



Lessons of History: British War Dead in the 1940s and Public Protest

Contemporary Implications for Promoting the Recognition of Every Casualty of Armed Violence

There is a perception in Britain that the British military traditionally has treated its dead well, at least since the First World War. This belief is mistaken. The treatment of casualties in the Second World War was so poor that the identities and remains of thousands of British servicemen were lost. In the years following this conflict, treatment of the national war dead improved. This change did not come from within but was forced upon the military by the public in the 1940s. In the immediate post-war years, amid the bitter experiences and disappointments occasioned by the treatment of the dead in the Second World War, Britons made clear that the state had not afforded sufficient care to those killed in its service. Their legacy is that the identity and location of British dead now are recorded promptly and accurately and the wishes of bereaved relatives are accommodated.

By examining the events which led to the British military affording better treatment to its war dead, this article demonstrates that the public can force higher standards from those engaged in war. At the same time, it argues that if all casualties of modern war – military and civilian – are to be identified and recorded, cultural change needs to precede or accompany legal change. As the British experience has shown, cultural change can determine the effectiveness of legal change.

The Geneva Convention of 1906 contained two articles in which reference was made to the treatment of dead bodies in wartime, no mention having been made of this subject in the earlier Geneva Convention of 1864. These articles built upon the movement, which had arisen in the United States and Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, to afford equal attention to all servicemen who had died in battle.¹ Approximately 100,000 Union soldiers killed in the American Civil War of 1861-65 had been buried in identified graves in specially-constructed cemeteries, while the Treaty of Frankfurt, which officially concluded the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, stipulated that the former belligerents should 'engage to respect and preserve the tombs of soldiers buried in their respective

¹ *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field*, Geneva, 6 July 1906, Chapter I, Articles 3-4.

territories.² Britain had not been greatly affected by this movement, as the treatment of its dead in the Boer War of 1899-1902 had shown. It remained more common for the corpses of British servicemen killed on the battlefield to be abandoned or thrown into mass burial pits than interred in identified graves. Nonetheless, Britain ratified the 1906 Convention.

To ensure that the British army did not have to rely solely on the Geneva Convention for information on battlefield burial, the War Office produced several basic regulations in 1909. These were printed in the army operations manual known as *Field Service Regulations*, and were similar in form and style to the articles on the treatment of the dead in the 1906 Geneva Convention.³ For the first time, the burial of military dead was an officially-accredited responsibility within the British army.

Prompted to review its burial policy by the momentous experiences of the First World War, the War Office issued revised and expanded directives on interment in the 1923 edition of *Field Service Regulations*.⁴ In the aftermath of the 1914-18 conflict the importance attached by next-of-kin to the preservation of individual graves had become apparent. The updated regulations thus sought to formalise practices which would ensure that each British serviceman killed in battle was given an identified and distinct burial. This principle was reiterated when *Field Service Regulations* were updated in 1930.⁵

Ostensibly, these were important advances but their significance is easily overstated. The burial regulations of 1909 represented little more than stock recognition of developments in international law. The changes made to the interment directives in 1923 and 1930 were similarly formulaic in that nothing was done to provide for their enforcement in future conflicts. Furthermore, the vague and non-binding language of the directives persisted through these versions of *Field Service Regulations*, creating ample scope for non-compliance. The War Office had acknowledged only superficially the principle of identified and honourable burial for every serviceman. Its senior authorities still did not place any particular importance on the collection and burial of battlefield dead, including their own.

It was unsurprising, therefore, that when the Second World War began in 1939 senior authorities at the War Office were ill-prepared to deal with the dead. As a

² Article XVI of the Treaty of Frankfurt, 10 May 1871, cited in Robert I. Giesberg, *The Treaty of Frankfurt: A Study in Diplomatic History, September 1870-September 1873*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), p. 292.

³ *Field Service Regulations, Part II, Organization and Administration, 1909*, (London: HMSO, 1913).

⁴ *Field Service Regulations, Volume I, Organization and Administration, 1923, Provisional*, (London: HMSO, 1923).

⁵ *Field Service Regulations, Volume I, Organization and Administration, 1930*, (London: HMSO, 1930).

consequence so too were frontline servicemen, those theoretically responsible for interment. Many did not know that burial was their duty. Of those who did know, some ignored their obligations in the knowledge that military expediency could be cited as an excuse, while others were deterred by confusing directives that lacked instructive detail. In any case, officers knew that the military command did not monitor and enforce observance of burial regulations.

The general lack of interest in the battlefield dead shown by senior authorities at the War Office also affected the Department of Graves Registration and Enquiries (DGRE). The purpose of this army department was to fulfil the second stage of the burial process, the first being the act of interment. Through its field branch, the Army Graves Service, the DGRE identified sites for permanent cemeteries, preserved the records of burials, and provided the means of identifying individual graves, something which often involved exhuming the dead. In fulfilling these tasks during and after the First World War, the DGRE played an important and extensive role, yet no thought was given to its potential future operations. As one officer noted, in the inter-war period the DGRE 'was overlooked, entirely forgotten, and relegated to an obscure pigeon hole at the War Office.'⁶ This neglect contributed to a lack of purpose and efficiency in its operations in the first four years of the Second World War. Even after 1943-44 the DGRE continued to fight a constant battle with its superiors for funds and manpower.

Inevitably, the work of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) suffered.⁷ It was responsible for the development and upkeep of battlefield cemeteries once the DGRE had finished with them, in effect the third and final stage of the burial process. The beautiful and striking cemeteries developed by the IWGC after the First World War had captured the imagination of the British public, and thousands of Second World War bereaved were sustained by the hope of standing by the graves of their relatives in such a cemetery and there finding consolation. Many envisaged this act as central to the mourning process. Thus, when the war ended in 1945, the public reacted with anger and dismay when it became apparent that the work of burying and commemorating the British dead was not sufficiently advanced to allow for this possibility.

In May 1945, G. R. J. Vick of Cheshire expressed his frustrations in a letter to Prime Minister Winston Churchill:

My only son ... was reported 'missing' from air operations against the enemy on the night of June 2/3rd, 1944, and for nearly a year my wife and I have suffered untold agony in our anxiety for news of his safety, or ultimate fate, however, to date we have not been able to obtain any information other than the bald statement that he is 'missing' ... the next-of-kin of those who have failed to return are entitled to expect more energetic action to be taken in tracing them. The majority of us know that

⁶ TNA, PRO WO 170/7365, Hoffman Report, 18 June 1945.

⁷ Since 1960 the IWGC has been known as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

the 'missing' will not return now, but this is not sufficient. We want to know what was their fate ... so that many of us may get to know the last resting place of those we loved.⁸

Others protested the treatment of the war dead through newspapers. In the immediate post-war years newspapers across Britain were inundated with letters from the bereaved and members of the public who shared their concerns. In September 1946 Reverend Colin Cuttall, minister at Southwark Cathedral, wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* to ask why the 'sacred' graveyard at Arnhem had not been transformed 'into a worthy memorial to brave Englishmen.'⁹ In a letter to *The Times* the same month, Mr G. E. Ballyn of Bath wondered whether the lack of progress in developing the battlefield cemeteries were a reflection of official apathy.¹⁰ The following autumn the *Daily Graphic* published the view of a woman who was identified only as a mother from the Isle of Wight:

I am only one of thousands who lost all personal happiness because of the war. But my case is typical. My elder son was burned to ashes in his tank, leading a night charge which got the 51st Highlanders through to avenge St. Valery ... when I wrote nearly two years later to the War Graves Commission asking if any arrangements were being made for relatives to go to the Normandy battlefields and cemeteries, I received a brusque circular letter saying that if I wished to see my son's grave I had better apply to a Tourist Agency. I suppose I could have done this and gone with a gay crowd of tourists. I never tried ... This summer some friends who were doing a motor tour of France took a snap for me. The same wooden crosses without inscription, the grass uncut and the next cross leaning over sideways.¹¹

Bereaved Britons also voiced their concerns through their local MPs. Ministers constantly were being asked questions in the House of Commons about the progress of grave and cemetery operations. As Frederick Bellenger, the Secretary of State for War, informed a ministerial colleague in August 1947: 'the public will not tolerate any laxity in dealing with the ... care of war graves.'¹²

Reports in newspapers and magazines, which invited unflattering comparisons with British practice, compounded the pressure on the military and political establishment. Articles told of the American army devoting considerable resources to burying its battlefield casualties and attaching great importance to this task, and of the attention even the vanquished were paying to the graves of their dead. A report in *The Star* in June 1945 described how German graves on

⁸ TNA, PRO AIR 20/9050, Vick to Churchill, 21 May 1945. The underlining is Vick's.

⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 1946.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 20 September 1946.

¹¹ *Daily Graphic*, 24 September 1947.

¹² TNA, PRO FO 371/64626, Bellenger to Bevin, 12 August 1947.

Crete had been adorned with thousands of beautiful geraniums.¹³ Other articles detailed examples of the extraordinary care Europeans were affording the British war dead. During the Second World War, many civilians living under German subjugation had buried Royal Air Force personnel (whose aircraft had crashed behind enemy lines) both to demonstrate solidarity with the Allied cause, and passively to protest the occupation of their countries.¹⁴ After the conflict ended, Europeans spontaneously adopted these and thousands of other war graves and tended the sites on behalf of absent relatives of the dead. News of this kindness, which was received with warmth and gratitude in Britain, was further evidence to its public that war dead were treated better by some than others.

As it was, DGRE field personnel, undeterred by the ambivalence of many in the military command, were working with remarkable skill and devotion to conclude their tasks. Of these efforts, however, the British public largely was unaware. Senior military authorities, knowing that they were responsible for the failures in the treatment of the Second World War British military dead – those labouring in the field were blameless – released minimal information about burial and graves operations in an effort to avoid controversy and possible censure. The possibility of their being censured became even less likely when, in the late 1940s, public anger began to subside as the DGRE completed its work, the IWGC began to make tangible progress, and government-sponsored pilgrimages to war graves commenced. The ‘public scandal of some magnitude’ anticipated by one officer in 1945 was thus avoided.¹⁵

In one sense this ending was in keeping with an unsatisfactory episode in British history. The efforts of DGRE personnel in particular went unrecognised, and those responsible for the poor planning and administrative incompetence which resulted in the identities and remains of thousands of servicemen being lost were not called to account. Yet something positive did emerge from the events discussed here. At a 1948 War Office conference held to review burial policy and procedures, it was acknowledged, privately, that these required fundamental improvement.¹⁶ While a direct line cannot be drawn between this conference and the attention that the contemporary British military accords its dead, it is apparent that public pressure exerted on the military and political establishment in the 1940s was a catalyst for change and that since then the treatment of British battlefield dead has continued to improve. On matters concerning the national war dead, the will of the public could no longer be disregarded.

¹³ *The Star*, 21 June 1945.

¹⁴ For example, see *The Times*, 29 May 1945; *The Times*, 17 September 1946.

¹⁵ TNA, PRO AIR 20/9050, Burges to Venn, 12 July 1945.

¹⁶ TNA, PRO WO 32/12968, Vale Minute, 23 August 1948; TNA, PRO WO 32/12968, Blomfield Minute, 25 August 1948; TNA, PRO WO 32/12968, Meeting Minutes, 9 September 1948.

What can this historical example offer to those working to gain support for the demands of the *Charter for the Recognition of Every Casualty of Armed Violence*? Despite differences in time and place, the example of what was achieved in the 1940s through unity and publicity applies in contemporary society. Further, the events discussed here demonstrate the strength of feeling with which people react when affected by an issue; when they appreciate its relevance to them as individuals and to the society in which they live. In this regard it was important that the wider British public witnessed at first hand the suffering of the bereaved and the consequences that followed from the treatment of their dead. This ensured that the implications of the issue pervaded society and it became a truly popular cause, affecting bereaved and non-bereaved alike. Nowadays, in modern Britain and other Western countries, most citizens know little of war. They are further removed from its effects than ever before. These people – the majority – will need to be convinced that recording every casualty of armed conflict, even if not in their direct interest, is in the wider social interest and ethically correct. Then militaries and governments will be pressured to act.

The historical events discussed here offer encouragements that such a connection can be forged and cultural change achieved. First, entrenched cultural and social attitudes can be transformed relatively quickly. Before the First World War, Britain was little affected by the American and European movement to afford better treatment to battlefield dead. Yet within ten years honoured burial of British servicemen in identified graves was regarded as a right and not a privilege, and by the Second World War this was an inviolable expectation of the public, a fundamental tenet of its contract with the state. Second, the example set by others can be a powerful stimulus for change. By the mid-1940s, the British public knew from newspaper and magazine articles that more was possible with regard to the treatment of war dead. Having learnt of how the American military, for example, cared for its dead, Britons wanted the same for their own servicemen. In this vein, the ease with which information can be disseminated throughout the modern world is a significant encouragement. Third, reforms can be made to battlefield casualty procedures despite the resistance and ambivalence of powerful officials in the military establishment. As late as November 1947 there existed in the War Office a school of thought that the army was expending too much time and effort on the dead, but eventually even the most recalcitrant officials had no choice but to accept and follow the new culture.¹⁷

Achieving cultural change will foster the circumstances to ensure effective implementation of legal change. As has been shown, legal change alone is no guarantee of wider, systemic change. From the early twentieth century to the Second World War, Britain routinely took its cue from developments in international and military law and incorporated directives on battlefield burial into Field Service Regulations. But as long as the armed services lacked the interest or reason to implement these directives and police their observance, effectively

¹⁷ TNA, PRO WO 32/12036, Internal Memorandum, 18 November 1947.

they were worthless. Ultimately it was the demands of the public which gave the regulations power.

This suggests that forging a military-civil consensus on the need to identify and record all casualties of armed conflict – although the ideal basis for promoting and implementing the *Charter* – may not be an essential pre-condition for action. If militaries were reluctant to establish such alliances, through public pressure they could be forced to identify and record every casualty of conflict were commanders to fear the consequences of treating enemy and civilian dead differently from their own. Consensus on the importance of the principle could follow its implementation. It was only once change was forced upon it in the 1940s that the British military establishment came to recognise and understand the importance of treating the national war dead well.

Over the course of the last 100 years the treatment of British war dead has been transformed. There is nothing to say that such a transformation in attitudes and actions cannot be replicated, in Britain or elsewhere, with regard to identifying and recording every casualty of armed violence. As history shows, public will is a powerful force.

*Seumas Spark completed a PhD (History) at the University of Edinburgh in 2009. His thesis examined the collection and burial of the British military dead in the Second World War and the profound social consequences of the manner in which this was done. **From Battlefield to Grave**, a monograph based on his thesis, will be published by Manchester University Press in 2012. He holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree from the Australian National University and Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees from the University of Melbourne. He can be contacted at seumasspark@hotmail.com*
