

Defence Today Commemoration In Canada **Commemoration In Canada**

March 1, 2003 by Legion Magazine

by Natalie Salat

From top: A new foundation for war graves in Winnipeg's St. Mary's Cemetery, where 30 Commonwealth casualties of the two world wars rest; Dan Wheeldon inspects a WW I grave at Elmwood Cemetery in Winnipeg; Equality of treatment is a policy the commission has adhered to since 1917.

Camp Hughes, 132 kilometres west of Winnipeg, once served as a bustling training camp for Canada's soldiers during World War I. Today, the site is desolate—apart from a tiny cemetery bearing witness to the fact that training for war is no picnic.

After an hour and a half of driving along the relentlessly straight Trans-Canada Highway westwards from Winnipeg, turning south and carefully pursuing signs towards the cemetery's lengthy dirt driveway, Dan Wheeldon is finally here. It is late September, and the secretary general of the Canadian Agency of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission wants to make sure the six war graves at the cemetery are being looked after.

A few weeks earlier, Wheeldon received a letter, with photos, from an amateur historian stating that the site was overgrown and in need of repairs. Wheeldon put in a word to the commander at Canadian Forces Base Shilo and asked him to look into the situation on behalf of the commission.

Walking through a simple white triangular arch, Wheeldon notices that since the photos were taken the gate has been replaced by base staff. He also sees that the grass has been cut. Seconds later the towering ex-sergeant major is busy examining the individual headstones, checking the depth of inscriptions and lamenting the black paint used to highlight the engraving, a practice that is not used by the commission. Wheeldon gives the markers a push to



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check their stability. “The headstones could use a good cleaning,” he notes, “but this place has a lot of character. Some people would like us to have four-lane highways leading to our sites.”

That same day, Wheeldon drives to Brandon where he inspects the war graves in the local cemetery. The next day he addresses a meeting of veterans’ groups and tells them about the commission’s work.

Wheeldon and his four colleagues at the Canadian Agency are responsible for making sure each of the 14,335 Commonwealth war graves in Canada and 1,000 in the United States is properly marked and maintained. They are also responsible for keeping records and registers. The agency reports to the head office in the UK, which oversees the worldwide commemoration of 1.7 million individuals who sacrificed their lives in the Commonwealth forces during the two world wars. “I always like to say that ours is not an important job. It’s a sacred duty,” says Wheeldon, who has worked at the Ottawa-based agency for 13 years.

More Canadian war casualties are buried in Canada than in any other country except for France. You can travel to some of our most remote areas, such as Bella Bella in British Columbia, and chances are a war grave will be in the vicinity. In fact, the Canadian Agency oversees 3,300 burial locations dispersed throughout North America and maintains memorials to the missing in Ottawa and Halifax. The secretary general takes responsibility for this work on behalf of the minister of Veterans Affairs.

The first phase of the commission’s task in Canada was to mark graves and build memorials following both world wars. Since its establishment, the commission adhered to the principle of burying casualties of war as close as possible to where they died, and marking all graves with a standard headstone. In North America, these distinctive headstones are made of granite as opposed to the limestone used for most of the commission’s worldwide operations, but the dimensions and information inscribed follow the same pattern. Each headstone must be 813 millimetres in height, and have engraved on it the national emblem of service or regimental badge at the top, followed by service number, rank, name, unit, date of death, age and, if requested by the next of kin, a religious emblem and an individual inscription.

The second, more recent phase has been to inspect all 3,300 locations. “A lot of effort went into mapping where the sites were in the first place,” explains Wheeldon. Over the last 10 years, the agency has been going out, making note of the work that needs to be done, and getting contractors to complete it. “People sometimes write in to say, ‘We’ve got a war grave here and wanted to let you know,’” adds Wheeldon. “We do know. It’s simply a matter of getting to them.”

Before last year, when the agency hired a fourth inspector, it was possible to get to each site every nine years or so, with the larger sites being visited more often. The inspection cycle is

now six years. Wheeldon notes that just 25 years ago there wasn't the infrastructure in place—highways, airports, etc.—to feasibly get to all the sites. He also says he appreciates when people take the time to write in and let the commission know if something is amiss; inspections only mark a point in time, so the agency has to rely on its points of contact at each site—whether a private company, non-profit organization or volunteer—to let him know, for instance, if a tree has fallen on a headstone.

Many Canadians, however, are not even aware that the war graves commission exists. At Wheeldon's Brandon presentation it was clear that a minority among the 20 or so attendees knew much about the CWGC. One man who did was Legion district commander Ove Larsen. "They're doing a pretty good job here in Manitoba," he says, adding that the presentation would provide useful knowledge for branch service officers.

Canadians are more aware of the war cemeteries in Europe, says Brad Hall, deputy secretary general of the Canadian Agency. "The war dead of Canada and the United States are almost the forgotten bunch. Most people don't think, quite frankly, of the sacrifice on the home front." Injury, disease and training accidents caused the death of the majority of Commonwealth war dead in North America, among whom are included a thousand or so Americans. "The war graves commission commemorates by service, not nationality," explains Hall. "We had a lot of American citizens who wanted to join the fight, so they jumped the border. If they then died on training in North America, it was considered one land mass and they were sent home."

There are casualties from Britain, New Zealand and elsewhere who died while taking part in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, as well as a number of women who died while serving as nurses or conducting other duties. "It's strictly equality of treatment," explains Hall.

But he also acknowledges the arbitrary nature of the dates around which the commission bases its commemoration. The CWGC maintains the graves of those who died in service between Aug. 4, 1914 and Aug. 31, 1921 and between Sept. 3, 1939 and Dec. 31, 1947. "There are many fellows who died the day after (those cutoff dates). You can bet your bottom dollar their death was attributable to service. Of course, their graves are cared for by Canada nationally."

As Veterans Affairs Canada is responsible for maintaining veterans graves, and those are often interspersed with Commonwealth war graves, the department and the Canadian agency often work together. "It's a very convenient relationship for all of us," says Robert Mercer, VAC's executive director of public affairs.

Philip Michael, director of national and international memorials with VAC's Canada Remembers division, often meets with Wheeldon. "There's a lot of issues that we have to deal with on a one-to-one basis. When Dan and Brad are doing their tours, we have an agreement with them that they will also take care of veterans' graves when they have to do work on a larger scale."

Wheeldon says he, Hall, or the two other inspectors, Robert Parsons and Annick Bilodeau, inform the department what needs to be done and obtain estimates. "They always say yes," says Wheeldon. "So we just get the work done, pay it, and they reimburse us." The CWGC benefits from economies of scale when there are larger numbers of headstones to be repaired or cleaned, and VAC gains from not having to pay management fees.

Over the six years, the agency has been collaborating with VAC, veterans groups and cemetery authorities to get larger groups of war and veterans graves repaired. Occasionally, there is polite sparring over methods. "Everybody wants the best solution," says Wheeldon. "All roads lead to Rome. But how do you want to get there?" A good example of how curved that road can be is the restoration project afoot at Winnipeg's Brookside Cemetery, where approximately 300 war graves lie alongside 9,000 veterans graves. This is actually take two. In 1995, VAC and the city completed the restoration of 4,600 graves for just under a million dollars (mostly VAC money), addressing the worn foundations in which groups of headstones were set. The replacement beams chosen, however—pre-cast concrete with hollow steel cylinder reinforcements—proved no match for the extremes of Winnipeg weather. "I was rather critical of the beams they used," says Alan Coombe, the CWGC's director of works at head office. "I did suggest they were going to experience problems because of the thin walls of the concrete, erosion of the steel reinforcement, the fact that the beam was in waterlogged ground, plus the experience of permafrost." Many of the beams have deteriorated.

Michael acknowledges that Brookside has posed "some significant problems in terms of longevity and maintenance of markers. So we're currently undergoing some rigorous testing with the University of Manitoba, and Dan is doing some projects at the same time. By early next year (2003), we will be able to evaluate all the testing and come up with a national standard for installation of grave markers."

Wheeldon has visited Winnipeg several times in the past year to review progress and to offer advice. At a September meeting involving several interested parties, Wheeldon listens attentively to the solutions proposed. But he is also forthright in expressing a preference for established commission practices. "We can also look at poured-in-place (cement beams) and grouting," he suggests. "We use that all around the world. It works." The commission has been using this technique for 85 years, and Wheeldon believes there is "no need to reinvent the wheel."

Unfortunately, the onset of the Winnipeg chill in September delayed trials of the commission method until 2003. In Canada, time, geography and the weather constantly challenge agency inspectors, who are on the road for eight to 10 weeks a year doing a series of two-week tours, mainly in the summer months. "Our biggest problem is seasonal," says Hall. "And that's not only for flowers but for construction. If things aren't done by the end of October, guess what?"

They're not going to get done in this fiscal year." Travelling is often the easy part, he adds, although it can sometimes take a day just to get to one site. "The hard part is coming back, organizing yourself and sending a package out to the contractors that's clear and concise."

The agency, which has a budget of about \$500,000 a year, uses 20 to 25 primary contractors across Canada, and gets most of its headstones from Rock of Ages, which quarries, cuts and engraves the stone. Wheeldon says staff try to engage regional contractors wherever possible.

Hall is working on getting more horticulture around North America's war graves, most of which are surrounded by grass and a few trees. It is an uphill struggle. "In the ideal situation, every headstone would have flowers planted around it all the time. That's probably not realistic," he says, adding that a lot of war casualties are buried in community cemeteries where the community is dying, or the operator won't allow flowers because they interfere with lawn maintenance. "The only thing I'm sure of is that the war graves in Canada are in better shape now than they were nine years ago..."

Provincial laws also affect the commission's work. In Quebec, some 99 out of 2,000 war graves were inadvertently lost owing to a provincial cemetery act that allows for a finite definition of perpetuity and calls for two types of payments—maintenance and concessions—to be made. "If any one of those lapsed," explains Hall, "then the grave could be reclaimed and used again. Because our inspection cycle was so long, it took us a long time to find out that, uh-oh, this is happening."

About five years ago the commission set about establishing how many of Quebec's war graves had been lost. It also began to develop a system for tracking the status of individual graves and to plan a memorial for those whose graves had been affected. "It took me about two years to contact every cemetery, sending letters, talking to them by phone," says Bilodeau. "Now I have a spreadsheet with every name on it, and I confirm every year that the grave is still assured."

Michael said last fall that he and the commission anticipate the Quebec legislature will amend the cemetery act to provide protection for veterans and war graves early in 2003. Meanwhile, the Quebec Memorial is set to be unveiled at the National Field of Honour in Pointe-Claire in mid-2003. The architect at CWGC's head office is designing it with input from Wheeldon and the cemetery authority, The Last Post Fund.

At the Ottawa office, records administrator Johanne Neville spends much of her time submitting corrections to the commission's database, which was computerized in the 1980s. Neville also handles records enquiries, which have become more involved since the CWGC's casualty database was launched online in 1998. "Now it's more complicated, with questions like, 'Why is he there?' instead of 'Where is he?'" She adds that while sadness accompanies the

task of commemoration, “You don’t necessarily focus on that—you’re in an office. But when you talk to people, that’s when it hits you.”

For agency inspector Parsons, an ex-soldier like colleagues Wheeldon and Hall, each inscription on the headstone is a piece of history. He says the reward is in making sure each grave gets the same respect. “There are many beautiful cemeteries in Europe, but a site in Saskatchewan tells the story. It’s about a 20-minute walk over the prairie hills to get to this one headstone that’s just in the middle of nowhere. Yet we still look after that headstone.”