

## **Meeting notes for 4.11.21 Drummond Lecture.**

Permissions were obtained from tonight's speaker Nicola Nash to reproduce parts of the talk, photographs and to place the meeting notes in the public domain of the BMS website.

### **'Battlefield Identification of Casualties' by Nicola Nash.**

President Roger Bragger gave a short history of the origins of the prestigious 'Drummond Lecture' and welcomed Nicola to give her talk.

#### **Introduction:**

Nicola explained her role as part of the JCCC [The 'J triple C'] – the 'Joint Casualty Compassionate Centre' – which is based in Gloucester. They have to deal with any military deaths whether casualties of war or other deaths due to accident or natural causes. Sometimes, emergency repatriation concerns returning a soldier in the event of a family member becoming gravely ill. They have an important role in various post death administrative functions including war graves. Some of the role is commemorative and, in this respect, the main workload relates to casualties of World War I ['WWI'] but can also involve World War II ['WWII'] or the Korean War.

Very often, relatives of a casualty are happy to hear about their 'outcomes' ['closure'] involving more distant conflicts eg WWI where is less personal recollection. With more recent wars, events will be naturally much more emotionally charged. In the recent Afghan campaign, battlefield casualties were being returned at a rate of four per week pausing commemorations work.

Nicola explained there had developed a further backlog of Battlefield Identification cases as no visits to sites had been possible for some two years because of Covid. The site visits have recently restarted.

#### **Battlefield Casualty work:**

The JCCC has now recruited more members in the very busy 'Commemorations' team to deal with this workload.

They deal with the identification of newly found remains and those unknown soldiers who are buried in a Commonwealth War Graves site [and buried as 'known unto God'], tracing next of kin to obtain DNA from relatives and the licencing of archaeological sites in the UK under the 'Protection of Military Remains Act' ['POMRA']. If there is a real risk of finding further military remains at such a site, it would be considered a war grave and a licence to excavate such a site in the UK is likely to be declined.

Pre-WWI, those killed in action ['KIA'] would likely be buried in a mass grave. There would be little opportunity to identify individual burial sites unless you were an officer of high rank. During WWI, when the sheer scale of casualties became apparent, families became dissatisfied with the concept of mass graves. Knowledge of where your family member [if KIA] was buried meant relatives could possibly visit the site in the future. Additionally, there was an implication for those serving to know their comrades were buried respectfully, properly cared for and honoured for their sacrifice.

Recovery of the deceased by the Army after a battle was a very difficult and personally traumatic task. The war diaries of such units note this and that they had extra rum rations to help them cope.

The Imperial War Graves Commission [now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission - 'CWWG'] was started by Fabian Ware to record where soldiers were being buried. Initial attempts to do this were by use of body density maps which record numbers of bodies *found and buried* over the trench

map for an area. The body density map would be made up of large squares measuring 1000 x 1000 yards: Each of these would be subdivided into thirty-six smaller squares each measuring 166 x 166 yards [approximately] which in turn had four subdivisions of 83 x 83 yards [approximately]. The casualties are shown as a number written in blue on each of the smallest 83 x 83 yard squares. There could be 700-800 identified casualties in some high casualty battle sites such as Delville Wood in an area measuring some 6,945 square yards.

The graves registration unit during and after WWI did not have the good resourcing and technology that we take for granted today, they could not cross reference records of the missing against an unidentified KIA which would mean many being buried as 'unknown'. The scale of their task was overwhelming.

There are other sources of information to assist in the modern era: remnants of equipment which can survive [eg boots]; metal materials eg badges and helmets and, importantly, the positions in which these are found or even scraps of uniform. Information quality is very context dependant so a shoulder tab in-situ anatomically near the upper limb would be considered a 'good' information whereas a cap badge located near the pelvis might suggest it was a 'find' being kept. Discoveries are often made by construction workers. At a new hospital site in 'Lens' [northern France] many bodies were found but the positional information of metal artefacts had been destroyed by the large excavators used.

#### **Case Study one:**

During the construction of a road near 'Polygon Wood' near the battle site of Passchendaele, nine bodies were found which, because of the regimental insignia, were believed to belong to members of the Northumberland Fusiliers. The construction team had immediately called in the archaeological team of the Belgian authorities. During the course of the dig, a 'Verey' pistol and two pairs of officers' boots were found [all in excellent condition]. Also found on one set of remains was an identity tag with a name and a ring still on the finger of one of the officer casualties. The tag was confirmed as an 11th Northumberland Fusilier and a KIA date of 15.10.1917. The Northumberland Fusilier War Diary confirms the soldiers had taken up positions in the front lines on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1917 with several trench map references. On the 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1917 the diaries note that Second Lieutenant L.W. Ablett [the owner of the ring and tag], another officer and seven other ranks ['OR'] had been killed on the same day.



**Above left and right:** Ring and identity tag belonging to Lt L.W. Ablett



**Above:** Other artefacts found relating to the Northumberland Fusiliers casualties [Case Study 1].

The team were then able to study the trench map records relative to where the casualties had been found and were able to identify the kia for the same day [a total of nine names]. They had been killed in a large trench explosion and were buried as they fell and not by any comrades.

DNA testing is possible from the next of kin via mitochondrial DNA of the maternal line and the Y chromosome [sex chromosome] of the paternal line. The latter is preferred as it provides faster results [two weeks versus three months for mitochondrial DNA].

The service records were also checked - these were available for the officers in the National Archive but for the OR in this instance, they didn't exist.

Further checks were made to identify relatives using 'Ancestry' and 'Find My Past' family trees referencing the casualty name.

In the case of Ablett, the paternal search line yielded no potential relative but, by then tracing the maternal line, it was possible to identify a relative who happened to be a 1<sup>st</sup> cousin three times removed. On the first contact by the JCCC, the first impression of the relative was 'Was this a scam?' being perpetrated by Nicola Nash! The relative had various family ephemera relating to the Officer casualty Ablett.

Much DNA testing of the other remains was only able to identify three out of the nine casualties one of whom it was established had died the week before and probably wasn't a Northumberland Fusilier. The troops stationed there in early October, 1917 involved different regiments.

Seven of the nine have now been identified.

Even Ablett's brother, who was serving in the Honourable Artillery Company, had been a nearby posting and it is possible [but unconfirmed] that the two brothers could have met on the Western Front.

In this era of warfare, it is important to note that bodies had to be buried very quickly usually within one-two weeks. Between 12-15<sup>th</sup> October, 1917, there are 5,412 names of the *missing* listed on the Tyne Cot Memorial. Modern DNA testing for JCCC purposes has to be selective as it is not possible to test large numbers of individuals for DNA matches owing to the resources and time needed for the investigations.

Nicola highlighted that DNA testing might give negative results owing to 'breaks' somewhere in a family line. This can be potentially a source of anxiety and distress for relatives today albeit originating from the distant past when a child may have been born as a result of an affair or even been adopted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. At the time, such information would be considered highly stigmatising and concealed within families.

On Wednesday 17.11.2021, Ablett and others will be buried at Tyne Cot Cemetery. Their names will remain on the Tyne Cot Memorial [this story will feature in a future episode of ITV's 'Long Lost Families'].

### **Case Study 2:**

Nicola introduced this section reflecting on the activities of modern metal detectorists who might locate and remove artefacts but then cover up any remains. This potentially could mean the difference between identifying a soldier or not.

Human remains had been discovered on the outskirts of the village of Gavrelle in Northern France.

The 90% complete skeleton had 'Anson Battalion' shoulder tabs in the correct position anatomically. In a [presumed] pocket position was a 'Hood' battalion shoulder title. Royal Naval [RN] divisions had been involved in this battle of April, 1917.

All the records survive for Navy servicemen. From the remains, his estimated height was 5'2". [Interestingly, average height would be 5'6" in the era].

From the CWWG website, a search revealed a list of thirty-five KIA for the Anson battalion around the battle of Gavrelle, but importantly, as all their records survive and based on the deceased's height estimate, this could be narrowed down to two persons. This was before any DNA testing needed to be considered.

The two casualty names whose height were Andrew Irvine and James Robertson [who'd previously been in the 'Hood' battalion].

The genealogy search led to several ‘same name’ matches so with the help of the media [BBC], the JCCC succeeded in getting next of kin [‘NOK’] for both Irvine and Robertson – the DNA match confirmed the casualty to be ‘Robertson’. At the reburial ceremony attended by family members, the RN provided the burial and firing party and a marine bugler to sounded the last post.

**Case study three: a medal connection:**

About fifty years ago, most but not all ‘Irish Farm’ casualties buried in the original ‘Irish Farm Cemetery’ were moved to a new burial site called ‘New Irish Farm Cemetery’ situated slightly north of Ypres.

Subsequently, when the original ‘Irish farm Cemetery’ site was being redeveloped, twenty-four sets of remains were found. The records did not assist precise identification and, as they had been officially buried, there were no identity tags. However, there were shoulder and cap badges of the Essex regiment and a medal bar on one casualty with some three medal ribbons. [Secretary’s note: this casualty was reburied in November, 2021] Photos were shown of the cap badge, shoulder titles and the medal bar.

A search of the records revealed these casualties were likely to have occurred between April and July, 1915 and would have belonged to the second Battalion, Essex Regiment. [note there can be WWII damage to some sites].

Cross-referencing with the CWWG records revealed total of 138 killed during this period who had no known grave.

The medal bar ribbons were a British South Africa Company medal [‘BSAC’], a Queen’s South Africa [‘QSA’] and a King’s South Africa [‘KSA’].

To have been awarded a BSAC medal in 1897 gave the recipient a possible minimum age of 14 years had he enlisted then and gave a possible age of at least thirty-two in 1915.

You might think the search would significantly narrow the list of names but, in fact, the Essex Regiment records revealed forty-seven with no known grave and with previous service! However, there was only one name for a recipient who had been awarded the three medals. There was some initial confusion from the records as his age did not seem to match the probable explanation being that he had lied about his age. The soldier identified was Lance-Corporal Robert Cook who had died 2.5.1915. He had received a BSAC medal with clasp ‘Rhodesia’ and had been a ‘Jameson Raider’ in 1895. On his service record, he was ‘35yrs’ of age but was actually several years older. The final proof of identity was a positive match of his great nephew’s DNA. Cook was re-buried in October, 2021 [an arrangement which had been planned pre covid so was long overdue]. The Anglian Regiment provided the burial party whose attendees included the great-nephew. Although relatives in the majority of cases usually do not have the recipient medal[s], they occasionally can have photographs of the recipient/soldier. Such photographs are very rewarding to the investigating team.

In fact, of the seven Irish Farm casualties identified, two had been awarded the Military Medal [‘MM’] but the whereabouts of these medals remains unknown.

In many such instances, these deceased soldiers had very much become living history for the present generation who had then had greatly researched their family histories.

In the case of Ablett, excellent quality photographs were obtained from Alleyne’s School which he had attended.

In the case of personal items found, rings and other personal items are returned to the families. Other artefacts for example, bayonets may return to regimental museums for display purposes.

**Treatment of German casualties:**

A German volunteer organisation called the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge [the 'VDK'] is the equivalent organisation dealing with German war casualties abroad.

**Q and A: a very interactive final third - a summary of points raised:**

The JCCC use their own DNA testing service testing service – there is no overlap with commercial organisations such as 'Ancestry'.

*For missing British servicemen in Korea*, a search can be done against the US casualty database. In the US system, families [including British] of casualties can submit their DNA in the event of further casualties being discovered. In the case of such a recent war, DNA testing is usually accepted but will sometimes be refused. A search revealed some three hundred missing British soldiers from the Korean War. Generally, few identifications have been made. One success was a casualty from the Royal Ulster Rifles.

*Sources of DNA in unidentified casualties* – this is usually sourced from teeth and bones. There are some unanswered questions about DNA storage and data protection [eg other applications for DNA collected from relatives were they to volunteer their DNA in the future] so the JCCC are very selective in their approach only DNA testing after researching and identifying relatives.

*Identification of Kipling's son* - No DNA testing was done in this era [approximately the mid 1990's]. The JCCC had been formed shortly after.

*Servicemen killed at sea eg aircraft crashing in the sea?* If there were any remains, they would be in poor condition plus a sea crash site would be quite chaotic compared with land conditions.

*In the event of mistaken identity*, a grave would have to be rededicated quite apart from the potential trauma to families visiting an incorrect grave site.

A display case of artefacts from battlefield sites was available to be viewed [see photo below].



Roger Bragger thanked our guest speaker for a brilliant and interactive talk – members gave a round of applause in thanks!!

Meeting closed at 20.53hrs

Chris Davies

## BMS Secretary

Notes typed 26.11.2021-10.12.2021.

Additional photos added 3.1.21.

With my usual apologies for any typos or errors.