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Travelling to pay tribute

Remembrance tourism is a growing and socially important trend

Global conflict has been part of our history over the ages, with scales of loss that can be hard to reconcile and difficult to rationalise – military cemeteries and places of remembrance provide spaces to learn about the past and ensure that the hard lessons of war and those who lost their lives in warfare are never forgotten.

Sometimes referred to as memorial or heritage tourism, remembrance tourism is steadily growing in reach. It transcends the conventional bucket list travel experience, giving us a journey back in time, a means to pay homage to historical events and a way to remember the sacrifices of those who came before us.

Visiting our sites as a place of memory has gained prominence in recent years. It offers travellers the opportunity to connect with the past, reflect on the lessons of history and gain insight into the human condition. It's an incredible experience for anyone with an appreciation and interest in real-life stories linked to heritage and history.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) works on behalf of the governments of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, the UK and South Africa to commemorate the 1.7 million men and women from the Commonwealth who lost their lives in the two world wars. In South Africa, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) maintains the graves of 10,625 South Africans at more than 600 locations across the country.

West Park Cemetery – Military Block (Gauteng)

Located in Johannesburg, this remembrance site is the resting place of 637 military servicemen and women.

During World War II, there was a large military wing in the Johannesburg General Hospital and military hospitals at Baragwanath and Cottesloe. The Baragwanath hospital handled a large number of casualties sent from the Middle East. In addition, flying training – under the Empire Air Training Scheme – was conducted on a considerable scale

from the Baragwanath airfield. Further to the south-west, at Lenasia, was the largest ammunition depot in South Africa.

Cullinan Military Cemetery (Gauteng)

This cemetery is the resting place of 102 casualties of World War II. The village of Cullinan served the Premier Diamond mine, and during WWII, the Union Defence Force occupied virtually the entire village as the command structure for the adjoining Zonderwater troop concentration and training complex.

Midway through the war, the largest prisoner-of-war camp for Italians captured in East and North Africa was established at Zonderwater, and this became the site of a large Italian war cemetery, now situated within the Zonderwater prison grounds.

Thaba Tshwane New Military Cemetery (Gauteng)

Tshwane was and still is an important military town, with many units and schools of the army, air force and medical services. During WWII, No 110 Military General Hospital operated in Voortrekkerhoogte. Thaba Tshwane (previously known as Voortrekkerhoogte and prior to that, Roberts Heights) was established as a garrison town by the British after the Anglo-Boer War and taken over by the South African Department of Defence after Union in 1910.



Hamilton War Cemetery (Free State)

During WWII, a military hospital was established in the Tempe Military Camp, which also housed the headquarters of the Orange Free State Command. Numbers 27 and 62 Air Schools were operated from the Bloemfontein Aerodrome close to the city, where training was carried out under the Empire Air Training Scheme.

Bloemfontein (Hamilton) War Cemetery contains 62 burials of WWII. Some 29 of the burials are of South African Army personnel who were originally buried in the vast areas of the old non-European



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cemetery, which became unmaintainable. Their remains were brought into the cemetery in the early 1970s. In addition, in 2005, the graves of 11 World War I casualties were removed to this cemetery from what was known at the time as Rooidam Native Cemetery, and a further 10, whose graves could not be found, are now commemorated on special memorials in this cemetery.



Stellawood War Cemetery (KwaZulu-Natal)

This site in Durban marks the sacrifice of 706 military servicemen who lost their lives in the two world wars: 193 from WWI and 491 from WWII. During WWI, the port of Durban was a considerable hospital centre with No 3 South African General Hospital, as well as seven additional hospitals and two convalescent camps to which the sick and wounded were brought from East Africa and other theatres of war.

During World War II, the city was a key port for the East African and Abyssinian campaigns and later for those happening in the Middle East and Italy.

A large military hospital operated at Springfield, with hospital ships travelling between Durban and the theatres of war in the north. Operational flights in protection of incoming and outgoing convoys and general anti-submarine patrols were conducted from the airfield to the south of the city.

Fort Napier War Cemetery (KwaZulu-Natal)

The Pietermaritzburg commemoration site is a significant CWGC site, as well as an Anglo-Boer War memorial. During WWII, a large transit and disposal camp was established in the Oribi Area, close to the city, and served by the Oribi Military Hospital. A convalescent depot was operated in the area of the country club, in the hills overlooking the town centre.

It contains 112 Commonwealth WWII burials and one from WWI. There are also seven war graves of other nationalities and one non-war burial in the CWGC's care.

Ladysmith War Cemetery (KwaZulu-Natal)

Ladysmith Cemetery contains two burials from WWI and 181 burials from WWII. In addition, there is the commemoration to a South African soldier who was killed when he fell down the Mont-aux-Sources escarpment in the Bergville District of Natal and whose body could not be recovered. His name, PINCKNEY, is recorded on a special memorial erected near the other war graves in this cemetery, in Plot 17.



Dido Valley War Cemetery (Western Cape)

Simonstown – the home of South Africa's Navy – saw massive shipping movements (including hospital ships) during both world wars. During WWII, naval and maritime air operations were conducted from the area. Instruction under the Empire Air Training Scheme was done at 65 and 66 Air Schools at the nearby Youngsfield Aerodrome. Most of those laid to rest here are naval personnel and it was here too that the Cross of Sacrifice was unveiled on 5 January 1930 by Vice-Admiral RM Burmester, RN.

A new memorial in Cape Town in 2024

In 2024, a new CWGC Memorial will be completed to honour black South African servicemen who served for labour regiments and perished in WWI and, to date, have no known graves. The Cape Town Labour Corps Memorial will be situated in Cape Town's popular Company's Gardens.

Text | **Juan Maree** Photography | **Supplied**

Juan Maree is the Director of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Southern Africa. For more information, go to cwgc.org.