

# Death and Burial Practices in WWI & WWII

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## OVERVIEW

This presentation is about the process of collecting, identifying, and burying the dead and the associated records. Many records of kinship were created as a result of the process. We will also discuss how the United States honors and memorializes those Service Members that die, regardless of cause, but especially those killed in combat.

Describing the records relating to Death and Burial Practices in WWI & WWII is a complex process. There are similarities between the two wars in that the United States Army was the lead agency in collecting, identifying and burying the dead. In World War I (1917–1918) there were 53,402 battle deaths, while in World War II (1941–1945) battle deaths rose to 291,557. The DVA is the source of these numbers. The records of death and interment are largely now in the custody of the National Archives (NARA). The American Battlements Monument Commission (ABMC) also plays an important role due to their responsibility to care for the graves of those buried in foreign cemeteries. Fortunately, for those of us researching this topic much is published, and much is online.

## WORLD WAR I

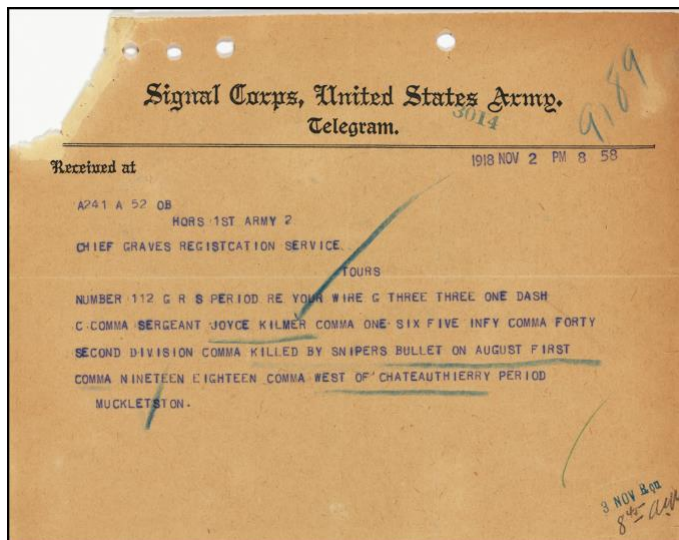


Figure 1: Death Notice, Joyce Kilmer Burial Case File, NAID 6233223, RG 92, NA

The Graves Registration Service (GRS), part of US Army, Quartermaster Corps, was organized in August of 1917. Ultimately over 7,000 soldiers were employed and supervised over 73,000 temporary burials. The GRS was also responsible for identification of remains. Though graves were marked and recorded, subsequent combat operations could destroy markings. Remarkably 97 percent of the remains were identified. After hostilities ceased the GRS moved remains to 700 temporary cemeteries from the 23,000 burial sites. Ultimately the War Department gave the families the choice to leave the remains in Europe or repatriate them to a United States

National Cemetery or a private cemetery. About 70% of the remains were returned to America. For those that would be interred in Europe, eight permanent cemeteries were established. In 1923 the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) was established and took over the

operation of the overseas cemeteries from the Quartermaster Corps. In addition to their primary mission of honoring our war dead, they provide extensive educational resources relating to the wars that these soldiers fought and died in.

### ***THE RECORDS***

You will note there are many different kinds of records involved including original textual records, databases, electronic records, audiovisual, and microfilms. When encountering microfilms created by the National Archives (NARA) the best practice is to review the descriptive pamphlet found in NARA's Microfilm Catalog. You may find additional information beyond what is in the main NARA Catalog.

The first place we look for a overseas burial of a soldier who died is on the website of the American Battle Monuments Commission, <https://www.abmc.gov/>. If the remains were repatriated, then the NCA Grave Locator, <https://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/> is the next search. If the soldier died in WW I, check *American WWI Burial Cards*, <https://wjh.us/AEF/> as this data base includes both repatriated remains and those buried in ABMC cemeteries.

More detail can be found in the NARA series "Correspondence, Reports, Telegrams, Applications, and Other Papers Relating to Burials of Service Personnel, 1/1/1915–12/31/1939" (NAID 595318) part of the Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General. This series is also known as the "Burial Case Files" and were later known as the "Individual Deceased Personnel File" or IDPF. A few records have been digitized. The original records are located at the National Archives at St. Louis and should be requested from them.



Figure 2: Photographic Albums Relating to Pilgrimages of Gold Star Mothers..., RG 92, NAID 585286, NA, photo courtesy ABMC

## GOLD STAR MOTHERS PILGRIMAGES, 1930–1933

From 1930 to 1933 over 6,600 Gold Star mothers and widows were provided escorted trips or pilgrimages to visit the grave of their son or husband. Mothers and widows of African American soldiers also participated. About 1,600 women were eligible; fewer than 200 participated. The low participation was a result of several factors to include the political sparring around the extent to which segregated conditions were imposed on every aspect of the pilgrimage. Both the bibliography and the relevant websites section of this handout identify resources that provide more detail on the conduct pilgrimages and the associated records. The two-part series in *Prologue* by Constance Potter provides a broad overview. The *Ancestry* collection “U.S. World War I Mother’s Pilgrimage, 1929” (cite listed below) is especially helpful in locating published and original textual records. A link is also provided below to the PBS special program on the pilgrimages. If you want to understand the background and details of these pilgrimages, watch the program. The program is also very moving.

The *FamilySearch Wiki* page “United States World War I Cemetery Records,” [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_World\\_War\\_I\\_Cemetery\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_World_War_I_Cemetery_Records), provides additional information on cemeteries, NARA records, and Gold Star Mothers.

## WORLD WAR II

Burial procedures in the Second World War were similar to those in the First World War. Again, the Army’s Graves Registration Service was in charge. The challenge was much greater as the War was truly worldwide, the scale of combat was greater, and the weapons were more destructive. As a result, there were a great many more missing and unidentified soldiers. The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency reports that of 16 million Americans that served overseas, 400,000 died and approximately 79,000 were unaccounted for at the end of the War. Included in this number are remains buried as unknown, missing in action, and lost at sea. The effort of the government to locate and identify the unaccounted for has reduced the number to 73,000 today. Today the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (<https://www.dpaa.mil/>) has responsibility for identification of recovered remains. Many genealogists assist in the repatriation effort. The operation of the Grave Registration Service is extensively described in Steere’s *The Graves Registration Service in World War II* (#39 in the bibliography) and Steere and Boardman’s *Final Disposition of World War II Dead, 1945–51* (#40).

### THE WW II RECORDS

The single best source to understand and locate records relating to casualties and burials pertaining to World War II is NARA’s Reference Information Paper (RIP) 82, *A Finding Aid to Records Relating to Personal Participation in World War II: American Military Casualties and Burials* (#10). Casualties in this context refers to both wounded and dead. The RIP begins with a discussion of the casualty reporting system of the services. Included in this report is description of Missing Air Crew Reports (MACR). These reports (NAID 305256) are part of Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General. The MACR records are online in the NARA Catalog and have been filmed as NARA Microfilm Publication M1380, *Missing Air*

*Crew Reports of the U.S. Army Air Forces, 1942–1947*. The film has been digitized and can be found on *Fold3*. The series consists of 27,000 file units.

The RIP in “Part 1: Textual Records Relating to Casualties and Burials” explains the holdings of the National Archives by Record Group as listed below:

- RG 24 Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel
- RG 52 Records of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
- RG 92 Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General
- RG 112 Records of the Office of the Surgeon General (Army)
- RG 117 Records of the American Battle Monuments Commission
- RG 127 Records of the U.S. Marine Corps
- RG 208 Records of the Office of War Information
- RG 242 National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized
- RG 247 Records of the Office of the Chief of Chaplains
- RG 337 Records of Headquarters Army Ground Forces
- RG 338 Records of U.S. Army Commands
- RG 389 Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General
- RG 407 Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-
- Reference Material on World War II Casualties and Burials

The publication continues with Part 2, a description of Audiovisual Records Relating to Casualties and Burials. The RIP concludes with an Appendix detailing casualties for the Army, Marine Corps and Navy. We should use the online version of this RIP, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/ref-info-papers/82/> to conduct our research as it is more current.

In addition to the RIP the *FamilySearch Wiki* page “United States World War II Casualty Records,” at [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_World\\_War\\_II\\_Casualty\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_World_War_II_Casualty_Records) provides useful information.

#### THE AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION (<https://www.abmc.gov> )



The ABMC is responsible for the maintenance of 26 overseas military cemeteries that commemorate the service Americans killed in war. There are 124,905 American war dead interred in the cemeteries operated by the ABMC (30,973, WW I; 92,958, WW II; and 750 Mexican American War). Another 94,000 U.S. servicemen and women are memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing. All burials are final though requests for repatriation are occasionally still made. Eight cemeteries were established after the First World War and 14 more in the Second World War. A few isolated burials remain based on requests of the next of kin. See Dickon’s *The Foreign Burial of American War Dead: A History* (#11). The webpage *ABMC Burials and Memorials*, <https://www.abmc.gov/database-search> allows users to search by a



variety of discriminators such as war, cemetery, or date of death. Records relating to repatriated remains are not recorded in this database.

#### **NATIONWIDE GRAVESITE LOCATOR (<https://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/>)**

The locator is operated by the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), part of the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). Burial locations for veterans and family members can be found in this database. The data is assembled from a variety of sources. The cemeteries include those operated or maintained by the DVA. The NCA maintains 153 national cemeteries, and 34 soldier's lots. Also found in the database are burial records for the 14 National Park Service maintained cemeteries, some post cemeteries, state veterans' cemeteries, and private cemeteries. If repatriated remains were interred in these cemeteries a record should be found. Generally, an approved request for a government grave marker will trigger an entry in the database. This database is online at *Ancestry* as "U.S., Veterans' Gravesites, ca.1775–2019," at <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8750/>.

The *Ancestry* version includes some Arlington Cemetery burials which the NCA Locator does not include. For Arlington Cemetery burials use the ANC Explorer, <https://ancexplorer.army.mil/publicwmv/#/arlington-national/search/>.

#### **HEADSTONE RECORDS FOR MILITARY VETERANS BURIED IN NONFEDERAL CEMETERIES**

Records relating to headstones are found within Record Group 15, 92, and 117. The best single source to discover these records is Archivist Claire Kluskens's paper "Research Guide for Headstone Records for U.S. Military Veterans Buried in Nonfederal Cemeteries, 1879–1985 (#23). This guide includes information on headstone applications, the evolution of headstone designs, and the identification of online resources. See the bibliography for additional information.

#### **RELATED RECORDS**

Useful and important to our topic are records related to service in the two World Wars. These include records such as the deceased veterans claims files (C and XC), awards, official military personnel files (OMPFs) and the records of the units to which the service members were assigned. Examples of unit records include morning reports and combat action reports. Soldiers that died would be reported in morning reports and those that died in combat might also be mentioned in battle action reports. Some of these records compensate for the OMPFs lost in the disastrous fire in 1973 that destroyed 80% of the Army OMPFs stored in the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) at St. Louis. To this day, NARA still works to process burned files ("B-Files") and reconstitute records of service.

It is beyond the scope of this presentation to discuss these records. Some of the websites and references cited below provide more information.

## RELEVANT WEBSITES

### RECORDS DESCRIBED IN THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES CATALOG (NAC) & OTHER NARA RESOURCES

- National Archives Catalog, “Activities of Grave Registration Service, France, 1919–1920,” RG 111, NAID 24713, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/24713>. The video items are online at YouTube, under the same title at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVgua3PIEQQ>. The film is very graphic.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Applications for Headstones for Sailors, Marines, and Soldiers Buried Outside the Continental United States, 1909–1923,” RG 92, NAID 607867, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/607867>. Applications relate to burials in Alaska, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Guam, Hawaii, India, Ireland, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Panama Canal Zone, Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Spain (Gibraltar). Though small in number, these files are digitized.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Applications for Headstones, 1/1/1925–6/30/1970,” RG 92, NAID 596118, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/596118>. These records have been filmed as M1916 and M2113. *Ancestry* has scanned the films and the original records, and they are part of the collection “U.S. Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925–1970,” <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2375/>. The films are also on *FamilySearch*.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Card Register of Burials of Deceased American Soldiers, 1917–1922,” RG 92, NAID 6943087, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6943087>. A much more user-friendly version of this series is the webpage *American WWI Burial Cards* at <https://wjh.us/AEF/>. See *AEF Resources* below.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Correspondence, Reports, Telegrams, Applications, and Other Papers Relating to Burials of Service Personnel, 1/1/1915–12/31/1939, RG 92, NAID 595318, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/595318>. This file is also known as “Burial Case Files.” There are approximately 218,905 files. Of these files 30,922 files relate to WW I soldiers. Records relating to surnames beginning with the letter “A” have been digitized.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Headstone Inscription and Interment Records for U.S. Military Cemeteries on Foreign Soil, 1942–1949,” RG 117, NAID 7408555, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7408555>. Online at *Ancestry* as “U.S., Headstone and Interment Records for U.S., Military Cemeteries on Foreign Soil, 1942–1949,” <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9170/>.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Initial Burial Plats for World War I American Soldiers, 1920–1920,” RG 92, NAID 12007376, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/12007376>. This series consists of 1,329 maps that record the names and initial burial locations of those soldiers killed in action. These maps are scanned and organized into 4 file units. See *AEF Resources* below.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Interment Control Forms, 1928–1962,” RG 92, NAID 5833879, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5833879>. Also, online at *Ancestry* as “U.S., National Cemetery Interment Control Forms, 1928–1962.”

- *National Archives Catalog*, “Maps and Plans of Temporary American Expeditionary Force Cemeteries, 1920–1922,” RG 92, NAID 642000, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/642000>.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Missing Air Crew Reports (MACRS), 1942–1947,” RG 92, NAID 305256, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/305256>. Online at *Fold3*.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Photographs of American Military Activities, ca.1918–1981,” RG 111, NAID 530707, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/530707>
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Photographs taken by the “Griffin Group,” of areas occupied by American Troops during World War I combat operations, 1918–1919,” RG 120, NAID 532280, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/532280>.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Veterans Administration Master Index, 1917–9/16/1940?” RG 15, NAID 76193916, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/76193916>. Online at *FamilySearch*, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2968245>. See also “Key to Codes and Prefixes” at <https://www.archives.gov/files/calendar/genealogy-fair/2018/6-csarhandout3.pdf>.
- *National Archives Catalog*, “World War II Honor List of Dead and Missing Army and Army Air Forces Personnel, 6/1946–6/1946,” RG 407, NAID 305276, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/305276>. Also, online on *Fold3* as “WWII Army and Army Air Force Casualty List.” There is a similar publication on *Fold3* for the U.S. Navy titled as “WWII Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard Casualty List.”
- *The Text Message*, “Now Available Online: Burial Cards of World War I Soldiers,” <https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2018/11/08/now-available-online-burial-cards-of-world-war-i-soldiers/>. This blog post illustrates the correlation of burial card information to unit records. For unit records consult the collections on *Fold3*.
- *The Text Message*, “Passports and Travel Documents for Pilgrims: Gold Star Travel,” <https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2017/12/26/passports-and-travel-documents-for-pilgrims-gold-star-travel/>
- *The Unwritten Record*, “Newly Digitized Series: Initial Burial Plats for World War I American Soldiers,” <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2018/11/06/newly-digitized-series-initial-burial-plats-for-world-war-i-american-soldiers/>
- *The National Archives*, “World War I Centennial,” <https://www.archives.gov/topics/wwi>
- *The National Archives*, “World War II Records,” <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2>. See also the brochure *Finding Information on Personal Participation in World War II* at <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/ww2/ww2-participation.pdf>.
- *AEF Resources Map*, <https://arcg.is/Xm1SO>. This GIS application integrates into a GIS application Initial Burial Plats (NAID 12007576), Cemetery Code Lists of the GRS (NAID 6814701), Burial Cards (NAID 6943087), and Griffin Photos (NAID 532280). A variety of layers are available such as areas of operations, cemeteries, front lines, trenches, and initial burials. High resolution images of Griffin images may be found at Meuse-Argonne, [http://meuse-argonne.com/?page\\_id=3074](http://meuse-argonne.com/?page_id=3074).

In addition to the above catalog entries, there is an extensive collection of casualty records within the *Access to Archival Databases* (AAD). See the section Genealogy/Personal History: Military Personnel, <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=GP23>. Pay attention to the link to FAQs as these collections are adapted from electronic records.

### **PILGRIMAGES OF GOLD STAR MOTHERS AND WIDOWS, 1930–1933**

- *American Gold Star Mothers, Inc.*, <https://www.goldstarmoms.com/>
- *National Archives Catalog*, “Records Relating to Pilgrimages of Gold Star Mothers and Widows, 1930–1933,” RG 92, NAID 6161915, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6161915>. Online on *Ancestry* as “U.S. World War I Mother’s Pilgrimage, 1929,” <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4224/>. This collection includes color scans from the cited series and the publication *List of Mothers and Widows of American Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines Entitled to Make a Pilgrimage to War Cemeteries in Europe* (#26).
- *Process: a blog for American history*, <https://www.processhistory.org/plant-and-clarke-federal-segregation-and-gold-star-mothers/>
- *Robert Penn Warren Center for Humanities*, “Mourning and the Making of a Nation: The Gold Star Mother’s Pilgrimages, 1930–1933,” [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw\\_center/pdfs/BUDREAU.PDF](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/pdfs/BUDREAU.PDF)
- *Vimeo.com*, “Gold Star Mothers: Pilgrimage of Remembrance,” <https://vimeo.com/250299547>. Several NARA archivists (Constance Potter, and Mitchell Yockelson) and Lisa M. Budreau, author of *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America* appear in this PBS production.

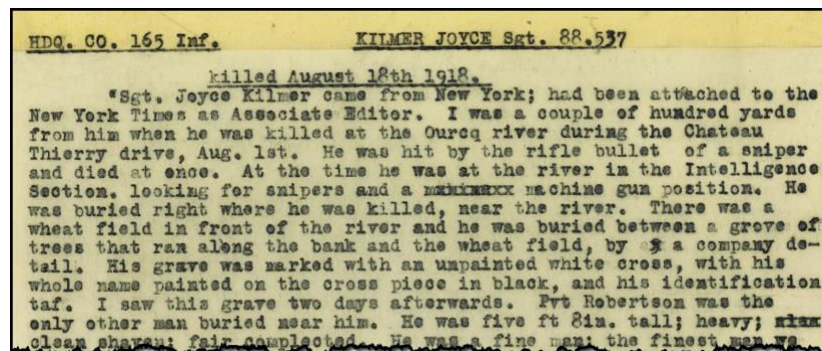


Figure 3: Report of Death, Sgt. Joyce Kilmer, Burial Case File, NAID 6233223, RG 92, NA

### **OTHER RELEVANT WEBSITES**

- *A Week of Genealogy*, <https://aweekofgenealogy.com/category/wwi/>. Website of the author of *Researching Your World War I Ancestor* (#28). Site provides tips on WWI and WWII research and many other topics.
- U.S. Army, *The beginnings of the Quartermaster Graves Registration Service*, [https://www.army.mil/article/128693/the\\_beginnings\\_of\\_the\\_quartermaster\\_graves\\_registration\\_service](https://www.army.mil/article/128693/the_beginnings_of_the_quartermaster_graves_registration_service)



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All urls were current as of 17 January 2021



**Isaac Looking Back - South Dakota** **ORIGINAL** **355 Inf. 69 Div. September 12, 1918**  
**WAR DEPARTMENT**  
**O. Q. M. G. Form No. 623**  
 Approved Aug. 12, 1913  
 Revised May 12, 1925

**APPLICATION FOR HEADSTONE**

**NAME** *Isaac Looking Back* **RANK** *Private* **COMPANY** *L. 355 Inf.* **U. S. Regiment, State Organization, or Vessel** *355 Inf. Sep 4. 12-18.* **DATE OF DEATH** *Sept 15 1918*

**NAME OF CEMETERY** *Isaac Looking Back* **CITY** *Little Eagle* **STATE** *S.D.*

**TO BE SHIPPED TO** *George Looking Back* **PERMANENT ADDRESS** *Little Eagle S.D.*  
*McLaughlin* **DATE** *April 22-1939*  
*South Dakota* **I hereby agree to accept the headstone at above destination, freight prepaid, and agree it will be promptly removed and set up at private expense.**  
*May 9 1939* **Good Looking Back** *Consignee.*

**DO NOT WRITE HERE** **Address** *Little Eagle S.D.* **Date** *April 22-39.*

**Verified** **DATE** *GEORGIA APR 19 1939* **It is understood the stone will be furnished and delivered at the railroad station or steamboat landing above indicated, at Government expense, freight prepaid, and agreed it will be promptly removed and set up at private expense.**

**From** **State** *whether soldier, sailor, marine, Army nurse, etc.* **308401** **Applicant.** *3-5-39*

**Shipped** *5-2-31* **\*Stones must not be requested for any grave at which a private stone, monument, or other permanent marker is already erected or is to be erected.** *3-5-39*

Figure 4: Application for Headstone, Isaac Looking Back, NAID 596126. RG 92, NA