

MORTUARY

AFAIRS

Honoring our Fallen Soldiers



Before the Civil War

In today's Army, care for the fallen comrade is considered a sacred duty; and the Mortuary Affairs community takes great pride in the rapid, dignified return of the human remains to the families, with zero tolerance for mistakes.



This was not always the case. The story of Mortuary Affairs is one of steady improvements in a difficult field of work.



Inscription at the American Battle Monuments Commission cemetery in Mexico City.

All unidentified casualties

Before 1862 mortuary procedures were limited. Most posts maintained their own cemetery that served Soldiers who died in garrison.

Soldiers who died in the field typically were buried in place, under primitive conditions. This included casualties from the prolonged Seminole Wars. If the family of an

officer provided the coffin, the remains could be shipped back to the family, circumstances permitting. During the Mexican War the United States did create a cemetery in Mexico City, but there were no identification procedures.

The Civil War



The Civil War marked a significant milestone in the history of mortuary affairs. Families wanted the consolation of knowing their loved ones received a decent burial after having sacrificed their lives in order to preserve the nation.

At the opening of the war, the remains of fallen comrades received little or no care. Sometimes they were buried in a shallow grave, or else the human remains were just left on the battlefield.



In July 1862 Congress authorized creation of a national cemetery system under the direction of the Quartermaster General. With these cemeteries, the mortuary affairs story begins.



Poor Identification

Even with establishment of the national cemeteries, the mortuary affairs story is often painful. During the war only 60 percent of the Soldiers were buried in a properly marked individual grave. The remainder simply became unknown remains to be interred in a mass grave. When you consider those numbers include Soldiers who died in a hospital setting, the numbers become so much worse. Soldiers who died in battle stood little chance of a proper burial, especially if they were on the losing side. The victor owned the battlefield and seldom displayed any interest in caring for enemy dead.



Before the battle of Cold Harbor, Union soldiers wrote their names on their bodies hoping to be identified. In the North companies began to advertise stamped metal pins that could be attached to the uniform.



After the War

After the war the Army began extensive searches of the old battlefields to find casualties and bury them in the newly created national cemeteries. This consisted of just old fashioned searching for remains and then burying them. The official searching continued until 1870, five years after the war. By 1870 the United States had 73 cemeteries containing 299,696 Union soldiers. From time to time, remains of Soldiers would be found through the twentieth century, and then



placed in a military cemetery.



Confederate Memorial
Hollywood Cemetery

The Confederates employed a similar approach to their war dead. Unwilling to leave their Gettysburg casualties lying on Union soil, the Richmond ladies hired a Pennsylvania physician named Rufus Weaver to excavate and return the remains. Using his knowledge of medicine plus research about the battle, Weaver achieved a remarkably high identification rate of 21 percent. All returned Confederate Soldiers received a ceremonious burial at Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery.

Spanish American War

Further progress came during the Spanish American War of 1898. This war began as the United States decided to assist Cuban rebels against Spanish rule, and the fighting occurred primarily in Cuba, with a minor campaign in Puerto Rico.



With American Soldiers fighting and dying overseas, the nation established the precedent that casualties would be returned home for burial. This policy marked a significant change from the policies of European armies, which simply buried their casualties overseas. To accomplish this end, the Quartermaster General employed civilian morticians, who were organized into the “Burial Corps.”

In Cuba the Burial Corps insisted upon timely identification of all casualties by the unit personnel before burial in a marked grave. As a further precaution, the identification information was placed into a glass bottle to be placed in the grave. As a result of these measures, the Army achieved an unprecedented 86 percent identification. Following the cessation of hostilities 1,222 bodies were disinterred and returned to the United States.

Philippines Wars & Charles Pierce

Even after the end of the Spanish American War, the US continued to fight a guerilla war in the Philippines for possession of that former Spanish colony. Once again American Soldiers died from battle and disease in a foreign land.

The Philippine War is important to us because of the emergence of Charles C. Pierce in mortuary affairs. Piece entered the Army as a chaplain in 1881.



In 1901 he was assigned to the Philippines in his capacity as a chaplain. Because a chaplain's normal duties included funerals, the commanding general also requested that he take charge of the Morgue and Identification Laboratory in Manila. Here he began his long affiliation with mortuary affairs. His work focused upon preparing bodies for return to the United States. He experimented with better embalming methods for tropical climates.

Hard work and tropical disease forced Pierce to leave the Philippines in December 1900. In 1908 he retired from the Army and became a civilian minister. He returned to the Army during World War I, this time in Quartermaster Graves Registration.



Today Pierce is called the “Father of Mortuary Affairs” because of his dedicated work.

New Identification Procedures

Pierce's work included identifying the remains of previously unidentified Soldiers who were buried in scattered graves before being sent to the morgue for return to the United States. He collected information about the Soldiers such as nature of the wounds, physical characteristics, personal possessions, place of death. He then took the exhumed bodies and matched what he observed against the information he collected.

It is better that all men should wear these marks (ID tags) as a military duty than one man should fail to be identified.

Charles Pierce

Through his efforts he managed to achieve a previously impossible 100 percent identification. Pierce later commented that he did this work only to help the grieving families.

Of course the comparatively small scale of the conflict also helped facilitate the task. This marks the beginning of modern identification techniques. When coupled with timely unit identification of bodies, these techniques served to make dramatic improvements in identification rates.

Pierce noticed that Soldiers often purchased metal identity disks at their own expense. He recommended making them a part of the standard issue for Soldiers. Pierce also recommended consolidation of all records relating to deceased Soldiers.

World War I

When the United States entered World War I, the Army understood the task would be enormous. After all, the Americans had the opportunity to observe the massive European casualties, and they well understood the difficulties ahead.



Fortunately a major organizational change allowed the Army to provide better support. In 1912, not long before the war, the Quartermaster Department reorganized into the Quartermaster Corps. One of the most important results of this reorganization was creation of military units for functions previously performed by contractors. The civilian Burial Service was eliminated to be replaced by Soldiers organized into the Graves Registration Service. At least this was the plan. In reality there were no Soldiers trained in Graves Registration.

When the United States did enter the war in 1917, the Quartermaster General recognized that he needed experienced help with mortuary issues. So he arranged to have Charles Pierce recalled to active duty, this time as a major in the Quartermaster Corps. Pierce subsequently received a temporary promotion to colonel, although this was cut back to lieutenant colonel after the war.

World War I

(cont)

The concept for this work was simple enough in theory, but complicated in practice. There was not sufficient shipping space or other resources to transport the remains back to the U.S. during the war. Therefore bodies were placed in temporary graves. The Army planned to determine the final disposition after the war.

Quartermaster activities were called the Graves Registration Service because their role was to supervise the creation of temporary burials and record (or register) the relevant information.

The American Graves Registration Service combined the lessons from observing European armies with their previous experience in Cuba and the Philippines in developing their procedures for identification. They requested timely identification from the units



and applied Colonel Pierce's principles for medical evidence. Soldiers were issued the identification disks, which have existed to this time as the famous "dog tags."

Problems of World War I

Even the simplest details could be problematic. The Soldiers were new to the Army and new to Graves Registration. Procedures developed under the pressures of combat.

Even seemingly minor details, such as preparing and printing the paper forms to record the information, needed to be invented as necessary.



The land was still owned by French civilians, so the French government obtained use of the land on behalf of the U.S. Army, which again required extensive coordination. The French were especially concerned about health issues.

The Graves Registration Service wanted to place the Soldiers in marked graves while the information was still available. On occasion this could mean conducting burial parties within range of artillery fire. Whenever the Army found isolated remains, such as aviators, the Graves Registration Service needed to recover these remains and respond as best as possible.



Despite all these obstacles, the Grave Registration Service achieved a previously unimaginable 97percent identification rate. Of course by today's standards that is unacceptable, but for the time, it was a breathtaking achievement.

After the War

After much discussion three alternatives developed for the final disposition of the war casualties. The first was to create permanent cemeteries in France. Second was to return the remains to the United States for burial in a national cemetery. The last alternative was to return the remains to the family for burial in a family cemetery.



In the end the U.S. government decided to leave the final decision to the families.

In war-ravaged France this was most difficult. Remember that France alone had over one million deaths, plus the remains of German soldiers remained on French soil.

The French were particularly concerned with the dangers of spreading disease during the exhumation process. Transportation was at a premium, which also required careful coordination. The US also needed to coordinate honors rendered by the French.

The difficult and unpleasant work of exhuming the partially decomposed human remains went largely to African American Soldiers.

The United States Marines fought alongside the Army, and the Graves Registration Service needed to work with the Department of the Navy in order to dispose of those remains.

Overseas Cemeteries

About 39,000 Soldiers were buried in Europe at their family's decision. The United States created six cemeteries in France, plus one each in Britain and Belgium.

The Quartermaster Corps initiated the construction of these cemeteries, but the management was later transferred to the new American Battle Monuments Commission. To this day these cemeteries are beautifully maintained by the American government.



*A pilgrim of Party "L" at Suresnes American Cemetery, Suresnes, France-July 26, 1930.
National Archives. College Park.*

Between 1930 and 1933, the U.S. government paid for visits to the graves by the widows and mothers of the casualties. Responsibility for managing these visits went to the Quartermaster Corps. Over 6,000 women visited the graves.

Tomb of the Unknown Soldier



After the war the principal Allied powers decided to honor all the war dead by placing the remains of one unidentified Soldier into a ceremonial tomb. The United States created a granite monument, which it placed at Arlington Cemetery.

The United States completed its Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on 11 November 1921, the anniversary of the armistice ending the War.

Subsequently remains of unknown casualties from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam were placed in the tomb. The Vietnam casualty was removed when new DNA techniques allowed for positive identification.

Today the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier remains a tribute to all service members who died in the service of their country. A sentry guards the tomb 24 hours a day.



From World War I to World War II

During the interwar years, however, Graves Registration was once again neglected.

When the United States entered World War II late in 1941, the basic principles remained unchanged but the Army lacked trained personnel. Planning did not show clear lines of authority. It required time to train the personnel, to decide how many Graves Registration units were required, and to adapt the procedures to the conditions of this global conflict.



Once established the Graves Registration community performed admirably at locating the human remains of casualties and providing the temporary burial. In cases of unidentified bodies, they searched for clues, or often collected finger prints for possible later identification.



In the Pacific commanders faced the painful decision of whether to bury the bodies near where they died and risk loss of identification, or else to transport the bodies to temporary cemeteries in the rear and consume scarce transportation that might be used to transport wounded. They decided to give priority to the wounded.

Elbert Legg

Elbert Legg is one of the extraordinary accomplishments of the Quartermaster Corps.

He was assigned to a Graves Registration platoon in support of the 82nd Airborne Division before D-Day. He recognized that a unit making an airborne assault behind enemy lines would have casualties, and someone should be there to ensure

proper burial of the dead.

The unit was scheduled to arrive a day or two after the assault, but Legg volunteered to accompany the assault force in a glider.



Immediately upon landing he got to work. He set up the collection point, and began to find French civilians to dig the graves. By the end of

the first week he was responsible for the burial of 350 Americans in the temporary cemetery. If he had waited until later, the task for identification would have been considerably more difficult.

He remained with the 82nd and accompanied the division on its assault into the Netherlands for Operation Market Garden, where he established another cemetery.



After the war Legg went to college and enrolled in ROTC. He served as an infantry officer until 1970.

Malmady Massacre

During the Battle of the Bulge (Ardennes) German soldiers massacred about 80 American Soldiers near Malmedy, Belgium. After the United States recovered the ground in January 1945, the 3060th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company entered the area to locate the bodies, which were now covered in snow, and to document the circumstances of each death.



Despite the fact that many soldiers were not wearing their dog tags personnel succeeded at 100 percent identification through personal effects and fingerprints. Before any of the casualties could receive a temporary burial, a medical examiner confirmed the deaths were caused by short distance machine gun fire. Like all other casualties, these Soldiers received a temporary burial in Belgium, with the final interment after the war.

Personal Effects

In addition to processing the human remains, the Graves Registration work included the possessions of deceased Soldiers. These items were of great emotional importance to the families.

The Quartermaster Corps established temporary personal effects depots in the theaters to hold these possessions, and the Kansas City Quartermaster Depot held the personal effects for final shipment to the families. This aspect required scrupulous inventories and detailed paperwork.



Like everything else this was simple in theory and complicated in practice. If a Soldier was missing from a unit when do you decide if he was dead? How do you track hospital patients to know when someone died? Once in the United States, disposition might be simple or it might involve court decisions to determine the legal next of kin.

After the Fighting

After the hostilities the Graves Registration Service once again began the exhausting task of exhuming the graves and transporting remains back to the United States for final disposition, or else burial in an overseas cemetery. As in World War I, the final decision was made by the family.



This time the temporary graves extended all around the world, including the isolated jungle islands of the South Pacific. The Army slowly excavated the cemeteries and returned the bodies back to the United States when requested by the families. In other cases they were placed in overseas cemeteries.



One of the most painful tasks was to search for American casualties along what is termed the “Bataan Death March.” In 1942 the Japanese forced American Prisoners of War to walk under extraordinarily brutal conditions, resulting in large numbers of Soldiers falling dead along the way. The Grave Registration Service had to locate as many of the bodies as possible.

The American Battle Monuments Commission constructed new cemeteries in Europe, plus one cemetery in North Africa and one in the Philippines. An additional Veterans’ Administration cemetery at the Punchbowl in Hawaii also buried casualties from the Pacific Campaigns.

Korean Conflict

The Korean Conflict (1950-1953) marked a significant change in the mortuary procedures for reasons not foreseen at the outset of the fighting.

The initial phases could be described as the seesaw war. First, North Korea pushed the UN forces to the southern edge of the peninsula. Then the Americans and other UN forces pushed the North Koreans almost to the Chinese border. Chinese intervention forced the American retreat close to the original dividing line.

After the fighting ended, both sides agreed to an exchange of the remains that had fallen into their control in what became Operation Glory. On occasion remains of American service members are still located and returned by North Korea.



Concurrent Return

During the retreat the Chinese overran the temporary cemeteries in the northern parts of the Peninsula. Determined to prevent further loss of American cemeteries, the Graves Registration Service excavated the cemetery at Inchon and shipped the remains to Japan in late December 1950. Other evacuations to Japan followed.



In the process the theater Quartermaster determined that it was better to evacuate the corpses through Japan to the United States during the hostilities. The Army did not wish to take the risk of further capture of gravesites.

This marked a radical departure from the previous practice of temporary graves. The practice of temporary graves has not been used since that time.

The morgue in Japan also employed forensic anthropologists to examine unidentified remains to determine if identification could be made. They employed Electronic Accounting Machines, which used punch cards to sort through data, as a means of facilitating the matching of records with the physical characteristics of the body. (These machines were the forerunners of today's computers.)

Vietnam

The concurrent return practices continued during the Vietnam War.

American involvement in Vietnam escalated gradually and so did the Graves Registration effort. It began by using the morgue in the Philippines. Then the U.S. established a mortuary near Tan Son Nhut Airbase (outside Saigon). Later the U.S. created another mortuary in the northern part of South Vietnam, near Da Nang. With the mortuaries the Army also created Personal Effects Depots.



The improvements in identification techniques left very few unidentified remains. Nevertheless one unidentified body was placed in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to represent the Vietnam casualties. Later as DNA testing improved, it became possible to identify this person, and the body was returned to the family. There is no Vietnam casualty in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Today the United States has agreements with Vietnam that allow us to send teams to Vietnam to recover bodies on occasion.

From Central Identification Laboratory to JPAC

Following the removal of American troops from Vietnam, the US Army created the Central Identification Laboratory, Thailand in 1973 to process and identify the remains of all American



service members recovered in Southeast Asia. In 1976 this facility moved to Hawaii to become the Central Identification Laboratory Hawaii, with responsibility for all of the Pacific area.



In 1992 the United States established the Joint Task Force Full Accounting, to locate and account for service members still missing from the Vietnam conflict.



In 2003 these two organizations merged to become the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC). It is part of the United States Pacific Command.

Although located in the Pacific, JPAC has worldwide responsibilities for locating missing American service members from any operation. This can include war or peace time operations, or the Cold War.

Jonestown Mass Suicide

Americans were horrified to learn of the mass suicide/murder among the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project in 1978. These people developed into a cult following of the emotionally powerful Jim Jones. In November 1978, Jones feared that his cult might be exposed. He therefore directed his followers to drink a Kool-Aid laced with cyanide, killing over 900 Americans.

The State Department turned to the U.S. military to recover the bodies of these American citizens. A combination of Army Graves Registration personnel and Air Force transport planes brought the bodies back to the United States.

This situation was gruesome, with the massive numbers of bodies including women and children that were partially decomposed because of the heat.

Grenada

In 1983 Graves Registration personnel supported the American intervention into the Caribbean island of Grenada. As often happens Graves Registration was something of an afterthought in the planning; but the personnel performed admirably.



In addition to processing the American remains, the Graves Registration personnel also process the remains of Cubans. In the hot sun these bodies quickly decomposed and became bloated. The job of caring for Cuban remains was complicated by the fact that they often had booby traps. This aspect was very sensitive diplomatically.

Crash at Gander, Newfoundland



In December 1985 one of the worst tragedies to hit the peacetime Army happened when a chartered flight carrying members of the 101st Airborne Division from Egypt back to Fort Campbell crashed after refueling at Gander, Newfoundland.

All 256 personnel were killed.

Recovery of those remains presented some unusual challenges. Because the accident occurred in Canada the Royal Canadian Mounted Police assumed primary responsibility for the operations, with the American personnel in a support role.



After the initial transfer of the remains, two Soldiers were missing in the snow covered ground. This required a painstaking thawing and search of the area.

Lastly the personnel records (including dental records) were in the aircraft. Some records were recovered from the crash site, while others were pulled together from various sources within the Army. Careful recording of the location of each casualty by the Canadians also assisted in the identification process.

This was the last time the military allowed the records to fly on the same aircraft as the unit.

Name change

By 1991 the U.S. Army had not used temporary graves for the last 40 years. Treatment of casualties shifted to timely identification and return of the remains.

Therefore the name changed from Graves Registration to Mortuary Affairs.

Wherever Soldiers Go

All military operations face the possibility of casualties, either combat or non-combat. Therefore the US Army must send some form of mortuary support.

Hopefully casualties will be minimal and the mortuary affairs workload will be light. But all mortuary affairs specialists know this can change suddenly. It can be an aircraft accident or unexpected hostilities.

In the 1994 Haitian intervention, Army personnel provided Joint Mortuary Affairs support that also included third country nationals and workers for non-governmental organizations. They also developed procedures for working with local authorities to return the remains of Haitians that were in US custody for any reason.



Mortuary affairs personnel in Somalia also faced problems of how to deal with local nationals, and they developed the protocols to balance respect for the local personnel along with the limits on their own resources. They also assisted in investigations of atrocities and developed procedures for responding to US casualties in neighboring Kenya (with the approval of the Kenyan government).

Other Activities

At critical times US Army mortuary affairs personnel have provided support to the US government.

In April 1996 a US Air Force plane crashed into a mountainside in Croatia. The Secretary of Commerce, Ron Brown, was on board the plane, plus the aircraft and crew. US Army mortuary affairs personnel deployed to Croatia to recover and process the remains from this crash.



In August and September 2005, one of the most destructive storms in American history hit the city of New Orleans. Because most of New Orleans lies below sea level, it relies upon levies and flood control systems. When these broke massive flooding resulted. Members of the 54th and 311th Mortuary Affairs Companies deployed to Louisiana to help recover and process the remains of civilians killed in this disaster. They worked alongside National Guard personnel and contractors in responding to this disaster. Later that year while still deployed to New Orleans, they also assisted in responding to Hurricane Rita.

Pentagon Attack

After the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon 11 September 2001 the 54th and 311th Mortuary Affairs Companies deployed to Washington to manage the processing of the remains from the Pentagon.



All the deceased were victims of a crime, and in fact, the impact area was one massive crime scene.

Therefore all the work fell under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Mortuary Affairs personnel needed to treat the remains as evidence of a homicide until transferred to the medical examiner. That included preserving what is called “chain of custody.”

The damage to the building made the work difficult and dangerous. Most of the labor was done by members of the 3rd Infantry (Old Guard) under the supervision of the FBI. Although normally a ceremonial unit, these Soldiers also performed duties as a security force. They worked in full protective clothing in the confined and dusty areas of the damaged Pentagon, first documenting and then removing the remains.

Afterwards the remains were flown to the Dover Port Mortuary for final identification and processing. Due to the extreme damage and fire, this became a laborious process that lasted for months.

War on Terrorism

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 resulted in a time of prolonged warfare by the U.S. Army, with the expected demands upon the Mortuary Affairs personnel.

Mortuary teams mobilized and deployed to the Pentagon immediately after the attack to assist in care of the remains of these victims.



As the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq turned to prolonged conflict, the Mortuary Affairs personnel deployed in support of Central Command. They established collection points in both nations, with a Theater Mortuary Evacuation Point and a Theater Mortuary Affairs Office in Kuwait.

Once in the U.S. the remains were flown to the Port Mortuary at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware.

The teams also managed personal effects of the deceased personnel.

Haitian Earthquake

In January 2010 a massive earthquake hit the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, devastating the city and leaving over 200,000 casualties. Both the U.S. military and civilian agencies were major participants in the relief efforts.



The Haitian government stated that they did not want international assistance in caring for their own dead. Yet the United States



remained responsible for the remains of American citizens who died in the disaster. The State Department requested assistance from the military and from other agencies, notably the Department of Health and Human Services.

Once in Haiti Army mortuary personnel established a cooperative arrangement for performing the work. Typically Army personnel recovered the remains and brought them to Health and Human Services for the identification. This could be challenging at times, and it required coordination to obtain proper medical records from the United States.

The task was also complicated by pressure from the families and political leaders for faster results.

In Conclusion

The Mortuary Affairs mission for the Quartermaster Corps began slightly over 150 years ago under primitive conditions. Back then the Soldiers wanted to provide a decent burial for their comrades who died in the Civil War.

Since that time much has changed. We have better technology and faster transportation, allowing for the immediate return of remains. Our identification techniques now allow for 100 percent identification. Trained Mortuary Affairs specialists within the Army now perform this work.

Yet the ethos of dignity, honor, and respect has not changed. The Army has continually sought to provide the best care that the circumstances will permit. Mortuary Affairs personnel have learned to adapt and improve as they have moved through the multiple challenges of their work.

I WILL NEVER
LEAVE A FALLEN
COMRADE