And we've done a lot of things and we got a lot of other procedures in place to where we won't let a vendor be the last person to touch correspondence or things that -- when we communicate with families.

So we're reviewing this, once we get to that step, but our number-one priority right now is to connect with those families and to get another over 7,000-plus letters of apology out to them, letting them know and reaffirm with them what our intent was.

And this Army is doing that at every level -- I mean, from its highest levels down to commanders in the field. Because -- one thing I'll say before we end: This just isn't about the connection with the Army casualty family. There are commanders out there who have formed special relationships with families. It is about providing them information to let them know what's happened, so when they're asked, they know what the facts are, and they'd know what our intent was, more importantly.

Again, you know, I mean we have sergeants, privates who form special relationships. The Army has a special relationship. And we want it to be one that is unquestioned, our support and loyalty to them, because they have given so, so very much to the service of our country and continue to give so, so very much to the service of our country.

Q Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Q Ms. Kyzer?

Q Thank you.

MS. KYZER: Yes?

Q This is Paul Boyce, over at U.S. Army's Public Affairs. May I take a moment?

MS. KYZER: Yes, sir.

Q General Jones, sir, you can't say this about yourself, and I know you've alluded to your team, so I hope you'll permit me to do it. This is Paul Boyce over at Army Public Affairs, sir.

The listeners need to know this, too. General Jones was one of the first people to bring this to everyone's attention in the leadership. He has taken this issue on personally, and done a fantastic job. Colonel Johnson, on his staff, you couldn't ask for a more sincere individual. And they treat every one of these communications like the "golden package" that you've heard about from some of the other commercials on the outside world, in that they do each of them, every night, day and night, dispatching casualty officers and assistance out there.

Sir, may I ask a question?

GEN. JONES: Sure.

Q Could you tell the group a little bit more about the Survivor Outreach program? Obviously, they all suspect that this is not the first letter or newsletter we've ever sent out to this distribution list. Could you tell them a little bit more about SOS and what we're doing, please?

GEN. JONES: Well, thanks for this opportunity. First of all, the SOS Survivor Outreach initiative -- again, I mentioned that it has been approved and funded. And again, it is a way for us to maintain a covenant with that family. Just as we have programs that strengthen equipment and strengthen other parts of our Army, this is a program that is -- that has been developed, supported by our Army. It is an integral part of the Army Family Action Plan, where we have pledged to our families the covenant that we have with them.

And, you know, we kicked this off back in February 2008, and we continue to grow this program. And what we look for in this program is a closer, better bond with our spouses and family members, as soldiers go and come from deployment, as soldiers go and come -- transition in and out of the Army.

And we want to ensure that our families know that this isn't just because we're in the battle that we're in today. This is a long-term commitment, because we often say in the Army that you enlist a soldier, but you reenlist a family.

And survivors are part of that family for as long as they desire. We will give that support to them, day in, day out. We want their buy-in. We engage them because a lot of times you're doing your work here in Washington or at some camp or station around the world, and you don't experience what that family feels. So we engage them through this Army-wide program that is out there, that is being supported by our great Army leadership. It's being supported at every camp and station around this globe. And I think it is a shining jewel of the Army's commitment to families.

One part of our covenant, our warrior creed, our warrior ethos, says -- it's the last line, and it says that we will never leave a fallen comrade. We expand that to say that we will never leave a family behind, either. And we try to demonstrate that through our Survivor Outreach Services initiative, and we try to do it every day.

And believe me, every time we think we have it about right, we'll get an e-mail and it says, "You need to go a little bit left." And guess what your Army does? Your Army goes a little bit to the left. If they want us to go a little bit to the right, we'll do that, because this is an evolving program that has gotten families energized. It has gotten Army leaders energized. It's gotten communities energized.

And this effort that we were attempting to communicate to our families is just one part of that energy that you see from our SOS initiative. It's where we have engaged or people have come to us after hearing about our families who've given so much and sacrificed so much: a husband deployed; a spouse becomes the head of household; kids take on different responsibilities.

Your Army respects that. Your Army feels it and your Army has done something about it with the Army Family Covenant. And it has been a success story.

But guess what? We aren't to the end. We hope this is a journey that never ends as we continue to connect with our families, receive their comments and feedback on what we can do better. This is a program that we say, hey, tell us what else can we do.

And believe me, the Army leadership is truly supportive of this initiative. And we are doing everything possible to keep it in the forefront of what we do, because, again, our families are so, so very important to this strong Army; Army strong.

Q And sir, like the other bloggers, I want to thank you also for taking the time to talk with all of us today, sir.

GEN. JONES: You're welcome. And just let me end by saying you all are very, very important to us here in the Army.

And one of the things that I learned a long time ago is to tell the story, tell it early, and that's what we have done. This is a great effort that we're just so, so horribly shaken by, where it went wrong. But I think what most Americans and what we're attempting to do is to let people know what our intent was and not let it get burdened down by this horrible, horrible error that has occurred.

Q General, this is Mr. Wolf from blackfive.net. I got two quick questions for you as a follow-up, sir -- (inaudible).

GEN. JONES: Okay.

Q What is the typical need that a family comes to the SOS program for? What typically do you see that they're requesting or they need based on the SOS program?

GEN. JONES: Well, I think you could look around at any family in your neighborhood that has had -- that has had a loved one or, through whatever means, that family has been fragmented. Those are the same needs that our families have. Our families are probably a lot closer knit because they know their Army loves them; they know that their Army will do whatever it takes to connect with them, to get them every benefit under the law and connect them with anyone who has something to give. So -- and I guess, if I were to go line by line, I would probably -- maybe disincentivize someone who may have a great idea, because they have great ideas.

And when you look at that listing, on that website, you're going to say, wow, you know, we have some very generous Americans out there who are giving all sorts of things.

And those are some of the things, when you look at that list, those are some of the things that our families have said, hey, we need a little bit of this and a little bit of that and, I think, we'll be a lot stronger family if we can.

So the American public has heard that cry. And the American public has answered. And will we have additions to that? Oh, absolutely we'll have

additions that families communicate to us. And America communicates to us what they want to share with the families.

Q Sir, the last question is, are you notifying the local commanders of the families affected, the ones that were -- (inaudible) -- soldiers' units -- (inaudible) -- General Casey was sending out?

GEN. JONES: Yeah. A great thing that the vice chief of staff of the Army did: He has a communication network to every colonel and every general serving our great Army. And he has alerted them because he knows, as we spoke of earlier, that there have been special relationships that these families form with the units. Even as the leaders come and go, those families have a very, very special bond with the units.

So we have taken great strides to say, let everyone know the intent of the Army, as we travel down this road, as well as to inform them of what has happened. So I think that that was -- that communication went out to the Army yesterday, as many of the other communications that you all have seen.

Q Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.

GEN. JONES: Okay. Again let me thank each of you, for sharing with us your time, as we attempt to meet this challenge that we have in front of us. And I think we are doing that. Again those letters of apology are being sent out as we speak.

We have a great team who has laced up their boots once again to come to the aid of our family, come to the aid of our Army.

And this is our number one priority is to make this right and that's exactly what we're doing.

MS. KYZER: Thank you so much, General Jones, for your time.

GEN. JONES: You're welcome.

MS. KYZER: Thank you so much to the bloggers who joined us.

This concludes the roundtable. You can find the transcript at defenselink.mil/bloggers. Have a great afternoon, everyone.

Q Thank you. Bye-bye.

Q Thanks.

END.