



CWGC
Commonwealth War Graves Commission

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MEDIA RELEASE

European leaders pay tribute at Commonwealth War Graves Commission sites

- **Prime Minister Theresa May and President Emmanuel Macron have laid wreaths at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's largest memorial to the missing in the world**
- **They learned about the 72,000 missing men commemorated at Thiepval, France, and visited the grave of Rifleman Philip Ernest Stubbs, who fought in the same regiment as Mrs May's grandfather**
- **Mrs May and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel earlier toured St Symphorien Military Cemetery in Mons, Belgium, where the first and last British combat deaths on the Western Front are buried**

The leaders of Britain, France and Belgium have toured Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries and memorials ahead of the hundredth anniversary of the Armistice.

The British Prime Minister and French President today (9 November) paid tribute to the fallen of the First World War at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's iconic Thiepval Memorial to the missing of the Somme, in France.

Theresa May and Emmanuel Macron laid wreaths under the commanding arches of the 45m tall memorial, which bears the names of more than 72,000 men killed in the Somme area.

Almost 100 years to the day after the guns on the Western Front fell silent, the leaders stood among the graves of the 300 Commonwealth and 300 French soldiers who were laid to rest side by side by CWGC at the foot of the Thiepval Memorial, to symbolise the common sacrifice of the Allied nations.

They included the resting place of Rifleman Philip Ernest Stubbs who is buried at Thiepval and fought in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, the same regiment as Mrs May's grandfather, Regimental Serjeant Major Tom Brasier.

The Commission's Director General Victoria Wallace guided Mrs May and President Macron around the Thiepval Memorial, the largest CWGC memorial to the missing in the world. Interns from the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation, set up to further the educational work of the Commission, then recounted the stories



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of some of the Commonwealth and French men buried on the site, which has been carefully tended by CWGC since it was unveiled in 1932.

Theresa May and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel were earlier on Friday (9 November) given a tour of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's St Symphorien Military Cemetery, near Mons, Belgium, where the first and last British soldiers to die in combat on the Western Front are, by chance, buried metres apart.

Just two days before the 100th anniversary of his death, Theresa May and Charles Michel both laid a wreath at the grave of Private George Ellison, the last British soldier to die in combat on the Western Front. Private Ellison was killed hours before the agreed ceasefire at 11am on 11 November 1918.

Directly opposite his grave, by pure chance, is the final resting place of Private John Parr who was killed on 21 August 1914, the first British soldier to die in combat on the Western Front. Both leaders also laid a wreath at his grave. Only a few metres of carefully trimmed lawn separate these men at St Symphorien, but more one million Commonwealth lives were lost around the world in the four years between their deaths.

Prime Minister Theresa May said: "Armistice gives each of us an opportunity to pause and reflect on the immense sacrifices that were made by so many a century ago. Each cemetery and memorial across the world is a unique and poignant reminder of the cost of the First World War, and a fitting place to observe a silence for those who died. I thank those who work year-round to maintain and preserve these hugely significant sites for the benefit of us all."

Victoria Wallace, Director General of CWGC, said: "We are hugely grateful to leaders of Britain, France and Belgium for their support for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and our work, and it was a privilege to have them visit our sites so close to the centenary of Armistice."

St Symphorien is also the burial place of Canadian Private George Price who is believed to be the last Commonwealth soldier to die in combat in the war, after a sniper's bullet struck him minutes before the Armistice came into effect.

The history of CWGC's creation and how it came to commemorate the 1.7 million Commonwealth war dead from the two World Wars is revealed in a new online exhibition, *Shaping Our Sorrow*, which can be viewed at: <https://shapingoursorrow.cwgc.org/>



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Notes for editors:

Thiepval Memorial

The Thiepval Memorial in France is the largest Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorial to the missing in the world and commemorates more than 72,000 men who fought and died on the battlefields of the Somme, but have no known grave. It was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and after four years of work it was unveiled by Prince Edward, Prince of Wales, on 1 August 1932. In addition to being a memorial to the missing, Thiepval is a battle memorial that honours the sacrifice and joint efforts of France and the UK during the Great War. At the foot of the memorial is a small military cemetery containing 600 war dead of both Commonwealth and French forces.

St Symphorien Military Cemetery

As well as the first and last British combat casualties on the Western Front, St Symphorien is also the final resting place of the first British officer to be awarded a Victoria Cross, Lieutenant Maurice Dease VC, and the first German soldier to be awarded an Iron Cross, Musketier Oskar Niemeyer. The cemetery was first constructed by German troops in 1916 to concentrate some of the burials of troops from Allied and German forces. Following the war the Imperial War Graves Commission (as it was then known) took over and created the site as we know it today. Spread across multiple levels in secluded woodland St Symphorien is unique among CWGC cemeteries and offers visitors a chance to explore the stories of those who died in the very opening days and in the closing minutes of the war, from both sides.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) commemorates the 1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen and women who died during the two World Wars. It also holds and updates an extensive and accessible records archive. The Commission operates in more than 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries.

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