

Individuality of World War II Soldiers

Introduction

Approximately 308,933 American soldiers died in World War II.¹ Those that were not repatriated to their hometowns were buried in standardized government-instituted military cemeteries around the world.² This research project aims to determine whether the soldiers that were buried in these cemeteries were allowed to be identified inside of their caskets in a way that reflected their individual identities. Ultimately, the goal is to ascertain whether American commemoration techniques for WWII soldiers left room for individual identity and, thus, if the perceived nationalistic efforts of the United States match how it actually treated its soldiers.

Throughout the existing literature, the majority of the scholars rely on external factors to analyze how the soldiers were presented to society. These factors include qualitative data about the design of military cemeteries and the societal values that different types of memorials reflect.³⁴ While this type of evidence conveys how the US portrayed the soldiers to the world, it is missing a personal level of analysis focused on how, and if, they were commemorated by their loved ones. This gap is supported by a lack of information about the grave goods buried with the soldiers, the caskets used in the military cemeteries, and the clothing the soldiers were buried in. An analysis of this type of evidence would reveal if the external characteristics of WWII commemorations differ from the way the soldiers were intimately memorialized in their burials.

Based on existing analyses, it seems as though the United States values its national identity more than its fallen soldiers.⁵ It is possible, however, that a deeper level of individuality will be found beneath the surface, conveyed through the personalization of the caskets, grave

¹ “World War II, Korea and Vietnam Casualties Listed by State”.

² Robin (1995) 56-57.

³ Mant & Lovell (2012).

⁴ Shanken (2002).

⁵ Robin (1995) 55.

goods, and clothing. An ethical challenge emerges when considering that WWII occurred so recently, but with proper permits and permission from both the owners of the cemeteries and the living relatives of the soldiers, excavations and analyses of WWII burials will be approved.

Overall, this research has the potential to challenge the impersonal way that government memorials seem to commemorate the deceased and provide further insight into how the United States truly treated and valued its fallen soldiers in the context of the war effort. This information would allow society, relatives, and living veterans to give the soldiers back their identities that were taken from them 70 years ago.

Literature Review

From recovery to commemoration, there is a shift in how the United States seems to have treated its fallen soldiers. In the recovery and identification processes, the US military demonstrated extreme care and honor of the individual soldiers. However, once the bodies were buried, this individualized concern was replaced with standardized commemorations, including military cemeteries, unknown soldier tombs, general memorials, and obituaries. It is important to note that there is no consideration of whether this homogenization extends to the way that soldiers were honored beneath the surface. Instead, the emphasis is placed on how and what the commemorations communicate to the rest of the world. Overall, based on the existing literature and evidence, there emerges a discrepancy in what the US valued and prioritized. This stepwise tension muddles the understanding of whether the individual soldier mattered at all.

Recovery from the battlefield is the first step in a military burial. Leonard Wong provides an analysis of the American mentality of “leave no man behind”.⁶ Wong argues that this practice originated from the US’s commitment to individual rights and the military’s loyal

⁶ Wong (2005) 600.

“brotherhood.”⁷ Wong’s argument comes from substantial research and interviews, demonstrated by his use of quotes from WWI, WWII, and Vietnam veterans. Specifically, a WWII combat surgeon’s account confirms that soldiers were willing to risk their lives to recover others while preserving their dignity.⁸ W. Raymond Wood and Lori Stanley validate Wong by explaining the efforts made by the Graves Registration Service (GRS) and the American Graves Registration Command (AGRC) to recover missing soldiers during WWII. Through a detailed description of protocols, such as area sweeps, Wood and Stanley convey the US’s dedication to recovering as many soldiers as possible.⁹ At this point, the military seems to be committed to the individuals.

Once the bodies are recovered, they are identified using physical anthropology techniques.¹⁰ Wood and Stanley also provide an analysis of this step. The goal of the GRS and AGRC identification labs was to reduce the number of dead soldiers with ambiguous designations, such as presumed dead.¹¹ While Wood and Stanley focus chiefly on activities in Europe, they cite Edward Snow to fill in the gaps. Snow contributes a first hand account of his lab in the Pacific Zone. He includes details about how he analyzed the remains while honoring the soldiers’ sacrifices, including draping flags over the caskets and having honor guards on duty at all times.¹² These two articles build on the values established in the recovery phase; the US seemed to be dedicated to giving each soldier back their identity all across the globe.

Next, the bodies are buried, typically in government-instituted military cemeteries whose design is carefully crafted by the state.¹³ Ron Robin provides a thorough analysis of 20 American military cemeteries in Western Europe while Madeleine Mant and Nancy Lovell take on a more

⁷ Wong (2005) 609.

⁸ Wong (2005) 608.

⁹ Wood & Stanley (1989) 1367.

¹⁰ Wood & Stanley (1989) 1369.

¹¹ Wood & Stanley (1989) 1366.

¹² Snow (2005) 324.

¹³ Robin (1995) 55.

comparative approach with their analysis of American WWII cemeteries in all theaters of the war, from Normandy to the Pacific. The sources concur in their use of qualitative data to establish the criteria used in their analyses. This includes symmetry, location, tombstones, and inscriptions. All of the criteria are based on external characteristics of the cemetery – there is no reference to the bodies themselves nor the items located inside of the caskets. Ultimately, the standardization of the tombs, the symbolism of the locations, and the minimalistic inscriptions demonstrate that the ethos of most World War II cemeteries is egalitarian and patriotic, espousing an equality that was not present in life to create a unified national identity.¹⁴ The American WWII cemeteries function as communicative “symbols of America”¹⁵ rather than commemorations of the individual lives lost. This sentiment contrasts the focus on the individual that was prominent in the recovery and identification processes. The question of why this shift occurs, and its implications, begins to emerge.

Susan-Mary Grant contributes a possible rationale for the homogenization of American military cemeteries: “the cult of the fallen soldier.” While it seems like this phenomenon indicates a fixation on individual victims, it actually means that nations use their fallen soldiers to their advantage. Grant argues that a nation lives through its dead and their sacrifices, so burials are akin to making territorial claims. While Grant supports her argument with quotes from historical figures, such as Abraham Lincoln, it ultimately comes across as an unsubstantiated claim, lacking empirical evidence. From Grant’s explanation, it is unclear if these territorial claims through burials are legitimate and honored in modern society. This idea does, however, align with the existing emphasis on burials being used to communicate with other groups.

¹⁴ Mant & Lovell (2012) 33.

¹⁵ Robin (1995) 55.

A caveat to the scholarly discussion of military burials is the phenomenon of the unknown soldier. According to K.S. Inglis, nations all across the globe are fixated with the idea of the heroic and anonymous fallen soldier. The perception of these soldiers as “great men” becomes more important than whoever they were in life.¹⁶ Furthermore, by comparing the practice between different countries, Inglis establishes a standard and uses it to highlight discrepancies. For instance, the US had significantly fewer deaths in both world wars, but its memorials to unknown soldiers are consistently the most elaborate.¹⁷ Again, the way that the US communicated its national identity to the world is prioritized over the soldier’s sacrifices.

Other types of commemoration can be analyzed for these values as well. Andrew Shanken details the traditional versus living memorial debate that swept the nation after WWII. Shanken draws on newspaper and magazine excerpts to provide readers with a vivid perception of how the public felt at the time.¹⁸ Society’s fixation with living memorials – civic projects marked with plaques¹⁹ – represents its desperation to move past the war; traditional memorials were scrutinized as holding society back.²⁰ Overall, the debate centered around the message that the memorials convey about society’s values. Shanken fails to analyze the obvious discordance that exists in this debate: society is attempting to commemorate a war while simultaneously trying to forget its existence. Also significant is Shanken’s exclusion of any references to the individual soldiers. He himself has forgotten that the war was won through individual sacrifices. To Shanken and living memorial advocates, the individual soldier is practically obsolete.

In a similar realm, Doron Taussig provides an empirical analysis of obituaries for WWII and Vietnam veterans to determine how the wars are perceived by the public. Taussig uses 100

¹⁶ Inglis (1993) 13.

¹⁷ Inglis (1993) 16.

¹⁸ Shanken (2002) 130.

¹⁹ Shanken (2002) 130.

²⁰ Shanken (2002) 131-132.

obituaries, 50 from each war, from many newspapers to establish conventions and comparative criteria, such as selection of life-defining experiences and use of historical detail.²¹ He eliminates confounding variables by only including obituaries written by professional journalists and about soldiers who served overseas.²² Taussig argues that society has embraced WWII as a patriotic representation of heroism while Vietnam is more controversial and is honored with more hesitancy.²³ Taussig also asserts that obituaries identify individuals based on society's values, not how the individual wanted to be remembered.²⁴ Taussig makes the assumption that obituaries often incorrectly represent veterans, but does not provide sufficient evidence to prove this. Nonetheless, Taussig's critical analysis of obituaries confirms that society is willing to take advantage of individual veterans in favor of portraying the war through a patriotic and nationalistic lens.

From a careful review of the existing literature on the treatment of WWII soldiers, a spectrum of values comes through. An emphasis on the individual soldiers is prevalent in the recovery and identification phases but is replaced by a broader focus on the whole country as the bodies are commemorated. Overall, the majority of the discussion is related to the nationalistic message that the memorials communicate to the world. There is no mention of the personal burial of each soldier – the items that they were buried with, what clothing they were buried in, and the caskets used in their burials. It would be interesting to consider if the preparation of the inside of the casket allowed for more individuality. Further exploration into these areas would contribute a personal and familial level of analysis to the existing discussion.

²¹ Taussig (2017) 465-466.

²² Taussig (2017) 465.

²³ Taussig (2017) 470-471.

²⁴ Taussig (2017) 471-472.

Methodology

Before excavations begin, researchers must establish where they want to dig and which graves they will excavate. The research team will focus its efforts on three main cemeteries: the Normandy American Cemetery in France, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, and Arlington National Cemetery. The purpose of choosing these three cemeteries is to encompass the main theaters of WWII, hone in on American government-instituted military cemeteries, and remain consistent with previous research.²⁵ By studying three different cemeteries in three different parts of the world, researchers will be able to establish comparative criteria, based both on burial location and the demographics of the soldiers.

The second step of the preparation phase is to decide which graves will be excavated. The research team will assign teams to all three cemeteries to record the information inscribed on the tombstones – typically name, date of birth, rank, and unit²⁶ – of all World War II soldiers buried in the three cemeteries. Then, using this data as well as information obtained from archival research, the graves will be separated into categories based on age, ethnicity, religion, rank, and military branch to ensure that the final sample includes a diverse range of identities. However, not all of the graves in these groups will be excavated; each category will be substantially pared down based on family approval, or lack thereof. It is also likely that certain groups will not be willing to talk to the research team due to negative feelings towards the government and military. As approval is a hard limit for this project, it is possible that the research team will not be able to dig up enough individuals from each grouping. This is a limitation of the proposed method.

After the graves are excavated, three pieces of evidence will be considered: the type of casket, the grave goods, and the organic remains found inside the casket. First, the qualitative

²⁵ Mant & Lovell (2012).

²⁶ Mant & Lovell (2012).

characteristics of the caskets will be analyzed, including their size, material, color, brand, and price. If it becomes evident that the casket has decomposed, the team will investigate what it left behind: the hole in the ground, the metal fixings, and particulates in the soil. Within each individual cemetery, the first priority will be to determine whether there exists a difference in the type of casket used for each soldier. If a heterogeneity does exist, researchers will use the predetermined categories to identify any correlations between the demographic characteristics of the soldiers and the type of casket used in their burial. This analysis will be completed in each of the three cemeteries, followed by an intra-cemetery comparison to establish a standard and highlight any discrepancies.

Next, assuming that items are found inside of the caskets, the research team will complete an in depth analysis of the grave goods buried with each soldier. The research team hypothesizes that a variety of items will be found, ranging from family photos to cigars to jewelry. The goal is to determine the purpose of each grave good in the context of the burial as well as its origin, personal significance, and monetary value. This determination will be done through a variety of methods, including family consultations and archival research. These items will provide information about each soldier's civilian identity and how their loved ones chose to commemorate them as individuals.

The final step in the burial analysis will be to analyze the organic remains found inside the caskets. As the majority of the bodies were buried in the late 1940s, the flesh has likely completely decomposed, leaving just a skeleton behind. However, it is possible that some fabric from the clothes that the soldiers were buried in will still be present, albeit in a low quantity. The skeletal remains are less significant to the goal of this research project, so they will not be forensically analyzed. The main objective will be to study the fabric remains. The degraded

fabric fibers will be analyzed using Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) technology to determine the nature of the fabric and its original color.²⁷ FTIR is the ideal method for this study because it only requires “a small quantity of sample.”²⁸ Once it is collected, the FTIR data will be compared to fibers from confirmed American World War II uniforms. This comparison will allow researchers to determine whether the soldiers were buried in their military uniforms or their civilian clothes. The discovery of any medal decorations from the uniforms or fasteners (buttons and zippers) from civilian clothing will also help make this determination. Once this data is obtained for each soldier in each cemetery, both inter- and intra-cemetery comparisons will be completed to determine if there was a consistent practice as to what clothing the soldiers were buried in and if it was correlated to any demographic variables.

All of this qualitative data, and the resulting comparative analyses, will ultimately be considered together to identify whether the individual soldiers were afforded a level of individuality in their burials. This individuality would be conveyed through differences in caskets, the personalization of grave goods, and the clothing that the soldier was buried in. Additionally, the international and comparative approach will provide insight into how, and if, burial practices differed between the Normandy American Cemetery, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, and Arlington National Cemetery. If burial practices did differ between the cemeteries – and if commemoration differed above and below ground– there would be greater cause to argue that the United States took advantage of their soldiers in order to politicize their World War II commemorations.

There is a possibility that grave goods will not be found in any of the graves, that the caskets are identical, and that every soldier was buried in their uniform. This null result would

²⁷ Osman (2014) 460.

²⁸ Osman (2014) 460.

still provide valuable information that would contribute to this project's question; the absence of grave goods and the homogenization of caskets and clothing would support the lack of individuality that persists throughout the existing literature. Such a result would indicate that more cemeteries should be studied in order to determine if this was a consistent practice.

Ethics

The fact that World War II occurred so recently in world history poses a unique issue for this research project. The soldiers buried in these cemeteries were only laid to rest about 70 years ago. This makes it highly likely that these excavations will come with backlash, especially from the veteran community. Many advocates will feel as though these soldiers are being prematurely disturbed and taken advantage of for science. Furthermore, these military cemeteries are currently used every day by people all around the world to commemorate the war. The ambiance is intended to be peaceful and somber in order to respect the deceased and their sacrifices. This project will temporarily disrupt the commemorative atmosphere of the cemeteries.

This research project aims to mitigate these ethical concerns through a four-step process. The first step, as briefly mentioned as part of the methodology, will be to reach out to the living relatives of all potential candidates for excavation. Researchers will verbally explain the nature of the excavation, what they will be looking for, and the purpose of the study. The families will also receive a written contract with all of the same information to sign, if they choose to do so. No further action will be taken if living relatives cannot be located, do not respond, or reject the proposition; verbal and written agreement is a hard limit for this study to ensure that definitive consent is received for every single excavation.

The second step in ensuring that these excavations obey all ethical guidelines will be to obtain permits for all excavation sites. For the Arlington National Cemetery, a permit will be

obtained from the Virginia state government as emphasized by the Virginia Antiquities Act.²⁹ Permission will also be obtained from the United States government because Arlington National Cemetery is owned by the federal government.³⁰ NAGPRA does not automatically apply in this scenario because the cemetery is not located on Native American territory and the excavations do not seek to recover Native American artifacts.³¹ In fact, the research team will eliminate all indigenous soldiers from the sample pool to avoid any related controversy. Unfortunately, this decision does have the potential to erase indigenous soldiers from the narrative; efforts will be made later on in the process to highlight their sacrifices and avoid this historical gap.

Similar rules apply for the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific because it is located in Honolulu, Hawaii. The research team will apply for a permit through the Archaeology Branch of the State Historic Preservation Division which will base its decision on Hawaii Revised Statutes 6E and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.³² This consideration will ensure that the project abides by the Archaeology Division's emphasis on historical preservation and damage mitigation. Additionally, permission to excavate will be obtained from the owner of the cemetery, the National Cemetery Administration.³³ Native Hawaiians will be excluded from the sample as NAGPRA regulations also apply to Hawaii.³⁴

The situation becomes a bit more complicated when considering the Normandy American Cemetery because it is located in France, on international soil. In France, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) decides where archaeological zones will be instituted, based on its scientific and conservation potential.³⁵ This research team will apply to set up an archaeological

²⁹ “§ 10.1-2305. Permit required for the archaeological excavation of human remains”.

³⁰ “Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial”.

³¹ “Part 10: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Regulations”.

³² “State Historic Preservation: Archaeology”.

³³ “List of all VA National Cemeteries”.

³⁴ “§ 10.1-2305. Permit required for the archaeological excavation of human remains”.

³⁵ “Archaeological Zoning”.

zone in the Normandy American Cemetery. Permission will also be obtained from the United States government as it owns the Normandy American Cemetery through the American Battle Monuments Commission.³⁶

A series of measures will be taken during the excavation process itself to ensure that the digs are as respectful to the soldiers and the veteran community as possible. The three excavation sites will be closed to the general public to ensure that they do not become a media spectacle; the families of the soldiers and a few carefully selected reporters will be invited to watch. The purpose of this decision is to afford the soldiers a degree of privacy and respect while still being transparent about the excavations. Additionally, after the excavations and analyses are complete, each grave will be reburied exactly as it was found. The goal is to return the cemeteries to their initial commemorative state and return the soldiers to their final resting place.

Finally, this entire research project will be framed in terms of its overarching humanitarian goal: to give the soldiers back the individuality that was taken from them in their burials. World War II serves as such a relevant part of the United States's history, so its soldiers deserve to be commemorated as individuals, not just as one collective entity, as they are now. Thus, efforts will be made to share the information that is gathered through the excavations and analyses with the general public. The stated goal will be to honor the soldiers for their sacrifices in a way that more openly represents who they were as individuals. To highlight the information that is discovered about each individual, commemorative plaques will be added to the excavated tombs to inform visitors about who the soldier was as a civilian.

Additionally, to reach the broader public, the research team will start a social media campaign with the slogan "Get To Know Your Heroes." Through a series of social media posts, each soldier involved in the research project will be "re-introduced" to the public based on who

³⁶ "Normandy American Cemetery".

they were as individuals. The indigenous groups, including the Native Hawaiians, that were originally excluded from the excavation samples will be given the opportunity to share their WWII sacrifices through this campaign. Additionally, this campaign will connect with The American Legion so that living veterans can share their stories with the public as well. This collaboration is intended to help the surviving veteran community feel connected to this project. Both of these initiatives will convey the notion that soldiers have nuanced identities and thus it is pertinent to honor each one as an individual. These initiatives also give the families an incentive to consent to the project – they will have the opportunity to give their relatives their identity back and share their achievements with the world.

Throughout the planning process of this research project, a clear distinction was made between hometown burials and the government-instituted military cemeteries that serve as the focus of the excavations. It was deemed to be too invasive and ultimately inappropriate to excavate soldiers that were given an intimate and personal burial in their hometowns. There would be no broader objective in digging up these graves – these soldiers were already afforded individuality in death and were peacefully laid to rest by their loved ones.

Conclusion

The proposed comparison between three different cemeteries and between individuals of different characteristics will allow this research team to determine if the family members of WWII soldiers had discretion in how they were buried as well as if burial practices differed between cemeteries. The research team expects to find evidence of individuality in the burials. Specifically, they expect that personalized grave goods, unique caskets, and civilian clothing will demonstrate connections to the ascribed demographic groupings of the soldiers in each cemetery.

Such a result would indicate that the United States allowed its soldiers to be given an intimate burial, even within the context of the impersonal military cemeteries. The discrepancy between the external and intimate characteristics of the cemeteries would imply that the United States politicized their military cemeteries in order to send a nationalistic message to other countries but still valued the soldiers' sacrifices enough to honor them individually.

Even though these soldiers died almost a century ago, they still deserve to be honored and celebrated for their sacrifices. This personalized commemoration is only possible if their nuanced civilian identities are celebrated alongside their accomplishments as American soldiers. A social media campaign is the ideal way to disseminate this modern commemoration to as many audiences as possible. Furthermore, the proposed collaboration with the living veteran community and indigenous groups involved in the war effort will communicate a more accurate picture of American war efforts to the world.

Thus, this research project will improve the way that modern American society remembers its fallen heroes. Rather than replacing individual identity with a homogenous national one, these new commemorations will celebrate the individuality of each soldier alongside their heroic sacrifices for the nation.

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