

In my youth, the dead were laid to rest in sacred ground, a cemetery, even paupers. Typically a Stone mentioned their name, the year of birth and death. That “Space”, between the two years, challenged the living to recall or imagine, what the dead accomplished, expanding the brief biography the “Space” suggested.

As a child, few relatives or friend died those first 17 years. There were etiquette rules for funerals. Precedents had been set. We visit the body of the deceased at their home, marked by a black wreath hung on the front door. Then, none went to a Mortuary for mourning. Entering the house, visitors quietly view the deceased in a casket with the family, join then in prayer. Then all proceed to the kitchen or designated separate room for a bite to eat, drink, joyously share tales of the goodness of the deceased. Sorrow and joy shared, separated by a door.

A similar celebration followed later in the Church of choice, the sober reminder, “man is dust and unto dust he shall return”. Many prayers for the deceased, his family, friends, and mourners. Then someone, often from the family, could be expected to recount that moments of that life with humor, hopefully laughter for all. Many times at a good friend death, this Commentary revealed a much more complex individual to all attending.

It was customary for everyone at Church who considered the deceased friend, to accompany the body to the Cemetery. There the body would be remembered in prayer, the casket blessed, flowers placed, lowered, while all watched. In some instances each would be asked to toss a handful of dirt into the grave, participate “fully” in the burial. Here none laughed. Returning to their transport, each soberly returned home with the living.

Later a stone would appear with the two dates, year of birth, “Space”, then death. And visitors a 100 years later could only imagine how significant that “Space” was to those who played, laughed, loved and lived with the deceased.

Change to what had existed for a few Centuries came to my attention when I became aware of the Permanent WW II Veteran cemeteries in Europe.

These fourteen European WW II locations are not active cemeteries. Additional burials are uncommon. Those cemeteries honoring the dead of WW II are located in Italy, France, England, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Belgium.

There, 218,000 graves identify that war's deceased.

Few remember that many Missing are also mentioned in those European cemeteries. They are remembered at each by a Cenotaph, mentioning the dead whose bodies lie elsewhere. This marble plaque is prominent at the end of the field of graves, above a memorial.

In effect visitors look up at automatically,
a fitting gesture for their body is not here. It was never found.

The total number so honored in WW II is staggering, 94,000.

It is a bit like they might return. On occasion remains are located.

That name stays, is marked with a Rosetta, indicating remains were located, interred in a location chosen by the family.

Visitors to European burial sites for American Servicemen of WW II, dead and missing, are mostly without acquaintance with the deceased. They are left to stand in silence, respect the immense, violent, sacrifice made.

Searching the "Space" on graves there, or in America, forever changed.