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Sarah I. Ashbridge

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Military Identification: Identity Discs and the Identification of British War Dead, 1914-18

SARAH I. ASHBRIDGE*

University of Huddersfield, UK

Email: Sarah.Ashbridge@hud.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Following the ratification of the 1906 Geneva Convention, in August the British Army approved the design for its first identity disc which was designed to assist with the identification of dead or wounded soldiers. A 1914 decision to produce the discs from compressed fibre rather than from aluminium resulted in an inability to identify thousands of soldiers during and after the First World War and it remained a problem despite the introduction of the double identity disc in 1916, created at the insistence of Sir Fabian Ware, founder of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This article reflects upon the development of the British identity disc system between 1906-1916 and considers why so many soldiers became 'unknown'.

Introduction

The 'Great War' introduced new methods of warfare including tanks, prolonged periods of trench warfare and gas attacks. Industrial warfare had a devastating impact on not only the landscape, but on the bodies of men. Within only a few months of war, issues with the burial of the dead and the absence of a system to record battlefield burials became apparent to the British Army. The single identity disc introduced by the British Army in 1906 was designed to be removed from the body in the event of death, leaving the body unidentifiable at a later date. In some cases, immediate burial was not possible due to the intensity of fighting, or the movement of units in the field, leaving corpses to rot for weeks, months or years before they were attended to for burial. In these cases, the presence of an identifying object upon the body was essential to prevent the creation of an 'unknown soldier'. As the numbers of missing and unknown soldiers began to rise, civilian expectations of a military burial began to change, with a preference for an individual grave for soldiers of all ranks - as opposed to the traditional use of communal trenches for the burial of soldiers below the rank of officer. Sir Fabian Ware, founder of what is now known as the Commonwealth War

*Sarah Ashbridge is a doctoral candidate at the University of Huddersfield
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Graves Commission (CWGC) is a pivotal character in this story, as he was not only the mediator who argued for an equal treatment of the war dead, but the man who facilitated the introduction of a double identity disc with one to be left with the body to aid future identification.

In August 1914, the maximum age of enlistment was just thirty-eight; at forty-five years of age, Fabian Ware was too old to enlist as a soldier..¹ “Old age” was not enough to deter Ware, who was determined not ‘to sit idly by’.² Lord Alfred Milner, under whom Fabian had previously worked in the Orange River Colony in South Africa, assisted him by arranging a ‘profitable meeting’ with Lt. Col. Stewart of the British Red Cross.³ The meeting was successful, and it was decided that Ware would take command of a mobile ambulance unit in France.⁴ He arrived in France on the afternoon of 19 September 1914 ‘with practically the first unit of ambulances’, sent out ‘under permission’ from Lord Kitchener to search for wounded and missing British officers and men following the Battle of Mons.⁵ This ‘naturally’ led to the finding of graves, many of which were inadequately marked and with some completely unidentifiable.⁶ To Ware and his unit ‘it was obvious that if something were not done immediately to preserve the records they would inevitably become forever obliterated’, and so they began to build wooden crosses which they would stencil to ensure the identity of the soldier was not lost.⁷ As the work of the mobile ambulance unit became ‘more in the nature of routine work’, the amount of time dedicated to locating graves increased.⁸ The President of St John’s Ambulance, Carlile, took notice of this work, providing additional cars and time which allowed them to greatly increase the scope of the unit’s

¹This was raised to forty in 1915; Peter Simkins, *Kitchener’s Army: The Raising of the New Armies* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007), p. 127.

²Lt. Col. Ralph Stephenson TD., ‘Maj. Gen. Sir Fabian Ware KCVO. KBE. CB. CMG.’, *The Friends of the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum Newsletter*, Spring 2018, p.17. <https://www.soldiersofglos.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018-spring-newsletter.pdf>. Accessed 1 July 2019.

³*Ibid.*, p17.

⁴*Ibid.*, p17.

⁵Phillip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: The History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2003), p. 3; Commonwealth War Graves Commission Archive (CWGC), ADD 4/1/3 Red Cross Record File 388a: Mr Fabian Ware’s Mobile Unit; CWGC, CWGC/1/1/1/25, Col. Stewart’s Report on his Visit to Major Fabian Ware’s Unit, Graves Registration Commission, ‘Major Ware’s Mobile Unit’, p.1.

⁶CWGC/1/1/1/25, Col. Stewart’s Report, p.1.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.1

⁸CWGC/1/1/1/20, Letter from C.H. Langston Cazalet to Lt. Colonel Stewart, M.D., 8 March 1915.

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work.⁹ Eventually, the work came to the attention of Nevil Macready, Adjutant-General of the British Expeditionary Force. Macready asked Ware to provide details of all the graves so far registered. He was sympathetic to Ware's work as he remembered the scandal over the lack of care for graves in the Boer War, which was regarded as a symbol 'of national humiliation', akin to the Army's sack of San Sebastián during the Peninsular War.¹⁰

On 27 February 1915, Macready wrote to Ian Malcolm, an officer of the British Red Cross, who was also working to repair and record graves on the Western Front, explaining that 'an organisation has been started and will be in working order during the next few days to take up the whole question of the locality, marking and registration of all graves belonging to men of the British Army'.¹¹ In March 1915 Ware's unit was formally recognised as the Graves Registration Commission, and was transferred to the British Army under the direct control of the Adjutant-General's office at General Headquarters in France.¹² The Commission was tasked with locating and registering existing graves, and assigning to graves registration officers the duties of the preliminary marking and recording of graves. Graves registration officers worked in close contact with chaplains and officers responsible for burials to ensure that the soldiers recorded in burial records matched the descriptions held in unit records. This meant that an 'elaborate' system for the exchange of information was required.¹³

Arguably the true value of the Commission remained unclear until the end of 1915, when it 'became increasingly evident that there was a large demand on the part of the public for detailed information regarding the location of graves, and it was thought desirable to use some means of centralising these enquiries, and including an enquiry branch in the work entrusted to the Commission'.¹⁴ There was an overwhelming rush of enquiries from the general public upon the opening of the enquiry branch, causing Ware to move the Commission headquarters to London where the administration was performed by civilians, leaving only the executive headquarters office in France to deal with the administration of graves registration units.¹⁵

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰David Crane, *Empires of the Dead: How One Man's Vision Led to the Creation of WWI's War Graves* (London: William Collins, 2013), p. 9; Longworth, *Unending Vigil*, p. 6.

¹¹CWGC/1/1/1/25, 'Col. Stewart's Report'.

¹²'The Registration and Care of Military Graves During the Present War, *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 62, Issue 446 (1917), p. 299.

¹³Ibid., p. 297.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 299.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 299.

Ware continued to liaise with the French government as his role now included the development of shared cemeteries for fallen British and French soldiers. This led to discussion about the use of two identity discs in early 1916, and not long after the Graves Registration Commission was renamed the Directorate of Graves Registration & Enquiries in February 1916.¹⁶ By this point, the difficulties in burying the dead were becoming innumerable. The absence of identity discs on fallen soldiers meant that soldiers could not be identified when they were initially buried or exhumed later for concentration into a more permanent cemetery. For the British public, the experience of mass loss combined with a lack of knowledge on the destruction resulted in a growing symbolic reliance on the presence of a marked grave. Where possible, a simple wooden cross would be used to mark each grave, with the soldier's details inscribed directly onto the cross, or pressed into thin strips of metal which were fixed to the cross. In the absence of a wooden cross, anything recognizable would be used including upturned rifles (Figure 1), screw pickets, barbed wire stakes, notes in sealed glass bottles, aeroplane parts such as wheel axles (Figure 2) and even wooden ration boxes.¹⁷

¹⁶CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Directorate Of Graves Registration And Enquiries: File 18 - Scheme for Duplicate Identity discs.

¹⁷Alastair H. Fraser & Martin Brown, 'Mud, blood and missing men: excavations at Serre, Somme, France', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2007), p. 158; J. P. P. Ganschow, 'Identification of the fallen: The supply of "dog tags" to soldiers as a commandment of the laws of war', *New Zealand Armed Forces Law Review*, Volume 9. (2009), pp. 22-54; Frederick Kenyon, *War Graves: How the Cemeteries Abroad Will be Designed* (London: HMSO, 1918); Andrew Robertshaw & David Kenyon, *Digging the Trenches: The Archaeology of the Western Front* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2008); Michael Sledge, *Soldier Dead: How we Recover, Identify, Bury and Honour Our Military Fallen* (Columbia University Press, 2007); Ross Wilson, 'The Burial of the Dead: The British Army on the Western Front, 1914-18', *War & Society*, Vol. 31, Issue 1 (2012), p. 36.

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Figure 1: Grave of an unknown British soldier near Ginchy, 1916. Courtesy of National Army Museum (NAM) – NAM.2007.-03-7-158.



Figure 2: "The grave of one of our air man" - postcard from author's personal collection.

In spite of Ware's work to ensure that every burial was correctly recorded, a huge number of soldiers would have no known grave. Between 4 August 1914 and 30 September 1919, 573,507 were "killed in action, died from wounds and died of other causes", with an additional 99,868 still reported as missing.¹⁸ In 1937, Fabian Ware reflected on the work of the Commission during and after the Great War, stating that the Commission had 'never forgotten that their whole policy should be based on, and built up round, the sanctity both of the individual grave and of the name and memory of the man who has no known grave'.¹⁹ Ware created an empire for the fallen, providing an equal burial for every soldier, whether named or unknown, transforming both military burial traditions and the administrative practice of graves registration.

Though Fabian Ware's role in the development of the CWGC has been well researched, his role in the development of the 1916 double identity disc, has been overlooked, and therefore his contribution to the development of both graves registration practice and military equipment has been undervalued.²⁰ Unfortunately, in spite of Ware's innovative methods of engaging with the British Army on behalf of the nation, the compressed fibre material from which the 1914 and 1916 model British identity discs were produced would render them unfit for purpose, as their rapid decomposition allowed for the creation of unknown soldiers, even in cases where a burial had taken place. This paper will investigate how the British identity disc developed between 1907 and 1916 and how the discs failed in their mission to ensure every British soldier was identifiable in death.

The First British Identity Disc

Identity discs had been utilised in multiple wars during the long nineteenth century, including the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), the American Civil War (1861-65), the Taiping Civil War (1850-64) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). Internationally, anxieties over the strength of military forces and large numbers of casualties incurred during war fuelled the development of shared humanitarian ideals.²¹ The impact of artillery and small arms with increased effective range had led to a widening interval between the lines, often leaving an 'impassable' zone littered with wire entanglements,

¹⁸The Army Council. General Annual Report of the British Army 1912–1919. Parliamentary Paper 1921, XX, Cmd.1193., Part IV pp. 62–72; note, the report states 254,176 missing less 154,308 released prisoners giving a total of 99,868 missing.

¹⁹Fabian W. G. Ware, *The Immortal Heritage: An account of the work and policy of the Imperial War Graves Commission during twenty years, 1917-37* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937).

²⁰Crane, *Empires of the Dead*; Longworth, *Unending Vigil*.

²¹Rebecca Gill, 'The Origins of the British Red Cross Society and the politics and practices of relief in war, 1870-1906', *Asclepio*, 66 (1), p2. DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/asclepio.2014.03>

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mines, trenches and more, creating new difficulties in responding to the deceased.²² On 6 July 1906 the terms of the Geneva Convention of 1906 were agreed, with new requirements for the occupant of the field to take measures to protect the bodies of the fallen from 'ill treatment' and to examine the deceased for any identifying marks or military papers of identification before burial.²³

Soon after the convention, pattern 6444/1906 for the 'disc, identity, aluminium' was approved by the British Army on 29th August 1906. This was followed by the approval of pattern 6453/1906 'cord' in September 1906. The aluminium identity disc was officially released to those on active service in place of Army Form B 2067, or 'Description Card for Active Service' following the release of Army Order 9 on 1st January 1907. The order instructed that 'identity discs will be regarded as an article of kit and issued as such to serving soldiers and reservists on mobilisation. They will be stored by officers commanding units – (a) for service soldiers at home and abroad. (b) for reservists who rejoin units direct'.²⁴ The discs measured approximately 35mm in diameter and were produced from a thin sheet of aluminium. Once fitted with a cord the discs were to be worn around the neck under the clothing. Officers commanding units were to forward indents (requisition forms) to the Army Ordnance Department for discs, cord and stamps required for marking the discs. Using 'stamps, steel, for metal, 1/8 inch', the discs were 'kept ready marked showing the soldier's number, rank, name, regiment and religious denomination'.²⁵ Upon a change of rank or regiment, a new disc would be marked, and the old disc disposed of. The cord was delivered 'in bulk, cut regimentally into lengths of 42 inches, and stored with the discs'.

²²C. S. Sperry, 'The Revision of the Geneva Convention, 1906', *Proceedings of the American Political Science Association*, vol. 3, Third Annual Meeting (1906), p. 37.

²³George B. Davis, 'The Geneva Convention of 1906', *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 1, No.2, (April 1907), p. 415; Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field (Signed 6 July 1906, entered into force 9 August 1907) (1907), Art. 3; Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field (Signed 6 July 1906, entered into force 9 August 1907) (1907), Art. 4.

²⁴Note that no list of approved religions or abbreviations of religions was provided. Army Order 9 1907, Army Orders January 1907.

²⁵For information on the stamps, AO9 refers the reader to Army Order 17 of 1907. Army Order 9 1907, Army Orders January 1907.

8
Army Orders.—January, 1907.

A.O. 8. Forage Allowance.—In accordance with paragraph 165 of the Allowance Regulations, it is notified that the following rates of money allowance in lieu of forage will be issued in the United Kingdom and the Channel Islands from 1st January, 1907, until further orders:—

No.	Command, &c.	For each ration.
1	Aldershot Command	s. d. 1 6
2	Eastern Command	1 6
3	Irish Command	1 8
4	London District	1 6
5	Northern Command	1 5
6	Scottish Command	1 5
7	Southern Command	1 6
8	Western Command	1 6
9	Channel Islands	2 1

Army Order 169 of 1906 is cancelled.

A.O. 9. Identity Discs—Regular Forces.—1. An identity disc (aluminium) fitted with a cord (42 inches in length) to be worn round the neck under the clothing has been approved for use on active service, in lieu of the description card (Army Form B 2067) hitherto in use.

2. Identity discs will be regarded as an article of kit and issued as such to serving soldiers and reservists on mobilization. They will be stored by officers commanding units—

- (a) for serving soldiers at home and abroad.
- (b) for reservists who rejoin units direct.

For reservists who rejoin at depôts the discs will be stored with their necessaries.

In the case of reservists belonging to a Cavalry regiment stationed abroad, these discs will be held by the officer commanding the affiliated regiment at home. When both regiments of a group are abroad, the discs of their serving soldiers at home, and of their reservists, will be held by the officer commanding the provisional depôt.

9
Army Orders.—January, 1907.

When soldiers are transferred to the Army Reserve, their identity discs will be passed by the officer commanding their unit to the officer i/c records, who will forward each man's disc to the depôt or unit which he will rejoin on mobilization.

3. Identity discs will be kept ready marked, showing the soldier's number, rank, name, regiment, and religious denomination, as follows:—



4. The stamping will be carried out with "stamp steel, for metal $\frac{1}{8}$ inch," issuable under the Equipment Regulations as amended by Army Order 17 of 1907.

Indents should be at once put forward on the Army Ordnance Department for the stamps required to complete to the revised scales.

5. On change of rank, a new disc will be marked. In the case of recruits, the allowance for marking the free kit will cover the cost of stamping the discs; in other cases a charge of $\frac{1}{2}$ d. each will be allowed. Indents for discs and cords should be forwarded to the clothing depôt, supplying the district. The cord will be issued in bulk, cut regimentally into lengths of 42 inches, and stored with the discs.

V
Brigades.
1907
Designation of Volunteer Infantry Brigades.—The "Harwich Volunteer Infantry Brigade" will, in future, be known as the "Suffolk Volunteer Infantry Brigade." The Appendix (page 27) to Army Order 120 of 1906 will be amended accordingly.

Figure 3: "Identity Discs – Regular Forces", Army Order 9 1907 – Army Orders, 1907 (1908); War Office, January 1, 1908. (London: Harrison and Sons), p.9

On 1 May 1907, Army Order 102 was released, cancelling Army Order 9 of 1907. The order removed the requirement to include a soldier's rank on the discs. The illustration included no longer featured the use of smaller, italicised letters on the abbreviated regiment. The order provided more detailed instructions on where the discs were to be stored:

- (i.) For serving soldiers at home and abroad, by officers commanding units
- (ii.) For reservists who rejoin at depots on mobilization, by officers commanding depots.
- (iii.) For reservists who rejoin units direct on mobilization, by officers i/c records.²⁶

Upon mobilization, identity discs held at record offices were transmitted to the unit in which the reservist had been allocated. Army Order 83 of May 1908 provided

²⁶Army Order 102 April 1907.

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instructions for the stamping and storage of discs issued to soldiers in the Special Reserve. For every special reservist, a disc would be marked with the name of the unit and held by the officer commanding the unit. 'On mobilization being ordered', the disc would 'be completed' by stamping the special reservist's regimental number, name and religious denomination.²⁷ Presumably, these amendments were introduced in order to reduce the need to re-issue discs if a soldier was promoted or transferred units during times of peace. Still, no list of religious abbreviations was provided. Army Order 38 of February 1909 instructed that officers commanding units of the Territorial Force should also ensure that their soldier's discs should be partially marked for completion upon mobilization. 'In peace', the discs of 'every officer, non-commissioned officer and man on the establishment, including the permanent staff' would be stamped with the name of the unit and held by the officer commanding the Territorial Force unit. Once mobilized, the disc would be completed with the regimental number, name and religious denomination.²⁸

These army orders provided no detailed instructions on how soldiers should use identity discs once mobilized, stipulating only that they were to be worn around the neck. Identity discs had been introduced in order to meet the political requirements of the 1906 Geneva Convention, which required each nation to provide identifying papers or marks, yet official communications on identity discs had included no information on when an identity disc should be removed, or who it should be forwarded to. This was remedied in 1909 with the release of Army Field Service Regulations Part II (FSR). Section 16 confirmed that duties relating to 'burying parties and places' were the responsibility of the Adjutant General's Branch of the Staff. The burial of soldiers was an acknowledged duty and responsibility of the British Army. Section 133 (3) stipulated that

Anyone concerned in burying a soldier, or finding a body after an action, will remove the identity disc and paybook...and will note the number of the equipment and rifle, or any other means likely to assist identification.²⁹

Information about men reported as dead, wounded or missing was to be entered on to Army Form B 103. 'Once a confirmation of death had been confirmed, the information should be reported on Army Form B 2090a which should be rendered to the proper authorities, with the will of the deceased if available.'³⁰

²⁷Army Order 83, May 1908.

²⁸Army Order 38, February 1909.

²⁹Field Service Regulations, Part II, Organization and Administration, 1909, (London: HMSO, 1913), p. 167.

³⁰Ibid., p. 168.

The pay book and identity disc of a deceased soldier, and any personal effects which may have sentimental value, will be sent with the least possible delay, by the officer under whose immediate command he was when he became non-effective, to the A.G.'s [Adjutant General] office at the base. The officer in charge of the A.G.'s office at the base is responsible that the pay book, small book, if any, and all available documents and effects are searched for a copy of the will left by the deceased.... The other effects will be forwarded to the officer in charge of records concerned.³¹

In addition to the provision of a physical identifying 'mark', FSR demonstrated a chain of accountability for the forwarding of the personal effects of deceased soldiers in order to confirm the death of a soldier. The identity disc was now embedded into the both the regulatory framework and the administrative structure of the British Army, but in reality, 1906-1914 was a peaceful period and there was limited opportunity to test the administrative procedure and the knowledge of lower ranked soldiers before the outbreak of war.

The 1914 Fibre Identity Disc

On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany. Earl Kitchener was appointed Secretary of the State for War on 5 August 1914, and on the next day, he sought parliamentary approval to increase the size of the army by 500,000 men.³² On the 7 August, Kitchener appealed for 100,000 men to join the army, which was quickly renamed the 'First New Army' by the War Office.³³ The appeals for volunteers, recruited in five waves of 100,000 were met with such a great response that additional recruiting offices were opened to speed up the process, and within three months, the final recruitment drive was complete, and the '5th New Army' was sanctioned.³⁴

The order to mobilize meant that the pre-marked aluminium identity discs were to be brought out of storage for the first time, and stamping completed where appropriate. New recruits would also receive an identity disc. On 21 August 1914, pattern 8111/1914 for a new fibreboard identity disc was approved. The new disc measured approximately 35mm in diameter and was produced from vulcanised asbestos fibre. The disc was to be hung from a cord and worn around the neck, as with previous models. The discs were to be stamped in accordance with Army Order 102 of 1907. Though the appearance of the disc had changed, the practical use of the disc remained the same – they were to be worn beneath the uniform, and if a fallen comrade was

³¹Ibid., p. 169.

³²Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 138.

³³Ibid., p. 138.

³⁴Ibid., p. 139.

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discovered, his identity discs should be removed and returned to the officer commanding the unit, thus beginning the administrative process to confirm the soldier's death. The decision to produce identity discs from compressed fibre rather than aluminium has proved a source of confusion for modern historians. In 2009, David O'Mara initially reported that fibre was selected to replace aluminium when 'it was realised that it would be practically impossible to keep up with the demand (and expense of) aluminium discs', and so fibre was introduced as a cheaper alternative.³⁵ However having checked the costing for materials provided in the *Priced Vocabulary of Clothing and Necessaries (including Materials)* of 1913 and 1915 published by HM Stationary Office, O'Mara has more recently confirmed that this is incorrect, and that vulcanised fibre was in fact more costly than sheet aluminium.³⁶

An explanation for the adoption of a more expensive material for this essential piece of equipment is provided within the minutes from a meeting of the Imperial War Graves Commission held in April 1920. During the meeting, Chairman Ware proposed that the new material was adopted as a result of concerns raised by army doctors.³⁷ Ware went on to explain that 'The metal ones were abandoned by the British Army some time in 1915. At the time I drew attention to the fact that these others would not last, but for military reasons and other reasons, it was considered wiser to use the fibre; it inflicts less of a wound. The doctors were altogether against the use of a metal disc, and these fibre discs were introduced'.³⁸ When questioned by Sir Thomas Mackenzie on whether the wounds were caused when the bullet struck the metal of the disc, Ware responded 'Yes, and the doctors were all against it. I had this fight out at the time. The doctors were very strongly against the use of the metal ones for that reason... They were often struck'.³⁹ Though it might seem incomprehensible that such a thin metal disc should contribute to a soldier's wounds, examples of this do exist. When Lieutenant Mason of the 3rd Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regiment was killed during the Battle of the Aisne on 14th September 1914, it was found that the force of the piece of shrapnel which wounded him had driven a portion of his identity

³⁵David O'Mara, *Identifying the Dead: A Short Study of the Identification Tags of 1914-18*, The Western Front Association, (2009). <http://wfa-archive.chrislord.me/the-great-war/great-war-on-land/weapons-equipment-uniform/1033-identifying-dead-short-study-identification-tags-1914-1918#sthash.GvA0FiEC.dpbs>. Accessed 1 August 2019, O'Mara, personal communication (2018).

³⁶David O'Mara, *Identifying the Dead*, unpublished.

³⁷CWGC/2/2/1/22 Minutes of the Proceedings of the Meeting of the Imperial War Graves Commission held at The Office of Works, St. James's Park on Tuesday, 20 April 1920, p. 40.

³⁸Ibid., p. 40.

³⁹Ibid., p. 40.

disc into his lung'.⁴⁰ Mason's college magazine, the *Malvernian* also reported his death, describing that 'the force... had driven the metallic identity disc into his lungs'.⁴¹ The fibre identity discs were put into production and were distributed to new recruits once existing supplies of the aluminium identity had been depleted. Small quantities of aluminium identity discs continued to be issued to newly enlisted soldiers until supplies ran out midway through 1915.⁴²

Whilst the introduction of the 1914 fibre identity disc may have alleviated the concerns of the army medics over the worsening of wounds, the system was not without flaw. Once the identity disc was removed from the corpse along with any personal possessions, a corpse could be rendered unidentifiable.⁴³ From 1914 onwards, privately purchased forms of identification such as discs, bracelets, buttons and medals can be found amongst the possessions of soldiers of almost every combatant nation for the duration of the war, with bracelets amongst the most commonly encountered examples.⁴⁴ The use of privately purchased or handmade identity tags and bracelets amongst British soldiers suggests that there were significant concerns about the potential of becoming one of the unknown.

⁴⁰The UK National Archive (TNA) RG 35/36, General Register Office: Miscellaneous Foreign Death Returns, 'Lieutenant Rowland Charles Mason', *Roll of Honour Vol. 1*, p. 258.

⁴¹*Malvernian*, (1914), November, cited in 'Malvern College First World War Casualties'. <http://www.stanwardine.com/cgi-bin/malvernww1.pl?id=275>. Accessed 1 August 2019.

⁴²CWGC/2/2/1/22, Minutes ... of the Meeting, 20 April 1920, where Fabian Ware states that the metal discs were totally 'abandoned by the British Army some time in 1915'.

⁴³Soldiers were expected to mark or stamp some items of their kit, and these items were sometimes used to confirm the identification of the fallen soldier. In cases where the identity discs and personal effects had already been removed by another soldier, or voluntary organisation at an earlier date, the body would be left without identification. From an archaeological perspective, it is important to note that cultures of swapping, collecting and looting mean that personal items and buttons cannot always be considered as conclusive confirmation of identity and further investigation may be required.

⁴⁴Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 215; Richard Van Emden, *The Quick and the Dead* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p. 136.

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Figure 4: “Identity disc worn by Lance-Corporal Albert Haughton, 23rd Battalion, The Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment), 1916” – NAM. 2005-09-35-1

Figure 5: Identity discs of Michael Connor. Note the handwritten 1914 pattern disc paired with a 1907 aluminium disc – From the collection of David O'Mara

In addition to privately purchased identification, some soldiers would adapt their existing discs, adding additional information to the reverse of their disc, or on a spare 'emergency' pattern disc. This creative marking was soon noticed and prohibited following the release of Army Order 206 issued on the 20th May 1915:

It has been brought to notice that in many instances the particulars of the identity discs are not stamped as directed in the regulations, but marked with ink or indelible pencil. This marking soon becomes illegible and the discs useless.⁴⁵

The reader is instructed that 'care must be taken to see that all identity discs are stamped with the 1/8-inch stamps' as directed.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Army Order 206 20 May 1915.

⁴⁶Army Order 206 20 May 1915.

In some cases, these items, whether purchased or personally adapted, may be nothing more than a souvenir or a product of boredom. However, it seems that both soldiers, and their loved ones at home, understood that there was a possibility of becoming one of the many unknown, and they did not consider their singular identity disc sufficient. The poet Roland Leighton wrote to his mother to ask her to send a silver identification bracelet to him in France. His mother would later recall her reaction to this request:

I knew what it stood for as I looked at it. It stood first and foremost for the fact that the boy who in himself was all earth and all heaven to me was in the army only one among many thousands- perhaps among many hundreds of thousands. It stood for a fearful confusion in which masses of men might get inextricably mixed up so that none could know who this fellow was; and it stood for a field on which there were many dead lying, and for grim figures walking about among those dead and depending for their identifications on some token worn by the still shapes whose lips would speak no more. All this passed through my mind while I packed up the little disc and chain.⁴⁷

This concern was not held without cause. As the death toll continued to rise, so did the number of enquiries from the home front. Ware's mobile ambulance unit had been primarily tasked with searching for the remains of lost British officers and men on behalf of the British Red Cross and naturally, this led to the discovery of many more graves, with many marked only in a most hurried and inefficient manner, and with some completely unidentifiable.⁴⁸ It was obvious to Ware's team that if efforts were not taken to immediately preserve the grave markings, with their details held by the Commission, that many of these graves would become lost forever. Ware asked his team to provide full details of graves found, and erected, and care was taken to ensure that crosses were renewed, varnished or repainted wherever possible to prevent the future loss of information.⁴⁹ Ware's unit continued to expand their work, ultimately transforming the practise of graves registration.

By 1916 there were six graves registration units in France, five distributed along the front line, and the sixth responsible for the communications areas.⁵⁰ Whilst each unit was still responsible for the burial of their own dead, graves registration officers were appointed to identify the deceased, providing a temporary grave marker and a report

⁴⁷Van Emden, *Quick and the Dead*, p. 37.

⁴⁸CWGC/1/1/1/34/18 Directorate Of Graves Registration And Enquiries: File 18.

⁴⁹CWGC/1/1/1/34/7, Directorate Of Graves Registration And Enquiries: File 7.

⁵⁰Units were also formed in Egypt, Salonika and Mesopotamia. Anon, 'The Registration and Care of Military Graves During the Present War, *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 62, Issue 446 (1917), pp. 299.

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confirming the location of the grave. Professional photographers were also employed to photograph each grave, and a photograph would be provided to anyone who enquired after a photo.⁵¹ Despite the rapid expansion of the Commission, it was still proving impossible to keep up with the identification and burial of such colossal numbers of war dead, particularly in cases where a substantial period of time had passed since the time of death. Here, Ware was able to utilise his position as a civilian working within the British Army to influence the development of a new identity disc which he hoped would meet the needs of his workers and therefore the nation.

On 16th May 1915 Temporary Major Arthur Albert Messer of the Graves Registration Commission wrote to General Macready to discuss 'the many instances' where it was not possible to identify bodies at the time of burial due to the absence of identity discs.⁵² This meant that identity could only be established with the 'greatest difficulty' and so Messer asked for Macready's consideration on the following points:

- 1) Identity discs are frequently removed at the time of death as evidence of death, and, when casualties are heavy, many bodies are not buried for some days; or it may even be weeks, as in the case of the Battle of Loos, when burying in some parts of the field of battle was stopped by the Corps General for military reasons.
- 2) When burying parties are eventually able to carry out their work, it is found that numbers of bodies bear no mark of identification, so that the identity of many is never established.
- 3) The provision of two discs (a system which has been introduced by the French during the present war), one of which is left on the body until the moment of actual burial, would seem to be the only practical means why which in these cases identity at the time of burial could be ensured and the grave marked in the usual way.⁵³

Messer had raised the idea of using a second identity disc at a previous point, which he noted was 'considered inadvisable as there were serious reasons for doubting if British soldiers would adapt themselves to the system'.⁵⁴ However, the French Army

⁵¹Jeremy Gordon-Smith, *Photographing the Fallen: A War Graves Photographer on the Western Front*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military 2017).

⁵²CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Letter from Major A.A. Messer to the Adjutant General, 16 May 1916.

⁵³CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Letter from Major A.A. Messer to the Adjutant General, 16 May 1916.

⁵⁴Ibid.

had since introduced their own system of double discs which had 'been found to work satisfactorily', and so it was now deemed appropriate to reconsider the issue for British soldiers. Messer closed the letter with a condemning sentence: 'unfortunately the number of graves which are unknown owing to this cause is very considerable'.⁵⁵

Ware wrote to the Adjutant-General on the 21 June to discuss this issue further. Ware reported that in a large number of cases it had proven 'impossible at the time of burial to identify men who have been killed owing to the fact that the identity discs have been removed. A largely increasing number of graves therefore are, and will remain, unidentified'.⁵⁶ The removal of the discs as evidence of death was essential, yet this action had created a new dilemma for the Graves Registration Commission. Ware referred to the introduction of two identity discs by the French Ministry of War in May 1915, which ensured that a disc was left on the body for secondary identification. In the French system, the two discs were worn separately upon the body, which Ware proposed would 'not be suitable for the British Army' for the French had 'been able to rapidly supply the second disc to all men already in the field', whilst it would take 'a very considerable time' to meet the needs of the British Army.⁵⁷ The separate disc system also raised questions of how one would be able to confirm whether or not a man found with an identity disc had been wearing another which had been previously removed, which would result in confusion and 'make matters worse than present'.⁵⁸

Ware included a sketch of 'two identity discs which would overcome this difficulty, and which seems in some ways to offer advantages over the French System'.⁵⁹ A new disc would be suspended from the original disc by a piece of cord. The lower of the two discs would be removed to provide evidence of death, leaving the upper disc upon the body to be removed at the time of burial. It should be stated that 'in the majority of cases these discs would be removed at night', often under rifle or machine gun fire, and so the new disc was produced from green fibre to make it easily distinguishable from the original disc during daylight, and 'lozenge shape' so that it could be easily felt in the dark.⁶⁰ Ware also stipulated that once the lower disc had been removed, the piece of severed cord should stay attached to the upper disc, which could be easily

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Letter from Fabian Ware to the Adjutant General, 21 June 1916.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Scheme for the Duplicate Identity Disc.

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felt by any searcher, providing evidence that there were originally two discs upon the body.⁶¹

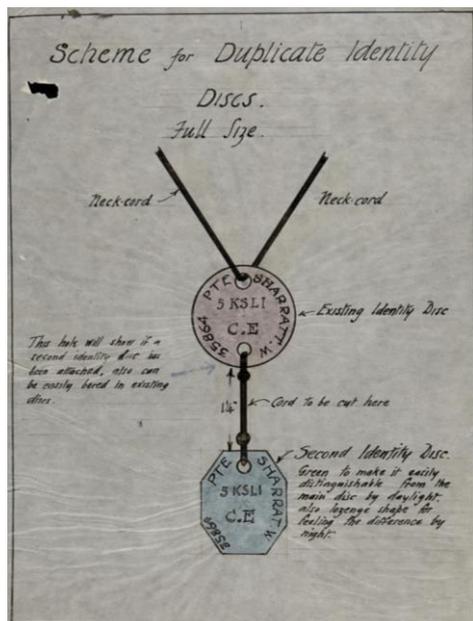


Figure 6: “Duplicate Identity Discs” Sketch from June 1916 – CWGC/1/1/1/34/18

The scheme was approved and on 24 June, instructions were issued to order 4 million discs as per Ware's drawing, with the cords fitted by the contractor. Contractors supplying outstanding orders for the red discs should now stamp an additional hole at the base of the disc, and red discs stored in R.A.C.D and at Clothing Depots should be perforated in the same way.⁶²

In a letter dated 29 June 1916, B. B. Cubitt sent a letter on behalf of the Army Council to an unknown recipient stating that the Army Council were 'prepared to accept Ware's suggestion and had 'issued instructions for the provision of a sufficient number of the duplicate identity discs to carry it forward'.⁶³ Cubitt's letter goes on to warn that there would be some time before a sufficient quantity of discs would become

⁶¹ CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Letter from Fabian Ware to the Adjutant General, 21 June 1916.

⁶² CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Note from D.G.O.S to C.O.O, R.A.C.D., 24 June 1916.

⁶³ CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Letter from B.B. Cubitt to Q.M.G.7, 27 June 1916.

available for general issue, asking the recipient for their 'opinion as to the best and most speedy arrangement for the preparation and supply of the second disc to the troops already in the field'.⁶⁴ Lastly, Cubitt acknowledged the need for additional supplies for stamping and punching holes in the new discs.⁶⁵ On 12 July Ware sent a telegram to Captain Taylor requesting 'if not inconvenient' a delay in the manufacture of the duplicate disc 'pending further opinions from Armies'.⁶⁶ Following the circulation of the new double disc scheme, 'the Ordnance people' had reminded Ware that when previously consulted, three of the Armies had suggested that an additional disc should be worn at the wrist.⁶⁷ Ware claimed that he had not been informed at the time, but merely informed by the Adjutant-General's office that the Armies had approved the general idea. Consequently, the Adjutant-General had requested that the Armies were consulted again to see if they would consider the new system which they had not yet seen, rather than a bracelet.

The War Office notified Commanding Officers of the pending duplicate scheme on 24 August 1916 with the release of Army Order 287, including new illustrations which depicted the new green disc worn round the neck, with the original red disc suspended from it, as opposed to the original design. The new discs were to be renamed "Disc, identity, No.1, green" and "Disc, identity, No.2, red".⁶⁸ Disc No.1 would replace disc No. 2 on the 42-inch length of cord worn around the neck. Disc No.2 was to be fastened to Disc No.1 with the new, shorter length of cord. Crucially, these orders gave no information about which disc to remove from the body of a fallen soldier, or why the double disc was being implemented. This information was circulated on the home front by newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, who interestingly gave clear instructions for their use in a feature entitled 'Tommy's Necklet' published on 25 August 1916.⁶⁹

A special Army order on the 24th September 1916 which provided further details on how to use the disc:

With reference to Army Order 287 of 1916, in case of the death of an officer or soldier in the field, the lower disc, known as "Disc, identity, No.2, red," will be removed and disposed of in the same manner as heretofore.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Letter from Lt. Col. Fabian Ware to Captain Taylor, 12 July 1916.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸CWGC/1/1/1/34/18 Army Orders, War Office, 24 August 1916.

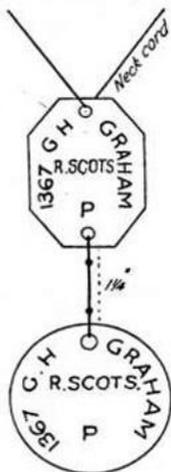
⁶⁹CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Anon (August 25 1916), Tommy's Necklet. *The Daily Mail*.

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The upper disc, known as "Disc, identity, No. 1, green," will not be removed but will be buried with the body.

Consequently, in cases where a body can be reached and identified, but cannot be brought back for burial, the lower disc will be removed, to ensure proper notification of death, while the upper disc will remain as a safeguard against the loss of identity when it becomes impossible to bury. The two discs will be worn round the neck, as directed in Army Order 287 of 1916, by all officers and soldiers on active service, and neglect to wear the discs will be regarded as a breach of discipline.⁷⁰

V.—Identity Discs.—In future each officer and A.O. 287.
— soldier will be supplied with two identity discs which 1916.
— will be worn as shown in the diagram below :—



The upper disc will be known as "Disc, identity, No. 1, green"; the lower one as "Disc, identity, No. 2, red."

A.O. 287 "Disc, identity, No. 1, green," will be issued with
1916 six inches of cord attached. In the case of troops now
continued. serving it will, after it is marked, be substituted for
the red disc now in possession. The red disc will then
be fastened to the green one by the string attached to
the latter.

Figure 7: "Identity Discs", Army Order 287 1916 – provided by David O'Mara

Despite the release of these orders, there were still substantial delays in the release of the new identity discs. Ware petitioned the office of the Adjutant General on the 6 November 1916 to confirm whether they were going to take any steps to expedite

⁷⁰CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Army Orders, War Office, 24 August 1916.

the issue of the discs. The GRC was 'receiving many inquiries as to why identification of bodies is in so many cases impossible; if we are able to reply that this new scheme of double identity disc (sic) has been completely carried out we can at least say that every possible precaution against loss of identity has been taken'.⁷¹ On 15 November it was reported that 200,000 discs had arrived in France, and were being distributed at a rate of 50,000 a week.⁷² Supplies had been distributed to other countries, but now France were to receive the 'whole supply' to ensure distribution in larger numbers was possible.⁷³ By 1 December 1,067,000 discs had been issued to France, with 690,000 outstanding though these orders were expected to have been fulfilled within a period of four weeks.⁷⁴ Occasionally, a combination of the new green disc and the 1907 aluminium design can be found (as opposed to the combination of a green and a red fibre disc) in archives or amongst private collections. It is possible that additional red fibre discs were not distributed to those still in possession of the aluminium discs, resulting in occasional unauthorised pairings of discs.

In May 1917 the Directorate of Graves Registration was rebranded as the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC). Graves Registration Units were formed to retrieve bodies and bury them before marking and recording the grave.⁷⁵ Information from the identity disc would be recorded on the grave marker, including the name, rank and number of the soldier, and the date of death would be added wherever possible.⁷⁶ Around this time, concerns were raised about the number of unburied dead. On 29 June 1917, Ware reported that 'we are on the verge of serious trouble about the number of bodies lying out still unburied on the Somme battlefields. The soldiers returning wounded or in leave to England are complaining bitterly about it and the War Office has already received letters on the matter'.⁷⁷ Adjutant-General G. H. Fowke campaigned for 'the necessity of the provision of some special organisation to

⁷¹CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Message from Fabian Ware to the Adjutant General, 6 November 1916.

⁷²CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Letter from the Adjutant General to the Director of Graves Registration and Enquiries, 15 November 1916.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴CWGC/1/1/1/34/18, Note from Q.M.G to A.G., 1 December 1916.

⁷⁵Ross Wilson, 'The Burial of the Dead: The British Army on the Western Front, 1914-18, *War & Society*, Vol. 31, Issue 1 (2012), p. 28.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 28.

⁷⁷CWGC/1/2/1/12, A Manual Of Instructions For Officers Employed In A Graves Registration Unit; letter from Fabian Ware to the Directorate of Graves Registration & Enquiries.

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undertake burials', or alternatively 'to make divisions responsible for the burial of their own dead'.⁷⁸

Arrangements were made for the provision of burial parties made up of soldiers and labourers from each unit to relieve fighting troops of the task of the clearing of the dead during heavy conflict. Where possible, the dead were moved behind the front line for identification and subsequent burial. These processes, combined with the presence of the duplicate identity disc, significantly increased the percentage of recorded burials.⁷⁹ If it was not possible to move the dead from the battlefield, they were buried in speedily dug graves and wherever possible the existing landscape was utilised. For example, soldiers were reported as buried within old trenches, or in shell holes.⁸⁰

Despite the organisation of burial parties, the identification and burial of the dead was not without its risks. Burials were frequently carried out in the dark and at risk of enemy fire. Searches for personal possessions could be limited to a quick fumble in the dark before a shallow burial to complete the job as quickly as possible. Many bodies had been exposed for days, if not weeks, and could result in a gruesome experience for the burial officer in attendance. Private J. McCauley was attached to a special burial detail between August and November 1918 when recovering from an injury. He described one particularly graphic incident:

Often have I picked up the remains of a fine brave man on a shovel. Just a little heap of bones and maggots to be carried to the common burial place. Numerous bodies were found lying submerged in the water, in shell holes and mine craters; bodies that seemed quite whole, but which became like huge masses of white, slimy chalk when we handled them. I shuddered as my hands, covered in soft flesh and slime, moved about in search of the disc, and I have had to pull bodies to pieces in order that they should not be buried unknown. It was very painful to have to bury the unknown.⁸¹

⁷⁸Peter Hodgkinson, 'Clearing the Dead', *Journal of First World War Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1. (2007), online at: <http://www.vlib.us/wwi/resources/clearingthedead.html>. Accessed 1 August 2019.

⁷⁹Anon, 'The Registration and Care of Military Graves During the Present War', *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 62, Issue 446 (1917), p. 300.

⁸⁰Wilson, 'The Burial of the Dead', p. 36.

⁸¹Imperial War Museum (IWM) DOCS 97/10/1; J. McCauley, cited in Hodgkinson, 'Clearing the Dead', <http://www.vlib.us/wwi/resources/clearingthedead.html>. Accessed 1 August 2019.

Conclusion

Identity discs used in the First World War act as a physical connection between us today and those that served during the war, providing us with information about the owner of the tag including, on occasion, information about his place of burial. In spite of the expansion of research into the way in which the war is commemorated, and with much focus on the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; the role of the identity disc in establishing the identity of a soldier for a named burial has been neglected.

By exploring the introduction of the double disc, we can see the unique way in which Fabian Ware communicated with senior military figures on behalf of the nation. The development of Ware's unit and the expansion of graves registration practice between 1914-16 helps us to understand how the British Army responded to the need for burial of the dead as a military necessity, and how it also responded to civilian needs.

The identity disc itself was developed alongside the new tradition of graves registration. Sir Fabian Ware created the spectacular landscapes of the dead that can be witnessed across the Western Front and elsewhere today in the form of CWGC cemeteries. However, the use of single and double fibre discs resulted in the unnecessary creation of many unknown soldiers when post-war recoveries refer to as few as 45% of bodies as having discs.⁸²

As early as 1920, it was clear that the fibre material used in discs produced after September 1914 was not fit for purpose. The organic fibre decomposed rapidly, particularly when left upon the body of the fallen. Ware and his Commission had communicated with key figures in the British Army during the war to develop the discs and a graves registration system but there appears to be a distinct absence of any conversations about the poor longevity of the discs, and how this could have been remedied.

The fibre 1916 double disc design is particularly significant as it was used by the British Army until after the Second World War, before being abandoned in 1960, Fibre discs continued to be to the Royal Air Force as late as 1999. Those actions demonstrate that the lessons learned about the identification of soldiers during the First World War were not properly acted upon until much later.⁸³

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³It should be noted that some metal tags were introduced in the Far East during the Second World War as the fibre quickly disintegrated in hot climates.