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Identification of the Military Dead: Comparison of the American and British Rates

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Identification of the Military Dead: Comparison of the American and British Rates

The Americans achieved an exceptionally high identification rate for their military dead, and, although this rate was assessed on different criteria, it still forms a useful comparison to the results which the British achieved.

The United States had a history of taking extraordinary care with the military dead. The practice of looking after dead soldiers had begun with the American Civil War of 1861-1865, some fifty years before the British began an equivalent programme. By the time of the First World War, considerable expertise had built up. The Graves Registration Service was founded in 1917 when the United States entered the war, its policy being to follow closely behind the combat troops. It was clearly understood that the speed with which war graves were registered was critical; identification rates dropped off precipitously with the increase in time between the original burial and the registration of the grave. This policy led to astonishing results, it being claimed that only 3.5 per cent of the total American First World War dead of over 79,000 remained unidentified.¹

The American Graves Registration Service was re-established as soon as the United States joined the Second World War in December 1941. It worked to a manual published a mere four months earlier. Although many of the practices of the earlier world war were to be followed, there were some significant changes in procedure, one of the most important being the policy of fewer cemeteries or burial grounds. There would eventually be only 54, as opposed to 2,240 after the First World War.² In North-West Europe there would only be 9, compared to the thousands of burial sites in the British programme.

The intense importance attached by the Americans to identifying their dead meant that they went a great deal further than the British in collecting potentially useful evidence. With immediate burials, official policy dictated that identification tags and all personal effects should be left upon the corpse. In many cases, a certificate of identity was created, signed by

at least one but preferably two members of the dead man's unit who had been able to recognise and name him. In cases where no one had been able to identify the dead man, special care was taken to record any other information which might help, such as the exact place where the body was found, any serial numbers of machinery, vehicles or planes, and the details of any identified dead in the same area.³ If necessary, fingerprints and dental charts were obtained. Profile and full-face photographs might be taken, and if the man had suffered disfiguring injuries morticians would spend many hours reconstructing the face in order that the subsequent photograph would be a recognisable one.

Morticians were considered indispensable to the Americans' identification procedures; their use of cosmetic wax, needles, and other artefacts could make all the difference in recreating a damaged face.⁴ *Study Number 107* describes the morticians as taking great pride in their work, 'despite advanced decomposition and sickening odors in many cases'. They were also highly observant of items remaining on the bodies which might appear to the untrained eye be of no value, such as razor blades or peculiar buttons.

If, despite all efforts, identification could still not be made, the unidentified body would be marked as an 'X' case, the X being the preface to a serial number which could then be cross-referenced to the grave in which the remains were buried. These bodies would later be exhumed more than once in further attempts to identify them. One case, never solved, shows the lengths to which the Americans went to identify nameless remains. The unknown casualty labelled X-244 had been buried at Henri Chapelle in Belgium, the date of death being recorded as 24 December 1944. On 5 November 1947 the remains were disinterred along with six other bodies belonging to one crew in an attempt to ascertain firstly 'the amount of remains interred in each grave' and secondly to solve the mystery of X-244.

The six bodies were found to be complete, but X-244 was fragments only. The remains consisted only of '3 very small pieces of skull bone and approximately ½ lb of flesh'. There were no other clues apart from 'Remnant of one (1) pair' of cotton drawers attached to the flesh. Obviously the case was almost impossible to solve, but nonetheless, the report was filled in down to every last detail, for example each line of the list of twenty-six possible items

of clothing and their significance, and every one of the forty-five possible physical identifiers, even though most of the entries were 'None' or 'U.T.D.' Lastly, the remains were prepared and placed in a casket; the casket was then sealed, boxed, marked, and recorded, each stage of the process being witnessed and certified by an inspector, in this case 1st Lieutenant Raymond G Johnson.⁵

Two years later, the case of X-244 was reviewed, and it was only then that it was decided that the remains should be classified as unidentifiable.⁶ It should be noted that there was nothing with the remains of X-244 to definitely confirm that he was an American. In fact, the American Graves Registration Command sometimes appears to have acted upon the presumption that all bodies were American unless there was strong evidence to the contrary.

These rigorous procedures gave the Americans a major advantage over the British. The other enormously significant factor was the use of two Central Identification Points, CIPs, in preference to graveside identifications such as those carried out by the British, often in the most appalling conditions.

The first CIP was created after a tour of the European battle areas by Dr Harry L Shapiro, the Chairman and Curator of Physical Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Shapiro had been invited to comment upon the methods used by the American Graves Registration Command, and after three weeks' observation in the field he recommended the creation of a centrally located laboratory where identification could be carried out by highly skilled personnel using state of the art scientific equipment.⁷ As the official history of the American Graves Registration Service noted:

The establishment and operation of the Central Identification Point in Europe, replacing graveside processing and identification, provided one of the highlights of the entire operation. [...] The successful identification of all but approximately 3 per cent of the recovered dead constituted a great overall achievement.⁸

The first CIP was located at Strasbourg in France, and from August 1946, all American remains, including those which had been identified, were sent to the CIP, together with their personal effects and anything else which might confirm their identity. A second CIP was later established at Neuville-en-Condroz in Belgium. The methods used by the CIPs included the chemical analysis of clothing, and skeletal reconstruction which could produce information about racial origin, age, and stature. There was also a technique known as fluoroscopy, similar to modern CAT scans, which could reveal identification discs, jewellery, and other metallic objects embedded deep in the tissues.⁹

Worldwide, out of 280,994 recovered American dead, only 10,011, around 3.5 per cent were still unidentified at the close of the programme on 31 December 1951. This was a staggering achievement. It is extremely important, however, to emphasise that this percentage was for the recovered dead, i.e. it did not represent the clear-up rate for missing cases which was the angle from which the British approached the matter. In fact, a straightforward comparison between the American figures for recovered remains and the British figures for solving missing cases is not possible. The key point is that the term 'recovered remains' meant bodies, or parts of bodies, which the Americans actually had in their possession. This did not directly correlate to the number of missing, and in fact the term 'recovered remains' included servicemen who had never been 'missing' in the first place. For example, servicemen who had been interred in the United Kingdom became 'recovered' once their bodies had been exhumed and taken to an American identification processing point, thus being brought back under full American control.

The British clear-up rates for missing cases were 49 per cent for the Army, and 57 per cent for the RAF where known graves were concerned. To the latter must be added the 22 percent of cases where the missing airmen were formally declared to have been lost at sea, and the 5 per cent where there was no known grave but there was some information about what had happened to the men. The total for the RAF was thus 84%.¹⁰

Although no direct comparison can be made to the American figures for recovered remains, it is obvious that the Americans enjoyed far greater success in identifying their dead.

This reflected not only far greater American expertise, but also larger resources and some circumstantial factors.

The resources available to the American graves units dwarfed those of the British. Worldwide, the American programme was a behemoth. The final cost of American Graves Registration Service operations – search, recovery, identification, the concentration of the scattered dead, the final burial overseas or repatriation to the United States — was \$163,869,000.¹¹ At the peak of the programme between the latter part of 1947 to the first half of 1948, when the dead in Europe began to be repatriated, 13,311 people were engaged upon it. The result of all this effort was that slightly more than 280,000 remains were recovered at an average recorded cost of \$564.50.¹² The actuarial detail may appear somewhat tasteless, but was consistent with the general American approach to war in which detailed costings were frequently compiled, such as for each individual bombing raid.¹³

There are no equivalent costs for the recovery and burial of the British dead. However, as a rough comparison, taken at the height of the American programme when 13,311 were engaged upon it, Stott's organisation, the Western Europe Graves Service Directorate, arguably the most significant Directorate in the entire British programme, had 12 Officers, 1 Liaison Officer, 1 Allied Liaison Officer, 85 ORs, and 42 Civilians, a total of 141 people.¹⁴ Whilst it is true that many other people were also engaged in the British programme, from A.G.13 staff to the MRES to graves units in other parts of the world, the very modest size of the Western Europe Graves Service Directorate puts the American resources sharply into perspective. This is so even when taking into account the fact that the American programme was at its peak.

Circumstantial factors which helped the Americans achieve better results than the British related mainly to timing. The United States did not join the war until December 1941 and thus there was no American equivalent to the 1940 British losses in France and Norway. America only commenced its bombing campaign in Europe in August 1942, three years after the RAF, which had been losing men since the beginning of September 1939. The American dead had thus been lost comparatively recently, a hugely significant factor in identification

rates. The Americans' high identification rate may also possibly reflect their not infrequent tendency to jump to conclusions about identity which sometimes led them into serious errors with the dead of other nations.

The Americans were not infallible and did make mistakes. Serious errors could sometimes occur between registration and concentration, such as two individuals being listed for the same grave location, or bodies becoming separated from the material which identified them. The absence of a master file of dental records to match that maintained for fingerprints made some identification attempts extremely difficult or impossible.¹⁵ But at least there *were* dental records and fingerprints, and, what was perhaps just as valuable, a master file of casualties. The problems which Colonel Arthur Owen Stott of the British Graves Service had with inadequate British record-keeping are clearly illustrated by a note he made in his quarterly report for the period ending 31 December 1946:

On the 6 Oct 46 I put forward to War Office a suggestion that Cas L or appropriate Records Officers by now had compiled lists by Theatres of all casualties since 3 Sep 39, and that such lists would obviate my having to refer the checking of service particulars to the following authorities:-

War Office (A.G.13).

Admiralty.

Air Ministry.

GHQ 2nd Echelon.

Home Records Offices.

Dominion Records Offices.

War Office (A.G.13) replied regretting that no authority had compiled alphabetical lists and that the creation of such lists at the present time is quite impossible.

Stott added, in his usual quiet but meaningful way, 'All Officers of the American Graves Service are in possession of alphabetical lists of casualties – in book form'.¹⁶

It is notable that the RAF, which kept extremely comprehensive records, was able to provide the Air Ministry Casualty Branch and the MRES with a complete list of every airman who was missing, together with all known information about him. It was this key difference with the Army which enabled the RAF search for the missing to take place. Record-keeping at such a high level of detail was possible because of the nature of the RAF war, aircraft and their crews being scrupulously recorded in the squadrons' Operational Record Books and any loss being known within a matter of hours. Losses would be known by the simple calculation of when the aircraft's fuel ran out and the absence of any report of the aircraft landing at a different location to its home station.

Beyond the question of record-keeping, any overview of the American system all too quickly demonstrates the major deficiency of the British system — the lack of reliable means of identification. This included such basic failures as the absence of dental charts (with the marked exception of the Dominion Air Forces, which were singled out by Group Captain Hawkins of the MRES for special praise); no fingerprint sets; no evacuation system for the soldier dead; and no photography of the unidentified soldier dead, let alone anything so un-British as a mortician first reconstructing a disfigured face.¹⁷ However, the factor which stands out from all the rest because it would have been such a simple matter to fix was that the British identity discs were very poor quality. They were made of fibre (the American discs were made of durable metal) and thus were very apt to become degraded, particularly after long immersion in water or if a body was buried face down with the disc underneath it — the moisture in the decaying flesh rendered the disc-stamping illegible.¹⁸

Scandalously, it appears that this matter was brought to the attention of A.G.13, the Directorate in charge of graves and their registration, well before the major campaigns in North-West Europe. In June 1943, A.G.13 received a report from GHQ, Middle East Forces, (MEF), that the identity disks did not last well, and when buried with a corpse became illegible and peeled. This bore out several isolated reports already received.¹⁹ The problem was mentioned again in the A.G.13 War Diary in November 1943 when a report from the Lethbridge Commission confirmed the situation.²⁰ By this time the invasion of Italy had

taken place. The A.G.13 War Diary continued to allude to the problem in 1944, but apparently no action was taken by the War Office, or indeed the Air Ministry if it was aware of the situation. Post-liberation, the poor quality of the identity discs would cause particular difficulties in identifying the dead from the French and Norwegian campaigns of 1940 due to the length of time which the men had been buried, and of course the same applied to airmen who had been lost in the early years of the war. In August 1948, a short report on the work of the Graves Service during the war called for a new identity disc, acknowledging that 'the present one is most unsuitable' and that due to this the 'identification of a large number of casualties' had been lost.²¹

It did not help the utility of the identity discs that the troops (or indeed the Germans when burying the dead) were so cavalier about removing them from corpses. Even British medical units also failed in this respect, Stott noting in June 1945 that an increasing number of hospital burials were being discovered 'of naked bodies wrapped in blankets and without any means of identity being left on the body'.²² A far more substantial problem, however, occurred with frontline troops whose responsibility it was to bury the dead with adequate means of identification. The War Office cannot be accused of not constantly reiterating the way that soldiers should act towards the dead, but the fact that its instructions were so frequently ignored, and that the War Office was well aware of this, suggests that something should have been done about enforcing or improving the system for immediate burials. This was recognised by some senior officers who were aware that the American system was far superior, but implementing such a system would have cost considerable resources upfront and the British could not really afford it.²³

The American programme for the Second World War dead was a reflection of an intense national preoccupation with the sanctity of human remains. Ultimately, it has to be said that the British had a more fatalistic attitude towards the business of the battle dead, and that this cultural difference could perhaps be seen as a blessing when one had fewer men and far less money.

In North-West Europe, the Americans ran a combined programme for airmen and soldiers. Would the Army and the RAF have improved their results if they too had worked together in a common programme? The likely answer is that, as the two Services found it difficult to work together harmoniously, a shared programme would not have been a success.

During the war there were some attempts to present the Services as having a joint policy, for instance the government pamphlet issued in the names of all three, *Advice to the Relative of a Man who is Missing*. This pamphlet described the procedure by which notification was received that a man was a prisoner of war, and what efforts were made to find him if no such news was received. It warned relatives not to try to glean information from enemy broadcasts because of their use for propaganda purposes, and said that ‘the official listeners’ never missed any name included in such broadcasts but passed all such information ‘to the Service Department concerned’. The leaflet concluded:

There is, therefore, a complete official service designed to secure for you and to tell you all discoverable news about your relative. This official service is also a very human service, which well understands the anxiety of relatives and will spare no effort to relieve it.²⁴

The impression of unity and common policy which the pamphlet presented did not reflect what was happening in reality. Behind the scenes there was not only lack of unity but even policies which directly contradicted one another. Probably the most notable example of this concerned the British Red Cross. In late 1941 the War Office fell out with the British Red Cross, and it disliked the harmonious relationship which was continued by the Air Ministry and the Admiralty with the charity. A post-war report noted:

It should also be recorded that both the Admiralty and the Air Ministry relied on the Missing Department of the BRCS to a much greater extent than did the War Office to carry out their enquiries; and the introduction of a common inter-Services policy in this direction would seem desirable.²⁵

The case was put even more strongly in the conclusion to the report, where a recommendation about standardisation between the Services in their dealings with voluntary bodies called for ‘no facilities or privileges’ to be granted by one Service whilst they were being denied by another.²⁶

It seems probable that the Army would have liked to have taken the central role and set the rules in every single matter pertaining to the military dead and missing. The occasional comment here and there in Army documentation suggests a slightly proprietorial interest in what the RAF was doing; for example, A.G.13’s War Diary noted in June 1943 that the RAF had ‘decided to adopt a scheme for burying all RAF dead in the UK in certain regional cemeteries’.²⁷ The RAF was here exercising an independence which it would not have with post-war burials in North-West Europe. Given the very unusual nature of a note about the RAF appearing in A.G.13’s War Diary, it would seem that the War Office was alert to the possibility that the RAF might wish to follow a more independent path when the war ended.

There is a memorandum in Stott’s paperwork, dated 11 February 1945, which shows that the RAF did occasionally undertake burials in North-West Europe despite the standing agreement to the contrary. Stott refers to RAF burials ‘effected by the RAF direct into British cemeteries which have been established by me’, i.e. the new Military Cemeteries:

Frequently it happens that a Registration Officer proceeds to a cemetery to register notified graves only to find that a number of RAF have been buried there since his previous visit, and for which the Branch (or any DAD in the Field) holds no record. For example since October last, about 100 RAF personnel have been buried by [the] RAF in Evere British Cemetery, Brussels.²⁸

This was an extremely rare instance in which the usual division of responsibilities between the Army and the RAF was not observed; for the most part, the restrictive guidelines were scrupulously adhered to by the RAF.

However, the RAF also firmly resisted the acquisition by the Army of any more control than it already had. In July 1945, when the Air Ministry Casualty Branch was seeking vastly

increased resources for missing research, it conclusively rejected the Army's proposal for a joint search for the missing in North-West Europe. Group Captain Burges's reasons for this were that the Army could have little interest in the RAF's special requirements, and similarly that the Air Ministry was not 'particularly interested in the search for groups of graves in the neighbourhood of Army prison camps or intense military operations'.²⁹ The RAF insisted in taking sole responsibility for its missing, and the results which it achieved without the Army's help, coupled with the significantly lower rate which the Army attained for missing soldiers, show that it was completely right to do so.

The RAF was resentful of the delays which the Army caused to its work. Sometimes these delays were simply difficulties of liaison, and Stott himself felt that the work carried out in conjunction with the MRES was not always satisfactory: 'an overlapping of work had often occurred unnecessarily'. Certainly, the Army could not be accused of lack of support — at the time of Stott's comment, on 10 March 1947, 20 per cent of all Graves Service concentration personnel were attached to the MRES.³⁰ These mixed Army-RAF teams could be very effective, such as the one working in November 1947 on the Dutch Frisian island of Schiermonnikoog. Such teams demonstrated that the two Services could indeed act as partners in a common enterprise.

However, top-level policy differences were immense, and, had a full partnership ever been formed, it would have been necessary for one of the Services to give up its strongly held views on how the matter of 'unknowns' (men in unidentified graves) and the missing (men whose fate was not known) should be approached. The likelihood of that happening seems to have been remote; thus any more expansive Army-RAF partnership would have had to operate within the tension generated by two markedly different viewpoints. Whatever way matters were arranged, however, what seems certain is that the British could not have matched the Americans' identification rate. This is because they were at war for so much longer, the resources were severely limited, and the necessary pre-planning had not gone into ensuring that adequate means of identification were provided.

FOOTNOTES

¹ W Raymond Wood and Lori Ann Stanley, 'Recovery and Identification of World War II Dead: American Graves Registration Activities in Europe', *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 34 (1989), p.1366.

² Ibid.

³ *Study Number 107: Graves Registration Service*, Reports of the General Board, United States Forces, European Theater, undated but around November 1945, pp.14-16.

⁴ Ibid, pp.16-17.

⁵ It actually says the GRS inspector on the form, but by this period the AGRC had replaced the GRS.

⁶ 'Unknown X-244 (Henri Chapelle cemetery, Belgium), OQMG Unidentified Remains Report', 22 November 1948, US 7th Armoured Division Association website: www.7tharmdiv.org/docrep/images/US-Non-7AD/.../X-244.pdf (last accessed November 2012)

⁷ Edward Steere and Thayer M Boardman, *Final Disposition of World War II Dead 1945-51*, US Army, Quartermaster Corps, QMC Historical Studies, Series II, No. 4 (Historical Branch Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington, D.C., 1957), pp.614-616.

⁸ Ibid, p.693.

⁹ W Raymond Wood and Lori Ann Stanley, 'Recovery and Identification of World War II Dead: American Graves Registration Activities in Europe', *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 34 (1989), p.1369.

¹⁰ The Army percentages are approximate as the official figures are themselves so approximate. TNA, WO 162/205, War Office, 'History of Cas L (Liverpool) (Cas L)', p.54. The RAF percentages are based on this report: TNA, AIR2/9910, Air Ministry Casualty Branch, illegible signature (possibly K C Stole), 'Missing Research Activities, October to December 1950', report, 3 January 1951.

¹¹ Steere and Boardman, *Final Disposition of World War II Dead*, Preface, p.v.

¹² Ibid, p.690. The average cost for each set of remains was \$564.50 on 30 June 1951 – at this point the total of recovered remains and its associated cost were slightly lower than at the conclusion of the programme. No breakdown of costs for North-West Europe (or indeed Europe as a whole, including the Mediterranean area) is available. Much of the United States' war was conducted in the Pacific Ocean areas, in Japan and on the Asiatic Mainland, regions which sometimes presented far more difficult challenges than Europe.

¹³ See Richard Overy, *The Bombing War, Europe 1939-1945* (Allen Lane, London, 2013), p.408. Anthony Cotterell, who reported for *WAR* on both the US Army and the USAAF in 1942-43, made some very interesting observations on cultural differences, such as: 'Americans look on the Army more as a nine-to-six job. Their loyalty is more akin to the pride of a business man employed by a first-rate firm. Whereas the British soldier's loyalty is based on the feeling that we mustn't let the old place down, plus personal attachment to officers.' 'Quit Horsing Around and Police Up', Anthony Cotterell, *An Apple for the Sergeant* (Hutchinson and Co, London, 1944), p.140.

¹⁴ At the beginning of 1948, HQ was located at Chateau Prunay, Louveciennes, in France, and these are the figures as given at that point, some 8 months before the organisation was disbanded. TNA, WO 267/609, BAOR HQ, Western Europe Graves Service Directorate, Quarterly Historical Report, quarter ending 31 March 1948.

¹⁵ Michael Sledge, *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury and Honor Our Military Fallen* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2005), pp.118-120.

¹⁶ TNA, WO 267/604, BAOR HQ, Western Europe Graves Service Directorate, Quarterly Historical Report, quarter ending 31 December 1946, Lieutenant Colonel Stott, entry for 31 December 1946.

¹⁷ Dental records: see TNA, AIR 55/65, Air Ministry, Group Captain E F Hawkins, 'Report on Royal Air Force and Dominions Air Forces Missing Research and Enquiry Service 1944 – 1949', p.142.

¹⁸ The War Diary of A.G.13 refers to them as being made of fibre in November 1943. TNA, WO 165/36, War Office, A.G.13 (The Army Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries), War Diary, January-December 1943. Stott devoted a memorandum to the problems of bodies buried face downwards and particularly mentioned the softening of the disc when it was in prolonged contact with the moisture of decomposing flesh. TNA, WO 171/3926, 21 Army Group HQ, GR&E, War Diary, January-December 1945, appendices for May, Appendix J2, Lieutenant Colonel Stott, 'Burials', memorandum, 6 May 1945.

¹⁹ TNA, WO 165/36, War Office, A.G.13 (The Army Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries), War Diary, January-December 1943, entry for June 1943.

²⁰ Ibid, entry for November 1943.

²¹ TNA, WO 32/12968, DGR&E, War Office, Brigadier C S Vale, Minute 1, 23 August 1948.

²² TNA, WO 171/3926, 21 Army Group HQ, GR&E, War Diary, January-December 1945, entry for 22 June 1945.

²³ See for example, TNA, WO 171/186, 21 Army Group HQ, GR&E, War Diary, September-December 1944, Appendix D, Tour of Inspection, Colonel S Fraser, 23 October 1944.

²⁴ Government leaflet, *Advice to the Relative of a Man who is Missing*, not obviously dated but perhaps March 1944 ('3/44' appears in a string of letters and numbers), author's collection.

²⁵ TNA, WO 162/205, War Office, 'History of Casualty Branch (Liverpool) (Cas L)', pp.63-64.

²⁶ Ibid, p.65.

²⁷ TNA, WO 165/36, War Office, A.G.13 (The Army Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries), War Diary, January-December 1943, entry for June 1943. An example of such a regional cemetery is Cambridge City Cemetery, which contains many of the dead of the bomber stations of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire.

²⁸ TNA, WO 171/3926, 21 Army Group HQ, GR&E, War Diary, January-December 1945, appendices for February, Appendix J1, Lieutenant Colonel Stott, 'Burial Reports', memorandum, 11 February 1945.

²⁹ TNA, AIR20/9050, Air Ministry Casualty Branch, Group Captain R Burges, 'Missing Research and Enquiry Service', report, 12 July 1945.

³⁰ TNA, WO 267/605, BAOR HQ, Western Europe Graves Service Directorate, Quarterly Historical Report, quarter ending 31 March 1947, Minutes of Conference held at HQ, GR&E Directorate, Western Europe, on 10 March 1947.