



## Tombstones of the War Dead: A Spectacle of Epitaphs and Emblems

“... (those) who sleep in these graves died  
so that we could live—and live in freedom  
and honour”

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The Madras War Cemetery (1939-1945) is a celebration of war dead laid to rest in St. Thomas Mount in the border of Madras known for its history and heritage. The cemetery, one among the 34 of its kind in India, is meant to keep alive the memories of soldiers, sailors, and airmen—from Australia, Burma, Canada, India, New Zealand, Poland, the United Kingdom, and West Africa—who served in garrisons and died in India on their way to battle fields in far off places to fight in the Second World War on behalf of the (British) Commonwealth of Nations. They died “thousands of miles away from their hearth and home, leaving a void in their families and a trail of grief” but their mortal

remains found a haven in the Madras War Cemetery.

The cemetery in St. Thomas Mount contains 856 Commonwealth burials. Each burial is commemorated with a tombstone—813 mm tall, 375 mm broad and 75 mm wide. C. Venkatesan, in a paper presented to the Tamil Nadu History Congress and published in its Proceedings, goes into raptures when he says: “Each headstone is a moving memorial, a mound of stone, a little mount, a miniature pyramid designed to last forever”.<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has ensured that on each stone is engraved “the national emblem or the service or regimental badge, followed by the rank,

name, unit, date of death, age, and usually a religious emblem; and at the foot, in many cases, an inscription chosen by relatives<sup>22</sup>—in short, a resume of the profile of the warrior.

Walking across the lawns of the cemetery, I felt I was in the presence of angels. Brave men and women sleeping in silence and solitude, the headstones executed with immaculate elegance, the regimental emblems sculpted with amazing precision, the epitaphs chosen mostly from sacred and secular literature of a bygone era, the lovely lawn resembling a green carpet of grass, the bronze sword representing the military character of the cemetery, the rain trees, the Rangoon creepers, the Indian laburnums, the west Indian jasmine, the roses, the shrubs, and the whole cemetery bound by a ledge of Madras thorn, white clouds floating in the blue sky of St. Thomas Mount make one feel that he is wandering across an earthly paradise, an Elysium so to speak.

The epitaphs and the emblems are the highlights of the tombstones; I was

enthralled by the former, and excited by the latter.

The epitaphs are expressions of love, of admiration, of gratitude, and, of course, of grief and sorrow; they are the family's attempts to communicate with the dead. The dead have been so much a part of the living, have shared so much of their thoughts, have dreamt so many of their dreams that their sudden loss devastates them. The living open their hearts for the dead in exquisite prose and poetry – and we call it epitaphs. The epitaphs are usually not more than a couple of lines but carry the marvel of moving people to tears. Never in history has so much been said in so few words.

The emblems are drawings of the banner under which the combatants fought their battles. They are like the royal insignia of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas of the Sangam age and the Pallava, Maratha and Vijayanagar kings of a later time. The emblems symbolise the traditions and values of the respective regiments, their weapons of war, their valour, the myths of their people, and the fauna and flora native to their land. The

persons who sculpted the pictures in stone had imagination, were steeped in the knowledge of legend and literature, believed in the efficacy of the emblems to bless their countrymen with victory—the result is an exhibition of emblems of everlasting value.

C.Venkatesan, a specialist in the study of cemeteries, especially war cemeteries, describes in his characteristic way the designs of the varied emblems in the Madras War Cemetery:

Profiles of regimental symbols sculpted on the stones are lovely little pieces of art. Reliefs showing the Egyptian sphinx, fierce lions, antlers of reindeer, short swords of the Gurkhas, fast-footed couriers, gun carriages, prancing horses, flying eagles, and medieval castles have been carved with great care, understanding, and even feeling. I was particularly struck by the sculpture of the enigmatic sphinx having a lion's body with a twisted tail and a woman's head; only a sculptor steeped in the knowledge of Egyptian

history and civilization could have created such splendid works of art.

One tombstone carries the figure of a dragon; the representation is so frightening and it is doubtful whether the dragon known to mythology would have been this dreadful. Another shows a ram carrying a flag in its fore legs; I could see arrogance writ large in the ram's face – arrogance arising out of the privilege given to it to carry the country's flag. Yet another stone shows a courier running fast with what appears to be a coded message; I could see strength and stamina oozing out every inch of his muscle. Many a stone contain falcons in flight in search of prey with a beak sharper than a razor. Each of these of sculptures is a treasure, and worth a king's ransom.

#### **Rest in Peace:**

Many of the well wishers, as in civilian cemeteries of simple folks, are content with a recording of "Rest in Peace"<sup>3</sup> on the epitaphs. This is prayer, this is seeking God's intervention to grant them peace and quietitude in His kingdom.

Dying is a journey into the unknown, and people are anxious that the dead should not meet with any harm in their new abode. On the surface “Rest in Peace” may appear to be simple in substance, but one can see hidden eloquence even in this unpretentious invocation: the dead should rest in silence and solitude, should rest in His arms free from the hue and cry of this turbulent and tumultuous world.

The words Rest in Peace may have been allowed to stand alone: I find a tendency to prefix or suffix these words with some other wish. It looks as though that Rest in Peace is not given the focus that is its due.

#### **In Memory of:**

Love is the bond between husbands and wives, sons and daughters and their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, and among friends. When a warrior dies in war, his loved ones are drenched in a million tears, feel a void in their life, and after a period of mourning, inscribe on the headstones the trait, the quality, the feature that impressed them most. Love is the dominant motif behind the memories

projected in these monuments. Different people have different perceptions of the memories of the dead. They are either “in memory of”<sup>4</sup>, or “in lasting memory of”<sup>5</sup>, or “in loving memory of”<sup>6</sup>, or “in ever loving memory of”<sup>7</sup>; a few speak of “beautiful memories”<sup>8</sup> and “sweet memories”<sup>9</sup>; there is at least one which refers to “grateful memory”<sup>10</sup>; references to “glorious memories”<sup>11</sup>, “proud memories”<sup>12</sup>, “precious memories”<sup>13</sup>, and “treasured memories”<sup>14</sup> are seen here and there; there are a couple of solemn allusions to “sacred memories”<sup>15</sup> and “divine memories”<sup>16</sup>.

I would not like to see much of a difference between memories and lasting memories and loving memories and ever loving memories because love is there everywhere linking people like a human chain. It seems to be a manner of writing, and there is no need to distinguish between different shades of love.

But I admit, though grudgingly, that there may be something in speaking of “grateful memories”, “glorious memories”, “proud memories”, “precious memories”, and “treasured memories”. Some act of

kindness, some deed of courage, some showing of chivalry may have touched a chord in the living, and therefore they are going a little out of the beaten track. But specific references to special acts would have been helpful to appreciate the appropriateness of adjectives, but of course there are constraints of space.

Allusions to “sacred memory” and “divine memory” appear to be somewhat awe-inspiring, but even here I don’t see any need to consider such references as “God-connected”, because there is a belief that all the dead, especially the war dead, go to the kingdom of God, “live” in his presence, and bask in the sunshine of his grace. In this context I don’t want to be misunderstood as denigrating the memory of those who fell dead in the Second World War. I am only looking at the whole scene with an open mind, a neutral platform as it were.

### **I shall Remember:**

Memories are the stuff of which history and heritage are made; they are the unwritten archives, the invisible artefacts of humanity’s long trek towards freedom

and honour; if they are not renewed and remembered, if they are not refreshed and “revisited”, the memorials on which they are cut would cease to convey any meaning, and would not serve the purpose they were meant to serve. Those who have commissioned the memorials have assured in the short space of the stone slabs that the dead would be “ever remembered”<sup>17</sup>, or “always remembered”<sup>18</sup>, or “proudly remembered”<sup>19</sup>. A few have undertaken to cherish their memories “not just today, but everyday”<sup>20</sup>; some have recorded that though the dead are gone, they are not forgotten.<sup>21</sup>

The most eloquent expression of remembrance is: “At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them”<sup>22</sup>. This is more or less a pledge, a promise to keep alive the memory of the dead. Man is at peace with himself, he is in union with god “at the going down of the sun” and “in the morning”, and these are the best moments for remembrance. But there is no need to insist that references to timings are references to sunset and sunrise; that kind of interpretation would

be rather pedantic. The promoters of the epitaphs may have meant in all probability: everyday, preferably twice a day. A reference to 6 a.m to 6 p.m. may not have dictated their prescription. Therefore neither time nor place need stand in the way of the living remembering the dead. What matters is the will to remember.

Fortunately, there is no such direction regarding the place of remembrance. One need not visit a cemetery, a church, a *darga* to remember a dead person; one's own home where the living and the dead lived and laughed, played together, worked and worshipped and shared whatever there was to share would do. What is required is a place where there is peace; the time recommended in the memorial is a time associated with peace.

The discussion on remembrance can be rounded off with a reference to a remark that "God's greatest gift is remembrance"<sup>23</sup>. By this the writer probably means that God has endowed the living with the power to remember, and among the several powers he has given him, that is the greatest gift. The faculty to

remember is a faculty which can be exercised without physical strain, mental stress, paraphernalia of ritual, financial expenditure, guidance of a guru, and a host of similar constraints. This is simplicity personified and presented as a quotable quote. Though it is conceded that remembrances are reminders of the gratitude of the living to the dead, a query that calls for a response is how long remembrances shall continue. May be for a generation or two; society is in a state of flux, and the old order changeth yielding place to new; after some years the present becomes past, and fades from the thoughts of the future. The impermanence of human lives determines the impermanence of remembrances as well. The fact that remembrances cannot be carried on endlessly is brought home in the headstone of Sgt M.T. Jones of Royal Air Force: "*as long as we live, we treasure his name*"<sup>24</sup>. It is surprising that the question has been anticipated and answered.

### God, King, and Country:

It was in response to a call from "God, King, and Country"<sup>25</sup> that men fought to defend freedom and honour, and

it was a duty they performed with pride, and with no thoughts whether they would survive or perish in battle. The headstones inform us repeatedly that it was “duty nobly done”<sup>26</sup>, “duty fearlessly... done”<sup>27</sup>, and “perilous path of duty”<sup>28</sup>; at least one headstone informs us that the warrior fell “a martyr to duty”<sup>29</sup>.

The epitaphs contain evidences of supreme sacrifices: Warrant Officer J.B. Duggan of Royal Air Force and his brother Bertram,<sup>30</sup> Gunner A. Knight of Royal Artillery and his brother William John,<sup>31</sup> Gunner M.W. Upson of Royal Artillery and his brother Ronald Mervyn,<sup>32</sup> Warrant Officer K. Webster of Royal Air Force and his brother Vincent,<sup>33</sup> and Sgt A. Powrie of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and his son Ernest Peter<sup>34</sup> all died on service. The death of two persons in the same family would make them grief stricken beyond words and consolation, and these are rare instances of supreme sacrifice in the chronicles of war anywhere in the world. The loss of Major A.C. Greene of Indian Medical Service<sup>35</sup> whose feats of courage were mentioned in Despatches *thrice* should be treated as too

big a tragedy for his family; there may be many more who have earned such honours and distinction. In all these cases, it is the call of duty that made them to lay their lives, and the thought of God, King and Country propelled them to new height of sacrifice.

### Grief and Sorrow:

The hurt and the pain of the loss of one whom they loved dearly, the sorrow that followed, was too much to bear for many. They were haunted by memories of “a happy face”<sup>36</sup>, “of a heart of gold”<sup>37</sup>, “of a loving smile”<sup>38</sup>. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters were troubled by the memories of the departed, and lamented: “to the world he was one, to us he was the world”<sup>39</sup>; he was a sun in the sky, the focus of their love and affection, the hope of their future, and his death left them rudderless.

The call to battle was abrupt and sudden; there was no time for the warrior to say goodbye to his family and friends. “He bade no last farewell, the heaven’s gates were open, a loving voice said ‘Come’”<sup>40</sup>, and he went. “No loved ones

stood around him to bid a last farewell<sup>41</sup>. What is distressing is the cry: “without farewell he left as all<sup>42</sup>, and “without farewell he fell asleep<sup>43</sup>. These are all moving passages, and make our heart bleed for the departed.

The death of the warriors is not to be viewed as ordinary death; they did not die of old age, of disease, of execution, at the hand of an assassin. They died fighting for their country, for their land and people, for their right to live in peace and liberty. Many of the epitaphs would want us to remember that “(they) died so that we might live<sup>44</sup>, that “(they) gave their life that we may live forever<sup>45</sup>, that “for our tomorrow (they) gave (their) today<sup>46</sup>, that “they gave their life that you may live in peace<sup>47</sup>. Dying so that others might live is the noblest death one can imagine.

#### **Far away from home:**

Many grieved that the graves were “in India<sup>48</sup>, they were “far away” from England<sup>49</sup>, that they “never shall see”<sup>50</sup> the graves, that the families and the graves were divided by “land and sea<sup>51</sup>. A mother cries “A foreign grave is a painful

thing to a mother’s aching heart<sup>52</sup>. One is angry that “no flowers can I place in the grave where you lie<sup>53</sup>. The anguish of another that her son languishes alone in India reaches us across time and distance, and makes us feel sad.

I wish to assure parents, husbands and wives, and siblings of the dead that their beloved are not alone in India, and the 1,239,450,000 million people of India keep vigil over their graves. We would preserve the grave as among our national treasures like the sculptures of Mamallapuram, the Taj Mahal, and the St.Mary’s church in Fort.St.George.

Please tell us the occasion, we will lay a garland on the grave, we will lit a candle on the tomb, we will say a prayer in folded hands so that they will be reborn in your midst, We will treat the War Cemetery as a place of pilgrimage.





### End notes

1. Proceedings of Tamil Nadu History Congress
2. Annual Report of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission 2000-2001.
3. Grave Reference: 1.A.13, 1.A.10, 1.B.10, 1.B.4, 1.C.16, 1.C.8, 1.D.12, 1.D.2, 1.F.12, 1.F.11, 1.J.11, 1.J.3, 1.J.2, 4.A.18, 4.A.17, 4.A.15, 4.B.15, 4.D.15, 4.D.13, 4.D.2, 4.E.15, 4.F.7, 5.C.14, 5.D.17, 5.D.6, 5.F.18, 6.A.10, 6.B.2, 6.D.6, 7.A.6, 8.A.5, 8.B.6, 8.B.3, 8.E.6, 8.E.4, 8.E.2, 9.C.4, 9.D.15, 9.D.11, 9.E.10, 9.E.5.
4. Grave Reference: 1.C.13, 1.H.16, 1.L.13, 4.D.16, 4.E.16, 8.E.10, 8.F.1, 9.E.7.
5. Grave Reference: 7.A.9, 9.A.15.
6. Grave Reference: 1.B.6, 1.D.15, 1.D.13, 1.D.11, 1.E.4, 1.F.5, 1.G.6, 1.H.18, 1.J.14, 1.J.6, 1.K.4, 4.E.13, 4.E.7, 4.E.1, 4.F.8, 5.C.6, 5.D.5, 5.D.2, 6.A.10, 6.B.16, 6.B.12, 6.B.4, 6.D.4, 6.D.9, 7.A.4, 7.B.9, 7.B.7, 7.A.13, 8.B.16, 8.C.18, 8.F.16, 9.B.9, 9.F.7, 9.F.4.
7. Grave Reference: 1.E.14, 1.H.7, 1.J.8, 1.K.9, 4.D.14, 8.E.2, 9.E.10, 9.E.3.
8. Grave Reference: 1.B.16, 1.H.17, 1.H.2, 1.K.5, 7.A.2, 8.B.5, 8.D.11, 9.F.16.
9. Grave Reference: 1.A.16, 1.E.8, 4.E.2, 8.C.14, 9.C.1, 9.D.7.
10. Grave Reference: 1.C.14.
11. Grave Reference: 5.C.11.
12. Grave Reference: 1.K.6, 4.B.17, 4.F.1, 9.C.5, 9.C.1.
13. Grave Reference: 4.C.13, 4.E.1.
14. Grave Reference: 4.B.9, 6.C.4, 7.F.10, 9.A.2, 9.E.6.
15. Grave Reference: 8.C.3, 9.C.8.
16. Grave Reference: 9.B.6.

17. Grave Reference: 1.D.17, 1.G.1, 4.E.3.
18. Grave Reference: 1.H.6, 4.B.13, 4.D.11, 6.D.8, 7.F.8, 8.D.14.
19. Grave Reference: 9.D.17.
20. Grave Reference: 1.D.10, 1.K.2, 6.B.1.
21. Grave Reference: 1.A.7, 1.H.18, 1.J.6, 4.A.18, 6.B.15, 6.B.4, 7.B.1, 9.D.18.
22. Grave Reference: 1.A.11, 1.B.18, 1.B.12, 1.H.14, 1.K.7, 4.A.10, 4.E.6, 5.C.8, 5.E.2, 5.F.3, 6.A.5, 6.B.11, 6.D.10, 7.F.16, 7.F.3, 7.F.2, 8.C.8, 8.D.7.
23. Grave Reference: 8.E.12.
24. Grave Reference: 4.D.16.
25. Grave Reference: 1.D.17.
26. Grave Reference: 4.A.2, 4.B.10, 4.C.7, 9.B.5.
27. Grave Reference: 4.B.18
28. Grave Reference: 1.L.1
29. Grave Reference: 8.B.12.
30. Grave Reference: 6.D.12.
31. Grave Reference: 4.C.6.
32. Grave Reference: 7.D.9.
33. Grave Reference: 1.L.6
34. Grave Reference: 9.D.7; Madras War Cemetery Register, p.50.
35. Grave Reference: 7.F.5
36. Grave Reference: 6.A.6.
37. Grave Reference: 1.A.13.
38. Grave Reference: 6.D.11.
39. Grave Reference: 4.C.9, 4.E.9, 8.D.16, 9.D.6.
40. Grave Reference: 9.E.8.
41. Grave Reference: 7.A.3.
42. Grave Reference: 6.C.14.
43. Grave Reference: 6.B.9, 8.B.17, 9.C.15.
44. Grave Reference: 1.L.4, 4.A.18, 4.F.12, 9.B.15, 9.C.1.
45. Grave Reference: 8.C.17
46. Grave Reference: 1.L.6, 7.E.4.
47. Grave Reference: 4.F.17.
48. Grave Reference: 6.D.4.
49. Grave Reference: 4.B.9, 4.B.4.
50. Grave Reference: 5.B.12.
51. Grave Reference: 8.E.18.
52. Grave Reference: 4.F.14.
53. Grave Reference: 1.D.9.