

# Identifying the Dead of Tyne Cot

by Peter Hodgkinson

*The process of clearing the dead from the battlefields of the Western Front began on 18 November 1918, conducted by Labour Companies and Department of Grave Registration and Enquiries (DGR&E) personnel. It was a huge endeavour. By April 1919 over 18,000 men were engaged in the task and more were needed – between six and nine men were required to exhume a body, transport it and re-bury it in the cemeteries being constructed by the Imperial War Graves Commission. In August 1921, when 204,654 remains had been concentrated, the Army declared the task to be finished, and responsibility was transferred to the IWGC. The task, of course, was far from over – approximately 300,000 of the dead remained unaccounted for. Between 1921 and 1928, a further 28,036 remains were recovered, with approximately 10,000 more up to 1937.<sup>(1)</sup>*

## Process and experience

There can be few battlefield tourists of the Great War who have not visited Tyne Cot Cemetery. The largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world, it sits on the Broodseinde ridge on the Ypres battlefield, and contains 3,605 identified and over 8,370 unidentified burials. Of the 'known', 343 are original burials from 6 October 1917 to the end of March 1918, when one of the pill boxes was used as an advanced dressing station. In the post-war period 194 bodies were concentrated from eight small cemeteries, 92 of these having been buried by the Germans. The rest of the 'unknown' burials in Tyne Cot are of the 'missing' brought in from the Ypres battlefield.



*Searching the battlefields for human remains and isolated graves. Courtesy Ivan L Bawtree Collection, © Jeremy Gordon-Smith, IWM Q100910*

The process of exhumation was as follows.<sup>(2)</sup> A Survey Officer selected 500 yard squares to be searched, indicating to the Burial Officer the anticipated number of remains based on the records of DGR&E. These were often inaccurate. For instance, in one location – a map square of 1,000 square yards – 'information reported 11 isolated graves, careful search reveals 67'. Similarly, in another area 'in one fortnight no remains (were) found under 4% of crosses erected'.<sup>(3)</sup>

Exhumation companies comprised squads of 32 men. Each squad was supplied with 'two pairs of rubber gloves, two shovels, stakes to mark the location of graves found, canvas and rope to tie up remains, stretchers, cresol (a poisonous, colourless isomeric phenol) and wire cutters'.<sup>(4)</sup> Experience was the only method of

knowing where to dig. Indeed, the IWGC noted that: 'Unless previously experienced men are employed ... 80% of the bodies which remain to be picked up would never be found'.<sup>(5)</sup> Indications of remains included:

1. Rifles or stakes protruding from the ground, bearing helmets or equipment;
2. Partial remains or equipment on the surface or protruding from the ground;
3. Rat holes – often small bones or pieces of equipment would be brought to the surface by the rats;
4. Discolouration of grass, earth or water – grass was often a vivid bluish-green with broader blades where bodies were buried, while earth and water turned a greenish black or grey colour.<sup>(6)</sup>



*Tyne Cot Cemetery – with the Tyne Cot blockhouse centre – photographed in 1919. Courtesy IWM Q100926*



*Men of an exhumation company at work under the supervision of a warrant officer who displays an extensive set of medal ribbons. Courtesy Ivan L Bawtree Collection, © Jeremy Gordon-Smith, IWM Q100913*

The remains were placed on cresol soaked canvas. For identification purposes, a careful examination of pockets, the neck, wrists and braces for identification tags was required. A description of attempts at identification might be as follows: 'Exhumed a grave found in a wood between St Marguerite and Missy. This grave contained an unknown British soldier wearing boots made by UNITY CO-OP SOCY LTD RINGSTEAD 1913. The remains were found in a swamp and had to be recovered from a foot of water. Nothing by which the remains could be identified could be found'.<sup>(7)</sup>

This article seeks to understand how the dead of Tyne Cot, uncovered by this process, were identified. The spreadsheet provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was used as a source for accessing each record in the on-line database. If a 'Burial Return – Concentration of Graves (Exhumation and Reburials)' form existed, the means of identification for each soldier listed, successfully identified or not, was noted.<sup>(8)</sup> 3,592 of the 3,605 identified dead were thus located, although in 12 per cent of cases either the burial return was not attached to the individual's record, or (more infrequently) the wrong form was attached or the details of identification not given. The limited means of identification of 6,848 unknown soldiers were noted from the total 8,370.<sup>(9)</sup>

The forms contain a myriad of errors and corrections. Some of these clearly arose phonetically – one person read out a name, another wrote it down incorrectly. As the recovered means of identification were returned to base, it is clear that a second stage of checking was carried out, with errors corrected and partial identifications converted to full identifications. A further level of introduction of error was created when forms were typed up from the handwritten returns.

Burial had, of course, occurred in an organised way during the fighting. Indeed, 325 bodies (10 per cent) were recovered from under crosses, either Graves Registration

Unit or divisional. A further 65 soldiers were recovered from under German-made crosses. Lieutenant C Barry and Second Lieutenant F E B Falkiner of the Royal Flying Corps, who were killed on 21 August 1917 when their plane went down behind enemy lines, were found in one coffin under a German cross, both identified by names on their shirts. Private W A Shepherd, Royal Scots, who died on 13 April 1918, during the German 'Georgette' offensive and on the day of the partial withdrawal from the Ypres salient, was described as being found under a 'crude cross', which sounds very much as if he was buried by his comrades. With the exception of Shepherd and any others buried in this way, such burials were recorded, and five other soldiers were noted as identified through records alone.

### Identity

The most common and formal form of identification was the identity disc, by which 2,183 soldiers were identified, 61 per cent of the 'known'. The British Army introduced identity discs in 1907. They were produced from aluminium and Army Order 9 of that year laid down that all soldiers should wear a single tag, with the name, rank, number,



*Five men make a concerted effort to lift the remains of a soldier from a water filled hole on the battlefield with due dignity. Courtesy Ivan L Bawtree Collection, © Jeremy Gordon-Smith, IWM Q100914*

regiment and religion stamped into it. *Field Service Regulations Part II, 1909*, (with amendments of October 1914), stated that: 'Anyone concerned with burying a soldier, or finding a body after an action, will remove the identity disc and pay book'. In August 1914 it was decided to move away from a metal tag, to a single red vulcanised asbestos fibre disc.<sup>(10)</sup> On 24 September 1916 a second disc was introduced by General Routine Order 1922 also made of compressed fibre (distrusting longevity, soldiers often carried personal, metal ones). The two tags required stringing in a particular way. An eight-sided green tag with two holes was strung through one hole and hung around the neck. Through the second hole another much shorter cord was strung, which had a round red tag on it. This method allowed the red tag to be retrieved simply by cutting its short string, leaving the green tag still in place on the body. Others subsequently finding a body with only a green tag would know that the death had been reported.

One hundred and sixty-six bodies were recorded as wearing 'discs', ie at least two. Private G A Clark, Durham Light Infantry, who died on 17 October 1917, is noted as having been found with 'disc on wrist, one on neck'. (Clark had, no doubt, not intended to cause confusion by being found with 'also disc of A Beaton 4th WYR in pocket' – a puzzling matter as only two soldiers of this name served with the West Yorkshire Regiment, and none with the initial A). Confusion was soon sorted in the case of Lance Corporal J A Warr, King's Royal Rifle Corps, who died on 15 December 1917, and was exhumed from under a cross. The burial return notes: '38200 on cross, 36920 on disc'. Thirteen were specifically noted to be wearing three discs; three were recorded as wearing four; and one five. Sergeant J A Stevenson, 46/Battalion Canadian Infantry, who was killed on 26 October 1917 in the Second Battle of Passchendaele when his unit attacked from some 250 yards beyond the site of his present burial, was found with a remarkable six discs. One hundred and sixty discs were described as damaged in some way, yet identification was achieved. The disc of Lance Corporal E Esson, 58/Battalion Canadian Infantry, who was also killed on 26 October 1917, was described as 'unreadable' (one of four soldiers whose discs were described thus), yet was eventually correctly identified. Private J McCombe, 2/King's Own Scottish Borderers, who died on 8 November 1918, was originally identified as 'Sgt. J M Combe 40409'. His service number was correct, which no doubt made resolving the error relatively easy. Similarly, Private W A McInnes, Australian Infantry, killed on 9 October 1917 at the Battle of Poelcapelle, was initially listed as 'MacGinnes A.'. The return that was eventually confirmed as Private G M S McDonald, who lost his life on 4 October 1917 at the Battle of Broodseinde, stated: 'Disc broken. 39279 NZ Rifles DZI KIA-ORA?' His service number was fortunately correct, and the recorded lettering in fact indicated 'D Company 21st 3rd Otago Regiment. Corporal H McGillivray, New Zealand Rifle Brigade, killed on 12 October 1917 at the First Battle of Passchendaele, was listed on the burial return as '42241 3 NZRB', when in fact his service number was 12441. The second stage of checking identified him correctly. Private R

J Noble of the Australian Infantry, a fatality of the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26 September 1917, was recovered with a damaged disc (and regimental numeral) which left only '... LERJ' readable, but was correctly identified by the recognition of the sequence of the last two letters of his name being followed by his initials, a process which must have taken time and ingenuity. Sergeant W H Saunders of The Queen's, killed on 20 September 1917 at the Battle of the Menin Road Ridge, was initially recorded as '—388 W..UNDERS', his regimental number was, in fact, G/9388, which may have presented a slightly less difficult task. Lastly, Lance Corporal T M Tyrrell, a victim of the unsuccessful attack on the Pommern Redoubt on 22 August 1917, was initially recorded as 17795 L/Cpl T.M-LL. Highrs'. His number was, in fact, S/17735, and his unit was 8/Seaforth Highlanders. Again, thought had gone into his correct identification. What is perhaps notable is that 37 of the dead identified by disc had perished in 1914 with the same number in 1915 (13 were 1916 deaths). Whilst only a small number, 3 per cent became casualties prior to the two disc era, their fibre tags having lasted in the ground for up six years.

### Informal inscription

The second formal method of identification was the AB (Army Book) 64, the active service pay book. It is remarkable, given the waterlogged

conditions of the Ypres Salient, that this cloth-bound object survived. Yet in 124 cases it was the primary means of identification, and was listed in a further 60 exhumations as a secondary source of identification to a disc.

Equipment also aided identification, when soldiers had informally inscribed them with service numbers or names. One suspects that they did so to protect ownership rather than prove identity in the event of their demise. This was the first means of identification in 149 cases. Soldiers had inscribed such varied items as their groundsheet, cutlery, plate, mess tin, canteen cover, clothing, boot(s), straps, buckle, helmet cover, breech/rifle cover, gas mask, map, route book, section roll book, compass and torch. In one particularly sad instance, it was a simple piece of sacking that had been thought worthy of a name. In 55 cases, the item of inscribed equipment recovered was the rubber groundsheet cape. Private H T Breakwell, Royal Welsh Fusiliers, who was killed on 26 September 1917 at the Battle of Polygon Wood, had made every attempt to keep hold of his groundsheet, as it was noted 'name on four corners'. In the case of Sergeant W M Stevens, King's Shropshire Light Infantry, who died on 18 September 1918, there was some confusion as it was noted: 'Sergt Hunt or Stevens KSLI, both names on ground sheet'. Named or numbered cutlery was used as identification in 39 cases, again, a logical survival. Boots also



*Several items recovered with the remains of a body exhumed from the battlefield are spread out on a blanket in the hope that they may provide clues to identification. Courtesy Ivan L Bawtree Collection, © Jeremy Gordon-Smith, IWM Q100916*

survived to provide identification of 11 men. Captain S F Brown, Royal Flying Corps, who crashed on 21 July 1917, benefitted from a very different type of numbered equipment, his aircraft's identification plate.

Personal items gave identities to 192 soldiers (6 per cent of all identifications). Perhaps surprisingly it was correspondence – the personal possession most vulnerable to water – that was most frequently used, in just over half these cases (106 men). Private T Morrow, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, who died on 8 August 1917, was originally described as 'Unidentified British Soldier' but 'letter from father, 9 Convention Street, Belfast', was used to establish his name. Other paper items that survived were books (including several bibles), photos, a cutting from a newspaper, cheque and bank books, a visiting card, certificates, and wills. Lance Corporal N L Hollowell, Royal Fusiliers, who was killed on 20 September 1917 at the Battle of the Menin Road Ridge, was identified by a form of application for a commission. A period of officer cadet training in England if successful, would, sadly, have kept him safe for several more months.

Wallets provided identification in 12 cases, also a tobacco pouch. Of more substantial items, cigarette cases, watches, matchboxes, trinket boxes, lockets and razors had been inscribed, as had a rosary. In several cases an insurance tab attached to keys gave a name. Second-Lieutenant F W Putney, 36/Battalion Australian Infantry, killed on 12 October 1917 in the First Battle of Passchendaele, was easily identified by a 'silver wrist watch engraved "Presented to Pte. F Putney by Alderman Carrington Council 1916"'. Rifleman M A Bennett, 1/Royal Irish Rifles, who died on the opening day of Third Ypres near Hooge, was identified by an inscribed 'presentation watch from A Squad showing date 13.10.16'. Private C Broxup, 9/West Yorkshire Regiment, killed on 27 August 1917 near Pheasant Farm, was primarily identified by his disc, but his cigarette case bore the legend 'Central Finsbury Radical Club Athletic Class 6.7.16'. Lance Corporal R Craven was fortunately correctly identified by two discs, as the watch he carried was inscribed 'G Creese'.

### Relatives and rank

Two of the more unusual identifications are that of Privates G C Hopkins and L J MacEwen, of Princess Patricia's Light Infantry, both of whom died on 15 November 1917, two of 59 casualties the unit suffered in Passchendaele village between 15 and 18 November when subjected to very heavy artillery fire. The burial return notes that they were both buried together, and that: 'Remains of both soldiers identified by Mr Hopkins. Gr.1 Cranium wound & inner pocket of tunic. Gr.2 Known to be buried together'. It seems extraordinary that Mr Hopkins, of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, was present at the exhumation of 30 November 1920. He must have spent some time in Ypres, and have been in close touch with the exhumation squads to know when they were searching Passchendaele village itself. He must also have had a detailed description of his son's death and burial, to know with whom he was buried and the nature of his wound.<sup>(11)</sup> The picture glimpsed is full of pity.

The most senior officer concentrated to

Tyne Cot was Brigadier General J F Riddell, who had been commanding 149 Brigade, 50th Division, when killed on 26 April 1915, near Vanheule Farm, St Julien, attempting to lead his units forward armed only with a stick.<sup>(12)</sup> The location of his body was the subject of a record, but his identity was confirmed by 'collar & shoulder straps, medal ribbons and armlet'. A badge of relatively high rank could give a name to an otherwise unknown corpse in a particular location, as the potential for error was much reduced. Major F W O Maycock, 1/Suffolk Regiment, was killed on 25 May 1915. Commanding the battalion, Maycock had been listed as missing after its attack at Witte Poort Farm, during the Battle of Bellewarde Ridge. His body bore his regimental numeral and major's crowns, his DSO ribbon (awarded in 1906 serving with the King's African Rifles) and a locket containing a photograph. The location of his body, in an area where his unit was known to have attacked, was an important piece of evidence in the jigsaw of his identity. This must have been the case in a number of identifications, even if it is never mentioned in the official record.

Unique in the accessible records of the identified of Tyne Cot, is the 'Report on Special Exhumation' of an unknown captain of the Royal Highlanders of Canada. Exhumed on 3 June 1921 in the cemetery itself, under a cross which bore rank and unit, the hair of the corpse was still visibly 'light brown', the front teeth were recorded as 'prominent' and there was a 'gold crowned tooth on left side of lower jaw'. The body wore a kilt two foot four inches 'in length' with 'captain's badges of rank on sleeves'. The body's height was 6ft 3" (or 4"), with 'Length of thigh bone 1 foot 9 ½ inches, length of humerus 1 foot 3 inches'.<sup>(13)</sup> This detail yielded G W Drummond, 13th Royal Highlanders of Canada, who had been killed on 22 April 1915. He and Major E C Norsworthy had held the line against the infamous chlorine gas attack that day until they met their deaths. Both had been exhumed from the spot where they fell, on 21 January 1921. Norsworthy had been identified by crowns and kilt. Clearly there was lack of satisfaction that the identity of the unknown captain might be that of a Canadian hero, and a sense that insufficient rigour had

been applied to his identification. As the only other captain present in that location on the day in question was not killed, it was highly likely that the body was Drummond's. His attestation paper shows that he was indeed 6ft 3 ½" tall.<sup>(14)</sup>

### The 'Unknown'

Less than one in three of the remains uncovered by the Passchendaele exhumation squads would be identified. The reasons are probably painfully obvious, but the notes against some of the unidentified in the burial returns elucidate – 'Bones in sandbag' or 'Remains badly shattered' speak volumes.

One hundred and thirteen of the unknown were found under crosses, 75 with their discs, yet both had either deteriorated or been damaged to the extent that they were not fit for purpose. Of the 6,848 unidentified listed in the burial returns consulted, 1,489 (22 per cent) have absolutely nothing recorded in the means of identification column, even though they were recorded as UBS, UAS or UCS depending on their nationality, (British, Australian or Canadian). Although nothing was recorded, uniform was probably the key factor. A further 1,864 (27 per cent) have only 'clothing' recorded to indicate their nationality. Thus, nearly half the unknown have their only nationality recorded on their graves.

Just under a third of all the 'unknown' – 2,147 soldiers – have their regiments listed on the stones beneath which they lie. This level of identification was achieved for two-thirds through the preservation of their regimental numeral. Whilst shoulder titles are specifically noted for a further 155 (these being metal, but also sometimes cloth), the numeral was part of the title, located on the shoulder strap. In only 353 cases did regimental badge contribute, (often found in soldiers' pockets). Further, 34 Scottish soldiers had their regiments identified by the tartan of their kilts. For 158, often dominion soldiers, their unit was identified. In 310 cases, badges of rank were recovered to add further detail to a gravestone.

Many of the items that assisted in identifying the known were found with the unknown, but could not provide the level of detail required. A dominion soldier of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry was noted to have



*A corporal examines an item found with the remains of a recently exhumed soldier. His rifle, boots and other equipment are clearly visible. Courtesy Ivan L Bawtree Collection, © Jeremy Gordon-Smith, IWM Q100915*



'3 wound stripes' and a ring with the initials 'FCL?' but remained unknown. Another had a groundsheet that proved to be the property of another soldier, but the additional detail of an address found in a book could not help. A soldier located with an address on his wallet: 'Mr Marland, 4 Nugget St, Glodwick, Oldham', similarly could not be identified. An Australian soldier found with a letter addressed to 'Mrs Walker, 39 Sailby Rd, Middleton St, Consett, Durham', could be given no name – if a sister, the name would have been a married name; if a mother, the name was common. And no one was going to write to Mrs Walker to enquire. Similarly, no one contacted the address found on the back of a photograph in the possession of another unidentified soldier. Even the additional information concerning unit might not prove useful. A soldier with the forename 'Alex' and a 'letter from sister, Winnipeg, Canada' could not be identified amongst a group of Canadians from the 49th Infantry found in same search square. The discovery of an Omdurman ribbon with indication of regiment did not narrow matters without rank. A badge of rank 'found near aeroplane No.64' did not narrow matters without regiment. The details 'advance pay book A459253 A459270' could not identify an officer of the South African Scottish. On one burial return related to a soldier of the Worcestershire Regiment, the writer had recorded: 'Photo in locket (lady & baby)'. In adding those last two words, the only instance for a recovered photo where the detail of a picture was given, it is difficult to imagine that pause for thought was not given by those exhuming to those in the picture. Sadly, nothing could be done to give the corpse back its name.

## Numbers

A number of service numbers were recorded on the burial returns of the unknown. One soldier had a service number on a mirror, another on a holdall, another on a field post card. The number '8028 on boots' yielded no identification. Reference to the CWGC database shows 22 dead soldiers alone with that number, and five with that number with prefixes. This figure swells to 79 when the medal roll indexes are searched. Given that the number might not be complete, missing elements at the start, end, or both, a further 97 dead come into consideration amongst the CWGC records alone.<sup>(15)</sup> It becomes easy to understand how number 2525 on a groundsheet, or 10898 on a spoon, drew a blank without further information. The 'No. 26017 on paper' did not yield an identity even when the regiment was known. The number 30272 and the regiment (King's Own Scottish Borderers) on part of a cigarette case similarly drew a blank as did the service number 16482, the rank of sergeant, the initials 'F C', with the regiment known to be the Royal West Kent. Similarly, the number 106239 belonging to a soldier precisely identified as serving with 1/Battalion Machine Gun Corps could not give a name. Second Lieutenant A H J Hyde of the MGC had this number, but survived the war.

## Remarkable achievement

In April 1920 it was noted that of corpses found with effects, 20 per cent were identified by identity discs; 25 per cent were confirmed by discs; 30 per cent were identified by other methods; with 25 per cent unidentifiable.<sup>(16)</sup> In



*The fact that so many bodies were found and identified by the exhumation companies was a remarkable achievement given the size of the task of recovery and the difficulties involved. Courtesy Ivan L Bawtree Collection, © Jeremy Gordon-Smith, IWM Q100630*

contrast, approximately 31 per cent of the Tyne Cot dead were identified. During the period 1921 to 1928 the IWGC calculated that only 25 per cent identification was achieved. The longer the remains were in the ground the chance of identification diminished.

The very notion of beginning to search for half a million dead men in the poisoned marshes, undergrowth and churned ground of the devastated zones of the battlefields of the Great War was one that was fraught with impossibilities. In an age when computer databases are taken for granted, the reams of paper that were needed to compare the details of the dead with the details of the millions who served is difficult to comprehend. It is remarkable that so much was achieved rather than so little. It is clear from the records of the known that care was taken and that the several stage checking process achieved results. It is clear from the records of the unknown just how insurmountable some of the difficulties were.

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## References

- <sup>(1)</sup> Peter E Hodgkinson, 'Clearing the Dead', *Journal of the Centre for First World War Studies*, (2007) Vol 3:1. Available at: <http://www.vlib.us/wwi/resources/clearingthedeath.html>
- <sup>(2)</sup> See N Christie, *The Canadians on the Somme*, (Ottawa: CEF Books, 1999), pp.57–61.
- <sup>(3)</sup> Memo: Major General J Burnett Stuart to

Secretary, War Office 14/3/1919. CWGC WG 1294/3 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 268 Box 1082.

- <sup>(4)</sup> Christie, *op. cit.*, p.59.
- <sup>(5)</sup> 'Exhumations and Concentrations of Isolated British Graves', CWGC WG1294 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.
- <sup>(6)</sup> Christie, *op. cit.*, p.59.
- <sup>(7)</sup> Memo: Richard Stiles ARO Aisne & Marne 14/2/1922, CWGC WG1294 Pt.1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.
- <sup>(8)</sup> Often 12 or more individuals are recorded on each form.
- <sup>(9)</sup> The discrepancy occurs because burial returns that contained all unknown bodies were not accessible.
- <sup>(10)</sup> It is commonly held that discs were made of asbestos, but the point is difficult to formally establish.
- <sup>(11)</sup> Hopkins' body was removed to Schoonselhof Cemetery, Antwerp, for reasons that are opaque.
- <sup>(12)</sup> J Dixon, *Magnificent but Not War: The Second Battle of Ypres, 1915*, (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2003), p.137.
- <sup>(13)</sup> The exhumation was superintended by Lieutenant J Robert Cleeve, and witnessed by the 'Foreman i/c Tyne Cot', Mr R Ricketts.
- <sup>(14)</sup> RG 150, Accession 1992–93/166, Box 2676 – 50, Item Number:361510. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca>. In one other case were dimensions of the body noted. Sergeant T Wills, Royal Air Force, an aerial gunner, who had crashed behind enemy lines on 20 April 1918, was exhumed on 2 February 1923, when it was recorded: 'Height about 5 foot 10 inches, thigh 18 3/4 inches. Teeth good except two left back and one right back tooth missing upper jaw'.
- <sup>(15)</sup> It was only in 1920 that the army issued unique numbers. During the war, each regiment issued its own numbers.
- <sup>(16)</sup> Memo from DAAG in charge of effects, 1/4/1920. CWGCWG 1294/3 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 268 Box 1082.