

At the heart of remembrance

By **VICTORIA WALLACE**

DIRECTOR GENERAL, COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION



VICTORIA WALLACE became the first female Director General of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 2014. She was Justices' Chief Executive at Sussex Magistrates' Courts from 2000-2004, and has held various posts within the Foreign and Commonwealth Diplomatic Service in Tanzania, Thailand, and Belgium. She also served as Chief Executive at the Leeds Castle Foundation and Enterprises in the UK for ten years, and is a council member of the Association for Independent Museums.

At a time when the world has woken up to commemoration of those who served and died during the two World Wars, the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has proved as relevant today as when this remarkable organisation was founded almost a century ago.

Created during the devastation of the First World War, the Commission forever changed the way we regard and remember those who died in conflict. For the first time, memorials were built to commemorate the sacrifice of all – not just those of rank or privilege or certain colour. The Commission believed then, as it does today, that every name mattered and that all should be remembered equally – no matter where or how they died.

That principle was not readily accepted when the Commission was founded in 1917 but the foresight, conviction and dedication of our founders, and the family of Commonwealth nations that brought our organisation into being, triumphed; and with that victory a perpetual and inclusive remembrance of those who had made the ultimate sacrifice was born.

Today, ably supported by our international workforce of more than 1,200 staff, and our Commonwealth partners and other key stakeholders, the Commission fulfils the vital role of maintaining the very fabric upon which our remembrance of the war dead is focused. We commemorate almost 1.7 million individuals who gave their lives in service to the Commonwealth – caring for their graves and memorials at 23,000 locations and in 154 countries.

Throughout 2015, many of our cemeteries and memorials have hosted national and personal acts of remembrance. From marking the sacrifice of Indian servicemen on the Western Front, to those of Africa in Namibia, Canada in Belgium, and Australia and New Zealand at Gallipoli in Turkey, ever-growing numbers of pilgrims have experienced our shared past among the graves of our fallen and departed from these places the better for the experience, with a renewed determination to always remember.

And in the background, the core work goes on – the maintenance of the records, cemeteries and memorials. That work is not without challenge – ageing structures, conflict and instability, particularly in the Middle East and in Africa, can limit our capacity to manage the cemeteries, and certainly reduces

access. In many cases, maintenance can only continue through the support of our Commonwealth partners and their agencies, embassies and High Commissions on the ground. In Eritrea, earlier this year, the British Ambassador drove our staff to Keren in his own vehicle, to enable them to safely effect repairs to a memorial to almost 300 Indian servicemen who died there during the Second World War.

We are also feeling the effects of time as our structures and memorials age; our buildings – like the Thiepval Memorial in northern France – now require a different approach to their maintenance, to ensure their long term survival, both as monuments to the dead, and as extraordinary pieces of 20th century design.

The legibility of headstone or memorial inscription is central to what the Commission does and in recent years we have had no choice but to replace many thousands of headstones that had suffered irreparable erosion. Now that this programme is complete, we are working harder at maintaining our headstones in-situ through less invasive interventions and periodic re-engraving – only replacing when absolutely necessary.

The outlook for the Commission is positive – and of course we are far more than just a maintenance organisation. Visitor numbers, both physically to our sites and virtually to our website, are at an all-time high. While new initiatives, like the launch of our first smartphone App and First and Second World War archives online, are making use of digital technologies to reach out to ever wider audiences.

In November this year, I will attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta and host the Duchess of Cornwall at the CWGCs Naval Cemetery in Capuccini, where more than 1,000 men are buried and remembered from both world wars.

In May 2016, I will be inviting Commonwealth High Commissioners in London to an event at Brookwood Military Cemetery near London to learn more about the Commission, and the people we commemorate from, and in, their home countries. We will also launch a design competition for children in all the countries in which we have cemeteries – 154 – for our own centenary in 2017. I hope this will help remind children around the world of the debt we owe to previous generations, and the legacy of care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

F