



POPPY DAY

An interesting article with a very interesting theme—The last British Empire –graves.

MATTI FRIEDMAN Associated Press Writer November 8, 2009 Jerusalem

It is the British empire of the dead.

Scattered across 150 countries and managed from a modest office building near London's Heathrow Airport, a global patchwork of graveyards constitutes a beautiful memorial to the ugliest carnage: the 1.7 million fighting men and women who died for Britain and its dominions in the world wars of the last century.

Most were buried where they fell, and their graves are still tended by dedicated groundskeepers even as the wartime generations dwindle and visitors to the cemeteries become rare.

The caretakers are men like Mohammed Odeh, a Palestinian who grew up with only the dead for neighbors, or Rosario Savarese, an Italian haunted by the one-legged veteran who couldn't bear to be far from his fallen comrades. And there's the Welsh graves official who lately is coping with 350 World War I tombstones damaged when war came to the Gaza Strip.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, representing Britain and its former colonies, tends the graves of more than 935,000 identified servicemen and of 212,000 who have never been identified, as well as memorials to the almost 760,000 still listed as missing.

They are Britons, Irish, Australians, Africans, Canadians, New Zealanders, Indians and others, all from the swaths of the world that once were ruled from London.

On November 11, the day World War I ended and became known as Armistice Day, Veterans' Day or Remembrance Day, some of the cemeteries draw officials and other visitors. For the rest of the year they are largely left to their gardeners.



"We would play," Mohammed Odeh says of his childhood, "but not in between the headstones."

The 42-year-old Palestinian looks after the graves of 2,500 Commonwealth servicemen on the slope of a Jerusalem hill. He grew up in a house in the cemetery that has since been converted into an office and toolshed, and inherited his job from his father.

Outside the door are the rows of dead soldiers who have been there since the British seized Palestine from the Ottoman Turks in 1917, their feet pointing to the walled Old City of Jerusalem with its Muslim, Christian and Jewish holy places.

Before it conquered Jerusalem, the British-led army fought in Gaza where it left some 4,000 men in two cemeteries. Ninety-one winters later, Israeli forces attacked Hamas militants in Gaza, and Paul Price, the Welshman in charge of the cemetery for the war graves commission, says he phoned his Gazan gardeners and ordered them to find safety. He told them: "Don't end up like the people you're looking after."

A war graves commission manual spells out every detail for proper maintenance of the graves: Geraniums, roses and gray-green cineraria are permitted; headstones must be 81.3 centimeters (32 inches) high.

The Jerusalem cemetery is striking for its peace and the care that goes into its preservation. But the verses chosen by family members and inscribed on some of the gravestones remind a visitor what the site really represents — 2,500 tragedies.

A typical inscription for a British soldier, Lt. A. Francis Dickson, killed in 1918 at age 27:

"All you had hoped for, all you had you gave."

Part of The massive Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium
11,954 graves, of which 8,367 are unnamed.
Contains many Aust & NZ soldiers



Tyne Cot Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery and Memorial to the Missing and burial ground for the dead of World War I in the Ypres Salient on the Western Front.

The cemetery grounds were assigned to the United Kingdom in perpetuity by King Albert I of Belgium in recognition of the sacrifices made by the British Empire in the defence and liberation of Belgium during the war. It is the largest cemetery for Commonwealth forces in the world, for any war. The cemetery and its surrounding memorial are located outside of Passendale, in Belgium.

The name "Tyne Cot" is said to come from the Northumberland Fusiliers seeing a resemblance between the German concrete pill boxes, which still stands in the middle of the cemetery, and typical Tyneside workers' cottages - Tyne Cots. The cemetery lies on a broad rise in the landscape which overlooks the surrounding countryside. As such, it was strategically important to both sides fighting in the area. The area was captured by the 3rd Australian Division, 1 AIF, on 4 October 1917 and two days later a cemetery for British and Canadian war dead was begun.

The cemetery was recaptured by German forces on 13 April 1918 and was finally liberated by Belgian forces on 28 September.

After the Armistice in November 1918 the cemetery was massively enlarged from its original 343 graves by concentrating graves from the battlefields, smaller cemeteries nearby and from Langemark.

The Cross of Sacrifice that marks many CWGC cemeteries was built on top of a German pill box in the centre of the cemetery, purportedly at the suggestion of King George V of the United Kingdom, who visited the cemetery in 1922 as it neared completion.

My wife and I 'did' a WW! Tour in 2006 and visited Tyne Cot, very moving, brings tears to ones eyes.

The countryside of Belgium is almost billiard table flat except for this rise on which Tyne Cot cemetery is built, it was held by the Germans giving them an advantage over a large part of the front near Ypres or Iper as the Belgians know it.

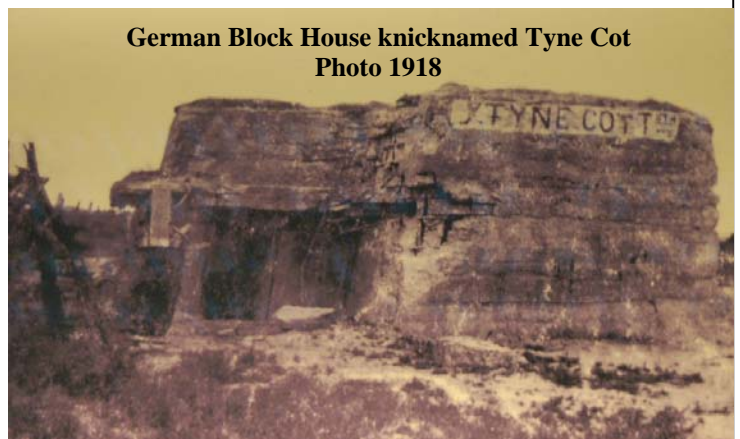
You can see the rise from Ypres from where the allies began their attack on the Passendale ridge as it was known, it is just 8Km distant. The attack started with 5 British and 3 ANZAC divisions, it lasted from June to November 1917 when it just faded away as both sides had reached exhaustion. In that time some 200,000 allied and 200,000 German troops were killed—a death for every 2CM of land gained or lost.

Amazingly to me is that the stated British aim for this battle was to try and gain control of the Belgian coastal ports as they believed (wrongly as it was later found) that they were being used by the German U-boats that were wreaking destruction on British & allied Merchant shipping.

Part of the Tyne Cot memorial Wall contains the names of 37000 missing soldiers. The cemetery contains 15600 graves 8,000 of these are 'unknown'



**German Block House nicknamed Tyne Cot
Photo 1918**





Above-1944 The Calgary Highlanders bury some of their dead in a WW1 Cemetery in France

Other countries have similar debts to posterity. France maintains more than a million graves at home and in 64 other countries, and Germany has 1.2 million of its sons buried inside its borders and 2.3 million outside them.

Of the 522,000 Americans killed in the world wars, 125,000 are buried abroad.

Many of the Commonwealth graveyards began as makeshift lots outside the chaos of a field hospital. They are clustered around the battlegrounds of Northern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Some of the cemeteries are vast. Others, especially in the French, Belgian and German countryside, are no more than a tiny enclosure in a farmer's field.

The graves are locally maintained and regularly inspected by war graves officials, said Ranald Leask, a spokesman for the commission. Their spread attests to the vast geographical

scope of the world wars — pilots who crashed in faraway countries, World War II secret agents captured, executed and buried in Albania.

Six British seamen from a torpedoed merchant ship whose bodies washed up in Ivory Coast.

Even in late 2002, as the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq loomed, a war graves official flew into Baghdad on a routine inspection of the tombs of British servicemen killed there in World War I.

Some Commonwealth cemeteries contain Germans or other dead of opposing armies, and all graves are cared for equally, Leask said. He noted that there is a Commonwealth cemetery of prisoners of war from 1914-18 in Berlin, and that Berliners looked after it through World War II.

There were several reasons not to bring the dead home. Wartime shipping was scarce and threatened by enemy submarines. Refrigeration was rare. Besides, the graves commission points out a survey of British troops conducted during World War I which showed that most would rather be buried where they fought.

Only in the 1950s did the military begin flying the dead home.

Nowadays, if you're looking for a relative lost fighting for a Commonwealth army in a world war, you would probably find him or her at www.cwgc.org.

Black South Africans serving in the world wars were treated by whites as inferiors: barred from bearing arms, paid less and discouraged from moving up the ranks.

In death, the graves of whites and blacks receive the same meticulous care.

And today, as survivors die and their children's children forget, the graves seem equally lonely.

At the end of a dirt track near the town of Springs, outside Johannesburg, lies the Palmietkuil cemetery, where 60 squat oak trees guard the graves of 217 members of the Native Military Corps, a black volunteer contingent in World War II.

Today "we really are trying to do something for our black colleagues," said Charles Ross, the graves commission's top official in South Africa.

"They served the country. And, to me, that's what we need to remember," said Ross, who is white.

During the war the whites didn't trust the blacks sufficiently to give them guns. And when peace came, returning

veterans who thought their military service would help them in civilian life "were rudely disillusioned," historian Jacob Saul Mohlamme wrote in a study of the subject. "The 'Native' was expected to know his place," he wrote.

Support roles didn't mean blacks were safer. During World War I a transport ship carrying a South African Labor Contingent from England to France sank, killing 600. In World War II, at El Alamein in North Africa, Cpl. Lucas Majozi, a badly wounded stretcher-bearer, was decorated for rescuing wounded men from a minefield under heavy fire.

It is becoming rarer to see flowers or other signs of personal visits to the graves of soldiers, black or white, Ross said.

Asked if he had seen recent evidence that anyone remembers this isolated cemetery, Ross replied, "Sadly not."

In Pretoria, the capital, workers were napping on the ground by the graves at Thaba Thswane Cemetery as a call to prayer sounded from a nearby mosque. South Africans and Britons are among those buried there.

On the grave of nurse B.L. Cameron, who died May 30, 1942, at age 37, the inscription reads:

"She sacrificed herself for others. Well done."

By Donna Bryson, Springs, South Africa



A south African War Cemetery in Takoradi. Also 15 American MN seamen



**Sai Wan bay cemetery
Hong Kong**

The British Empire that once covered a quarter of the world has shrunk to a handful of small outposts and islands. Its last momentous withdrawal was from Hong Kong in 1997. China took over, promising no change for at least 50 years, and that attitude is certainly evident at the Sai Wan War Cemetery on the eastern tip of Hong Kong island.

The graves of the 1,600 soldiers killed in a futile attempt to resist the Japanese invasion of 1941 remain well-tended and undisturbed. And every year a Hong Kong official lays a wreath here, commemorating those who died trying to keep the colony British.

In a corner of China that is constantly on the go, making and remaking itself with ever-loftier skyscrapers, land is so scarce that remains in public cemeteries have

to be exhumed after six years and cremated or buried in smaller graves.

Except for the war dead. At Sai Wan, W. Wadsworth lies with Ghulam Muhammad and Sheikh Munir — testimony to the mix of races and nationalities that fought in World War II.

The Canadian graves are etched with maple leaves, the Dutch with their lion-themed coat of arms.

A visitors' book shows 27 entries over a four-month period. "Very humbling. They gave their lives for Canada," Matt Johnson from Winnipeg wrote.

It took 20,000 Japanese troops 18 days to overwhelm a defending force of 14,000. Even though the defenders had little chance of success, Winston Churchill, the wartime British prime minister, urged the garrison to resist "with the utmost stubbornness."

One of the Canadians buried in Sai Wan, Brigadier John Lawson, was said to have tried to break through a Japanese cordon with a revolver in each hand. Machine-gunned in both legs, he most likely bled to death, according to Tony Banham, who wrote a history of the Hong Kong fighting titled "Not the Slightest Chance."

By Min Lee, Hong Kong

The one-legged man, elderly and ailing, always had a hard time walking down the steep paved road into the Bolsena War Cemetery in Italy. A New Zealander and veteran of World War II, he would limp to where his comrades — all 22 of them — lie under identical white marble gravestones. The man would just stand there, praying in silence, groundskeeper Rosario Savarese remembered. He couldn't recall the man's name and, having not seen him in years, assumes he is dead.

Savarese said it took patience to learn the man's story. "He was injured on the battle-

field and was taken away from the camp he shared with his companions. That same night, the camp was bombed and all were killed but him," Savarese said. He said the veteran eventually bought a house near the cemetery and spent years struggling with the pain of having left his companions behind. "After that day, we have never parted again," Savarese recalled him saying. The cemetery 150 kilometers (90 miles) north of Rome marks the site of a fierce stand by the Germans after being driven out of the Italian capital by the Allies in 1944.

White gravestones stand in rows, each with a simple decoration of yellow or red roses. Some graves marked with Stars of David have a small stone on top left by visitors as a sign of their passage. It's a Jewish custom.

"In loving memory of my dear husband Bill. My thoughts are always with you," says a note recently left on the grave of W. Garvock, who died in 1944. He was 24.

Birds sing, squirrels dart, and the sun drenches the nearly 600 tombstones. The 185 South Africans buried here are honored by four tall trees from their country. Savarese, 44, has worked at the cemetery for 10 years and spends much of his time alone with the graves.

"These kids gave so much to us," he said. "They gave us the possibility to be free."

By Marta Falconi, Bolsena, Italy.

Additional reporting by Rachel Kurowski in Paris and Mary Lane in Berlin.



**Canadian, Indian
& South African
cemetery
Monte Casino
Italy**