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Recovery and Identification of World War II Dead: American Graves Registration Activities in Europe

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ABSTRACT: About two thirds of the 281 000 Americans who died in World War II (WWII) fell in the European Theater. Of the 148 000 bodies recovered from Europe, nearly 99% were identified. Through the efforts of the Graves Registration Service and the American Graves Registration Command, more than 171 000 Americans who died overseas worldwide during WWII were eventually returned to the United States for final burial. The procedures used at the Central Identification Point in Strasbourg, France, for the identification of unknown remains is illustrated by the case of an Eighth Air Force crewman killed over Germany in 1943 whose body was recovered in 1947.

KEYWORDS: physical anthropology, graves registration, World War II, war dead

The purpose of this paper is to describe the history, objectives, and activities of the Graves Registration Service (GRS) in 1942 to 1945, and the American Graves Registration Command (AGRC) in 1945 to 1951. These were the two U.S. Army organizations primarily responsible for the location, identification, and interment of the remains of American military personnel who fell in World War II (WWII). Graves registration activities differed somewhat from one theater of operations to another, since each area presented a unique combination of problems, challenges, and potential solutions to mortuary issues. This account focuses on graves registration in the European Theater, where about 65% of U.S. WWII combat fatalities occurred.

Although the activities of these two organizations affected thousands of American families in the 1940s and early 1950s, very little literature is available concerning their activities. The two primary sources are *The Graves Registration Service in World War II*, and *Final Disposition of World War II Dead: 1945-51* [1,2]. These monographs, which lean heavily on an unpublished, three-volume history of the AGRC [3], include a great amount of detail but lack good summary statements. Here we provide a brief history of and a bibliography for WWII U.S. graves registration programs, highlighting the activities of forensic scientists in identifying the unknown war dead.

Pre-WWII Efforts

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Americans have been committed to the recovery, identification, and proper burial of the war dead, but only with the experience gained

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through involvement in several conflicts was it possible to accomplish in practice what was supported in theory. Following the Mexican War of 1846 to 1847, less than 10% of the total fatalities were identified. During World War I (WWI) however, the War Department directed the military to keep mortuary records and to mark soldiers' graves with registered headboards. When the dead were exhumed and reinterred in national cemeteries after the war, 58% of total fatalities were positively identified. After the WWI dead were returned to the United States, only 3.5% of the more than 79 000 fatalities remained unidentified.

The success in recovering and identifying WWI fatalities can be attributed to the establishment in 1917 of the Graves Registration Service in the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. This organization was charged with collecting and identifying bodies, marking battlefield graves, keeping accurate mortuary records, and maintaining temporary burials and semipermanent military cemeteries in Europe. Speed in registering war graves was critical; experience gained from the two previous wars demonstrated that the number of unknowns is directly proportional to the time lag between original burial and registration of the graves. WWI graves registration units followed closely on the heels of combat troops, thereby achieving a 96.5% identification rate. Success did not come easily, however. The dangers and difficulties of service on the WWI battlefield can hardly be exaggerated, especially when graves registration was taking place on active battlefronts that moved back and forth over collection and cemetery areas [4].

WWII Graves Registration Activities

The unprecedented success of the WWI mortuary program confirmed that a special service was needed to perform the task of graves registration if the dead were to be recovered quickly, thereby maximizing identification. Consequently, a Graves Registration Service modeled after the WWI organization was established following the December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor at the onset of American entry into WWII. Recovery techniques followed a technical manual that had been published four months earlier: TM 10-630 [5]. Field units eventually were placed in all overseas theaters, but in WWII, the GRS was most active in the European Theater, where more than two thirds of all American combat fatalities occurred.

Like their WWI prototypes, WWII GRS units were charged with coordinating the collection, identification, and burial of the dead, but for reasons of efficiency several changes in procedure were made. For example, in contrast to the WWI practice, WWII fatalities were not buried in battlesite cemeteries. Instead, remains were evacuated first to battalion and then to division collecting points by teams detailed from combat units. At the collecting point every effort was made to establish the identity of the deceased by consulting members of their own units. This accomplished, the bodies were transferred to one of the temporary interment sites in Europe.

There were two advantages to this system. First, the practice of identifying as many casualties as possible at the collecting point resulted in a reduction in the percentage of unknown bodies delivered to cemeteries. This procedure also allowed for concentrating burials in only a few cemeteries. At the close of hostilities in Europe, 117 000 U.S. casualties were interred in only 54 cemeteries, whereas by the end of WWI, 75 000 casualties had been placed in 2 240 scattered burial areas [6,7].

Post-War Search and Recovery

With the end of hostilities, the GRS of the Quartermaster Corps was replaced by the self-contained American Graves Registration Command (AGRC). This post-war organization took over the responsibilities of the wartime Graves Registration Service, but with the cessation of combat field units were no longer collecting and removing bodies

from the battlefield. Instead, the AGRC concentrated its energies on “Search and Recovery”—the recovery and concentration of isolated and unrecorded burials and unburied remains.

Search and recovery efforts began as early as 1944 in some rearward areas and increased significantly in late 1945 when the AGRC was assigned primary responsibility for carrying out the post-war Casualty Clearance Plan. The plan was designed to confirm or alter the casualty status (Presumed Dead, Missing in Action, Missing, Prisoner of War, or Captured) provisionally assigned to thousands of American soldiers. Because the families of these men anxiously awaited word on the status of their soldier kin, casualty clearance was given high priority. To hasten the process, the AGRC undertook the responsibility of locating the recorded and reported burials of American military casualties, and in addition made searches for the locations of graves of all individuals believed to be deceased.

The European search and recovery mission was accomplished by a series of area sweeps, each of which was carried out in three phases. In the first phase a three-man Propaganda Team systematically visited communities in a given area, distributing posters describing the search and recovery operation and urging local people to come forward with any information they might have regarding burial places of American dead. Appeals to local residents to contact the team also were publicized in radio broadcasts and newspaper announcements.

The initial data gathering phase was followed by the time-consuming investigative phase, during which a special team followed every lead concerning the whereabouts of grave sites of U.S. soldiers. All investigations began with data contained in digests of documented cases compiled by Command Headquarters. The digests were prepared from such sources as Casualty Clearance Plan forms, Missing Air Craft Reports, and German Buff Cards, and Green Cards. These cards were prepared by the German Government for enemy soldiers killed in crash landings behind German lines or who died in German prison hospitals, and records of war prisoners who were treated in German prison hospitals. Arriving in a locality with these reports in hand, the Investigating Team contacted community leaders and other residents reported to have information on burial places of American soldiers. Additional clues were gleaned from hospital and cemetery records and from the files of the mayor’s office. All documented cases were researched until the graves in question were located, or it was demonstrated that the sites could not be found. They were obligated to continue their investigations until they had “thoroughly inquired into every rumor and bit of gossip concerning the disposition of American remains for which no documentary evidence existed” [8].

The final phase of search and recovery was accomplished by the Disinterring Team, consisting of an investigator, a driver, and several local laborers. This team used the information gathered during the previous phase to go to the grave site and exhume the remains, which then were removed to mobile collecting points.

For nearly three and a half years, search and recovery units continued to make sweeps, and in some areas re-sweeps, of Europe in quest of isolated remains. That part of north Europe where American troops had been in combat was divided into four zones for this purpose. Germany itself was a fifth area, under the First Field Command, and Italy was in the Mediterranean Zone, a separate area command (Fig. 1). By the time AGRC field activities came to an end in 1949, 16 584 isolated remains had been recovered from throughout Europe.

Identification of Unknown Remains

The search and recovery efforts were highly successful, but the mission was never intended to be an end in itself. The true success of the postwar graves registration program was measured by the rate of identification of American war dead. Under the Return of

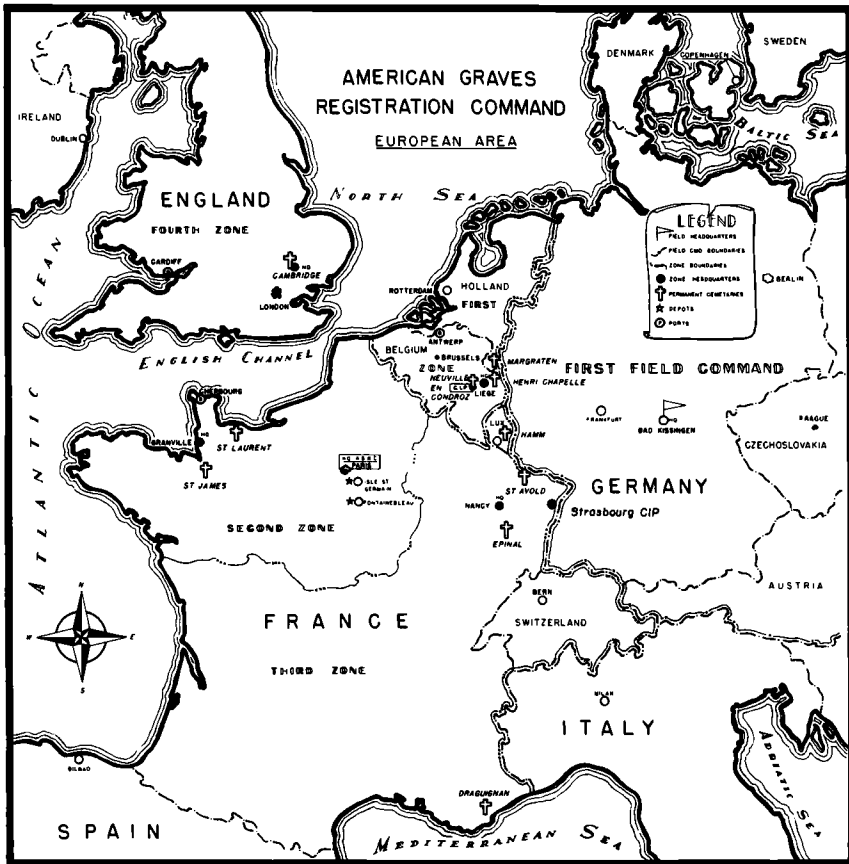


FIG. 1—Map of the four American Graves Registration Command zones for 1946 to 1949, European Theater, WWII, showing the location of permanent centers (from Ref 2, Map 1). Strasbourg, location of the Central Identification Point, has been added.

the Dead Program, more commonly known as “repatriation,” next of kin were given the option of having the remains returned to the United States for burial or permitting their interment in a permanent military cemetery overseas. Clearly, the objectives of the repatriation program could only be achieved if bodies were positively identified so that families could be contacted for their decision on final disposition of the remains.

In the early months of search and recovery, AGRC field units made every effort to identify isolated burials and unburied remains as they were recovered. The disinterring teams attempted to establish the identity of exhumed remains at the grave site, usually on the basis of one or more of the following: (1) an identification tag around the neck, (2) an identification tag found elsewhere on or near the person, (3) a paybook found in the clothing, (4) an Emergency Medical Tag signed by a medical officer and fastened to the body, or (5) an identification bracelet.

Exhumed bodies were removed to mobile collecting points having personnel and facilities for attempting even the most difficult identification problems. Here field identifications were confirmed and unidentified remains underwent a thorough examination for additional clues that might reveal the identity of the individual [9]. Initially this procedure was reasonably effective. However, as the months wore on, the increasing

time lag between death and recovery of the body made the task of identifying unknown remains more and more difficult. A new approach was badly needed.

The AGRC sought out expert advice in several areas, including physical anthropology. Early in 1946, Dr. Harry L. Shapiro, Curator of Physical Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, received a telephone call from the Quartermaster General in Washington, DC, and was asked if he could be of help in the identification of the war dead. Assuring the Quartermaster General that "current knowledge of skeletal variation and its correlations with age, sex and race would be helpful,"³ Shapiro was asked to visit sites in Europe where American casualties were being exhumed and to study the identification problems faced by AGRC. Shapiro went to France in May 1946 and began a three- to four-month tour of western Europe, ending his visit in Austria. He then offered recommendations for means of identifying the war dead based on techniques of physical anthropology.³ These techniques were quickly put into practice at the newly created Central Identification Point (CIP) established in a military barracks in Strasbourg, France [9,10,11]. The personnel at the CIP responsible for the identification in Europe were European forensic scientists under the technical direction of C. Simonin [12]. No American scientists were employed there. Beginning in August 1946 all recovered remains, known and unknown, along with personal effects and other identifying media, were sent directly to the CIP for examination. A second CIP was later established at Neuville-en-Condruz, Belgium, where the activities, under the direction of F. Vandervael, paralleled those at Strasbourg [13].

Processing a remains was a complex task accomplished by a team of technicians using a variety of analytical techniques, including skeletal reconstruction, determination of race, age, and stature, dental charting, and fingerprinting. The initial search generally revealed that the identification tags were missing, especially for those casualties that had been in German hands. The size, serial number, and the trademark on undergarments were examined, as were all personal objects, which were forwarded to the personal effects section. Objects carrying clues that were effaced or unreadable were sent to the chemistry laboratory for further analysis.

Following a thorough physical examination of the remains, the body was fluoroscoped, a process that often revealed identification tags, bracelets, rings, and other metallic objects imbedded in the tissues that otherwise might not have been discovered. Fluoroscopic or chemical analyses or both of clothing also sometimes yielded clues to the identity of the individual. Mass burials and extremely fragmentary remains proved challenging, but even so, positive identifications could sometimes be made.

After compiling their files, the body was sent to an American cemetery in Europe. The data were forwarded to Headquarters, AGRC, for assessment and, where possible, identification. The principal role of the CIP was not to identify the remains, but to collect the data necessary to assist in identification.

The skill and persistence of the CIP technicians is revealed by the fact that of over 148 000 remains recovered in the European Theater, only slightly more than 1 700 or just over 1% were still unidentified at the close of the graves registration program at the end of 1951. On a worldwide basis, 281 000 bodies had been recovered, and only 10 000, slightly over 3.5%, remained unidentified. Identification efforts continued even after the program had ended, and by 1954 this figure had fallen to 3.1% [8].

After his return to the United States, Shapiro was periodically notified that problematic cases that could not be resolved at the CIP had arrived at the Brooklyn Navy Yard for him to inspect. He was able to provide identities for some of these cases. Shapiro read

³H. L. Shapiro, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 4 Nov. 1987, personal letter to W. R. Wood.

a paper on his consultation role at the 1948 meetings of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, but no formal publication was prepared [14].

In the Pacific Theater, American physical anthropologists undertook the identification of unknowns. Charles E. Snow, of the University of Kentucky, was the first director and chief physical anthropologist at a second AGRC identification laboratory established at Schofield Barracks, near Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The practices recommended by Shapiro for the Strasbourg CIP were carried out at the Central Identification Laboratory (CIL) at Schofield Barracks under nearly ideal conditions [15]. Snow was followed as director in 1948 by Mildred Trotter, Department of Anatomy, Washington University, whose study there of stature based on long bone measurements of the war dead provided a landmark study in physical anthropology [16]. In contrast to the CIL in Hawaii, no research was done at Strasbourg, but at Neuville-en-Condroz, F. Vandervael of the University of Liège obtained data relevant to aging the skeleton from 225 American casualties [17].

A Representative Case

Each casualty processed by the GRS and AGRC generated a dossier known as a “293 file”—the individual deceased personnel file. These files are now held by the Mortuary Affairs and Casualty Division, U.S. Army Military Personnel Center, Alexandria, Virginia. The following case, based on one of these files, is that of ESW, a crewman of an American B-17 heavy bomber, shot down near Frankfurt, Germany, on 14 Oct. 1943 on a mission to bomb the ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt. The crewman, a second lieutenant, was found dead in his parachute and was buried with military escort by the Bürgermeister in the cemetery at Michelbach.

The 466th Quartermaster Battalion (Mobile), AGRC, APO 171, somewhere in Germany, received a telephone call on 13 March 1947 from the British Missing Research and Enquiry Service unit at Butzbach. The message described the loss of an aircraft and the burial of the U.S. airman in the cemetery at Michelbach. His grave had been missed in earlier sweeps of West Germany. That afternoon a War Dead Civilian Investigator was sent to field check the case.

The Investigator's first visit was to the Bürgermeister of Michelbach, who provided a copy of a statement made on 6 Jan. 1946 by the man who had been Bürgermeister in 1943. This document gave the details of the dead airman's recovery and funeral. The Bürgermeister then took the Investigator to the airman's grave in the town cemetery marked by a simple wooden cross, inscribed “Grabstatte des ‘ECW’, 14 Oktober 1943.”

That evening the Investigator interviewed the former Bürgermeister, who recalled that “CWW” was the name given the deceased airman by a Wehrmacht Medical Corps captain. When the Bürgermeister was asked why there was no entry in the cemetery register for the burial, he replied that the Wehrmacht captain had said no entries were to be made. The Investigator also went to the nearby town of Alzenau to obtain a statement from a doctor who had examined the body the day following the plane crash. He stated that the airman had died of strangulation by his parachute cords.

The grave was opened the next day by the Investigator's assistant and four German civilians. No identification tags were found, nor was there anything in the pockets, since it was customary for the Germans to remove all such personal effects: they sent one identification tag to the International Red Cross, the other, to Berlin. The disinterred remains were placed in a metallic liner and mattress cover in a burial box together with the wooden cross from the grave. A “Notice of Disinterment” was left with the Bürgermeister, and the remains were taken to the U.S. Military Cemetery at Margraten, Holland, from which they were transferred to the military cemetery and CIP at Neuville-en-Condroz, in the Ardennes region, Belgium.

There were two discrepancies in the identification that required investigation. Not only were there inconsistencies in the name (CWW and ECW versus ESW), but the number that was found marked on some of his clothing was not in agreement with ESW's army serial number. For this reason the remains were classified as "Unknown X-5423: believed to be Lt. ESW," as listed in the AGRC Casualties Book.

An "Identification Check List" noted that the remains were clothed in an officers' pink shirt and green trousers, tie, yellow web belt, cotton socks, jockey shorts, and size 40 gabardine flying coveralls. Leather bars denoting the rank of second lieutenant were on the coverall shoulders and the name "ESW" was printed on the left chest. The fluoroscopic examination was negative. Laboratory examination also began, and "Chemical Laboratory Case No. 1366" reported that the numerals "7934" had been found stenciled eight times on the waist band of the Hanes size 28 jockey type cotton shorts worn by X-5423.

The remains were then interred at Neuville-en-Condroz pending the result of the identification processes initiated at the CIP there. The "Report of Interment" filed on 20 May 1947 states the remains were buried on that date in Plot V, Row 11, Grave 267. A joint Protestant, Catholic, and Hebrew religious ceremony was conducted, as was customary in all cases where the religious affiliation of the soldier was in doubt.

"Unknown X-5423" was eventually positively identified through several lines of evidence: (1) there was excellent agreement between his tooth chart and that recorded on the Office of the Quartermaster General Form 371 for Lt. ESW; (2) the laundry mark "7934," found eleven times on the clothing of X-5423, was consistent with the last four digits of the enlisted serial number of Lt. ESW when he was an aviation cadet in the United States; (3) the name "ESW" was found on the flying coveralls of X-5423; (4) the two leather second-lieutenant's bars on the coveralls, and the officers' shirt and trousers, were in agreement with ESW's rank; (5) the estimated date and place of death was consistent with the Missing Air Craft Report for B-17 serial number 42-30199, of which ESW was a crew member; (6) the inscription on the cross of the grave at Michelbach read "Grabstatte des 'ECW', 14 Oktober 1943"; and (7) the records at Michelbach noted only one American had been interred in that cemetery.

On 14 Dec. 1948, Headquarters, AGRC, European Area, forwarded by Transmittal Letter 3285 a corrected copy of the "Report of Burial" to the Quartermaster General in Washington, DC. The information on identification in that report was then summarized by the Quartermaster Corps Memorial Division in a letter to ESW's parents dated 8 Feb. 1949. The same letter contained an information pamphlet, "Return of World War II Dead Program," and included a "Disposition Form" on which the father was to indicate his desires as to where the remains were to be permanently interred. The choice that his remains were to be reinterred in the United States rather than remain in foreign soil was 1 of more than 171 000 similar postwar decisions made by families of deceased servicemen.

Return to the Homeland

On 10 Oct. 1947 the bodies of 3012 war dead were returned to the United States from the Pacific Theater aboard the U.S. Army Transport *Honda Knot*. This event marked the beginning of the Return of the Dead program. Later that month, the first war dead repatriated from the European zones—6248 men—arrived aboard the Army Transport *Joseph V. Connolly*. In time, the remains of more than 171 000 of those who died overseas during WWII were returned to U.S. soil [18]. Although there was debate in the popular press as to the pros and cons of the Return of the Dead program, next of kin of more than half of the recovered dead preferred that they be returned to the United States for final burial [19,20].

The "Record of Custodial Transfer" for ESW notes that on 28 May, his casket was transported by truck from Neuville-en-Condroz to Pier 140 at Antwerp. Three weeks

later the casket was taken aboard the U.S. Army Transport *Carroll Victory*, a ship which returned thousands of war dead to the United States in 1948 and 1949. On 28 June, the *Carroll Victory* left Antwerp for New York, from which point ESW's casket was shipped via rail to the Distribution Center at the Chicago Quartermaster Depot, and then to a small town in the Midwest for final burial.

A British Counterpart

An analogous organization, the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, was maintained by the United Kingdom. The Royal Air Force (RAF), however, sought out its own dead. To this end the RAF's Missing Research and Enquiry Service (MRES) established five sections—four of them for Germany and the occupied countries in Europe, and a fifth for the Far East. Its task: "Find and identify all RAF Graves, and attempt to trace all missing RAF airmen of the Second World War." Each section consisted of several Missing Research and Enquiry Units, which had the task of assessing the information for the 47 130 members of Bomber Command who had been killed or were presumed dead in missions to bomb Germany, as well as the thousands of other RAF personnel lost over Europe [21].

The RAF produced a "casualty file" much like the Missing Air Craft Report which the U.S. air forces filed for each aircraft lost in action. Between 1944 and 1949 the RAF sought out crash sites and the graves of airmen killed in them. They attempted to identify the individual bodies using essentially the same techniques as those employed by the CIP in Strasbourg by the WGRC [22]. Isolated individual graves were consolidated into military cemeteries in Europe where they are tended by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission [21].

Conclusions

The success of the program of recovery and identification of U.S. casualties after WWII is a credit to the wartime Graves Registration Service and the analogous postwar organization, the American Graves Registration Command. The AGRC was the first such unit to apply forensic science practices systematically to the identification of the war dead.

Only the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii remains of those established by the AGRC; it continues its work of identifying the remains of WWII casualties, as well as those of more recent U.S. conflicts in the Pacific rim.

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