The Unsung Heroes of World War Two

By Lucy Howard

During World War Two a host of heroes contributed to the war effort, such as nurses, air raid wardens, ambulance services and firefighters. In fact, everyone played their part on the home front whilst also enduring horrific air raids and rationing. Indeed, people became very clever and ingenious at making do.

However, funeral directors remained unsung heroes because of the stigma and taboo attached to their profession. Yet the contribution made by funeral directors the challenges they faced, both personally and professionally, and how they tried to ease the pain of loss for families and friends of those who were killed by enemy action was immense.

Lessons had been learned from WW1. As Britain prepared for war there was the setting up of committees and conferences were held to anticipate how Britain would deal with the impact of war. Therefore, the NAFD appointed its own war committee made up of five members to deal with specific war related problems.

From the onset of WW2 the British Government was well aware of the need to bury the war dead and the negative impact on morale of those injured and dying. In fact, it did not allow reporting in the newspapers until sometime after the event. Thus, secrecy was of paramount importance. A coffin making factory in Willesden in West London operated in secret for fear of alarming the populace and to avoid creating panic and affecting morale. Furthermore, with the difficulty in obtaining raw materials and the loss of manpower to conscription, the task of burying the dead became even more challenging.

The funeral industry faced many acute and professional challenges. All materials that funeral directors used were either rationed or in short supply. Restrictions on timber and sandpaper were introduced at the end of September 1939 and coffins were made thinner. Regulations stated that the sides, ends, bases and tops were not to exceed 5/8 inches thick (approximately 16 mm). Low grade timber was used and other materials such as cardboard was also introduced and disguised to enable the deceased to have a decent funeral.
Local authorities had been given permission to bury the dead in shrouds but this was considered inappropriate by funeral directors at the time as this was reminiscent of a pauper’s funeral. Metal fixings such as handles were reduced and Sir Arnold Wilson, a Member of Parliament, sought a ban on metal fixings on coffins but was informed that this would require special legislation. However, the industry responded by suggesting that two pairs of handles be used instead of four. There were also suggestions that the recycling of brass hearse rails, faulty coffin plates and tarnished fixings be used. In fact, rope ended up being used in some cases.

Petrol and tyres were also rationed and families were encouraged to use public transport to reduce car use. In fact, hearses ceased to be manufactured altogether during the war. Therefore, the impact of war encouraged the funeral industry to change its work practices.

Embalmers were also subjected to rationing meaning that fewer bodies were embalmed. Although embalming was largely discontinued for the duration of the war, embalming was still carried out on the bodies of United States servicemen who would be repatriated at a later date.

Other working practices changed too. W Sherry & Sons Funeral Directors in Greenford, for example, purchased whole trees and processed them in-house to make coffins. As more young skilled men were conscripted from the industry, older workers were brought back into the industry. Newly recruited members of staff were trained in the interviewing of the bereaved and in identification techniques. In fact, when bodies were so often very damaged from the effects of war, funeral directors were encouraged to focus on the head and, if the head was so very damaged, to rebuild it to make it acceptable for viewing.

Funeral Directors were also often put at risk as they entered dangerous buildings and witnessed the worst effects of enemy action. In fact, one funeral director at the time suggested that he found it easier to equate what he saw with a butcher’s shop as he felt that he did not feel the same horror as if he viewed it as a bomb site. Entering buildings was also dangerous as there may be an unexploded bomb on site or the building may have been at risk from collapse. It was necessary for those in charge to make on-the-spot decisions as there was no health and safety legislation to guide them.

During air raids funeral corteges were encouraged to stop at a suitable place and seek shelter and gas masks were also required to be carried at funerals.

When war broke out, coroners’ courts and mortuaries were emptied in preparation for the influx of bombing victims. The logistical challenge of where to accommodate the bodies rapidly became a problem as mortuaries filled up. Other public buildings were quickly converted into temporary mortuaries. Schools, swimming baths and recreation halls were all commandeered for this purpose and the then Ministry of Health sent a circular to all local authority clerks informing them of their responsibility for providing mortuary accommodation.

Although funeral directors’ premises were not commandeered to be used as mortuaries or their staff as attendants, as war progressed funeral directors increasingly gave their time freely as mortuary attendants and offered their vehicles and premises for body collection and storage.

Each body was required to be labelled with a metal or Bakelite disc, with a serial number and, appropriate, photographs were taken.

Air raid precautions prior to and during the Second World War included guidance on the burial of civilians who were killed due to enemy bombardment. A Ministry circular was published and advised on mass internment of fatalities. Furthermore, there were shortages of local burial sites. Advocates of cremation felt their method of disposal was well suited to the needs of war. In fact the objections were many, and there were also legal difficulties if unclaimed or unidentified bodies were cremated. Recognition was also given with regard to the possibility of gas and electricity lines being severed by bombing and services becoming vulnerable and so cremation was largely discounted.
When the Blitz began Medical Certificates were dispensed with and time was saved to enable the organisation in the burial of civilian war dead. However certificates would continue to be issued for non-war-related deaths.

Often the war dead were buried in trenches. When there had been massive casualties trenches would be dug by soldiers and labourers and coffins would be transported to the cemetery during the night on lorries or trucks and laid to rest three deep in two parallel trenches.

During the war, there was little time to mourn or to recognise the work of those supporting the war effort. As Robin Sherry, of W Sherry & Sons put it: “People had to ‘keep calm and carry on.’”

Following the end of WW2 though there followed the setting up of numerous war memorials to honour the war dead and also those who contributed to the war effort. However, there is little mention of the work of funeral directors nor any World War II memorial to their efforts.

Funeral directors and others connected to the industry are the unsung heroes of World War II. They risked their lives, worked in the most difficult of circumstances with few resources.

Sources:
Horowitz A “On the dark side of WW2.”