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COMMONWEALTH
WAR GRAVES
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COMMEMORATIONS POLICY

Caring for War Dead and our Graves

25 August 2020

Policy History

Version	Date	Amendment	Approved By
1	25/08/2020	All content regarding CWGC's approach to caring for war dead and our graves collated into one policy.	Policy and Commemorations Group

Next Review

This policy is reviewed every three years. The next review of this policy is scheduled to commence in August 2023.

Contact Details

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1 Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to define how the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) will care for war dead and the graves for which we are responsible.

2 Scope

This policy defines the approach to caring for war dead and all graves within our responsibility. This includes war graves and non-war graves (managed as agency services).

3 Definitions

Cemetery	Includes civil cemeteries and churchyards.
Grave Marker	Includes headstones and pedestal markers.
Member Government	Governments that fund the CWGC, namely the governments of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India.
Next-of-Kin	A war casualty's spouse, parent, sibling or child (except where expressly stated otherwise).
Non-War Grave	Graves of non-war dead managed by CWGC on an agency basis.
War Cemetery	A cemetery or cemetery plot owned or granted in perpetuity to CWGC.
War Dead/ War Casualty	Those eligible for commemoration, excluding civilian war casualties.
War Graves	The grave of one or more war dead.

4 Additional Burials

4.1 Additional Burials in War Cemeteries and Outside the UK

No additional burials, including next-of-kin, are permitted to be buried in war graves in:

- war cemeteries, as these are expressly for the burial of war casualties; or
- plots or isolated graves in civilian cemeteries or churchyards outside the UK and under CWGC's control.

4.2 Additional Burials in Civilian Cemeteries within the UK

A war casualty's spouse, sibling or child may be buried with a war casualty in an isolated grave in civilian cemeteries or churchyards within the UK, where we have the burial rights. In most cases, these graves will be owned by the family in which case we have no authority.

The remaining headstone space for a personal inscription may be used to commemorate the additional person. An existing personal inscription will not be altered to accommodate additional wording.

If the family decide to replace a CWGC grave marker with a new memorial, we will seek to ensure that the new grave marker includes adequate commemoration of the war casualty.

5 Strewing of Ashes

The ashes of a war casualty's spouse, sibling or child may be strewn in the soil over a war grave in a war cemetery, subject to local legislation and regulations.

We do not have the authority to approve the strewing of ashes over war graves in civil cemeteries and churchyards. Any such request will be referred to the appropriate authority.

Requests for the strewing ashes over non-war graves under our care are referred to the relevant government authority.

5.1 Method of Strewing Ashes

Any permitted ashes must be strewn. Scattering of ashes is not permitted in war cemeteries.

Strewing means to place the ashes in the soil after peeling back the top layer of turf or in the border soil. Ashes should not be buried in a casket or urn as this requires a deeper hole, which may disturb the grave and is an obstacle to future maintenance.

Ashes may be strewn over a collective grave. In this case, the ashes must be strewn in front of the headstone commemorating the relevant casualty.

At our discretion and only where practical, we may arrange, free of charge, for the preparation and reinstatement of the ground before and after the strewing of ashes. Such requests will only be considered if reasonable notice is given and the strewing takes place normal working hours.

5.2 Form of Commemoration

If ashes are strewn in a war grave, the details of that person are not permitted to be added to a CWGC grave marker. An exception is made in the case of family graves in the United Kingdom, where the headstone space available for a personal inscription may be used to commemorate the additional person.

If the grave owners decide to replace a CWGC grave marker with a new memorial, we will seek to ensure that the new grave marker includes suitable commemoration of the war casualty.

5.3 Family Responsibilities

While CWGC may permit ashes to be strewn in a cemetery in principle, any such permission is subject to local legislation and regulations. It is the responsibility of the family to obtain the necessary permissions to import and strew ashes. We will provide written confirmation of our approval if necessary.

5.4 Ashes of Ex-Comrades

Ashes of ex-comrades are not accepted at war cemeteries, except at the following cemeteries where there is an established tradition:

- Arnhem (Oosterbeek) War Cemetery;
- Cassino War Cemetery;
- Brookwood Military Cemetery; and
- Runnymede Memorial.

The strewing of ashes for comrades takes place in an area designated for such purpose, not over war graves, and no form of commemoration is permitted.

6 Exhumation

6.1 Commonwealth War Graves

Exhumation of a Commonwealth war grave will only be considered, as a last resort and where all other options have been exhausted, under the following circumstances:

- the grave is at serious risk of disturbance due to physical deterioration of the land;
- the grave will become inaccessible; or
- reasons of significant public necessity.

Exhumation will not take place for the purposes of identification.

For practical reasons, exhumation will not normally be considered from graves containing multiple burials or co-mingled remains.

All decisions on exhumations are determined in accordance with CWGC's *Exhumation Procedure*.

6.2 Non-Commonwealth War Grave and Non-War Dead

Exhumation of a non-Commonwealth war grave in a war cemetery may be permitted at the request of the relevant government, but only if it is possible to do so without disturbing another grave.

Exhumation of a non-war casualty whose grave is under our care is permitted at the request of the relevant government, but only if it possible to do so without disturbing another grave.

7 Repatriation

Commonwealth war dead who died overseas are not repatriated to their home country, in accordance with the following principles:

- equality of treatment;
- those who fell together are united with their comrades in death as in life;
- the ideals of common purpose, cause and sacrifice are best represented by the cemeteries established in foreign lands; and
- preservation of the spirit of unity in which the countries gifted land in perpetuity and agreed to adopt the war dead.

Non-Commonwealth war dead may be repatriated at the request of the relevant government.

8 Recovered Remains

When a war casualty is recovered from previous battlefields, they will be reburied in a war cemetery. Determining the appropriate war cemetery for reburial will consider:

- the principle that war dead should be buried and commemorated with their comrades, close to the battlefield where they fell;
- the historical context of the loss e.g. the conflict in which the loss occurred, the force with which the war casualty served, any context that helps establish where those the war casualty served with are buried and commemorated; and
- the availability of grave space to accommodate the burial.

8.1 Disposal of Artefacts Recovered with Remains

Various artefacts may be found when a war casualty is recovered, including personal items and kit, uniform and military equipment. The handling and disposal of these items will be managed in accordance with CWGC's procedure [Disposal of Artefacts Recovered with Remains](#).

8.2 Reburial of Scant Remains

Scant remains that are discovered are reburied in accordance with CWGC's [Reburial of Scant Remains Procedure](#). Scant remains are:

- fragments of bone which are too small or degraded to be identified but which are believed to be human; or
- bones which are anatomically identifiable as human but cannot be associated with other recovered remains and which in total amount to less than 10% of the human skeleton.

Scant remains do not refer to human remains believed to be additional remains belonging to an identified casualty buried in a known grave. Refer to Additional Remains below.

8.3 Additional Remains

If additional remains of a war casualty with an identified war grave are recovered, the remains will be placed in a small casket and interred in the casualty's grave. The burial will usually be conducted by CWGC staff in private.

A blessing may be arranged after the burial.

9 DNA Testing

9.1 War Graves

We do not permit war graves to be disturbed to conduct DNA testing.

9.2 Newly Discovered War Dead

Newly discovered remains that are confirmed as war dead are referred to the relevant member government to investigate the casualty's identity. We support the investigation by providing a list of potential candidates.

The decision to use DNA testing to establish a match between a living relative of one or more candidates and the casualty is at the discretion of the member government.

Samples removed by or on behalf of the member government for testing, will be recorded on CWGC's Chain of Custody Form. Any samples not destroyed during testing must be returned for burial with the rest of the body, in accordance with the policy of non-repatriation

We do not hold samples or the results of DNA testing.

Refer CWGC's [DNA Testing Guideline](#) for further information.

10 Agency Services

Work that falls outside our core function of commemorating Commonwealth war dead is undertaken as Agency Services, on a repayment basis.

10.1 Foreign Nationals

We maintain the graves of First and Second World War casualties of non-Commonwealth countries, both allied or former enemy, and including armed forces and civilians, if they died in:

- the United Kingdom, at the request of the UK government;
- another Commonwealth country, at the request of the government of that country, and subject to mutually agreed terms; or
- a foreign country where CWGC has an existing commitment to maintain a Commonwealth war cemetery or memorial, at the request of the government of that country, and subject to mutually agreed terms.

We don't accept requests to commemorate foreign nationals outside of the United Kingdom directly from individuals, groups or organisations.

10.2 Non-War Graves

Under our Charter, CWGC may accept requests to maintain a place of burial or memorial from any government, person or body. Requests will be considered for:

- graves and memorials **outside** war cemeteries from any government, person or body; and
- graves and memorials **inside** war cemeteries only from a member government, or the government with whom we have the relevant war cemetery agreement.

10.3 New Battle Exploit Memorials

New Battle Exploit Memorials (BEMs) are not permitted within CWGC war cemeteries.

Requests for CWGC to take on maintenance of new or additional BEMs outside CWGC war cemeteries will only be considered if appropriate long-term funding is in place.

We will not normally take on the maintenance of new BEMs which record named individuals, as this could be misconstrued as double commemoration, although each case will be judged on its own merits

10.4 Existing Battle Exploit Memorials

Sponsors are sought for all Battle Exploit Memorials (BEMs).

BEMs will be maintained, regardless of whether there is a sponsor, if they are:

- located within CWGC war cemeteries, or are within the immediate vicinity of a CWGC war cemetery and cannot be distinguished as separate by members of the public;
- listed and covered by the 1938 convention; or
- in effect Private Memorials marking a physical grave location.

All other BEMs are maintained on an agency basis only. If a sponsor is not available, maintenance may continue or cease, at CWGC's discretion. The decision will consider the following matters and is subject to the approval of the Policy and Commemorations Group:

- historical, political and/or cultural importance of the BEM;
- likely costs of current/future maintenance and works; and
- reputational risk to CWGC if maintenance is discontinued.

Any decision to end maintenance will be notified to interested parties.

11 Policy Review and Consultation

All reviews of this policy will be conducted through CWGC's Policy and Commemorations Group. Member governments will be consulted as necessary.

12 Responsibilities

CWGC's **Policy and Commemorations Group** is responsible for:

- overseeing reviews of this policy; and
- approving major policy revisions.

The **Commemorations Policy Manager** is responsible for:

- maintaining this policy and ensuring it is communicated clearly and applied consistently across CWGC and member government service authorities;
- scheduling and leading the review of the policy; and
- ensuring member government service authorities are consulted as necessary on any proposed changes to this policy.

13 Related Documents

Commemorations Policy: Eligibility Criteria for Commemoration.

Commemorations Policy: How we Commemorate War Dead.

Exhumation Procedure.

Reburial of Scant Remains Procedure.

Disposal of Artefacts Recovered with Remains Procedure.

DNA Testing Guideline.

14 References

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission Charter of Incorporation.