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Ref: FOI2020/12787

10 December 2020

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for your letter of 7 November 2020 to the Ministry of Defence (MOD) requesting the following information:

"The unknown soldier"

I write to request copies of data held by the MoD regarding the circumstances relating the decision to bring back a deceased soldier from France. I appreciate this is a very wide ranging request that encompasses data such as

- *Who were the officers involved*
- *How were they chosen*
- *What instructions were they given*
- *What reports they filed at the time*

The "War detectives" (so called) at Imjin Barracks

Is there any published data by the MoD on the unceasing and highly commendable work some by this department? If so could i please be provide with whatever is available"

A search for the information has now been completed within the MOD and I can confirm some of the information in scope of your request is held. However, the information you have requested falls entirely within the scope of an absolute exemption under Section 21 of the FOIA as it is reasonably accessible by other means. As Section 21 is an absolute exemption, there is no requirement to consider the public interest in making the decision to withhold the information.

Under Section 16 (Advice and Assistance) of the FOIA, with regard to the first part of your request, the operation to select the remains of a World War I soldier for burial in Westminster Abbey was conducted in secret and subsequently, little or no records were kept. However, there are records relating to the planning for the repatriation and burial of the Unknown Warrior, as any surviving records are now held at The National Archives.

The National Archives can be contacted at the following address:

Advice and Records Knowledge Department
National Archives
Kew
Richmond
Surrey TW9 4DU

Tel: 020 8876 3444

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

If it is not possible for you to attend The National Archives to undertake personal research, the Advice and Records Knowledge Department will provide a list of [independent researchers](#) in order that you may arrange for one to carry out the research on your behalf, for a fee.

You may also be interested to read some articles regarding the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior:

At Annex A to this letter, and at the following link, is an article produced by The National Archives:

<https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/planning-the-burial-of-the-unknown-warrior/>

At Annex B to this letter, and at the following link, is an article produced by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission:

<https://blog.cwgc.org/blog/they-buried-him-among-kings-the-story-of-the-unknown-warrior>

With regard to the second part of your request, at Annex C of this letter and at the following link, is an article produced by the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre, on the remit of the War Detectives:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/mod-war-detectives-the-joint-casualty-and-compassionate-centre-commemorations-team-what-we-do>

If you have any queries regarding the content of this letter, please contact this office in the first instance.

If you wish to complain about the handling of your request, or the content of this response, you can request an independent internal review by contacting the Information Rights Compliance team, Ground Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.gov.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review should be made within 40 working days of the date of this response.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may raise your complaint directly to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not normally investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website at <https://ico.org.uk/>.

Yours sincerely
Defence Business Services Secretariat

Planning the burial of the Unknown Warrior

Thursday 5 November 2020 | [William Butler](#) | [Records and research](#) | [45 comments](#)

'Every precaution must be taken to ensure that his identity shall never become known.' On Friday 15 October 1920, a mere 27 days before Armistice Day, the British Cabinet considered a proposal sent by the Dean of Westminster, Herbert Ryle. He had suggested that 'the remains of one of the numerous unknown men who fell and were buried in France should be exhumed, conveyed to England, cremated if necessary, and given an imposing military funeral in Westminster Abbey on November 11th'.

After a lengthy discussion, in which the Chief of the Imperial General Staff declared that the Army would be unanimously in favour of the proposal, the Cabinet agreed, and plans were swiftly put into motion to make sure that this plan would come to fruition ([WORK 20/1/3](#)). Records held at The National Archives shed light into this last-minute planning, and how the interment of the Unknown Warrior would coincide with the unveiling of the new permanent Cenotaph in Whitehall. After overcoming objections that this type of event would be deemed as 'sensational', the view was taken that such a gesture would be acceptable to the people, honour fighting men, and do so 'without singling out for such distinction any one known man'. Arrangements were made for the selection of the individual and plans put together for their transportation to London.

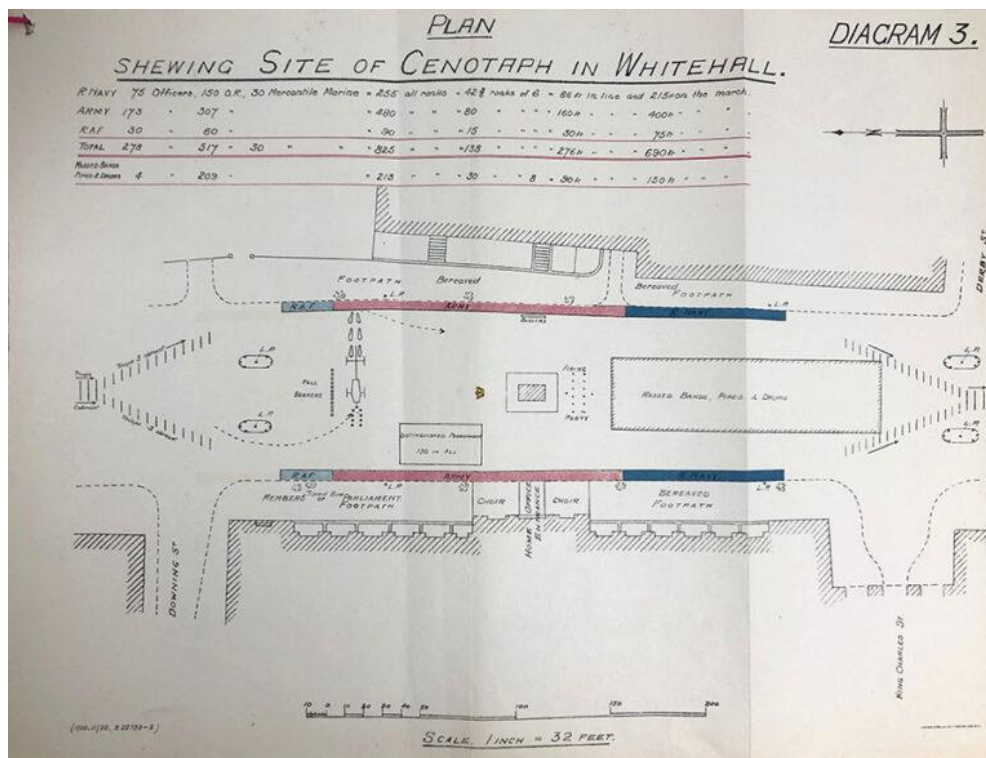


Diagram of site of the Cenotaph in Whitehall. Catalogue ref: WO-32-3000

The ship chosen to take the coffin of the Unknown Warrior from Boulogne to Dover was *HMS Verdun*. The vessel was specially selected to perform this duty as a compliment to France, given the significance of the Battle of Verdun to the French people.

As late as 6 November, the Admiralty notified the Commanding Officer of the vessel that 'Their Lordships have selected HM Ship under your command to convey a coffin containing the remains of an Unknown Warrior...on November 10th'. The letter went on to provide instructions as to how the coffin was to be treated:

'The coffin is to be received on board HMS Verdun by a seaman guard of about 20 men under an officer, and placed on a bier [pedestal] in a suitable position. A large Union Jack is to be taken to cover the coffin from Boulogne to London. Colours to be half-masted as the coffin arrives on board. The ship's company is to be fallen in. After arrival on board, sentries with arms reversed are to be posted round the bier' ([WO 32/3000](#)).

Upon its arrival in Dover, the military garrison there was also given further instructions as to the procedure to be adopted. Once *HMS Verdun* had passed through the entrance of the Harbour, a 19-gun salute would be fired by No.11 Fire Command, Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA). The vessel was to come alongside No.3 berth, and was to be met by the band of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers, which would be playing 'Land of Hope and Glory'. The coffin would then be conveyed to the railway carriage, bound for London Victoria Station, by six bearers, one man from each of: the Royal Navy; No.11 Fire Command, RGA; 2nd Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers; 2nd Battalion, Connaught Rangers; Royal Marines; and Royal Air Force. Guards of honour, consisting of 3 officers and 100 other ranks, from the two Irish regiments stationed at the Dover Garrison, as well as students from the Duke of York's Royal Military School, would then line the route through the town. The band was to play a slow march while the coffin was carried to the railway platform ([WO 32/3000](#)).

The coffin was to be placed in a luggage van, the same van which had carried the bodies of Edith Cavell, a nurse executed in 1915 for helping Allied service personnel escape in occupied Belgium, and Captain Charles Fryatt, a Merchant Navy Captain who was executed in 1916, having attempted to ram a U-boat off the Netherlands coast in March 1915. It would arrive at Victoria Station by the afternoon of the 10th.

The event at Westminster Abbey was also to coincide with the unveiling of the permanent Cenotaph at Whitehall. A temporary memorial had initially been built, but the Cabinet had authorised Sir Edwin Lutyens to create an exact replica on the same site as the original at an estimated cost of £10,000, 'in order that on the day of the Peace Procession the Nation should visibly express the great debt which it owes to those who, from all parts of the Empire irrespective of their religious creeds, had made the supreme sacrifice' ([WORK 20/139](#)). Though initially saying that he would not unveil the memorial (because of fear this would appear too ostentatious), following a groundswell of public feeling, the King agreed to perform the unveiling ceremony ([WORK 20/1/3](#)).

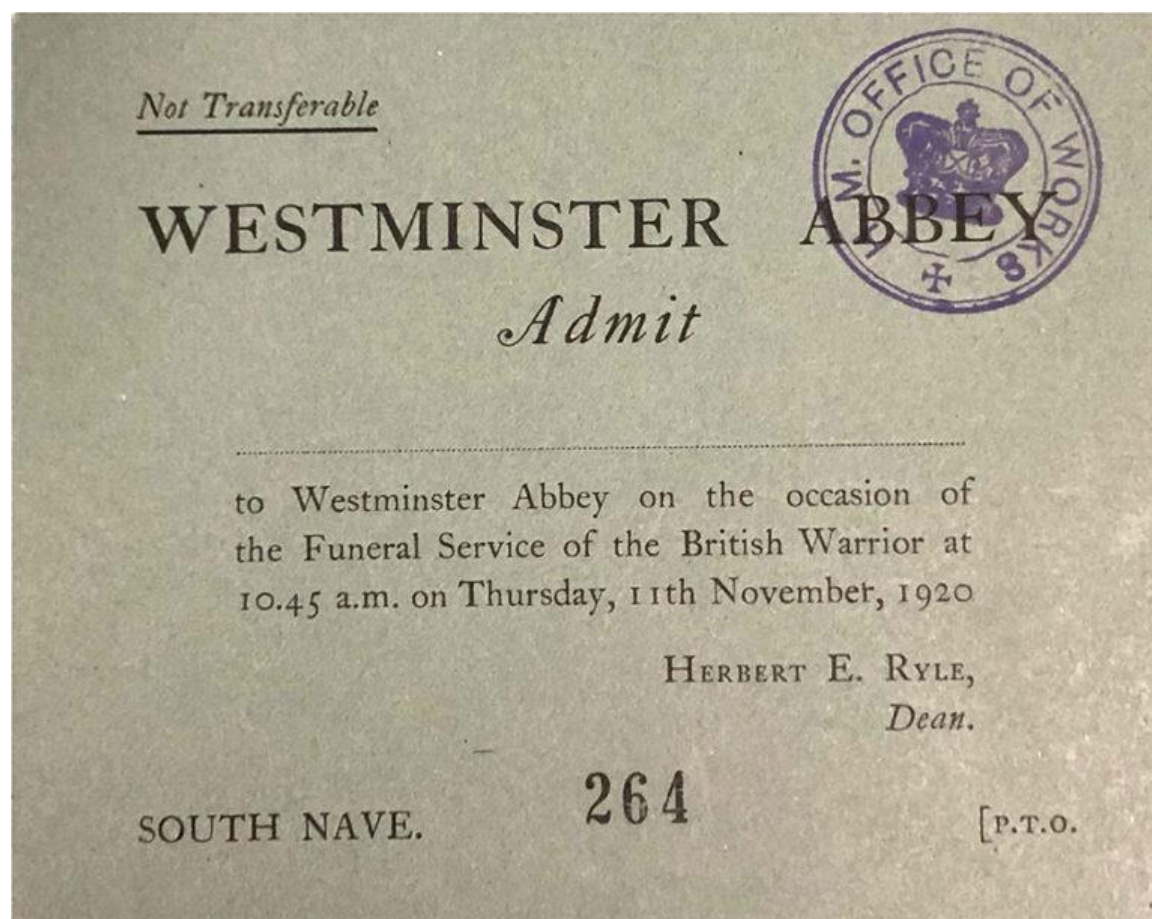


Photograph of the Cenotaph November, 1920. Catalogue ref: WORK-20-139

By 2 November, the Memorial Services Committee had decided that 'the remains to be interred in the Abbey shall be those of an unknown British fighting man, and every precaution must be taken to ensure that his identity shall never become known' ([WORK 20/1/3](#)). This broadened the initial proposals, when discussion had focused on the selection of, specifically, the bones of a soldier (they were not to be cremated – though this suggestion was in the Dean of Westminster's initial proposal) who had fallen in 1914, and not just at any time in the war. This

was even the preliminary recommendation made by the Cabinet, before the definition was subsequently broadened.

Tickets for the event at the Abbey were allocated by ballot. A team was responsible, in a period of only a few days, for dealing with callers and correspondence from 'in all cases bereaved parents or widows who were labouring under deep emotion', before allocating the tickets. Applications exceeded 15,000, despite the short amount of time between the ballot opening and the event itself. Tickets were open to three categories of people: women who had lost a husband and one or more sons; mothers who had lost an only son or all sons; and widows. Nearly 100 applications were received from those who fell into the first category, and over 7,500 were received by mothers who had lost an only son or all or their sons ([WORK 20/1/3](#)).



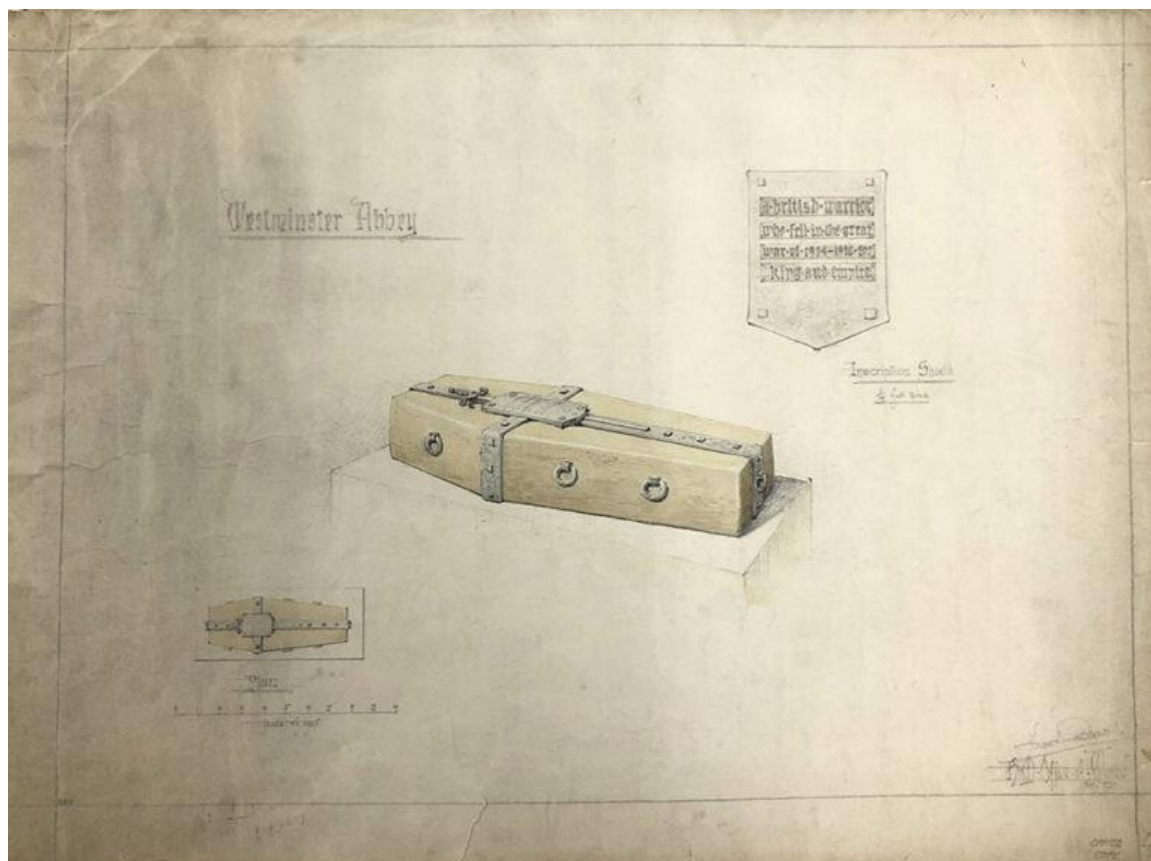
Admission ticket for Westminster Abbey service. Catalogue ref: WO-32-3000

The event itself was carefully choreographed, as the funeral procession was to form at Victoria Station, taking a route through Grosvenor Gardens, Grosvenor Place, the Wellington Arch, Constitution Hill, The Mall, the Admiralty Arch, Charing Cross, and to the Cenotaph. Here they would be met by the King who would unveil the Cenotaph while Big Ben was striking the hour of 11.00. This would be followed by a two-minute silence, and a procession to Westminster Abbey, with the Coffin followed on foot by the King and his entourage. The former was keen to express that this would take place (and without the use of umbrellas) even if the weather was unfavourable.

Supreme Allied Commander during the First World War, 'entirely on his own initiative' paid farewell to the coffin as it was embarked on *HMS Verdun*.

In the following year, in the lead up to Armistice Day, the United States presented the Unknown Warrior with the Medal of Honor, its highest award for valour, while the American Unknown Soldier (and by this time other nations had adopted a similar approach, most notably France and Belgium) was reciprocally awarded the Victoria Cross ([WO 32/4996A](#)).

Eventually the tomb of British Unknown Warrior was to be capped with black Belgian marble stone, and remains the only tombstone in Westminster Abbey on which it is forbidden to walk.



Drawing of the tomb of the Unknown Warrior. Catalogue ref: WORK-31-2252

'They buried him among Kings...' the story of the Unknown Warrior

November 06, 2020/ Peter Francis

As plans were being drawn up for the unveiling of Lutyens' Cenotaph on 11 November 1920, a proposal that the body of an unknown soldier be returned to England for burial to represent all those who had been lost in the Great War, gathered momentum. Peter Francis, CWGC's Media and PR Executive, uncovers the story of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey.

While serving on the Western Front in 1916 the Reverend David Railton MC "had just laid to rest the mortal remains of a comrade" when, returning to his billet near Armentieres, he came across a solitary grave. "At the head of the grave there stood a rough cross of white wood. On the cross was written in deep black-pencilled letters, "An Unknown British Soldier" and in brackets beneath, "of the Black Watch". How that grave caused me to think. Later on I nearly wrote to Sir Douglas Haig to ask if the body of an "unknown" comrade might be sent home..." and so the idea was born.

In 1920 David wrote to the Dean of Westminster Abbey, the Rt. Reverend Herbert Ryle, resurrecting his idea and suggesting the burial should be in the Abbey – after which things began to move quickly. The Dean contacted the Prime Minister and the King gave his consent on 4 October.

Brigadier-General Wyatt, the officer in charge of all British forces on the continent and later a CWGC Commissioner, was given the task of realising the concept. He gave instructions for the exhumation of four unknown soldiers, one from each of the areas of the Somme, Aisne, Arras and Ypres.

On 7 November four groups commenced their task, no group knowing the whereabouts of the other. Once selected, the remains were transported to the Military Headquarters at St Pol, where they were examined to confirm that no name, regiment, or other means of identification could be established. Each body was covered with a Union Jack and placed on a stretcher. At midnight, Wyatt entered the room and randomly selected one of the bodies. The remaining three were removed.

The following day the body was taken to Boulogne where it was placed in a coffin made of English oak from a tree that had stood in the grounds of Hampton Court Palace. The body was transferred to HMS Verdun for the trip to Dover. For the final leg of the journey, from Dover to London, the Unknown Warrior was placed on board a train. During the journey, crowds gathered at every station...

"The train thundered through the dark, wet, moonless night. At the platforms by which it rushed could be seen groups of women watching and silent, many dressed in deep mourning. Many an upper window was open and against the golden square of light was silhouetted clear cut and black the head and shoulders of some faithful watcher" - from the Daily Mail 11 November 1920.

Crowds began to arrive early on the morning of 11 November 1920 and were soon six or seven deep. At 10.40 the King took up his position facing the Cenotaph, which was covered in two huge Union Flags. On the east side of the Cenotaph the gun carriage carrying the Unknown Warrior came to rest in front of the King. The King saluted, and placed a wreath of red roses and bay leaves onto the coffin, with a hand-written card:

*In proud memory of those warriors who died unknown in the Great War.
Unknown, and yet well known, as dying and behold they lived.
George R.I*

At eleven o'clock as Big Ben began to chime, the King faced the Cenotaph and, by a touch on a button, released the flags veiling the monument. As the sound died away, everyone fell silent for two minutes. After the Last Post sounded, the official party formed up behind the coffin for the solemn journey to Westminster Abbey.

At the Abbey, a bearer party from the Coldstream Guards carried the coffin through two lines made up of 100 holders of the Victoria Cross. Most of the congregation was composed of widows and mothers who had lost sons and as the Dean began to conduct the service, people began to sob.

Immediately after, the grave was covered with the Actors Pall and the Union Flag, and four sentries were mounted at each corner of the grave. Members of the public queued for hours to file past. When the grave was closed on 18 November an estimated 1.2 Million people had visited the Abbey.

The grave was later covered with a slab of black Belgian marble. Part of the inscription reads:

*THEY BURIED HIM AMONG THE KINGS BECAUSE HE
HAD DONE GOOD TOWARD GOD AND TOWARD HIS HOUSE*

Since 1920 Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand have all requested the remains of one of their soldiers from the Great War to be commemorated in a similar fashion. Although responsibility for the tomb does not lie with the CWGC, we are responsible for the remains buried in each of the tombs in the Commonwealth countries throughout the world. Over the years many people have speculated as to the identity of the Unknown Warrior, and there remains much debate over the actual process. It all adds to the mystery and intrigue but isn't really important. We will never know who he is and that is the point. He is all of us.

MOD War Detectives – the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre Commemorations team - what we do

Published 26 September 2019

What we do

MOD War Detectives – the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre Commemorations team -
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Our work is varied and interesting and includes the following;

- when remains of British personnel killed in historic campaigns dating back to the Great War are found, the JCCC will try to identify them
- where new evidence confirms the name of an individual already buried in an “unknown” British war grave, the JCCC will verify or decline the evidence

We are solely responsible for:

- researching military and historical records to help confirm the identity of a casualty where possible
- investigating military and personal items found with a casualty
- genealogical research to find casualties’ families
- working with the host nation, Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), the historic branches of each of the armed services and regimental contacts
- organising DNA testing if necessary where casualties have recently been found
- arranging a military funeral/service of rededication
- hosting a reception after a burial or rededication service
- liaison with casualties’ families

Although we work with many different organisations, JCCC is the ultimate authority responsible for naming a casualty or previously unknown grave.

Attend A ‘Full Military Honours’ Funeral or Rededication Service

Our services are free to attend and a list of future services can be found at our future services and current appeals.

Help Identify a Missing Soldier, Sailor or Airman?

The MOD War Detectives need your help to trace family of British casualties found on historical battlefields. See our future services and current appeals.

Giving A Name to Those Found On Historical Battlefields

Following the discovery of the remains of British Service personnel from historic conflicts, the MOD War Detectives attempt to identify the remains. We work closely with overseas authorities and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (who recover remains in France and Belgium) to assess what artefacts or identifying uniform fragments may have been found with the remains. Dog tags were commonly made of compressed fibres which may have decomposed over the years. However, metal shoulder titles and other items often still survive and these can identify a Regiment with which the individual served.

If no identification is possible from the artefacts found, the team works with the single Service Historical Branches, Regimental museums and others to research when a particular Regiment was in the area where the remains were found. Analysis of war diaries and other records can then allow a shortlist of missing personnel to be created.

Once a shortlist has been compiled, the War Detectives use genealogical research to create a family tree for each individual on the list. Official records, and where needed media appeals, are used to trace surviving family members, who may be asked to provide a DNA sample in the hope of a match being found to the remains, confirming an identity.

Arranging Military Funeral Services

The MOD War Detectives co-ordinate all arrangements for funeral services, with full military honours, for all British personnel found on historical battlefields or aircraft crash sites. Services usually take place at a CWGC or other military cemetery near to where the remains are found. We work with the current Armed Forces, Service Chaplaincies, CWGC and local authorities in country to arrange a dignified service for every case, irrespective of how long ago they died, to honour the sacrifice they made for their country. If the casualty can be identified, surviving family members are invited to the service and in some cases can be funded by the MOD. Our services are open to the public and free to attend. See our future services and current appeals.

Rededications

Many Service personnel have been buried with no known name, but new evidence can still emerge today to suggest a name for an individual buried in a specific grave. Anybody can research an "unknown" grave and send their findings to CWGC, who act as a "gateway" for these cases. The MOD War Detectives are the only authority in the UK who can approve these cases. Where they decide that there is enough evidence to prove the identity of a previously "unknown" grave, a new, named headstone will be arranged by the CWGC. The MOD War Detectives will attempt to trace the family and arrange a rededication service at the graveside. See our future services and current appeals.

Repatriation

All casualties of both WW1 and WW2 are buried with their comrades in the country of their death (usually in a CWGC cemetery).

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

We work closely with the Commission. They are involved with the discovery of casualties in France and Belgium. They are responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of cemeteries and memorials at 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries. They also hold many helpful historical records that help us with our research to identify casualties.

Licences to excavate at military aircraft crash sites in the UK

All military aircraft crash sites in the UK are protected by the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. It is illegal to disturb a crash site without a licence issued by the JCCC. To apply for a licence contact JCCC.

DNA

If we need DNA to help us confirm the identity of recently discovered casualties, we will look for a suitable donor from their family. We have no way of accepting speculative DNA samples for possible use at some future point. We contract our DNA work to a reputable specialist company. Neither we nor our contractors keep a DNA database.

Working for us

We have a very low turnover of staff. If there are ever any vacancies, they will be advertised on the civil service jobs website.