



Cleaning up afterwards

Australian war graves in WWII

A personal story

Presented by Howard Leemon



- Lt Jack Leemon b. 1910 – d.1962
- 10 Australian Graves Registration and Enquiries Unit 1942 – 1944
- OC 26 Australian War Graves Unit 1944 - 1946

The beginning

- Enlisted July 1941, rejected as unfit for active service
- Age 31, flat feet and colour blind
- 95 kg rugby winger and sprinter!
- Called up 18 April 1942, assessed as B2 – Unfit for Marching
- Started in District Records Office
- Sought transfer to War Graves
- DRO objections overruled by promised promotion
- Staff Sergeant after 11 weeks!

Role of War Graves

- When a soldier is killed on active service his unit is responsible for his burial
- A Burial Return was required to be completed, including map references and other useful information
- War Graves units were then responsible for Location, Identification and Re-Location
- In PNG, locals were employed for recoveries and grave digging
- In Thailand, Japanese POWs
- War Graves Units peculiarities:
 - The only troops who could not be called on to dig graves
 - Did not belong to any operational units
 - Responsible to Advanced Land HQ only

Location

- Open grave and uncover body
- Check for grenades in pockets
- Check for identity disks, remove lower one
- If none, check for other identifying items
- Remove personal belongings
- Wrap/sew body in blanket/groundsheet
- Fill in grave and destroy any cross or marker to minimise future confusion

Identification

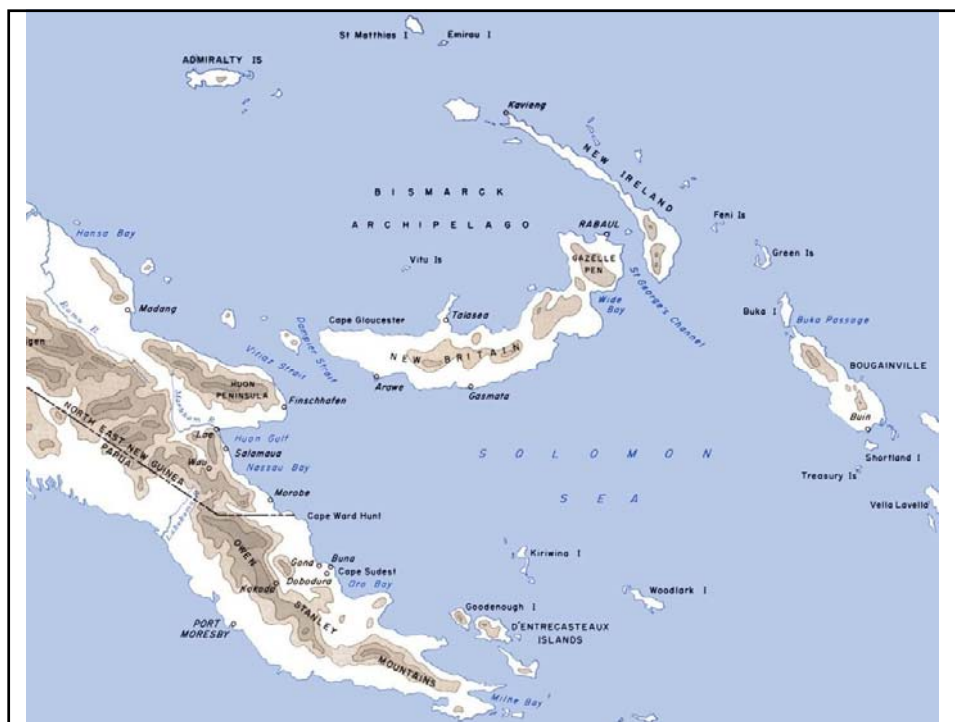
- In the following order:
 - Information from burial reports
 - Identity discs
 - Pay books, personal letters
 - Personal items, watches, religious items
 - Prepare dental chart
 - Unusual height, tatoos, other marks
- Identification had to be positive and beyond doubt
- Payment of pensions etc depended on it

Re-location

- Bury in Temporary War Cemetery in a grave marked with a standard white cross
- Religion, regimental number, rank, name, unit, date of death
- When in doubt use "Believed to be"
- When appropriate, relocate to permanent cemetery

Training

- 10 WGR&I Unit sent to Tamworth, NSW, to train for PNG deployment
- Included weapons training
- Graves Unit troops carried weapons and could be used as infantry
- Relocated to Brisbane
- Jack came down with dengue fever
- Missed travelling with unit
- Discharged himself from hospital and got to Townsville
- Boarded ship to PNG June 1943



Buna: Cape Endaiadere

- *10 Aust GR&E: 1 July 1943 – 11 November 1943*
- Scene of the famous bayonet attack by 2/9th Battalion on 18 December 1942
- Fighting had ceased in early January
- Australians, Americans and Japanese dead mixed up
- Ground waterlogged
- Trip wires and other booby traps made recovery dangerous + air raids
- Temporary cemetery established

Lae

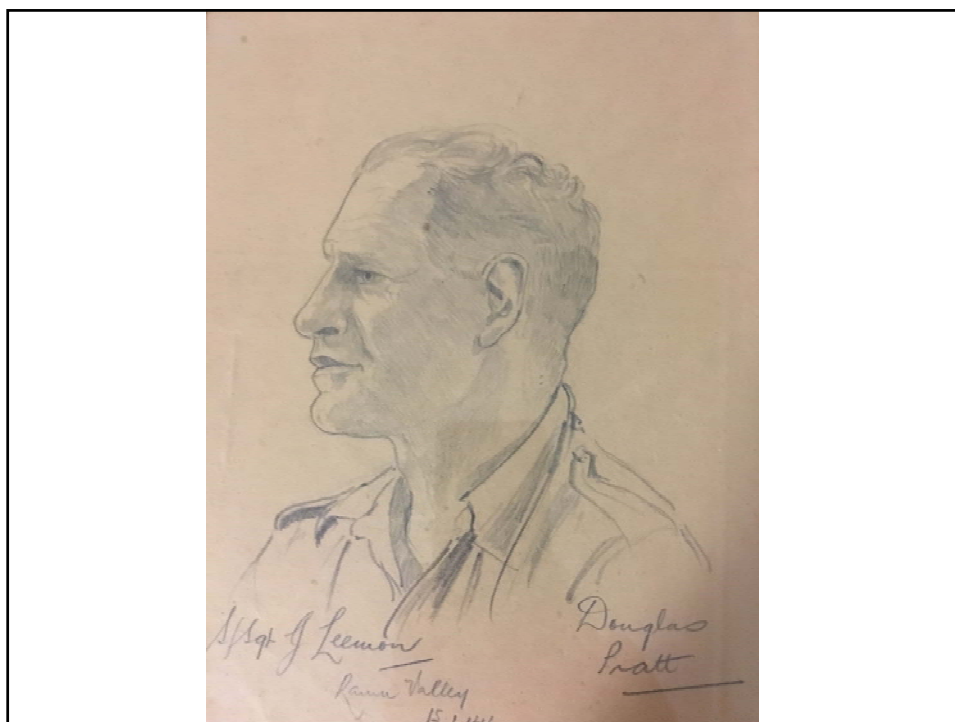
- *10 Aust GR&E: 12 September 1943 – 27 May 1944*
- Lae fell to allies on 16 September
- Unit relocated very soon after
- Air raids still common
- Cemetery site chosen on plateau overlooking Lae
- Became one of 2 permanent sites in PNG with 2,381 graves

Laying out a war cemetery

- Each section contains 4 rows, 16 graves per row, 4 ft (1.2 m) apart
- Each grave is 7 ft (2.1 m) long with a footpath 4 ft wide at each end
- With careful planning, crosses line up in all directions
- No distinction between ranks, race, creed
- Crosses and inscriptions standardised

Ramu Valley

- Jack was recruited for a reconnaissance trip out of Dumpu, HQ of 7th Division
- Then returned to Lae
- Returned to Dumpu preparing for arrival of new unit OC Captain Douglas Pratt, well known artist
- Japanese attacks still happening (7 December 1943)
- Jack spent Christmas in the valley



Lae again

- Active recoveries continued around Lae
- Leave was coming up
- Jack and others were selected for a special mission to Wau and Sunshine
- They were promised that they would not be left behind
- But they were!
- 10 WGR&E had sailed away on leave
- Another troop ship was not expected for months
- Would not be considered for air transport

Getting out of Lae

- Practised being “unmitigated nuisances” at Movement Control
- Put on Air Priority List, finally got the call
- “.. with full gear and weapons” and a maximum load of 200 lbs
- Jack weighed more than 200 lbs
- And weapons were not to leave “the Island”
- Loading officer would not budge, except for the weight limit
- Jack’s Owen gun left “the Island”, all the way back to Sydney
- It caused a minor sensation on public transport
- Civilians had heard about them but few had seen one
- He had to leave to it at his parents’ house while someone worked out what to do with it



The Cowra Breakout

- 5 August 1944, 1100 Japanese POWs attempted a mass breakout from the camp at Cowra, NSW
- They heard that the authorities were planning to separate the NCOs from the other ranks
- Their plan largely failed when the Vickers gun was disabled by its gunner at the last moment
- 359 managed to escape, most later surrendered after wandering around the countryside aimlessly
- By the time all were rounded up, 231 were dead, 108 were wounded
- Some had been deliberately burned to death in huts by the escapees
- A War Graves team was hurriedly rounded up and rushed to Cowra



The aftermath

- War Graves was given the task of identifying and burying the dead
 - Step 1: count the bodies prior to identification
 - Step 2: identify the living through a muster parade
 - Step 3: locate and identify the wounded who had refused medical treatment and were hiding in the remaining huts
- This was the highly dangerous bit
- Jack, Captain Melville and an interpreter went in unarmed but completed the task and came out safely
 - Step 4: match the bodies with the remaining ID cards
- Some of the Japanese volunteered to help with this task
 - Step 5: bury the dead
- Then the NCOs were escorted to Hay POW camp

The plans keep changing

- WGR&I units were reorganised as War Graves Units
- At his age, Jack was not going back to the tropics
- Promoted to lieutenant, now OC 26 AWGU
- To be involved in training at home
- Got engaged, but ...
- The unit started collecting gear for the Middle East
- Suddenly switched to tropical kit, destination unknown
- Then suddenly the war had ended, for some

Burma & Siam (Myanmar & Thailand)

- The advance party arrived in Bangkok, via ...
- Cocos Islands
- Colombo (Ceylon/Sri Lanka)
- Madras (India)
- Rangoon (Burma)
- Many interviews with ex-POWs took place in Rangoon, but it became clear that most of them were going out through Siam
- The team was transferred to Bangkok and the work began finding records, conducting interviews

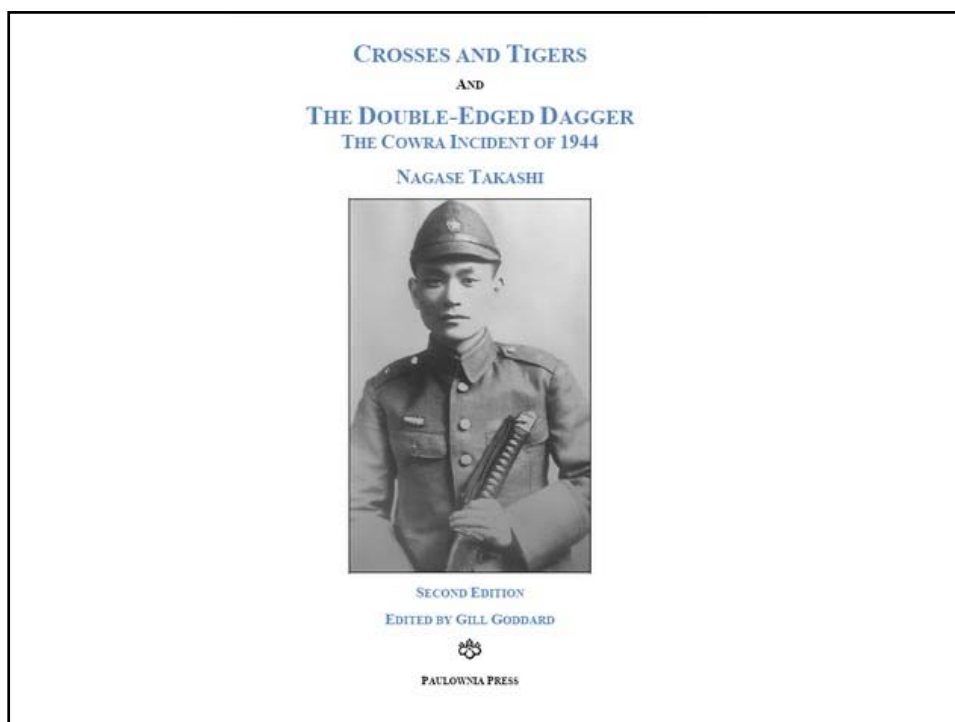


The Death Railway

- 21 September to 10 October 1945, a reconnaissance team set out by train up the railway - 415 km, 103 camps
- Jack, 1 British, 1 Dutch with 13 ex-POWs, mostly Australian, as guides and 12 armed Japanese guards including an interpreter
- In 3 weeks they located 155 cemeteries and more than 10,000 graves for future relocation (final total of Allied graves was 12,000)
- At Thanbyuyat the reception from the Japanese troops was cold
- The colonel said he had not received any direct orders regarding the surrender
- The interpreter was worried and sent the team away
- The next day (25 September 1945) they were welcomed with salutes and a march past by the Japanese

The Interpreter

- Nagase Takashi was a young English language student who had been conscripted and placed in the Kempeitai (Secret Police)
- Wikipedia describes him as a war criminal based on his role as interpreter during interrogations and torture
- Scottish POW, Eric Lomax, wrote about him in "The Railway Man"
- Nagase was genuinely remorseful about what he had done
- He raised funding for Buddhist temple at the bridge to atone for his actions
- He published books in Japanese (including Jack's war diary) to counter the Japanese Government propaganda
- He worked with a group of history teachers in Japan to tell the public the truth about the war
- In later years, he became a good friend of our family



Boon Pong

- As an approved trader in the Kanchanaburi region, he had a contract with the Japanese Army to supply the canteens of Allied POWs
- Secretly, he smuggled medicine, money and food to the POWs and is credited by many, including 'Weary' Dunlop, with saving thousands of lives
- The Australian Government somewhat reluctantly granted him £1,000 as recompense
- When his business was having financial difficulties in 1948 British POWs raised £56,000
- Thai collaborators had tried to kill him and was treated in a British Army hospital
- Afterwards Allied troops provided him with an armed escort whenever he travelled to Bangkok



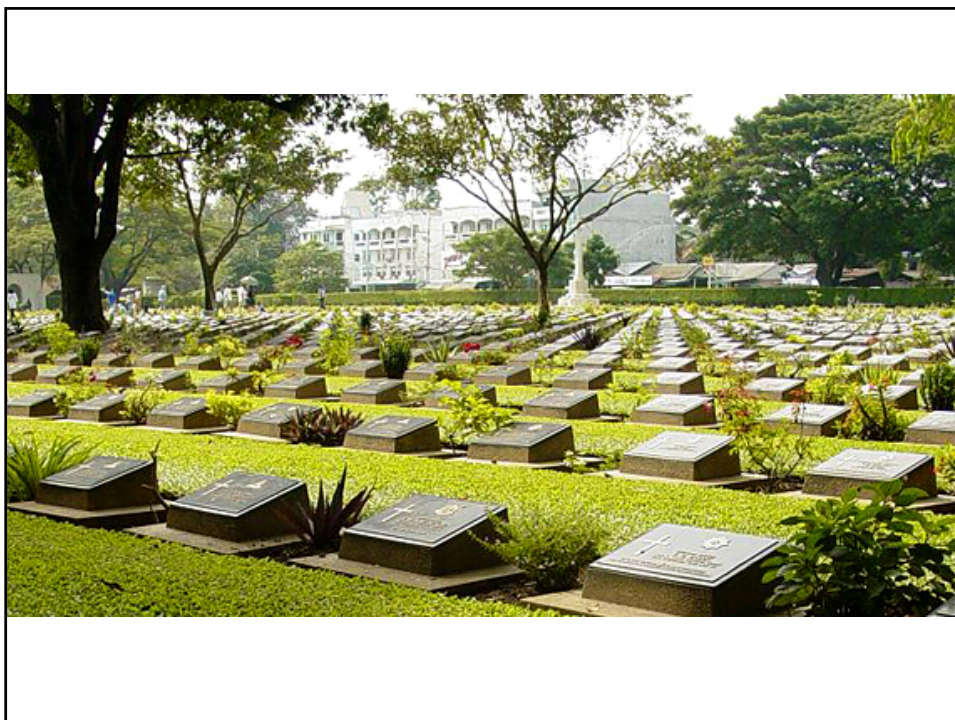
The cemeteries (12,292 graves)

- Kanchanaburi – 6,982 graves
 - 3,585 British
 - 1,896 Dutch
 - 1,362 Australian
- Thanbyuzayat: 3,617 graves
 - 1,651 British
 - 1,335 Australian
 - 621 Dutch
- Chungkai: 1,693 graves
 - 1,373 British
 - 314 Dutch



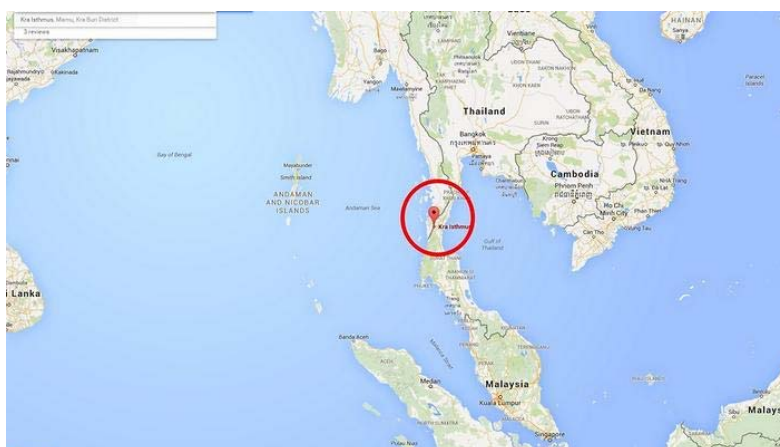
Kanchanaburi cemetery

- ◆ The challenge was to beat the monsoon season
- ◆ Jack preferred Tamarkan (Tha Markam) but was overruled
- ◆ There was more room and the Japanese were based there
- ◆ His recommendation that Chungkai be retained was accepted which significantly reduced the workload
- ◆ Chungkai did not conform with the standard layout but was in beautiful condition
- ◆ Graves were dug by Japanese “surrendered personnel”
- ◆ Each was given a quota to dig 2 graves per day
- ◆ Grave number was recorded on the Reburial Return x 8 copies
- ◆ January 1946, 26 AWGU was joined by 34, 35 and 36 AWGU
- ◆ All were commanded by captains with no overseas experience



Burma again

- March 1946, Jack headed to the Isthmus of Kra where a road had been built by POWs and the conditions had been worse than the railway



Departure

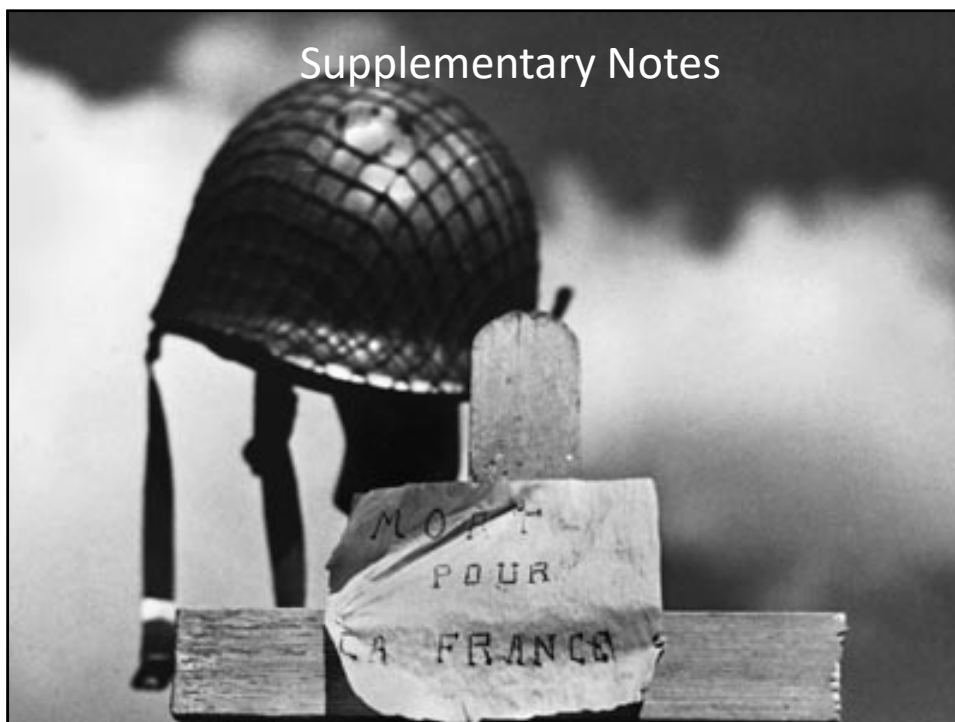
- 3 June 1946 26 AWGU departed for Bangkok
- 24 June departed for Singapore
- Planned for a move to Rhiau Archipelago, south of Singapore
- Fighting between Dutch and Indonesians put that on hold
- Unit returned to Australia
- Jack was discharged in November and finally got married
- In 1948 he was offered and accepted the (civilian) position of Supervisor, British Commonwealth War Cemetery at Hodogaya, Yokohama, Japan
- I spent my first few months there before the family came back to Australia at the end of 1952



Sources

- 'War Graves Digger' by Jack Leemon
- Australian War Memorial - www.awm.gov.au
- Wikipedia
- 'The Railway Man' by Eric Lomax

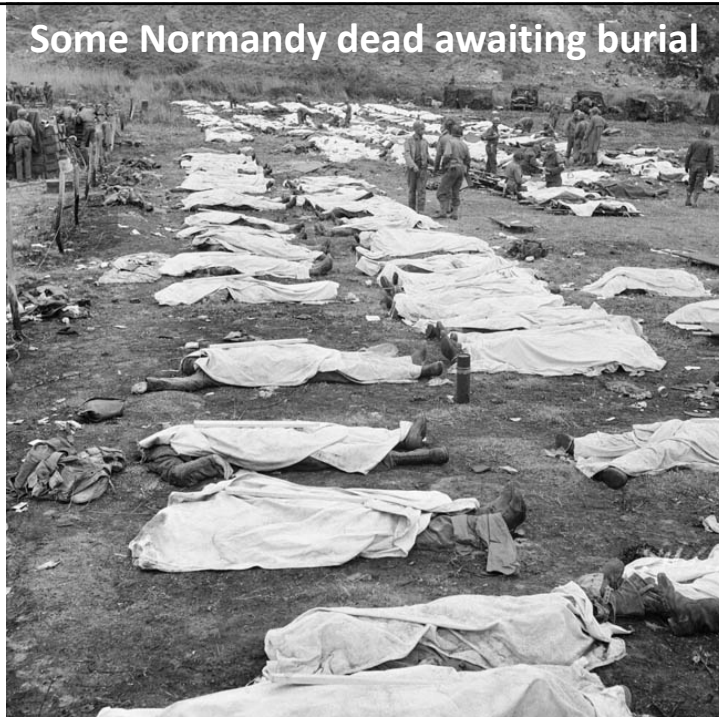
Supplementary Notes



Eight glider infantrymen in a Normandy field.

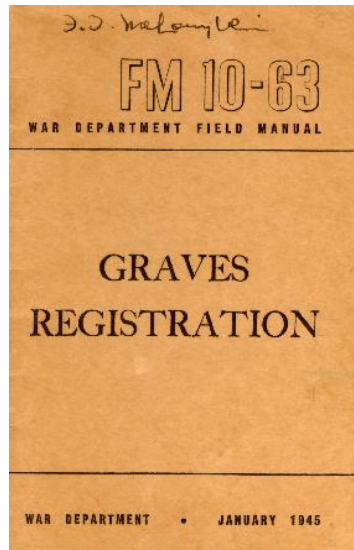


Some Normandy dead awaiting burial



USA QM Graves Registration Service

- Care of deceased military personnel and maintenance and supervision of National Cemeteries are entrusted to The Quartermaster General (USA).
- In 1861 the Secretary of War ordered The QM General to provide forms for preserving burial records and materials for registered headboards to be placed at the heads of all fallen soldiers' graves.
- In 1876 the Secretary of War formally charged The QM General with supervising the National Cemetery system, and centralizing all Mortuary Records



TO&E 10-297 -QM Graves Registration Company

Graves Registration Company
(per T/O 10-297, dated 1 Jan 40)

Company Headquarters
4 Officers + 12 Enlisted Men

(per) **Platoon**
22 Enlisted Men

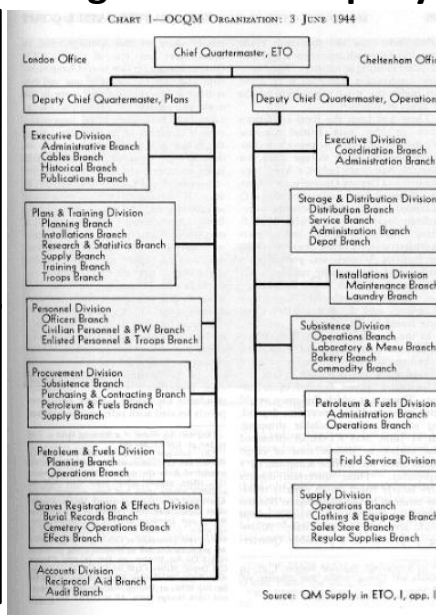
Medical Detachment (attached)
12 Enlisted Men

Graves Registration Company
(per T/O 10-297, dated 1 Jul 43)

Company Headquarters
2 Officers + 24 Enlisted Men

(per) **Platoon**
1 Officer + 22 Enlisted Men

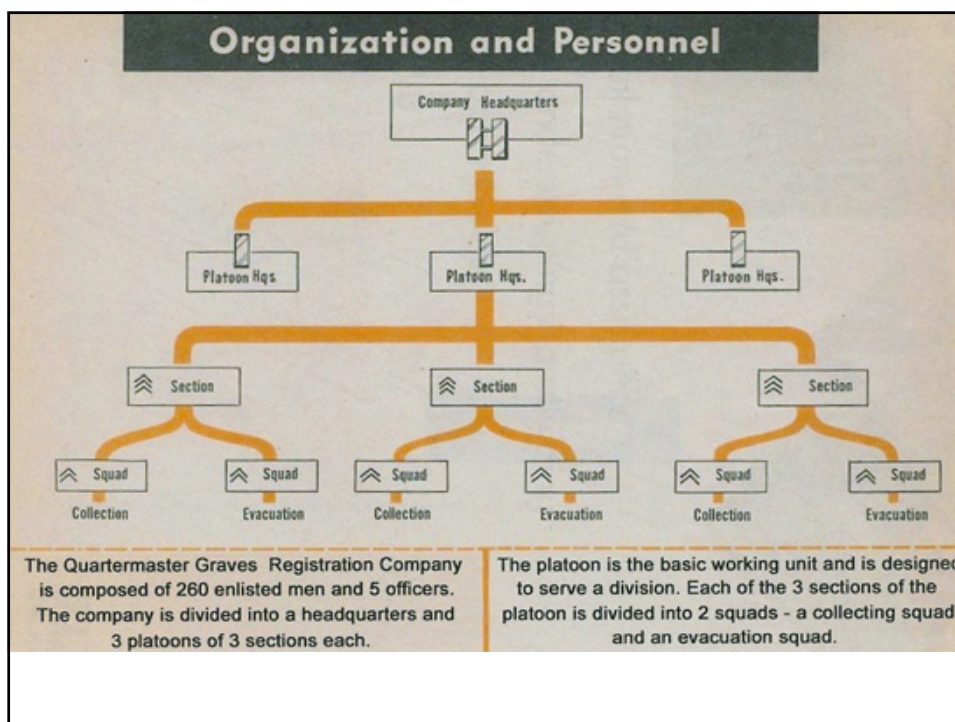
Medical Detachment (attached)
12 Enlisted Men



Buildup of QGRC throughout WWII

	GR Units Activated	
	<u>Companies</u>	<u>Strength</u>
● Wartime Mobilisation Plan	4*	488
● As of 2 December 1942	13	1,612
● As of 8 February 1943	23	2,962
● As of 12 March 1943	33	4,312
● As of 28 November 1943	40	5,222
● As of 1 September 1944	About 61	7,867

* Fighting forces in 1942 and early 1943 improvised their own Graves Registration Service, and tactical units were responsible for collecting and burying their own dead.



France, German POWs bury American dead



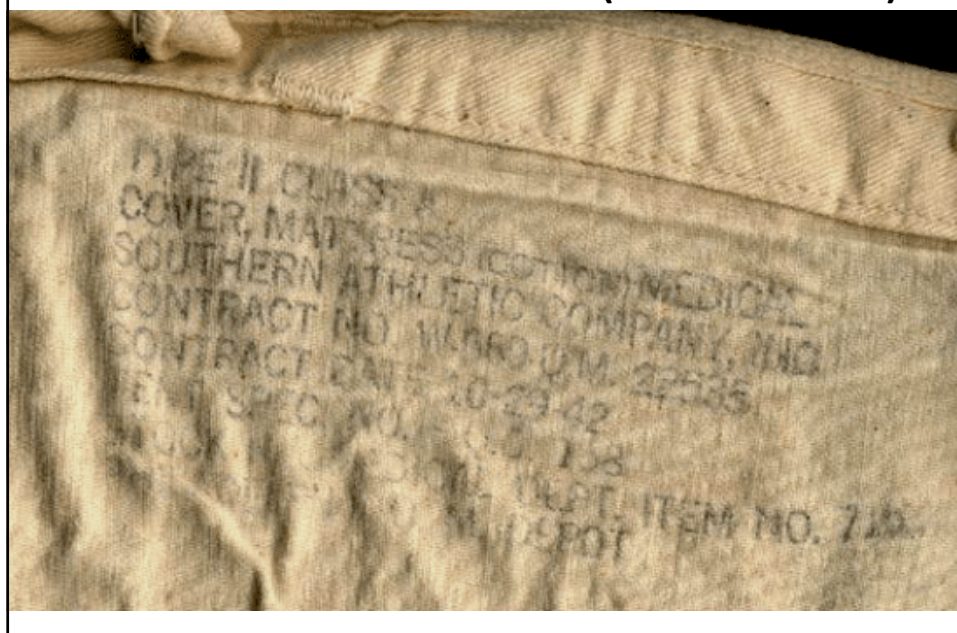
Identifying dead after Battle of the Bulge



Recovering a victim of the Malmedy Massacre



White Cotton Mattress Cover (Item No. 71620)



Identifying dead after Battle of the Bulge



Examining dental work to help identify a deceased soldier.



Sorting personal effects of a deceased soldier.

Typical Means of Identification

- Identification tags
- Paybook or pay data card (or personal letters or papers)
- Official Army identification card (or operator's permit)
- Identification bracelet worn on the wrist (or engraved personal jewellery, or marked clothing)
- Emergency Medical Tag (in absence of other evidence)

If a certificate of identity could not be obtained, record all information that may help establish the identity later, e.g.: exact place where the body was found, if found in a vehicle or an aircraft wreck, the names of identified remains found in the same vehicle or plane, serial numbers of arms or other issue equipment found on or near the body, etc.

**U.S. Army, 30th Infantry Division,
117th Infantry Regiment, Medical Detachment
T/5 Joseph F. Kinnon 31132047, Age 27
Killed In Action - July 30th 1944**



Personal Effects Bag (QMC Stock No. 27-B-250)



WWII Battlefield Deaths - USA

● European Theater	108,731	
● Mediterranean Theater	36,274	
● Pacific & Other Theater	<u>29,651</u>	
● Battle Fatalities	174,656	<u>174,656</u>
● Non-battle deaths		22,000
● Navy, USMC and Coast Guard		25,000
● MIA in ETO 44,243 (assume half KIA)		<u>22,121</u>
● Tentative Aggregate 30 April 1945*		<u><u>243,777</u></u>

* Excludes the remains of American dead interred in the Zone of Interior.

WWII Interments in US Military Cemeteries

● ETO (200+ cemeteries*)		
● American	117,322	
● Allied	1,773	
● Enemy	<u>71,890</u>	190,985
● MTO (51 cemeteries*)		
● American	28,630	
● Allied	659	
● Enemy	<u>7,457</u>	36,746
● PTO (? cemeteries*)		
● American	?	
● Allied	?	
● Enemy	?	<u>?</u>

* Temporary



**“St. Laurent-sur-Mer” temporary American
military cemetery
(Omaha Beach casualties)**



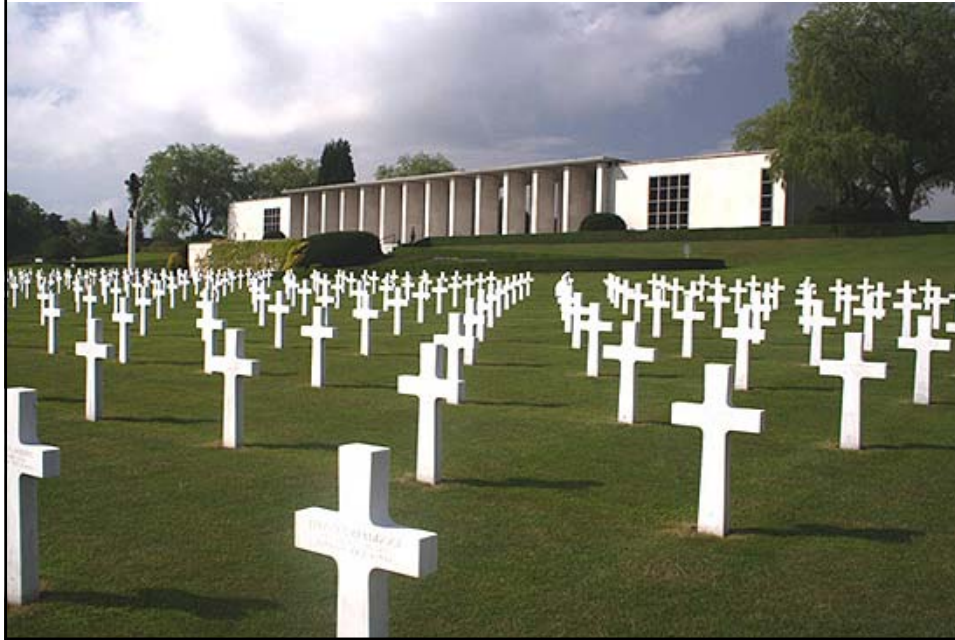
After the War

- By 11 Dec 1945, there were 27,780 missing, presumed dead. 1,654 were recovered in 1946; 16,548 in 1948; and 2,833 in 1949. (6,745 left)
- All temporary cemeteries were disestablished by the War Department and the remains were permanently interred in accordance with the directions of the next of kin.
- Where NOK requested remains be undisturbed, NOK took responsibility for care of the grave.
- In 1947, 14 sites in foreign countries were selected to become permanent burial sites and turned over to the American Battle Monuments Commission (AMBC) after internments were made.
- Between 1947 and 1954, 172,000 American dead were repatriated.
- Graves Registration was reduced to 24-3/4 QGRC (99 platoons). One (1) Graves Registration Platoon was usually assigned to each Army Division.

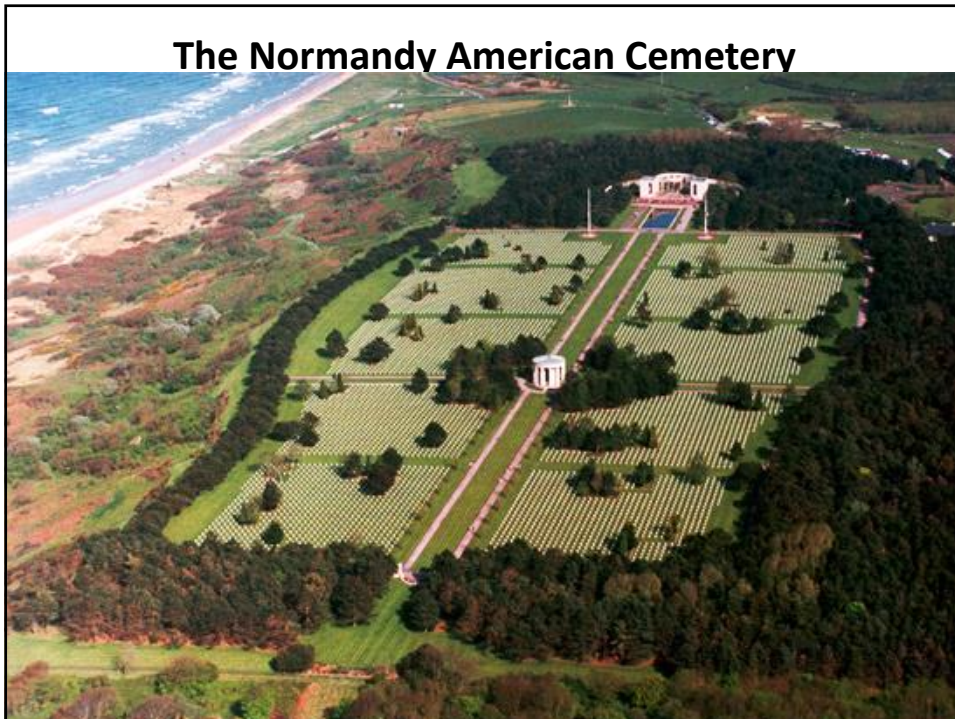
Henri-Chapelle (Temporary) American Cemetery



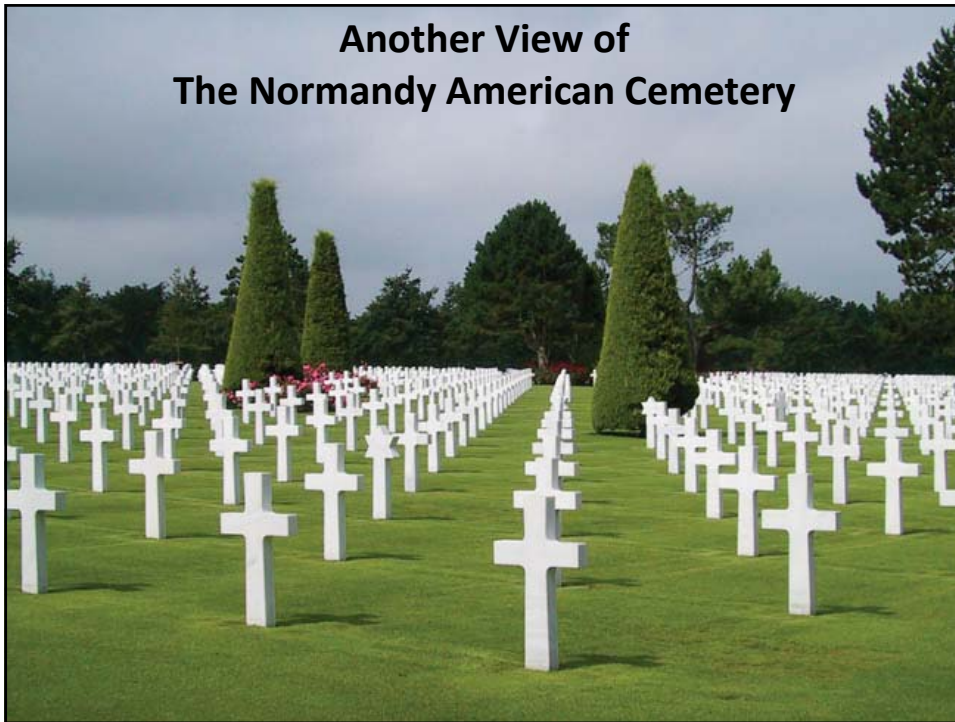
Henri-Chapelle (Permanent) American Cemetery



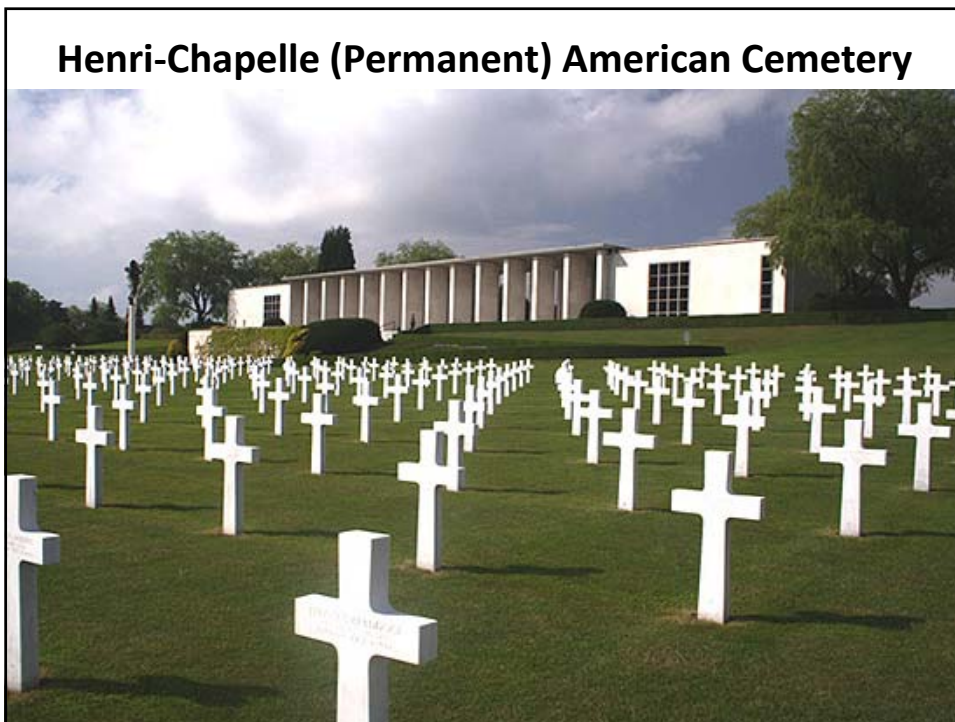
The Normandy American Cemetery



**Another View of
The Normandy American Cemetery**



Henri-Chapelle (Permanent) American Cemetery



The Luxembourg American Cemetery



The Netherlands American Cemetery

