

What happened when a Tommy was killed, or died?

Almost a million British soldiers died in the Great War. Some died alone, killed by a chance shell, grenade or bullet; many died together as they attacked or defended against attack. Thousands of men died of wounds they had suffered, at the medical facilities along the casualty evacuation chain. This is all well-known and well documented: but what happened to them after they died?

Killed in the fighting area

The varying nature of men's deaths in the front line and the specific conditions at the time of their death meant that their ultimate fates differed widely. For example:

- some men would have been **identifiable, and probably buried close to the front line**. This would have included, for example, men killed by a sniper or shell explosion whilst holding a trench or on a road behind the lines; men dug out of a collapsed mine, trench, sap or dug-out; and men dying of wounds having begun their evacuation, but whilst still in the Battalion or Brigade area. These men would be identified by comrades, NCOs or officers.

some men would have been **less identifiable, and probably buried in cemeteries or burial plots** still quite close to the firing line. This might typically have included those men who had attacked and been killed or died of their wounds, but whose bodies could not be brought in because the place they were lying was under fire. Eventually when the fighting moved away, their bodies would be buried if possible. In this category too would be men who died in a successful advance, whose bodies would be cleared by other units than their own. Identification would be through pay books, tags, and other physical means by men who did not know the individuals.

- some men would be **unidentifiable**, if the damage to them was such that they ceased to exist as a body. Fragments of men, once found, would be buried if possible.

- many men were simply **not found**, although post-war battlefield clearance (see below) reduced the total of missing.

- Many thousands of small burial plots were created on or very close behind the battlefields. They were often damaged by shellfire, and in 1918 many were over-run first by the advancing enemy and later by the Allies pushing eastwards again. Plots were destroyed as the ground was shelled, and the locations of many graves that had been registered and known about were made uncertain.

Died on the casualty evacuation chain

Cemeteries were created at most of the places where the [Casualty Clearing Stations](#) and the less mobile [Hospitals](#) were located. These cemeteries were rather more orderly in terms of layout, tended to be rather larger due to the concentration of death, and some had the benefit of attention to the grass and flowers around the graves. In most cases, the man was identified and usually his burial was attended by a Chaplain. Some of these cemeteries suffered from shellfire or other damage, particularly as those laid out in 1914-1917 were overrun by the enemy and then the counter-attacking Allies in 1918.

Development of the Graves Registration organisation

In the earliest days of the war there was no organisation responsible for the marking, recording and registration of soldiers graves outside the man's own unit.

In October 1914, a Mobile Ambulance Unit provided by the British Red Cross and headed by Fabian Ware (it had previously been operating as a medical unit with the French Army) began to undertake these duties on a voluntary basis. Soon enough, the unit found that the need for grave registration so large, and the growth of army medical units so rapid, that it was able to concentrate solely on this task.

Prior to 11th November 1918, graves registration was the responsibility of the Army in the field. The following information is extracted from the Adjutant Generals Instructions to the BEF.

The establishment of permanent graves was afforded by the French Government by law on 29th December 1915. France provided land that would be maintained in perpetuity for British war dead. The Director of Graves Registration and Enquires (DRG&E), as representative of the Adjutant General, had sole and global responsibility to work with the French Government for the establishment of these cemeteries.

The office of the Director of Graves Registration and Enquires was located in Winchester House, St James, London. Below this office each Field Army had a Deputy Assistant DRG&E.

Grave registration in the field fell squarely on the shoulders of the unit Chaplains. They were responsible for filling out the proper form (AF W3314) that included the information about the grave, and forwarding to both the DADGR&E and the DAGGHQ 3rd Echelon. Information submitted included map references using the 1/40000 or 1/20000 [trench maps](#), or detail descriptions of localities on the back of the form, in addition to the usually expected basics such as the man's name, unit etc. He was also responsible for the marking of the graves. However, many dead were interred into already authorised cemeteries. In this case special instructions were issued as each authorized cemetery was usually under the care of a Graves Registration Unit.

The actual interment of graves was up to the unit. The term "unit" could mean many things; internment by the unit of the actual casualty, internment by Casualty Clearing Stations, Field Ambulances, General Hospitals, Graves Registration Units etc. Grave registration units were non-permanent units, that is some lucky unit was detailed to perform that task and it could be any one. Basically graves registration was the responsibility of the unit responsible for the casualty or the unit finding the casualty.

Post-war clearance of the battlefields

After the war, certain parts of the battlefields were taped out into grids and searched at least six times. This activity went on well into the 1920's, on a large scale.

The search parties (Exhumation Companies) did not dig over all of the land marked out by the grid. Instead, they looked for clues that indicated that a body or bodies could be buried there. For example: rifles or stakes protruding from the ground bearing helmets or equipment; partial remains and equipment that had come to the surface; small bones and pieces of equipment brought to surface near to rat-holes; discolouration of grass, soil or water. (Grass was a more vivid colour where bodies were buried, and water turned a greenish-black).

Once a grid had been searched and possible bodies marked then the gruesome task of exhumation began.

Remains once discovered were put onto cresol soaked canvas for a careful identification. If any uniform remained, pockets were searched and badges and buttons identified. If a Scottish soldier was found, the tartan was recorded. Next they looked for identification discs and personal effects: watches sometimes had useful inscriptions, for example. Sometimes knives, forks and spoons that had been placed down the puttees carried the man's name, initials or number. Webbing was checked because that also often had soldiers names and numbers stencilled on.

If the remains were deemed to be an officer (bedford cord breeches and privately bought army boots being a good indication) and the skull or jawbone was intact then a dental record of the teeth, fillings, false ones etc was also made in an effort to confirm the identification of the man.

The remains would then be taken to one of the cemeteries that was open for burial. Thus many of the small wartime burial plots were expanded with the post-war additions; indeed many bodies were exhumed from small cemeteries and concentrated into larger ones. Those remains that could not be identified were buried as an unknown soldier.

The military cemeteries

In the earliest weeks of the war, the deaths were relatively small in number (although at the time they were a substantial portion of the Army strength, and the losses were bitterly felt). Men were buried in **churchyards or civilian cemeteries** where it was practical to do so, but where there were a large number of casualties or where no natural plot existed close by, a purely military plot would be started.

Gradually, more and more **military cemeteries** were opened. By the Armistice there were many thousands of them in France and Flanders alone. In the 1920s and 1930s, many smaller cemeteries were cleared by moving the remains into larger 'concentration' cemeteries.

The Imperial War Graves Commission, as the Graves Registration Unit eventually became (and in more modern times it has become the Commonwealth War Graves Commission), undertook the development of wartime cemeteries into the beautiful, permanent cemeteries that they are today. In addition to the cemeteries, they also erected a number of Memorials to the Missing, where each man who was lost but whose body was not identified. Thus, each man is commemorated either by a named grave or on such a Memorial.

Many British military cemeteries and memorials can be seen in the [Sacred Ground](#) section of this site.

The search goes on even today

Remains of soldiers who died in the war continue to be found today. In most cases, there is little left that can help identify the man. There have been high-profile large finds, such as a number of men found near Point du Jour (near Arras) when ground being prepared for a new factory building was being searched, and the large number of casualties found near Boesinge by the [Diggers](#) group in Belgium. British soldiers remains - when they are reported - are always given a dignified burial in one of the nearby military cemeteries.