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WAR GRAVES

War graves are the most obvious visual symbols of the human cost of war. The scale of human loss never fails to shock, especially when it is chiselled in stone.

But the custom of giving the wartime dead a proper burial and commemoration is only a recent one. For example at Waterloo in June 1815 and in the Crimea four decades later, the British shovelled their dead soldiers into holes in the ground and forgot about them. Major historical figures certainly did have marked graves and memorials – but not the people who died fighting for them.

The change in attitude began about 90 years ago with the pioneering work of Fabian Ware in World War I. Too old for military duty he arrived in France in September 1914 in command of a mobile unit of the British Red Cross. He was quickly struck by the usual lack of any British system for the marking and recording of the graves of fallen soldiers and he was determined that this should change. He made his own notes and took photographs of the sites for the next of kin.

He called on the British Government to reverse its traditional callous policy of not doing much about the dead. The War Office realised that the proper care of war graves would boost morale of the troops and comfort the bereaved relatives at home. The War Graves Registration Commission was created in 1915. Meanwhile, Ware also contacted British architects and experts on flowers to devise suitable memorials.

On May 21 1917 the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission was established by Royal Charter, with Ware as its Vice Chairman. Its duties are to mark and maintain the graves of the members of the Commonwealth armed forces who died in the two World Wars, to build memorials to those who have no known grave or who perished at sea, and to keep records and registers, including of the Civilian War Dead.

1.7 million men and women of the Commonwealth forces died in the two World Wars. Of these, the remains of 925,000 were found and their graves are marked by a headstone. Where the remains are not marked, the casualty's name is commemorated on a memorial. There are war graves in 150 countries around the world, mostly in the 2,500 war cemeteries and plots constructed by the War Graves Commission.

Commonwealth war dead fared much better than those who died on the German/Soviet front in World War II. For example, in 1942-3, a quarter of a million German soldiers (including 50,000 Austrians) perished in the battle of Stalingrad (now Volgograd) or as a result of the Russian winter and captivity. The earth was frozen and so they could not be buried. The bodies were left on the ground. Their bones remain scattered across the isolated, desolated area of one of history's biggest battlefields. Now that the Cold War has ended some attempts are being made to clear up the "bone fields".

Sir Fabian Arthur Goulstone Ware (1869-1949) had a colourful life. Among his appointments were, from 1901-5 as a senior civil servant in South Africa and then he became a newspaper editor from 1905 to 1911.

He was told that he was too old to enlist in 1914 and so he worked for the British Red Cross. But this is when his life's work really began - when he was aged 45 and he took steps towards the creation of the War Graves Commission. Having originally been too old to enlist, his war graves work resulted in his being commissioned into the British Army, where he finished the war as a major-general with a knighthood.

In 1939, aged 70, he was called back to the War Office as Director of Graves Registration and Enquiries (while also continuing to serve as Vice Chairman of the War Graves Commission). Winston Churchill, who had been one of his backers in World War I, agreed to his suggestion that the Commission's work in World War II should also include keeping a record of civilian casualties as well as service personnel who fell.

He died on April 29 1949. His grave at Surrey, England is marked by a standard Commission headstone.

The Commission still operates on the basis of four principles laid down in the Ware era:

1. Each of the dead should be commemorated individually by name on headstone or memorial;
2. Headstones and memorials should be permanent;
3. Headstones should be uniform
4. There should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed.

Everyone was to be buried or commemorated as near to their place of death as possible. There should be "equality in death". Ware's system avoided elaborated memorials being erected by wealthy families which would overshadow those who had no wealthy relatives (or no relatives at all) to pay for headstones.

This also meant that each cemetery is not only a garden of remembrance but also virtually a regiment on parade, with all the uniform headstones neatly measured and laid down out. The surrounding grounds are immaculate and well maintained – even in poor countries.

The overall aim behind the horticultural design of a cemetery is to give the effect of a garden rather than the common concept of a cemetery. The plants immediately in front of headstones are low growing so that the engraved personal inscription is not obscured, and they also prevent soil from splashing back onto the headstones during rain.

The Commission now also operates the “Debt of Honour Register”, which is a computer data base listing 1.7 million men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died during the two World Wars and the 23,000 cemeteries, memorials and other locations worldwide where they are also commemorated. The register can also be searched for details of the 67,000 Commonwealth civilians who died as a result of enemy action in World War II.

The Commission is financed by its partner governments on the following ratio: Britain pays 78.43 per cent of the Commission’s annual budget of almost 40 million pounds; Canada 10.07; Australia 6.05; New Zealand 2.14; South Africa 2.11; and India 1.20. The high commissioners of each of the member governments are represented on the governing body. The total capital value of all the Commission’s sites worldwide is worth well over a billion pounds.

The Office of Australian War Graves (OAWG) maintains, on behalf of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, war cemeteries and memorials to missing in Australia and Norfolk Island, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The OAWG also maintains the German War Cemetery at Tatura, Victoria and the Japanese War Cemetery at Cowra, NSW, through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, on behalf of the German and Japanese Governments.

All the Commonwealth War Grave Commission sites are immaculately maintained and they afford an atmosphere of peace and serenity. This is an appropriate atmosphere to the memory of all who gave their lives for our peace and freedom and of those for whom the fortunes of war denied a known and honoured grave.

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Commonwealth War Graves Commission: <http://www.cwgc.org>.

Office of Australian War Graves: <http://www.dva.gov.au/commem/oawg>