



JOINT POW/MIA ACCOUNTING COMMAND

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

From: Jeffrey K. Johnson, Historian; JPAC Research & Analysis Group
To: Debra Prince-Zinni, Disinterment Project Manager; JPAC Central Identification Laboratory
Subj: X-3 GORRON/X-356 GERMANY COMPARISON WITH PFC LAWRENCE S. GORDON

Overview

Due to internal inquiries concerning X-3 Gorrion/X-356 Germany (X-356)¹, an unknown set of remains from World War II, JPAC Research & Analysis Group (R&A) staff conducted a review of the case. Specifically, the request questioned whether or not R&A personnel could associate the remains with an unresolved casualty from that conflict. The casualty in question is Pfc Lawrence S. Gordon, a Canadian citizen serving as a U.S. Army soldier from the Reconnaissance Company, 32nd Armored Regiment, 3rd Armored Division. On 13 August 1944, Pfc Gordon was killed near Carrouges, France, when German anti-tank fire destroyed the M8 armored car in which he and three other soldiers were riding. Upon consideration of this case, R&A staff concluded that the association between the casualty and this set of remains was possible but improbable.

Aside from the general issues with World War II unknowns, there are specific problems with X-356 that warrant a degree of caution prior to any proposed forensic analysis effort. The problems with this set of remains include:

1. ambiguity regarding the remains' country of origin,
2. the lack of a skeletal chart and a clear description of the remains,
3. undocumented recovery and processing by both American and German personnel,
4. and the usual number of problems related to the recovery of casualties in post-battle situations.

The pertinent information for this case comes from several primary and secondary sources. The former include the X-356 file, the Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) for Pfc Gordon, Pvt Anthony J. Abato, and Pvt James A. Bowman, and a statement from (former) Pvt Charles H. Kurtz.

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1. Initial Recovery

It is unclear how and when the initial recovery of X-356 was undertaken. It is known that an undisclosed party “picked up” X-356 along with X-2 Gorrion (X-2) and both sets of remains were interred by American Graves Registration Command (AGRC) personnel at U.S. Military Cemetery #1, Gorrion, France (Gorrion #1), on 15 August 1944.² Federal Bureau of Investigation personnel later used fingerprint analysis to identify X-2 as Pvt James A. Bowman, a soldier in the same armored car as Pfc Gordon on 13 August 1944. An unnamed party reportedly recovered X-2 “from [a] Command car” at an undisclosed location on an unidentified date.³ The third soldier that died in Pfc Gordon’s armored car is Pvt Anthony J. Abato, who was reportedly shot, presumably after fleeing the destroyed vehicle.⁴ Private Abato’s IDPF contains little information regarding the effort by the U.S. Graves Services to recover his remains and only indicates that he died of wounds on 15 August 1944 and was later interred at Gorrion #1.⁵ Because of the scarcity of evidence, it is unclear if the remains of Privates Bowman and Abato were recovered near the same area as X-356. On 21 April 1945, Quartermaster Corps (QMC) personnel notified the family of Pfc Gordon that the QMC was in possession of the Pfc Gordon’s “billfold and some souvenir money.”⁶ It is uncertain how and from where QMC personnel received the serviceman’s wallet.

Known evidence suggests that X-356 was likely recovered from the same general geographical area of northern France in which Pfc Gordon was reportedly killed. Private Bowman’s remains and X-356 were reportedly recovered around the same time and likely by the same personnel. It is unclear if X-356 was recovered near Pvt Bowman’s remains or if the two sets of remains are associated only because they were located during the same recovery mission. In reality, X-356 could be associated with any one of a large number of individuals who died in northern France during the second week of August 1944. The lack of evidence regarding the remains’ recovery provides little context to understand and assess the provenance of X-356.

2. American Processing

In the initial Report of Burial, QMC officer 1st Lt Harry Dubrov notes, “Body burned. Tooth chart only means of identification.”⁷ No skeletal chart is included in the file and there is no indication of what remains are present. As previously stated, the Report of Burial does include a tooth chart with the notation, “Teeth Sprung far apart.”⁸ A handwritten item near the top of the form reads, “found to be enemy dead enemy unk- 356.”⁹ It is unclear when this notation was made, but it was presumably after Graves Services personnel disinterred and reprocessed the remains in March 1945. Graves Services personnel interred the X-356 remains in Plot A, Row 2, Grave 23 at Gorrion #1 on 15 August 1944.¹⁰

A 17 March 1945 memorandum states that Graves Services personnel exhumed and reprocessed X-356 on undisclosed dates. The report writer notes that, “Examination of remains revealed deceased completely clothed in German equipment, labels of which named German manufacturers. No laundry markings, numbers or initials were found in this clothing.”¹¹ The memorandum describes the remains as “mangled and decomposed” and, because of this, tooth charting and fingerprinting were impossible.¹² Graves Services personnel believed that because

the remains were dressed in a German uniform X-356 must be German.¹³ Graves Services staff designated the remains as “Unknown German Solider X-356” and on 21 March 1945 interred the remains in Plot F, Row 1, Grave 9 of the “German Section of Gorrion Cemetery.”¹⁴

Graves Services personnel attempted to identify X-356 from 1944 to 1951. In July 1951, one official stated “Further attempts have been made to associate Unknowns from the areas concerned, with Pfc Gordon and Pvt Grimes, with negative results.”¹⁵ The other serviceman in question is Pvt Ray Grimes of the 32nd Armored Regiment who reportedly died in mid-August 1944. A 2 October 1951 letter from the Memorial Division to Pfc Gordon’s family declares that, “All unknowns recovered from this area were examined by an accredited anthropologist in an attempt to establish an association between one of these unknowns and your son. I regret to inform you, however, that such an association could not be made.”¹⁶

3. Non-Recoverable

On 2 April 1945, the War Department declared Pvt Gordon to have been Killed In Action on 13 August 1944 thereby officially changing the serviceman’s status from Missing In Action.¹⁷ On 8 December 1950, a Board of Review recommended that the remains of 83 U.S. service persons declared non-recoverable from several regions of France. Private Gordon was among the deceased on the list.¹⁸ A 31 July 1951 letter from the Memorial Division to Grave Services indicated that an investigation into the possibility of Pvt Gordon’s recoverability was ongoing and that efforts to declare him non-recoverable should be, “suspended pending advise [sic] from your Headquarters.”¹⁹ In September 1951, a Board of Review did declare Pvt Gordon’s remains to be non-recoverable. The board found that, “The remains of the decedent could have been recovered. However, after review of the following [personnel records and lists of unknowns from the area] it has been determined that evidence does not exist to contradict a finding of non-recoverability.”²⁰

4. German Processing

On 25 May 1961, custody of X-356 was transferred to German officials who reprocessed the remains.²¹ It appears that this transfer and reprocessing was undertaken because in 1961 the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*) moved over 10,000 sets of German remains from various cemeteries to the German Cemetery at Huisnes-Sur-Mer, France.²² The reprocessing technician produced a dental chart but not a skeletal chart and noted that a skeletal inventory did not apply.²³ It is uncertain if this means that the remains were either too sparse or too broken to inventory properly. In another section of the report the technician estimates that the remains are from a person who was approximately 25 years old. This estimate was reportedly based on the epiphyses, which suggests that some remains were intact. The report writer also describes the skeleton as completely broken and states that the remains cannot be measured. Unknown X-356 was interred on an unspecified date in the German Cemetery at Huisnes-Sur-Mer, France.²⁴

5. Present Review

The present review of this case focused upon the combat operations in France to establish a broad range of historical candidates for possible association with X-356. As outlined above, Graves Services personnel reportedly recovered X-356 near Carrouges, France, in mid-August 1944. Carrouges is located in the Basse-Normandie (Normandy) region of France about 50 miles south of the English Channel. A little over a month after the invasion of France on 6 June 1944, Allied troops began to “break out” and move quickly southward and westward. On 8 August 1944, General Omar Bradley devised an operational plan to surround the German military west of Argentan and Falaise, France. The purpose of this combined British, Canadian, and American operation was to encircle and entrap German ground forces. American troops were to serve as the southern portion of the operation creating a boundary through Mortain, Dornfront, Carrouges and Sées, France, which would help to close the vise.²⁵ The operation was finished by 20 August 1944, but it did not work as well as designed. A large number of German troops escaped and Allied troops suffered numerous losses.²⁶

On 13 August 1944, the 3rd Armored Division pushed northeastward over 20 miles from the town of Mayenne.²⁷ German anti-tank fire that day reportedly destroyed Pfc Gordon’s armored car killing the soldier and two of the other three crewmen about five miles west of Carrouges.²⁸ According to (former) Pvt Charles H. Kurtz, the armored car’s radio operator and sole survivor, the vehicle passed through Rânes on 13 August 1944 shortly before German fire damaged the M8. Mr. Kurtz remembered that a German shell struck the armored car’s gas tank and “Two men in the turret burned up.”²⁹ Since Pvt Abato was likely shot after exiting the armored car, one can hypothesize that Pfc Gordon was one of the crew members killed inside the armored car. A number of U.S. vehicles were destroyed and American service persons killed in the area during and after the offensive. At least 86 American servicemen were killed in France from 8 to 18 August 1944. Of these lost service personnel, 79 are currently unaccounted for.³⁰ There are at least 92 members of the 3rd Armored Division who died from 8 to 18 August 1944 and 12 of these individuals are currently unaccounted for.³¹ In 1947, AGRC personnel attempted to locate Pfc Gordon’s armored car but were unable to do so. One official noted, “The Army vehicles in this section have been removed for scrap iron according to local civilians, and it is believed that any human remains would have been found when the vehicles were taken away.”³² Salvage records indicate that an M8 armored car was recovered on 15 April 1944, the same day that Pfc Gordon was interred at Gorrion #1.³³ It is unclear from where the M8 was salvaged and if it was Pfc Gordon’s vehicle.


In July 1951, Graves Services personnel compared both Pfc Gordon and Pvt Ray Grimes to X-6 Gorrion (X-6), a badly burned set of remains reportedly recovered during mid-August 1944 from the Normandy area. A QMC representative stated, “... due to the paucity of remains, no positive association can be made.”³⁴ Unknown X-6 is currently unassociated with a U.S. service member.

6. Summary and Conclusions

The initial inquiry explored the possible association of Pvt Gordon to the X-356 remains. As shown above, there is a possible circumstantial association between this unaccounted-for service

person and the unidentified set of remains, but a dearth of historical information and primary source evidence makes any association very uncertain. The historical narrative does not contain any information regarding the initial recovery of the remains or the manner in which X-356 came into AGRC custody. There is no documentation of the original processing effort and the record does not include a skeletal chart, so it is unclear what portions of the remains are present. Additionally, U.S. officials transferred custody of X-356 to German authorities in May 1961 and it is uncertain how the remains were processed and handled in the subsequent years. It is also highly problematic that the remains were seemingly recovered clothed in a German military uniform. Although one could concoct explanations for an American service person's remains being clothed in an enemy uniform, each of these scenarios would seem unlikely. While undocumented parties likely recovered X-356 from the same general area that Pfc Gordon perished, there are a number of other unaccounted-for U.S. servicemen that died in the region. More research could produce a broad listing of historical candidates based on the region of loss, but the scarcity of historical information, the lack of documentation regarding skeletal remains, and the possibility that the remains are of a German service person would indicate that extreme caution be advised. Also, it should be noted that Pfc Gordon was a Canadian citizen serving in the U.S. Army and it is unclear what is JPAC's authority or responsibility in such matters. If Gordon's remains were associated with X-356, then it would involve a Canadian citizen who died as a member of the U.S. military and whose remains are in a German cemetery in France.

Because of these concerns, future investigators should consider all of the American service persons killed within the Normandy region, along with any missing German personnel. This monumental task would require a subject matter expert to research American ground and air losses within the area along with an in-depth understanding of unaccounted-for German service persons. There is no complete database of all the U.S. personnel unaccounted-for in France as a whole or the Normandy region in particular. Undertaking such research would require an in-depth analysis of the 2,379 known (Missing Air Crew Reports) MACRs associated with France. Additionally, the researcher would have to review Eighth and Ninth Air Forces to locate non-MACR missions and losses. Furthermore, the investigator would have to engage in substantial archives research to determine the movements and losses of each military unit in France. This research would yield a large data pool of American Normandy area losses. Compiling such a pool of German losses in the Normandy region would require extensive German archives research and engagement with the proper German authorities. Finally, the researcher would also need to analyze AGRC recovery and identification operations in France to better understand how remains were recovered and processed. This research would also provide insight into recovery and identification patterns and would allow the investigator gauge the methodology and validity of previous identifications.



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Endnotes

¹ While X-356 was in American custody it was designated X-3 Gorrón. This designation was not changed to X-356 until the remains were transferred to German control.

² Harry Dubrov, "Report of Burial," 15 August 1944, Unknown X-3 Gorrón/X-356 German file. Record Group (RG) 92: Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD.

³ Harry Dubrov, "Report of Burial," 15 August 1944 (revised 19 May 1945), Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) for Bowman, James A., 15045464. RG 92: Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD.

⁴ Harry Dubrov, "Report of Burial," 16 August 1944 (revised 27 November 1944), IDPF for Abato, Anthony J., 12040890. RG 92: Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Harry Niemiec, Letter to Ella Gordon, 21 April 1945, IDPF for Gordon, Lawrence S., 19074804. RG 92: Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD.

⁷ Dubrov, "Report of Burial," 15 August 1944, X-356 file.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Alexander K. Zelenski, "Reprocessing of Unknown X-3 (Gorrón Cemetery)," 17 March 1945, X-356 file.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ It is unclear why the initial processing technician did not notate that X-356 was dressed in German clothing. It is possible that the report was completed in haste and lacked the expected thoroughness.

¹⁴ Alexander K. Zelenski, "Reprocessing of Unknown X-3 (Gorrón Cemetery)," 17 March 1945; "Report of Burial," 21 March 1945, X-356 file.

¹⁵ Benjamin B. King, "Further Investigation," 31 July 1951, IDPF for Gordon.

¹⁶ James B. Clearwater, Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Samuel A. Gordon, 2 October 1951, IDPF for Gordon.

¹⁷ "Report of Death," 7 April 1945, IDPF for Gordon.

¹⁸ C.C. Wasson, "Proceedings of a Board of Review," 8 December 1950, IDPF for Gordon.

¹⁹ Benjamin B. King, "Further Investigation," 31 July 1951, IDPF for Gordon.

²⁰ "Non-Recoverable Remains Reexamination of Records," 25 September 1951, IDPF for Gordon.

²¹ "Umbettungskladde," 25 May 1961, X-356 file.

²² Laura Wood, "War Memorials HQ," 2011, http://warmemorialsHQ.org/cpg/displayimage.php?album=113&pid=790#top_display_media (accessed 27 March 2013).

²³ The reprocessing report is written entirely in German. Any reference to the language within this document is referring to a translation provided by Dr. Katrin Koel-Abt, a forensic anthropologist at JPAC-CIL.

²⁴ "Umbettungskladde," 25 May 1961, X-356 file.

²⁵ Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit: United States Army in World War II* (Green Series), The European Theater of Operation (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1993), 492-99.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 550- 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 511.

²⁸ "Data on Remains Not Yet Recovered or Identified," 20 May 1947 (revised 26 June 1947), IDPF for Gordon.

²⁹ Charles H. Kurtz, Letter to Alexis Boban, undated, Gorrion electronic file.

³⁰ These figures are compiled from the United States Army Quartermaster General's Office, *Rosters of World War II Dead (all services)* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army, 1954). Note, that these figures are the minimum number of U.S. personnel killed in France during these dates. The actual number of U.S. dead is almost certainly higher.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "Data on Remains Not Yet Recovered or Identified," 26 June 1947, IDPF for Gordon.

³³ "Disability Report," 14 August 1944, Gorrion electronic file.

³⁴ Harry Dubrov, "Report of Burial," 15 August 1944, X-6 file; Benjamin B. King, "Further Investigation," 31 July 1951, IDPF for Gordon.