


 THE WAR GRAVES
PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT



PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY

The photographic recording of war graves can really bring family history alive, as **Pauline Pedersen** explains

There will be very few readers who are not familiar with the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). Working in association with them is The War Graves Photographic Project (TWGPP), a voluntary and self-funding group, whose aim is to extend the work of the Commission by photographing every war grave and memorial worldwide.

The ethos of TWGPP is very simple: to enable families and researchers to obtain, via its website, a photograph of a grave or memorial which many cannot personally visit.

Initially the project's brief was confined to British graves or memorials for the two world wars, but the scope is now widened to include all nationalities, (except America at its own request) and deaths of British servicemen in service after 1945.

In addition to the distinctive CWGC headstones, many family memorials relating to war dead have been recorded along the way.

Currently the website contains well over a million images taken from 23,000 cemeteries or memorials in over 150 countries. However, the greatest amount of blood, sweat and tears from the volunteers probably occurred from the work in Britain, which is now almost fully covered.

Dealing with the dedicated, beautifully maintained CWGC cemeteries is one thing, tramping through the undergrowth of oft-neglected churchyards or vast council cemeteries looking for single – or scattered – headstones is another story altogether, as volunteers can testify with many an amusing or exasperated anecdote.

At one time there was around 900 volunteers worldwide from all walks of life. Children, parents and grandparents have all been enlisted

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to help on occasions! All that was needed was motivation, a digital camera and the CWGC location data supplied by the regional coordinators. This is a project which owes its existence to modern technology: the facility to download from camera to computer to website with comparative ease and speed. Not all volunteers are on the ground though; many work at home on administrative tasks or prepare photographs for the website.

The launch of our website in February 2008 was well received but perhaps the most gratifying recognition came from a volunteer, who wrote: "On 15 January 1940 my Dad put his call-up papers in his pocket and was waved off on the Pontefract bus by his friend Les Greasby. Les worked underground at the pit and was exempt but, for some obscure reason, went in that day and handed his notice in. Of course he was called up shortly afterwards. They never saw one another again because Les was killed in 1945. I've been to his grave in northern Italy but I can honestly say if I can give just one person one tenth of the feeling I've experienced



Uncovering a gravestone in an unkempt part of a cemetery.

seeing him on the new website then it's definitely a job well done."

A month later an Early Day Motion was published on Parliament's website with the signatures of 61 MPs, praising the work of the Project.

Requests are dealt with daily by the Project Coordinator, Steve Rogers; the success rate is high and the numerous letters of thanks are at

Photographing The Helles Memorial at Gallipoli.





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Members of the Project at Dantzig Alley cemetery in France, May 2009.



The War Graves Photographic Project

once poignant, heartwarming and, in many instances, heartbreaking.

But some of the best moments came earlier this year when we appeared alongside the CWGC at the Who Do You Think You Are Live! show in London. The project team re-named it the "Oh Wow!" show because that was the general reaction of those to whom we were able to show a photograph of a great grandfather's or uncle's headstone or memorial inscription. A box of tissues would have been handy too.

We do try to go that extra mile to fulfil a request if the photograph has not yet been taken. One such occasion arose when we received the following letter from the granddaughter of Isabella Lindsay, aged 99: "...her only regret is that she has never been able to see her father's grave in France. He died when she was nine. We live in Australia. She is not one to ask for much. She is a survivor, lost her father, her family home burnt down in Scotland. Emigrating to Australia when she was 11 with her mother and four sisters, with no education, she had to care for her younger ill brother. She lived with little and has given so much. I would like to give something back. It would help her get some closure. Can you help?"

Isabella's father died in 1918 and is buried in St Pol British Cemetery, France, which is a bit off the beaten track. TWGPP's nearest volunteer was on holiday at the time; another volunteer was 300km away, not exactly local. He did, however, consider this story to be newsworthy so he contacted local newspapers and without much persuasion a journalist offered to visit the grave of Petty Officer William Lindsay to lay flowers on the grave on Bella's behalf.

Left: Soldier attends the grave of a fallen comrade in the Mametz area.

Within a few days, the photographs were forwarded to Australia and, when they were presented to Bella, who had been unaware of all these goings-on, her family videoed the extremely emotional occasion. A copy of the video was subsequently shown to volunteers at their next annual meeting. Once again, a box of tissues would have been handy.

Photographic tours for members have taken us to the Somme and Arras in France; Ypres, (where TWGPP had the honour of being invited to lay a wreath at the Menin Gate ceremony); Arnhem in The Netherlands; and Gallipoli.

The latter was the most ambitious trip to date. We took 18 intrepid volunteers to the beautiful Gallipoli Peninsula, enjoying the hospitality of Eric and Ozlem Goossens at The Gallipoli Houses, in the safe care of minibus driver Mehmet Ali and under the tuition of the knowledgeable guide Kenan Celik.

It was a trip to remember, quite hard work sometimes, given the terrain and the early morning awakenings (the visit coincided with Ramadan), but the volunteers achieved their objective of photographing 36,500 names from the British and Commonwealth cemeteries and memorials on the Peninsula.

One of the rewarding aspects of TWGPP is the way in which it draws in the younger generation.

Amy Thorne is a 17-year-old volunteer studying history A-level. "I have always had a great interest in the First World War and four years ago I travelled with my parents to France



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and Belgium. We stayed in Ypres for a few nights and travelled by bus to Passchendaele and several other locations. We then travelled by train to stay at Arras, from where we visited Albert, and hired a car to tour the Somme.

"My Mum has been tracing her family history for 25 years and wanted photographs of family war graves and my Dad is interested in military history. What chance did I have?"

"I also recorded the names on my local War Memorial at Hillmorton, Rugby and took photographs of the graves of soldiers whose names appeared on the memorial. I then wrote an article to my local newspaper giving details to anyone who might be interested.

"I was searching the CWGC site last year and

At Azmak Cemetery in Gallipoli.

Gunners firing from positions at Helles, Gallipoli.



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Steve Rogers reads a tribute to the fallen before he places a wreath on the grave of a glider pilot at Oosterbeek cemetery near Arnhem.

followed the link to TWGPP. That's when I decided to become involved. My grandparents live in Glasgow and we went as a family to the Glasgow Western Necropolis. The cemetery is almost derelict in parts and while the official CWGC stones are mostly in good order it is sad to see the state of many of the family graves, where men and women, who had died as a result of wounds or illness, were buried. Some had been killed during the Blitz on Clydebank [in March 1941].

"We ended up cleaning the stones before they were fit to be photographed. Over the summer, also with my parents and grandparents, I visited and photographed war graves and family memorials in Lanark, Biggar and small Lanarkshire villages. Some were very remote but were still tended by family or by locals. We carried on again at Christmas when it was dry and very frosty.

"I photographed stray gravestones in Rugby and Coventry London Road Cemetery with my mum and dad – my Minders! Coventry required several visits as it is very widespread and overgrown in sections. Once again, my parents and I cleaned the stones before they were photographed and even took shears to trim back some of the growth. I think visitors to the Cemetery thought we were staff!

"My maternal great-grandfather Private Marshall Barrie Smith of the 6th Airborne Division, 13th Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, was killed, aged 31, on 24 March 1945 at Hamminkeln during Operation Varsity. He is buried in the Reichswald Forest Cemetery. His grave has been photographed by volunteers, as has the family gravestone in Dalbeattie Cemetery, Kirkcudbrightshire. Although he has visited his father's grave on several occasions, my grandfather was pleased to see the



Pauline Pedersen is Tours and Events Organiser for The War Graves Photographic Project. She is also a vice-president of the Birmingham and Midland Society for Genealogy and Heraldry.

photographs recorded on the project site.

"I have just completed my Queen's Guide Award. I decided to use my work as a volunteer with TWGPP for the 'Community in Action' section of the Award. I will be doing a presentation about the work of the project and have also involved the 1st Hillmorton Brownies in research about the Poppy Appeal. Every Remembrance Sunday we parade to Hillmorton War Memorial. There is a sole war grave in St John's Churchyard, Hillmorton, which I have been keeping an eye on for years.

"I am now studying War Poetry for my exams and recently attended a lecture in Birmingham about Wilfred Owen, and watched a performance of the play about *The Accrington Pals*. I intend continuing to help with the project, so if you see a car with a teenager, four adults, a camera or two, shears, cleaning material, sandwiches, a map, a list of graves and the dog, it is only me with my scouts and security!"

And from the Sacred Heart College in Auckland, Callum Quin wrote to us about a project undertaken by the pupils of a Year 8 English class. They were each asked to research the life of a Sacred Heart Old Boy killed in action during the Second World War.

All they were given was the person's name and photograph, the rest was down to them. Callum's Old Boy was Sergeant Pilot David Leo Nola, and he found out that he had served in the RNZAF, flying for 75 Squadron. Sergeant Nola died in May 1941 and is buried in Grimsby Cemetery, Lincolnshire, England.

His research led him to TWGPP's website and a request to Steve, who declared it one of the spookiest moments of the project as he had only just, within the previous few minutes, downloaded the photograph of Nola's headstone.

Adding images to the website is an ongoing task. Ultimately, the archive, when complete, will form a lasting record of all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice and will be deposited with the CWGC to complement the Commission's own archives.

The project has many far-reaching aspects. Volunteers develop specialist interests or adopt a particular grave; a photographic session will throw up a story that deserves further research and chance encounters with the CWGC gardeners and maintenance people. There is never a shortage of material for our quarterly newsletter, which goes out electronically to over 1,000 addresses. Previous editions of the newsletter, plus additional information about the project, can be viewed at www.twgpp.org.