On April 6, 1917, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) landed in France. Shortly thereafter, soldiers of the U.S. forces became part of those listed as dead and wounded. What was to become of the dead was the responsibility of the Graves Registration Service (GRS), which preserved and identified the bodies and assured respectable burials. The World War I Graves Registration units became part of the AEF beginning in August 1917. It was not until October 1917, seven months after the troops landed, that the first of these units arrived in France. This delay left the task of identification and burial to the Quartermaster Corps, which perhaps understandably had not counted on this added responsibility. This burden, in addition to their role of supplying the troops, led Quartermaster General Henry G. Sharpe to recommend that “the bodies of our soldiers who die in Europe be interred there and no attempt made to bring them back until after the close of hostilities.” It was not until after the war that families had the choice between bringing the body home or leaving it in Europe.

The Quartermaster Corps deployed units of the Graves Registration Service into the trenches or along the line of battle to follow the advancing troops. Battle conditions could make a proper burial or identification of the body impossible. Men killed during an advance might not be buried for a week, sometimes longer, depending on when the battle ended. Despite these difficulties, most men killed in the trenches were buried within twenty-four hours. Bodies were often buried several times—a quick burial a day, week, or even longer after death; a more formal burial in a local cemetery; and finally burial in an American military cemetery in Europe or a cemetery back in the United States. Throughout the process the GRS cared for the bodies and kept identification records.

When the GRS first found a body, it carefully marked the grave and its location. This could be done several ways. The name and unit might be inscribed on a wooden marker. Along with identifying information found on the body, the name and unit could be sealed in a bottle left with the body. A man’s dog tag could also be nailed on the grave marker. This information was all recorded for future use.

The enormity of the task posed by locating, identifying, registering, and burying the dead can be shown by the size of the Graves Registration Service. In April 1917 the service consisted of two hundred men of all ranks; at the end of the war in November 1918, the number had increased to just under one thousand. By March 1918, when the Graves Registration units began work in earnest, they were already terribly far behind.

By the end of the war, more than 2,300 military cemeteries were located in England, Italy, Germany, across the western front, and even near Murmansk, Russia. Of the seventy thousand soldiers buried in France, fifteen thousand were in isolated graves. The French government wished these to be concentrated as much as possible. Accordingly, after a recheck of all the graves in France, the Graves Registration Service established fifteen concentration cemeteries in the most forward areas where AEF combat troops had fought. These burials did not take into account deaths that occurred in the rear areas and base sections.

By the summer of 1919, the task of recovery and concentration of remains was ended, and
the Graves Registration units were consolidated with the Cemeterial Branch of the Quartermaster Corps. In 1920 it became the Cemeterial Division of the Office of the Quartermaster General.

This division then began to prepare for the burial of American servicemen buried in Great Britain, Belgium, and Italy. The remains were to be interred in Europe only on the official request of the next of kin. Bodies buried in Germany, Luxembourg, and North Russia, however, were not to be left in those countries regardless of request but buried in France or returned to the next of kin.

The GRS issued a questionnaire to each next of kin to let them decide the final disposition of the remains. They were asked whether they would like the body to be brought back to the United States for final burial in a family plot or nonmilitary cemetery; buried in a National Cemetery, such as Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia; or buried in an American military cemetery in Europe. The questionnaire also asked for the name and address, including town and state, of the soldier’s widow, children (oldest first), father, mother, brothers (oldest first), and sisters.

From 1920 to 1922, the program of returning the deceased to the United States continued until at last more than forty-six thousand remains had been returned. With the completion of this program, the number of burial places in Europe had decreased to just below seven hundred. Even this number was too expensive to maintain, and plans were made to establish a few permanent cemeteries. At last the decision was made to establish eight cemeteries, six in France and one each in Belgium and Great Britain. Eventually, more than thirty thousand American servicemen, or about 40 percent of those who died in the war, would be buried in these eight cemeteries. The United States purchased the land and acquired burial rights in perpetuity and began construction.

Many families who originally asked that the body be brought back to the United States
PROLOGUE

changed their minds when they received pictures of the graves of their sons or husbands and realized that they could visit the grave. In April 1919 Mrs. Charles Kreps from West Philadelphia wrote to the Chief, Graves Registration Service:

Some time ago I received a letter signed by Charles C. Pierce in regards to location of graves and in the letter was a paragraph reading that inquiries regarding photographs and etc. Does that mean that it would be possible for me to get a photo of my son's grave. If so I would be more than pleased as you can know it is very hard to have and see nothing he being buried so far away. I would be very thankful for same if it would be possible to get it thanking you most graciously.

After the Krepses received a photograph of their son's grave, they chose not to have his body brought back to the United States, and it was buried in the American cemetery at Meuse-Argonne in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon in France.

Whether a man was buried in Europe or returned to the United States, the Graves Registration Service prepared a "Report of Disinterment and Reburial." The form gave the man's name, serial number, rank, and organization. It also showed where he was originally interred and where he was reburied. The bodies were reburied as much as two to three years after the war, and report after report notes that the features were unrecognizable. No photographs of the bodies are in the reports. The GRS identified the body through dental records, identification tags or grave markers, or other means of identification on the body. Kreps's tags were with his body but were unreadable; however, the collar ornament of Co. I, 314th Infantry, and corporal chevrons were found on what remained of his uniform.

The GRS records are part of Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General. They are held at the Suitland Reference Branch (NNRR), National Archives, Washington, DC 20409. The records are arranged alphabetically by surname. There are no published indexes to the records, and none of the records have been microfilmed. To request the records, a researcher must have the name of the soldier. If the name is fairly common, the unit and other identifying information such as the date of death, names of immediate family, and place of residence in the United States are also necessary.

These records can lead to two other important series of records—World War I service records and records about the Gold Star Mothers.

World War I Service Records

The Graves Registration forms give the serial number, rank, and unit of the soldier. All of this information is needed when requesting World War I military service records from the Military Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. The records are ordered using a Standard Form 180, which is available at no charge from the National Personnel Records Center, 9700 Page Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63132-5100.

Gold Star Mothers

In 1929 Congress enacted legislation that authorized the secretary of war to arrange for pilgrimages to the European cemeteries by mothers and widows of members of the military and naval forces of the United States who died in the service at any time between April 5, 1917, and July 1, 1921, and whose remains are now interred in such cemeteries. Congress later extended eligibility for pilgrimages to mothers and widows of men who had died and were buried at sea or who died at sea or overseas and whose places of burial were unknown. The Office of the Quartermaster General determined that 17,389 women were eligible. Before the project ended on October 31, 1933, 6,693 women had visited the European cemeteries.

These records, also part of Record Group 92, are arranged in alphabetical order according to the mother's or widow's surname. There is a published index to the Gold Star Mothers titled...
Pilgrimage for the Mothers and Widows of Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines of the American Forces now interred in the Cemeteries of Europe as provided by the Act of Congress of March 2, 1929 (House Document 140, 71st Cong., 2d sess., GPO, 1930). Copies of the files can be ordered by writing to the Suitland Reference Branch (NNRR), National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20409, and providing the name of the widow or mother, the name of the soldier, and the city and state in which they lived.

American Battle Monuments Commission

A source of information outside of the National Archives is the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC). Congress created the American Battle Monuments Commission in March 1923. The commission is responsible for commemorating the services of American Armed Forces where they served since April 6, 1917, through the erection of suitable memorial shrines. The following information and services are provided without cost to friends and relatives of those interred in or memorialized at ABMC cemeteries and memorials: name, location, and general information about the cemetery or memorial in which they are interested; the plot, row, and grave number if appropriate; black-and-white photographs of headstones and section of the Tablets of the Missing on which the serviceman’s name is engraved; large color lithographs of the cemeteries and memo-

rials on which photographs of the appropriate headstones or Tablets of the Missing are mounted; and arrangements for floral decoration of grave and memorial sites and provisions to the donor of a photograph of the decoration in place. For additional information about the American Battle Monuments Commission, write to them at Casimir Pulaski Building, 20 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington DC 20314-0300.

As often happens, those who died in war leave more records than those who survived. In caring for the remains of the men who died in World War I, the Quartermaster’s Office left detailed information about individuals and their families that might not be available otherwise.

NOTES

2 Ibid., pp. 690–693.
3 Ibid., pp. 692–693.
4 WCD-8436-75 and WCD-8436-107, War College Division, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, Record Group 165, National Archives, Washington, DC.

GENEALOGY EVENTS

For less and other information, contact the appropriate office:

Washington, D.C.


Atlanta

August 8, 1991, 6:30 P.M.–9:30 P.M. Workshop for Beginners, National Archives–Southeast Region, 404-763-7477.

September 21, 1991, 9 A.M.–5 P.M. Second Annual Genealogical Book Fair, sponsored by the Friends of the National Archives–Southeast Region, at the Atlanta Airport Convention Center, 404-763-7477.

October 3, and December 5, 1991, Workshop for Beginners, National Archives–Southeast Region, 404-763-7477.

Seattle