

COMMISSION RESPONSE TO THE  
REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE  
AND ITS REVIEW INTO HISTORICAL  
INEQUALITIES IN COMMEMORATION

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# COMMISSION RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE AND ITS REVIEW INTO HISTORICAL INEQUALITIES IN COMMEMORATION

## Commission Response – A Promise Renewed

The Commissioners of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) have reviewed and considered the report of the Special Committee and accept its findings. The Commission acknowledges that the report makes for sobering reading and recognises that there will be peoples and communities to whom these findings relate, as well as many more not directly connected, who will be deeply saddened by the contents of this report.

The Special Committee's principal finding was of historic non-observance of the core principles on which the IWGC (now CWGC) was founded; the principle of equality of treatment in death, meant that whatever an individual's rank in social or military life, their treatment in the grave would be the same. The report highlights that, in certain circumstances, those principles so rigidly adhered to for all who fell in Europe were applied inconsistently or abandoned in the more distant corners of the globe when applied to the non-European war dead of the British Empire, in the immediate aftermath of World War One.

The Commissioners acknowledge that this was not right then and must not be allowed to remain unaddressed now. Those identified in the Special Committee's report deserve to be remembered as much today as they did a hundred years ago, and as fully as those whose memories we have already preserved for more than a Century.

Therefore, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission:

- Acknowledges that the Commission failed to fully carry out its responsibilities at the time and accepts the findings and failings identified in this report and we apologise unreservedly for them.
- Acknowledges and fully accepts the Special Committee's recommendations on how we might begin to address today, the historic wrongs of the past.
- Commits to positive and pro-active, inclusive action, engaging directly with the communities affected, to address the issues raised.
- Recognises this is a significant report that offers the Commission the opportunity not to rewrite our history, but to complete it.
- Renews afresh our abiding commitment to equality for all in commemoration, in perpetuity.

While the Commissioners acknowledge the report's observation that many of the individual names may never be known, they also recognise the central importance of continuing the search, so that these casualties when identified, might receive the equality in death they are owed. Where that cannot be done, the Commissioners realise that the

organisation will need to think differently about how it commemorates these casualties and is committed to engaging directly with the communities affected, to identify ways that will ensure their forebears' collective sacrifices are never forgotten.

Though it is clear that there is no single, swift or easy resolution to the issues raised in this report, and it is clear that in some circumstances the outcomes of the recommendations might take years to come to fruition, we nonetheless make the following, immediate commitments in response to the report's recommendations and will work with all due determination to deliver them.

## TEN REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Ongoing Commitment to Continue the Search for the Unnamed War Dead and those Potentially Not Commemorated** – research suggests there are collections held globally that may fill gaps in commemoration. The CWGC should commit to actively continuing the search for these men and women and state what resources it is willing to put behind this.

### **Commission response:**

The CWGC commits to investing the appropriate ongoing levels of resource to this important task and to working with local communities directly. In recent weeks, we have created and appointed a dedicated, research-specific post that will work alongside the Official Historian and our local teams in countries, to continue this search and to increase our understanding of these issues. Teams will work in conjunction with a new Operational Manager role that has also been created, to ensure maximum cooperation, liaison and coordinated efforts.

2. **A Commitment to Transparency Online** – in our increasingly digital world, it is the CWGC's online presence that will provide most interactions between the organisation and the global public. The CWGC should be upfront about this difficult history across the website and should highlight and share its progress in putting right the wrongs of the past

### **Commission response:**

This is one of several of the recommendations that point to the need to bring this history properly to life and to ensure we communicate it, and how we feel about it, to those interested in the work of the CWGC everywhere. Over the next 12 months we will commit the report's findings and our responses, to the wider narrative of the Commission's

history, ensuring they become an important, acknowledged and understood part of our 104-year-old story.

The website will be the primary carrier of this new information, so new pages dedicated to non-commemoration, communicating these findings and our work to address them, will be developed and signposted. These web pages will also be used to publicly document the organisation's progress.

Where historical omissions and errors have already been corrected, we will also make sure these changes are detailed on the website.

We will continue to use our digital platforms and social media presence, to tell the stories of the past and ensure that our ongoing work to redress areas of non-commemoration is appropriately and transparently documented.

Our progress and continued work in this area, will further be documented each year, in the Commission's Annual Review.

We will share the details of our emerging plans and next steps on an ongoing basis and will commission a full review of progress against the wider findings of the report after three years, in 2024.

- 3. Flexibility in Evidence Criteria for Specific Non-Commemoration Cases** – the minimum evidence requirements set by the CWGC to support cases of non-commemoration may exclude many from parts of the world where paperwork does not survive or was never produced. The CWGC should develop and publish new criteria that allows for flexibility where it is required.

**Commission response:**

All new proposed commemorations must meet specific criteria before being granted War Graves status. The Commission has, for some time, been working on new policies concerning the evidence required to prove this status, allowing increased flexibility where it is known that documentation will be wanting. These policy changes will be finalised to assimilate the recommendations of this report and implemented within six months, while ensuring the unique significance of War Grave status is not diminished.

- 4. Establish a Consultative Committee** – this process has demonstrated how beneficial external contributors are to the way in which the CWGC reflects on its own history and interacts with those affected by its work. The organisation should commit to establishing an appropriately diverse independent consultative committee with a global reach to advise the CWGC on points of history, policy and outreach.

**Commission response:**

The Commissioners recognise the important benefit and significant value, the external voices, expert opinions and diverse global perspectives have brought to this report. Over the coming six months, to support the crucial next phases of this work, the Commission will identify and assemble a global community of external experts; a diverse advisory group with whom we will consult and test our thinking and understanding of issues, options and solutions, as well as the ways in which we should best reach out to the communities, and local bodies with whom we will wish to work.

5. **Community Engagement and Education** – engagement and education programmes that highlight the sacrifices made by communities currently underrepresented through commemoration could be just as powerful as permanent monuments. The CWGC should, directly or through its Foundation, reach out to these groups. It should also ensure that its own staff engage with and understand this history.

**Commission response:**

The Commission will develop a broader and more far reaching range of relationships, working in partnership on projects that will promote increased awareness of our work and the contribution and sacrifices of those who served and died in two World Wars.

We will do this through the development of an Education and Engagement Strategy and the creation of locally based, in-country community engagement teams, that within 24 months will be actively: increasing awareness of our global memorial sites and the stories and histories of the people commemorated in them; identifying, engaging and working with international communities in the exploration of their own First and Second World War history at local levels; and enabling communities wherever they may be, to discover, create and tell their own stories of the conflicts and the people in them. Collectively, we will all be contributing to a shared understanding, of a shared history.

6. **Digital Rather Than Physical Commemoration** – to reach new generations and connect them with this difficult history, and to encourage grassroots research that might support the search for those not commemorated, the CWGC should develop digital platforms and encourage broad, global participation.

**Commission response:**

As above in Response 5, the Commission commits to co-creating with affected communities, digital and physical commemorative resources, spaces, and structures that are a fitting tribute to those who lost their lives. We are committed to equality of commemoration across our global estate wherever achievable, but equally we recognise that commemorative solutions may need to be more flexible beyond a rigid construction or solution.

Over the next 12 months, the Commission will review all existing projects (e.g. Kariokor in Nairobi<sup>1</sup>) to ensure they meet these criteria – working with local partners in-country to deliver the most appropriate solution. In addition, over the next 12 months we will develop a roadmap to address the cases identified in the Special Committee’s report, with the aim of delivering those projects by the end of 2026. This will also lay the framework for any additional, much longer term, future developments uncovered by the continuation of our research.

7. **Context Panels for Existing Memorials** – recent history has demonstrated how important it is that historical memorials with their historical flaws are fully and honestly explained. The CWGC should follow this trend and explain why some memorials do not carry names.

**Commission response:**

In additional to Response 2 above, over the next 12-18 months the Commission will review all the memorials to the missing across its 150 plus country, global estate to identify those which should be corrected. Those that cannot be corrected for want of information will nonetheless have their respective and collective stories told in contextual panels and the work will be phased and completed by the end of 2024<sup>2</sup>

8. **Inscription of Recovered Names on Existing Memorials** – where names have been recovered for casualties who were ‘sent missing’ and assigned to nameless memorials, the CWGC should inscribe the names directly or find ways to display the names.

**Commission response:**

The Commission’s archives, database records and physical structures are living, evolving monuments to those who died during the two World Wars. Where errors or omissions have been identified or raised, the Commission has always sought to rectify matters and is continuously working in this area.

For the past two decades, a detailed programme of evaluation and corrective work has been in operation, targeting memorialisation across our global estate. New memorials that stand as a fitting tribute to the dead, and more importantly bear their names, have been constructed and dedicated in Hong Kong, Abuja and across the Middle East, and we will now seek to give even greater prominence to these stories, while also completing the programme of works and in addition, implementing the recommendations of the report.

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<sup>1</sup> Nairobi (Kariokor) Cemetery contains 59 Commonwealth burials of the Second World War. Working in partnership with the Museums of Kenya and local communities we will ensure any renovation or enhancement to the site adds value to the community and promotes greater understanding of the history of the site in connection to both world wars. The Kenyan authorities have ‘gazetted’ the whole site as a heritage asset – recognising its standing as a part of Kenya’s history as well as that of the Second World War.

<sup>2</sup> Assumes world-wide Covid-19 travel restrictions lifted/relaxed by the end of 2021

In order to ensure we do this to the best of our ability; we will be dedicating additional resource to these projects. A new Operational Manager position has been created and will be appointed before June 2021, to deliver the completion of the existing programme which began in the 1990's and draw up plans for places where it will be challenging in the short-medium term to physically correct existing structures (e.g. Iraq).

In Sierra Leone, the names of those who should have been commemorated will, after consultation with the local community, be added to a new memorial within the next 24 months.

In addition, all sites previously not selected as permanent cemeteries (Issue 3 sites in Appendix 1 of the Special Committee Report), where we have evidence of historical burial locations, will be assessed to establish whether the grave or cemetery can be restored. A wholesale review of each location will be undertaken over the next 18-36 months<sup>3</sup>.

9. **Adoption of Third-Party Memorials** – several memorials containing names not held by the CWGC are now known to exist. The CWGC should adopt these as places of commemoration and add the names to the Commission's Casualty Data Base (CDB).

**Commission response:**

By Autumn 2022, the Commission will seek and establish clarity of the ownership of the third-party memorials identified by this research and will work to adopt and permanently preserve them. The search for further memorials will be the responsibility of the Operational Manager who will work with the Researcher (both critical roles created as per Response 1). Those memorials that carry the names of the dead which are not currently in our records, will have those names incorporated into our records by the end of 2021.

10. **New Memorials or Commemorative Structures** – where there is a clear omission in current commemorations for a particular group that cannot be served by an existing memorial, it might be appropriate to build some form of new commemorative structure or space, not necessarily a memorial. This should only be pursued in collaboration and must be of value and use to the communities it is built to serve and represent.

**Commission response:**

As set out in Response 8 above, where there are new memorials required, such as Sierra Leone, the Commission will design and build these in conjunction and collaboration with local communities. It is too soon to be specific on how many, where or when these may be required but where absences in commemoration can be corrected, they will be, in a timely manner.

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<sup>3</sup> Assumes world-wide Covid-19 travel restrictions lifted/relaxed by the end of 2021



## COMMISSION CONCLUSION – A PROMISE RENEWED

More than 100 years ago, a remarkable organisation was created to commemorate our Commonwealth war dead. The establishment of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, forever changed the way peoples of the world, view and treat the dead of our armed forces and those who so bravely fought and worked alongside them as allies and comrades in the theatre of war.

It is the world-wide work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission that has for over a century, maintained a global remembrance landscape, that has helped shape the deeply felt values and culture of commemoration and remembrance we know today.

At its inception, the Commission set out with a clear vision and purpose that *“all, whatever their military rank or position in civil life, should have equal treatment in their graves”*. It is clear from this report that in parts of Africa, the Middle East and India after the First World War, this sadly did not happen for many individuals and for this we are deeply sorry. This needs to be corrected and will be.

Although the historic failings identified in this report must be acknowledged and acted on, they do not, nor must they, diminish the wider work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Nor do they diminish the value of those original guiding ideals, which are as worthy and meaningful today, as they were at our Founding, in 1917.

The battlefields may be long gone, but our cemeteries, memorials, records and outreach programmes remain an important and abiding memorial to all those who fell. They are the last physical and human reminders we have of those world-changing conflicts.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission and all those across the world that work within it, are deeply committed to honouring and recognising the ultimate sacrifice of all our war dead and ensuring their light and the scale of their sacrifice never fades. The findings of the Special Committee are therefore welcomed by us all and will drive another crucial evolution of our role, and our service to the nations of the world, in the shared and collective commemoration and remembrance of millions.

**The Commonwealth War Graves Commission of today retains an enduring conviction that the promises we made to those we were set up to serve at our inception, remain binding, and it is without hesitation that we therefore reaffirm our commitment to our founding principles of commemoration in perpetuity and with equal treatment for all Commonwealth service personnel who died during the two World Wars.**

Above all, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission will continue in its mission to live up to a promise made more than a century ago and inscribed in stone at CWGC sites around the globe...

**“THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE”**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission would very much like to put on record our deep and sincere gratitude to the members of the Special Committee and its chair, for their dedication, expertise and focused endeavours in bringing forward this report and its findings.

**Approved for public release by the Commonwealth War Graves Commissioners.**

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