

Soldier Dead

[HOW WE RECOVER, IDENTIFY, BURY,
AND HONOR OUR MILITARY FALLEN]

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and may also involve disinterring bodies from temporary gravesites established when it was impossible or impractical to remove them to major cemeteries. Area clearance still poses hazards to recovery teams—primarily from field conditions, live ammunition, and booby traps—even though it usually takes place days, weeks, months, or even years after combat.

Historical recovery currently receives a great deal of attention and, accordingly, receives much support and funding. Teams of specialists, after detailed research, conduct search missions throughout the world, but particularly in Southeast Asia. These teams are composed of highly trained and qualified civilians and service personnel from all branches of the military.

Noncombat recovery occurs when soldiers die in circumstances not involving direct contact with the enemy or threat of attack. Deaths in these noncombat cases still require recovery, as the remains may be in remote locations or otherwise be difficult to extract from the site. Some death incidents are classified as “mass fatalities,” and special procedures apply in such cases. Noncombat recovery generally poses less threat to those involved than the other types, but is far from risk free.

These divisions in recovery operations are not as distinct as chapters in a book; they have overlapping boundaries. For the purposes of this study, an overview of all recovery methods and history is provided in this chapter, but a more detailed analysis of area clearance, historical, and noncombat recoveries is reserved for later.

History

Our formal policy of recovering soldiers’ remains for a recognized and permanent burial had its earliest origins in the Seminole Indian Wars of Florida in the early 1800s. Then, relatives could have the remains of an officer returned to them if they provided a leaded coffin to a “designated Quartermaster at a port, [and] the Department would have it forwarded free of charge to a quartermaster operating in the field closest to the area of burial.” The body would be disinterred and then shipped home to the relative who had made the application for return. But, since the laws provided no funding for the government to pay expenses, the relatives bore all costs. The return of these officers’ remains was an exception, as most, and all enlisted men, were buried in the field with few records kept about location.¹

The next step came during the Mexican-American War of 1846–47. In this conflict, the U.S. Army buried its soldiers where they fell; there was little else they could do. In 1847, Kentucky authorized the return of its dead, at

state expense, to a cemetery dedicated to that war.² Since more than 13,000 died and only 750—none of whom were identified—were recovered for final burial in an official cemetery, it is apparent that the procedures extant at that time were rudimentary and mostly ineffectual.

As a nation, the United States made its first large-scale efforts to recover, and subsequently identify and bury, military fatalities during the Civil War. Recognizing its obligation to the fallen and their families, the War Department issued General Orders No. 75 on September 11, 1861, that directed the Quartermaster General to supply hospitals with a formal paperwork system designed to keep accurate mortuary records. The General Orders also required that a registered headboard be placed over each grave.

General Orders 75 was a good start, but it was lacking in scope and depth. It did not provide for burial sites or for the disposition of those who died on campaign. In other words, it envisioned a system for the dead inside what is called the Zone of the Interior but did not offer directives for fatalities that occurred in areas of conflict.³

Recognizing the shortcomings of these orders, the War Department issued General Orders No. 33 on April 3, 1862. Section II established two precedents: that the primary responsibility for retrieval of combat fatalities rested with the commanders in the field, and that the commanders had the duty to identify and bury the dead:

In order to secure, as far as possible, the decent interment of those who have fallen, or may fall, in battle, it is made the duty of Commanding Generals to lay off lots of ground in some suitable spot near every battlefield, so soon as it may be in their power, and to cause the remains of those killed to be interred, with headboards to the graves bearing numbers, and when practicable [*sic*], the names of the persons buried in them. A register of each burial ground will be preserved, in which will be noted the marks corresponding with the headboards.⁴

While General Orders 33 instructed commanders on what to do, it offered little guidance on how to carry out their responsibilities. Short on men and engaged in a protracted struggle, military commanders were reluctant to divert precious resources to noncombat activities. The words “as far as possible,” “as it may be in their power,” and “when practicable” provided a convenient excuse for those who chose to give recovery, identification, and burial lower priority than winning battles. However, as the war progressed, an excellent example of adhering to both the spirit and letter of General Orders 33 occurred during a battle near Washington, DC.

In July 1864, General Lee's forces threatened to invade Washington. Faced with a shortage of combat troops, Brigadier General Rucker quickly formed a brigade with 1,500 quartermaster employees, placed Captain James Moore in charge, and assigned the newly formed unit to Fort Stevens on the north edge of the city. Once reinforced by this hastily thrown together brigade and other troops, a Union division attacked the Confederates to drive them from positions near the fort. The Confederates retreated without offering fierce resistance, leaving Fort Stevens, and Washington, secure.

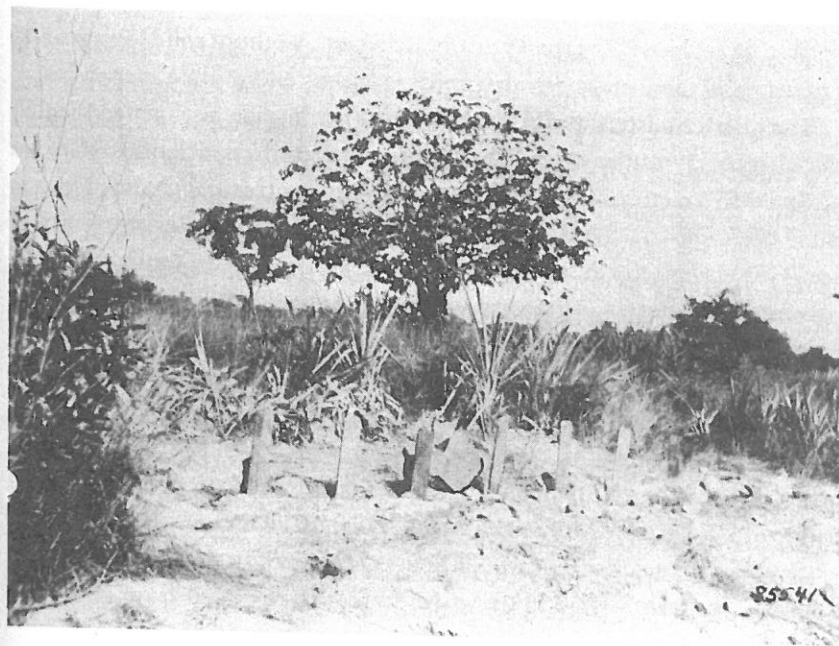
General Montgomery C. Meigs selected a site for a battlefield cemetery and ordered Moore to recover the dead and bury them. Moore and his men then not only evacuated all the dead but also were able to identify every one of them. This novel feat was accomplished because several favorable factors converged at just the right time: the quartermaster personnel, trained in logistics and record keeping, were readily available; emphasis was placed on retrieval and burial; the fight was brief and relatively mild—if there is such a thing; and the Union Army controlled the field of battle. Unfortunately, the tactics and procedures used with such success in this engagement were not employed extensively during the Civil War, resulting in scattered graves and relatively scant record keeping.⁵

After the surrender at Appomatox, the Union forces undertook the task of exhuming their dead from burial sites and transferring them to national cemeteries. Recovery parties fanned out across the countryside, searching battlefields, roads, fields, and valleys for the graves of the fallen. From 1866 to 1870, the remains of 299,696 Union soldiers were located and buried in 73 cemeteries. Another 13,575 were buried in cemeteries by military posts or in private plots. As large as these figures seem, they are 26,125 short of the estimate made in 1866 of the total number of remains to be retrieved.⁶

Apparently, the record keeping on unrecovered remains was incorrect, or many soldiers were not found. Either way, despite valiant efforts, the discrepancy illustrates the inadequacies of that era. Yet, even taking into account the number of Soldier Dead not recovered and returned, the over 90 percent success rate in retrieval was a remarkable achievement. And, most important, the moving of the Union dead from far-flung battlefields to national cemeteries established the precedent that would be followed in future wars, even when American casualties lay in foreign soil. The Civil War marked the point at which “public opinion and the armed forces would no longer tolerate the indifference that had heretofore attended the care of the nation's dead in war.”⁷

Not long afterward, the United States entered the Spanish-American War and put to good use its experience in searching for and recovering its dead from faraway battlefields. In February 1899, the Quartermaster Burial Corps began to disinter and return the remains of soldiers buried in Cuba and Puerto Rico. By June 30 of that year, 1,222 bodies had been repatriated to the United States. Quartermaster General Marshall I. Ludington spoke words that became a harbinger of U.S. retrieval efforts in major world conflicts only a few years later. He said that the efforts of the Quartermaster Corps in the Spanish-American War were most likely the first attempt of a nation to “disinter the remains of all its soldiers who, in defense of their country, had given up their lives on a foreign shore, and bring them . . . to their native land for return to their relatives and friends or their reinterment in the beautiful cemeteries which have been provided by our Government for its defenders.”⁸

After completing its mission in Cuba and Puerto Rico, the Quartermaster Burial Corps moved its operation to the Philippines. At the same time,



2.1 Graves of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry (Rough Riders) killed during the advance on Santiago, Cuba, 1898. *National Archives & Records Administration*

Major General E. S. Otis, commander of the Pacific Department, ordered Chaplain Charles C. Pierce to “establish and direct the United States Army Morgue and Office of Identification,” which performed duties essentially identical to those managed by the Burial Corps. The records speak very clearly of the conflict between the two organizations, with D. H. Rhodes, Chief of the Burial Corps, writing, “*Chaplain Pierce* will never be lost sight of in any work he may be in charge of,” and describing Pierce’s final report as “indecent in its claims . . . simply bosh.” Pierce adopted a defensive stance, including letters from those in influential military positions in his report. Despite the friction between the two units, the system worked. Both made valuable contributions to the recovery effort, and innovations from each became part of official procedures.⁹ In this case, competition fostered improvements.

After the Spanish-American War, the Army consolidated several departments into the Quartermaster Corps, establishing a permanent military infrastructure of logistical support for Army operations. The Quartermaster Corps, founded on June 16, 1775, is composed of soldiers who call themselves “logistics warriors.” They provide “the right supplies, at the right time and place, in the right quantities.” An army does not travel only on its stomach; it must also have weapons and ammunition. Broken equipment must be repaired or replaced. The mail must be delivered. Without solid logistics and support in all these areas, fighting spirit is useless and morale evaporates.

The quartermasters, proficient in handling minutiae, performed the first official recovery duties in the Civil War, assisted in repatriation efforts in the Spanish-American War, and were officially, by General Orders No. 104 issued on August 7, 1917, assigned the duties of the Graves Registration Service (GRS). Henceforth, the Quartermaster Corps could recruit and train personnel exclusively for the purpose of recovering, identifying, and burying the Army’s dead.¹⁰

During World War I, the War Department chose Major (formerly Chaplain) Charles C. Pierce, by then retired, to recruit and train men for the GRS and to oversee its operations in Europe. The service was to perform six duties: field units along the battle lines to identify remains and mark graves immediately after fighting began; establish and maintain all temporary and permanent military cemeteries that would house the American dead; keep a record of burials; assist in identification when dead were relocated from battlefield burial sites to more permanent cemeteries; correspond with the bereaved family and friends; and coordinate mortuary affairs with foreign governments.¹¹

In effect, during World War I, the GRS served as the agent carrying out the desires of the people of the United States as expressed in the General Or-

ders issued since the Civil War: to recover, identify, and bury soldiers killed in service. Two precedents were established. First was the “appearance of a theater graves registration service, with its operating units in close support to combat, and a headquarters staff charged with the maintenance of temporary burials and semi-permanent military cemeteries.” Second were innovations and improvements to the retrieval process, given the need to clear the battlefield of large numbers of corpses in order to maintain morale: “The survival of wartime political regimes, whether autocratic or democratic, depended upon the will of their respective armies and peoples to endure the ordeal of blood sacrifice. All were equally concerned in removal of the dead from the sight of the living.”¹² After fifty years, the desire to take care of our Soldier Dead had produced a system capable of doing so.

Once the armistice was signed to end World War I, the Memorial Division of the Quartermaster Corps assumed the duties of the GRS, with the exception that if war erupted again, it would confine its activities to the continental United States while the GRS, under orders of the theater commander, would operate in areas of combat. Also, the Memorial Division was to maintain a central database of all mortuary records, assist in identification cases that required investigative work, and ensure that grave markers were inscribed with correct information about the deceased.¹³ Of course, since the first computers were not developed until World War II, the databases were voluminous card files.

In the period between World War I and World War II, the Army considered various arrangements of personnel and duty assignments for those responsible for handling military dead. Leaders were trying to avoid fighting wars relying solely on tactics developed during a previous conflict, a disastrous mistake committed in World War I. The trouble was, the Quartermaster Corps, like combat units, didn’t have a crystal ball foretelling what the next war would be like, and it was not prepared to handle deaths at the start of the next global conflict.

At that time, a military Table of Organization (T/O) described the staffing and equipping of each military unit. It listed how many men and of what rank would comprise the unit. The T/O also listed the hardware assigned to and, finally, the purpose of the unit. T/O 10–297, November 1, 1940, for Graves Registration said, “Functions: Supervision of identification and burial of dead; collection and disposal of personal effects; location and registration of battlefield graves and cemeteries.” The T/O made it clear that the GRS unit would be responsible for overseeing specific activities and would not be responsible for embalming, and that non-GRS service units would