

## **THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION**

*(An extract from their information leaflet)*

The scale of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's commemorative task in the countries that saw the worst of the fighting during two world wars is well known. The practice of non-repatriation of the dead established during the First World War meant that Commonwealth servicemen and women who died on active service abroad were buried there, alongside their comrades, for the most part in specially constructed war cemeteries now cared for by the Commission.

Memorials to commemorate those who were not found or could not be identified were built in significant locations, often at the heart of the battlefields themselves. Images of these cemeteries and memorials in Europe, North Africa and the Far East are familiar to all and have come to represent the most widely recognised face of the Commission's work.

The significance of the 'home' countries (the Commission's member countries: Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom) as places of commemoration for the Commonwealth's war dead is, however, less widely appreciated and it will surprise many to learn that the UK, with well over 300,000, is second only to France, the scene of intense fighting in both wars, in terms of numbers commemorated.

More than a third of this total can be accounted for by the commemoration of missing naval and air force casualties who are listed on the great memorials at Chatham, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Tower Hill, and Runnymede. But the greater part of the balance – more than 170,000 casualties – have known and marked graves, a figure representing 50% of the total in France and significantly more than any of the other recognised battlefield areas. These are the men and women who died at home and in military hospitals of wounds, sickness and disease, or in training accidents and air raids. Some were killed in action in the air or at sea in coastal waters, and their bodies washed ashore.

For most of these casualties the UK was their home, and, as wartime service burials for those who died in their home country were not rigorously regulated, they were laid to rest not in war cemeteries, but often in locations chosen by their families. Some of the graves are in parish churchyards, others in municipal cemeteries or in huge private burial grounds dating from Victorian times. Some form small war graves plots within larger cemeteries, but by far the majority of the burials, many in family graves, are scattered throughout cemetery grounds. In all, there are Commonwealth war graves in almost 12,500 different locations throughout the United Kingdom.

Of the 170,000 Commonwealth war casualties buried in the UK, more than 15,000 served with the armed forces of other Commonwealth nations. Many of their graves are centred in areas where there were troop concentrations, military training camps and hospitals, and, during the Second World War, air force bases from which Commonwealth squadrons operated. In addition, the Commission cares for more than 10,000 war graves of other nationalities in the UK (for example those of Czech, Dutch, German and Polish casualties) and in many cases there are reciprocal agreements whereby the foreign governments maintain some or all of the Commonwealth war graves in their countries.