



The Commonwealth War Graves Commission - from 1917 until now

Commonwealth
War Graves
Commission
Head Office



As many of us remember today the *Battle of Britain*, honoured this year for its 70th year when the skies above England were a battle ground for the pilots in the infamous Spitfires and Hurricanes against the offensive from the German Luftwaffe. I think it should also be made clear that during this time it was still a *Battle for Britain* - the global war on the ground and sea never stopped and the air support played a crucial part towards the eventual conclusion of the Second World War.

WHO, WHAT, WHEN & WHY?

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) was established in 1917 by Royal Charter and pays tribute to the 1,700,000 men and women of the

Commonwealth forces who died in the two world wars. It is a non-profit making organization that was founded by *Sir Fabian Arthur Goulstone Ware* (1869-1949).

Who is Sir Fabian? He was the man who originated the idea of keeping records of the war dead and came up with the idea whilst in France in September 1914 at the head of a mobile Red Cross unit aged 45. Determined he worked with the government to set up the Graves Registration Commission which grew into the Imperial War Graves Commission which in turn gave us the CWGC. He wanted to ensure the ongoing international recognition of the war dead beyond the conclusion of hostilities and fought for this support and gained it through architects *Sir Edward*

Lutyens, Sir Reginald Blomfield, statesman *Sir Winston Churchill* and author *Rudyard Kipling* - who produced the standard inscription on the graves on the unknown:

'Known Unto God'
Headstone of the Unknown Soldier

'Their Name Liveth For Evermore'
Edward Lutyens' Stone of Remembrance

Since its inception, the Commission has constructed 2500 war cemeteries and plots, erecting headstones over graves and, in instances where the remains are missing, inscribing the names of the dead on permanent memorials. Over one million casualties are now commemorated at military and civil



sites across 150 countries. But there's more to the Commission than cenotaphs and cemeteries - they play a vital role in remembering the dead.

From a single poet's grave on the Isle of Skyros to a cemetery in Belgium with over 11,000 burials, the CWGC maintains over a million war graves as well as hundreds of memorials honouring the 750,000 war dead who have no known graves. And countries also known as 'member governments' around the world where these graves are maintained make a financial contribution to the CWGC.

Now that some of the origins, purpose and history of the Commission has been established let us now look at the heritage, architecture and future of what this tremendous organization achieves. The topic of wrought iron gates, shelter buildings, cemeteries and the HQ's offices are not to my knowledge often written about but need to be, in order to present a clearer and livelier understanding. It is of course about the living working today at the CWGC with much outside support that allows the cemeteries to remain more than functional.

WHERE IS THE CWGC?

The answer to this question takes us across many borders, but to begin with we'll look at where the



Commission is working from today. It's base and headquarters are stationed in Maidenhead, Berkshire approximately 6 miles from the garrison town of Windsor and 2 miles from the river Thames.

The CWGC building adopts a semi castellated shape and was built there in 1971, moving from its Wooburn Green location, where it was evacuated to during WWII.

The shape of today's headquarters may be a result of what it replaced? Prior to 1971 the site was occupied by Pearce Hall more commonly known as the Drill Hall, where soldiers were accommodated.

Drill halls had begun in the 1880's following the Cordwell reforms of the Army in which Rifle Volunteers were formed into Volunteer Battalions of the county - some of those remaining today have been **Listed** to protect their heritage,

Top:
Uplands
Cemetery, France

Bottom:
Menin Gate
Construction

integrity and history. Although as time moved on and the military was modernized drill halls took on a new function as GPO sorting offices and telephone exchanges.

The Pearce Drill Hall is so named as it was built with a £3000 legacy from a Mr J D M Pearce.

The Times newspaper refers to it in a short article on the 5th of January in 1904. It reports:

Lord Grenfell (better known as *Lord Desborough*) yesterday opened a new volunteer drill hall at Maidenhead... with two galleries and accommodation for 700 persons. The cost of the hall is £3,200 including architects fees'

The biggest school in Maidenhead today is called Desborough and as it happens it is also the place where Dragons Den investor *Peter Jones* was educated. I also use to go there on Sundays for Berkshire County ➡



Left:
Hautrage Military Cemetery, Belgium

Right:
Chungkai War Cemetery, Thailand



tennis coaching with John Woodward. I worked hard at trying to be a *John McEnroe* but was beaten by *Illie Nastase's* 15 years old cousin in straight sets at the under 18's Berkshire Open - and he was 3 years my junior. He served that ball like an RPG.

At the time of writing there is discussion as to the future location of the headquarters of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

FACTS & FIGURES

'The core work of the Commission is that relating to the maintenance of the graves, memorials and records of those members of the Commonwealth forces who died in the two world wars, as defined in

the Charter' (CWGC - 12th September, 2010).

Let's look at the enormity of the tasks of the Commission and it's partners in how and **where** it cares for War Graves and Memorials in countries and territories around the world.

Using my method of a pencil and one closed eye for focussing I counted 260 off their printed page from their website.

As to be expected in a relatively short article I could only pick a few of the 260 to outline which I thought most relevant - but on saying that each and every one of them of course represents lives that have been lost in combat.

In these published figures we have listed the dead who are

commemorated by name which do not include those remembered with memorials which run into the hundreds of thousands. The **Total** does include: *Commonwealth Identified/Unidentified, Other Nationalities, Non-War Graves and Burial Grounds.*

WORLD WAR I & WORLD WAR II - 1,700,000 DEAD

Country/Territory	Total
Australia	12,484
Belgium	204,807
Canada	18,422
Hong Kong (China)	6,404
Egypt	52,456
Falkland Islands	53
France	574,697
Gibraltar	751
Greece	18,053
India	62,144
Iraq (<i>UK territory after WWI</i>)	53,906
Malaysia	4,615
Burma (Myanmar)	37,847
New Zealand	3,478
Singapore	29,132
South Africa	8,441
Tanzania	54,923
Turkey	36,644
UK, Channel Islands & Isle of Man	304,993

BREAKDOWN OF NUMBERS OF WAR DEAD BY FORCES

UK & Colonies	1,296,852
Undivided India	161,221
Canada	110,331
Australia	102,391
New Zealand	29,979
South Africa	21,382



During the Second World War the names of Commonwealth civilian casualties, numbering 67,073 are commemorated in the Civilian War Dead Roll of Honour located near *St George's Chapel* in *Westminster Abbey* in the capital, London.

ARCHITECTURE & FEATURES

Structural design has always played an important part in the Commission's cemeteries. Since it's inception, they have worked closely with distinguished architects and sculptors to ensure that our sites are lasting and dignified tributes to the Commonwealth soldiers who perished during both wars.

We have mentioned Sir Edward Lutyens and Sir Reginald Blomfield but we need to recognize others such as *Sir Herbert Baker* and *Charles Holden* who laid the foundations for the use of classical renaissance design in the Commission's building work prior to 1938.

These principal architects were predominantly active in Belgium and Northern France, where their work was completed by *C S Jagger's* rugged and realistic sculptures, of soldiers, the stone figures carved by

Eric Kennington and a specially commissioned font by *Macdonald Gill* which is used for all headstone inscriptions.

Mirroring these early classical influences, *Sir Robert Lorimer*, *Sir John Burnet* and *Edward Warren* were responsible for the design of the Commission's cemeteries in countries from Italy to Iraq.

The CWGC has always believed in honouring all casualties equally without distinction on account of rank, race or creed. For this reason, the design of buildings and memorials follows a fairly uniform style.

CEMETERY FEATURES

Materials that evoke simplicity, respect and permanence are favoured by the sculptors and architects who combine stone, iron and bronze with brickwork, joinery, steel and concrete in their design.

In any cemetery with over 40 graves you can find The Cross of Sacrifice designed by Blomfield to represent the faith of the majority. By using a simple cross embedded with a bronze sword and mounted on an octagonal base, the architect

hoped to, in his own words: 'keep clear of any of the sentimentalities of Gothic' - indeed the words of an architect and not a poet.

Graves with 1000 or more burials have a Stone of Remembrance designed to commemorate those of all faiths and none. The geometry is based on studies of the Pantheon - steering clear of shapes associated with any particular religion.

Heritage at work with Faith.

*By John Crampton of
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It is right and proper that soldiers, sailors, airmen and women of the Commonwealth fallen in the two World Wars of the last century have a dignified and, where possible, identified last resting place. This is the honourable and dedicated work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, whose cemeteries are a by-word for reverence, tranquillity and gratitude. Beautifully constructed and maintained, these cemeteries are in themselves a lasting and eloquent tribute to those who gave their all, and are where due homage may be made. May they rest in peace.

GENERAL SIR MIKE JACKSON

Above:
Beny-sur-Mer
Canadian War
Cemetery, France

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