

COMMISSION RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

REMEMBERING THE DEAD OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE: A REVIEW OF COMMEMORATIVE ACTIVITY DURING AND AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR



COMMONWEALTH
WAR GRAVES



The Commissioners of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) have reviewed and considered the report, Remembering the dead of the British Empire: a review of commemorative activity during and after the Second World War, and accept its findings.

The report highlights that, while no evidence of systematic exclusion from named commemoration was found for the Second World War, it is evident that decisions made during and after the conflict led to inequitable commemoration for some, particularly those from African and Indian communities.

The CWGC fully acknowledges that the unequal treatment highlighted by this report was wrong then and is unacceptable now, running contrary to the promises made to the Second World War dead and their families.

The CWGC deeply regrets these historical shortcomings and remains fully committed to meaningful redress – work that is already underway through a dedicated global programme to restore equality in commemoration.

Therefore, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission commits to the following actions:

1. **Issue: Abandonment of Graves** In an effort to properly commemorate predominantly African casualties during WW2, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) entered into complex negotiations with military and colonial authorities. Decisions informed by contemporary racial and cultural assumptions led to the abandonment of up to 7,500 African graves. Their names were instead recorded on memorials, rather than marked graves, due to perceived religious prohibitions on disturbing remains and CWGC's preference for centralised cemeteries.

Commission response: In consultation with national and local authorities, and other key stakeholders, make efforts to locate and mark abandoned WW2 graves when and where practical to do so. To date, burial sites across Kenya, Mauritius, Thailand, The Gambia, and Malawi, have been found and grave reinstatement is underway or imminent.

2. **Issue: Muslim Casualties Left in Temporary Burial Grounds** Up to 1,200 Muslim soldiers, mostly from the Indian Army, were left in temporary battlefield graves due to a ruling by General Headquarters India, based on perceived religious guidance. Although this policy was later overturned after the Commission intervened, some decisions were irreversible at the time, resulting in names being recorded on memorials instead of individual graves.

Commission response: In consultation with national and local authorities, and other key stakeholders, make efforts to locate and mark abandoned WW2 graves when and where practical to do so. Remedial action will be when such work is safe and sustainable.

3. **Issue: Rolls of Honour in Lieu of Stone or Bronze Memorials for Indian Casualties**

It was decided to commemorate 32,329 undivided Indian casualties on ornate paper rolls of honour, a departure from the standard practice of using stone or bronze. This approach was mandated by the British Indian government.

Commission response: CWGC will open dialogue with the Indian government to obtain their view on the form of commemoration and act accordingly – either maintaining the status quo or working with this key stakeholder to realise an appropriate form of commemoration. In addition, CWGC will develop an enhanced form of digital commemoration for the existing Rolls to raise awareness of them and those they commemorate.

4. **Issue: Limited Contact with Next of Kin** The IWGC made little effort to contact the families of the dead in India and British African colonies, which denied those next of kin the rights afforded to other Commonwealth families – for example, personal inscriptions on the graves of their dead. This is acknowledged by the CWGC as a serious oversight.

Commission response: We recommend that where graves can be found and reinstated, families will be encouraged to add a religious emblem of their choosing and a personal inscription along established CWGC guidelines. Where this is not possible, the public will be encouraged to add details for existing or newly reinstated graves to the online For Evermore platform.

5. **Issue: Under-recording of Civilian Deaths** The CWGC established a Civilian Roll of Honour listing over 68,000 Commonwealth civilians killed during the war as a result of enemy action. However, due to wartime secrecy, poor recordkeeping, and reporting challenges, many civilian deaths—particularly across the British Empire—went unrecorded.

Commission response: CWGC believes the Civilian Roll of Honour presents an opportunity to create a world leading record of ALL Commonwealth civilians who died as a result of enemy action during WW2.

We will initiate a call to action in those countries where it is known there was a significant under reporting of civilian war dead, with a view to ensuring this important memorial is as complete and inclusive as it can be. The aim, to create a world leading commemorative asset that reflects the human cost of the war on civilians globally.

The project will be delivered digitally, through partnership, and externally sourced funding. It will be supported by a full communications campaign.

DIGITAL, EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Underlying all the above will be a comprehensive Community Engagement and Education programme that recognises that commemoration extends beyond physical memorials. CWGC will expand its global engagement and education programmes, particularly in underrepresented communities.

DELIVERY AND COMMUNICATION

To deliver this activity, CWGC will build upon the existing structures established for the Non-Commemorations programme. The resources required to realise the Commission's actions are in place.

In the interests of transparency, regular update on progress against our actions will be shared on our channels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission would very much like to put on record our deep and sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to this process – including CWGC's team of in-house historians who researched and authored the report. We would also like to thank those who reviewed the various iterations of the manuscript. Their critical feedback, and suggestions and guidance, were gratefully received. Naturally, they bear no responsibility for the conclusions drawn within the report or CWGC's responses to the issues identified.

Approved for public release by the Commonwealth War Graves Commissioners.

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