



COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES



PIECES OF A PUZZLE: RECONSTRUCTING THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE IN SEARCH OF THE MISSING DEAD



DISCOVER LEARN REMEMBER

RESEARCH REPORT COMPILED AND WRITTEN FOR
THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION AND
THE KENYA ABANDONED GRAVES GROUP

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Reconstructing the colonial archive in search of the missing dead

This is the story of how dispersed archival collections have been pieced back together to identify the final resting places of missing African service personnel of the First World War. Although a limited example, this report demonstrates a methodology for this work that it is hoped can be replicated elsewhere in East Africa. It is provided to the Kenya Abandoned Graves Group for consideration and action as part of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's ongoing programme to tackle historical inequalities in commemoration.

The missing dead

Research previously published by the CWGC acknowledged that large numbers of African soldiers and carriers who died during the First World War remain completely unaccounted for.¹ In some cases, these men died in the field as a result of combat or exhaustion. As with the rest of the army, however, it is likely that more died in hospital following injury or disease. To give an example, the official statistics of the Military Labour Bureau show that between January 1917 and November 1918 a total of 231,387 carriers were admitted to hospital, and of those, 31,293 died.² Thanks to decisions made outside and within the Commission during and after the war, the organisation possesses very few names and even fewer burial locations for these men. This presents two issues for commemoration: firstly, without their names, the CWGC cannot commemorate them individually as it does other casualties; and secondly, the organisation cannot mark their graves as it does not know what happened to their mortal remains.

As nominal commemoration sits at the heart of the Commission's philosophy, the search for missing names has always been a priority for the Non-Commemoration Programme. Sitting alongside this work, however, is the search for information about what happened to these men in death.

Complicated archival legacies

Finding answers in any archive is rarely as simple as consulting a catalogue. Even in the most well-established and carefully administered state institutions, the researcher is at the mercy of cataloguing and must use logic as well as an understanding of those who made deposits to find what they are looking for. At the other end of the spectrum are collections that are completely without cataloguing, making the researcher reliant on the knowledge and help of those who administer them. Added to these issues is the history of the material itself. Government departments and institutions create vast quantities of paperwork, only some of which will ever be considered for preservation. In the colonial context, there is the added challenge that some of this material was returned to the metropole as

¹ For more information see *Report of the Special Committee to Review Historical Inequalities in Commemoration*, (Maidenhead: CWGC, 2021), <https://www.cwgc.org/media/noantj4i/report-of-the-special-committee-to-review-historical-inequalities-in-commemoration.pdf>

² TNA, CO 533/216, *Report by Lieut-Colonial O.F. Watkins, CBE, DSO, Director of Military Labour to the B.E.A. Expeditionary Force on the period from August 4th, 1914 to September 15th, 1919.*

part of administrative practice, while large numbers of other papers were destroyed on the eve of independence.

In isolation, what survives in the former colonial archive and what was removed to the UK may make little sense or, at best, will not provide a full picture. Often, if we are to find the answers we need, we must reunite these materials. This process is akin to trying to piece together an old and very large jigsaw puzzle: you know the pieces you need, as well as the general outline of what you are trying to put together, but all the individual bits are scattered about in different locations. Worse still, you know some of those pieces are very likely lost for good. And yet, despite the gaps that inevitably exist, by drawing together the fragments that do survive, you can begin to see the overall picture come together.

The invisible Mombasa cemeteries

Mombasa, Kenya, has always been a focus of the Programme's attentions given its significance as a seaport during the First World War and the vital role it played in the movement of manpower. We know, for example, that it contained a carrier depot and three military hospitals, all of which served a large number of Kenyans and other East Africans who passed through Mombasa on their way to and from the theatre of war to the south.³ Based on what we know about hospitalisation and casualty figures within carrier units, we have also assumed that Mombasa Island will have to have provided burial grounds for those who sadly died there. Indeed, we know from three death lists produced by the Military Labour Bureau spanning the period September 1914 to October 1915, that 58 men died in Mombasa, of whom 5 died in Mombasa Carrier Depot Hospital.⁴ Up until August this year, however, we were unable to say where these men and their comrades were laid to rest. Continued archival work in Kenya and the UK is finally getting us close to an answer.

The first part of this jigsaw was located within the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi. By combining simple keyword searches of the limited digital catalogue with methodical trawls through the relevant paper accession lists, the research team was able to identify and analyse hundreds of potentially useful files. And yet, as is often the case with archival research, one of the most significant finds came as a surprise. Within the accession lists was a file titled 'Native Cemeteries Mombasa', which – like many other cemetery files for towns across Kenya – was ordered in the hope it would include information on wartime burials. Up to that point, the team had largely drawn a blank, but when this folder arrived, they were greeted by an alternative title on the file itself: 'Carrier Corps Cemetery, Native Cemetery MSA'.

³ See for example TNA, CO 533/216, *Report by Lieut-Colonial O.F. Watkins*; TNA, WO 95/5349-5352, *Headquarters Branches and Services: Adjutant General (Base)*; Edinburgh University, Col-207, *Papers of John William Arthur*; Bodleian Library, MS. 5901/1, *Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel O.F. Watkins relating to the First World War in East Africa*.

⁴ KNA, PC/COAST/1/13/70, *Military Labour Bureau Death List No.1 Verified, Period Sept 1914 to 30th June 1915*; E.A.T.C. Carrier Section, *Monthly Death Return, List V, October 1915*.

The folder contained a series of letters from mid-1917 referring to the high death rate at the Carrier Depot Hospital on Mombasa Island – a figure placed between 5 and 14 per day between May and July 1917. As might be expected given the limited size of the island, so many dead quickly brought the issue of cemetery space to crisis point. The exact position of the hospital was not given, although it was referred to as being in the north of the island, partly on government land.⁵ It had an adjoining cemetery, which by May 1917 was said to contain 150 burials. For hygiene and space reasons, it was ordered that this site must close and that all future burials should ‘take place in the various cemeteries according to religion of deceased’. As the Carrier Depot Hospital was reported as being ‘about a mile’ from the nearest cemetery, funding was sought from the Director of Military Labour for the transfer and burial of the bodies.⁶ One cemetery named directly as being used for Carrier burials at this time was the Pauper Cemetery, which was said to be near the convent on the south side of the railway.⁷ Given the mounting demand for burial space, by the end of May it was reported that this cemetery would be full within a matter of months and authorisation was sought to purchase more land on the island.⁸ This was done in August 1917, and while no map was included in the folder, the plot reference was given as:

III/28
6700

Beyond this, no other hint was given as to its location beyond the fact that these 6 acres were in the north portion of the island, near the Hobley Road. We know, however, that the area was subdivided into religion-specific plots, with a small access road branching off the main Hobley Road. The correspondence shows that this cemetery was intended for civil and Carrier Corps burials, and no room ‘was to be wasted’. Planned interments per acre were ordered to be not less than 600.⁹

By November 1917, the Provincial Commissioner recorded that, from a high of 14 carrier burials per day in July, interments had dropped to around 100 per month. On top of this, civil interments were taking place in the same cemetery at around 90 per month.¹⁰ While an exact figure for wartime burials was not given, assuming the death rates quoted extended into 1918 (and potentially rose given the known impact of influenza), we could reasonably assume that the total would reach into the thousands.

⁵ See KNA, PC/COAST/1/12/285, Letter: MLB Deputy Assistant Director of Military Labour, to C.W. Hobley, Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, 21/05/1917. See also the handwritten notes on the front and back of this letter.

⁶ See KNA, PC/COAST/1/12/285, Letter: Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, to Commissioner of Military Labour Nairobi, 26/05/1917; Letter: Ag. Superintendent, Inland Revenue and Conservancy, to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, 26/05/1917.

⁷ KNA, PC/COAST/1/12/285, Letter: Senior Medical Office (Civil) to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, 14/06/1917.

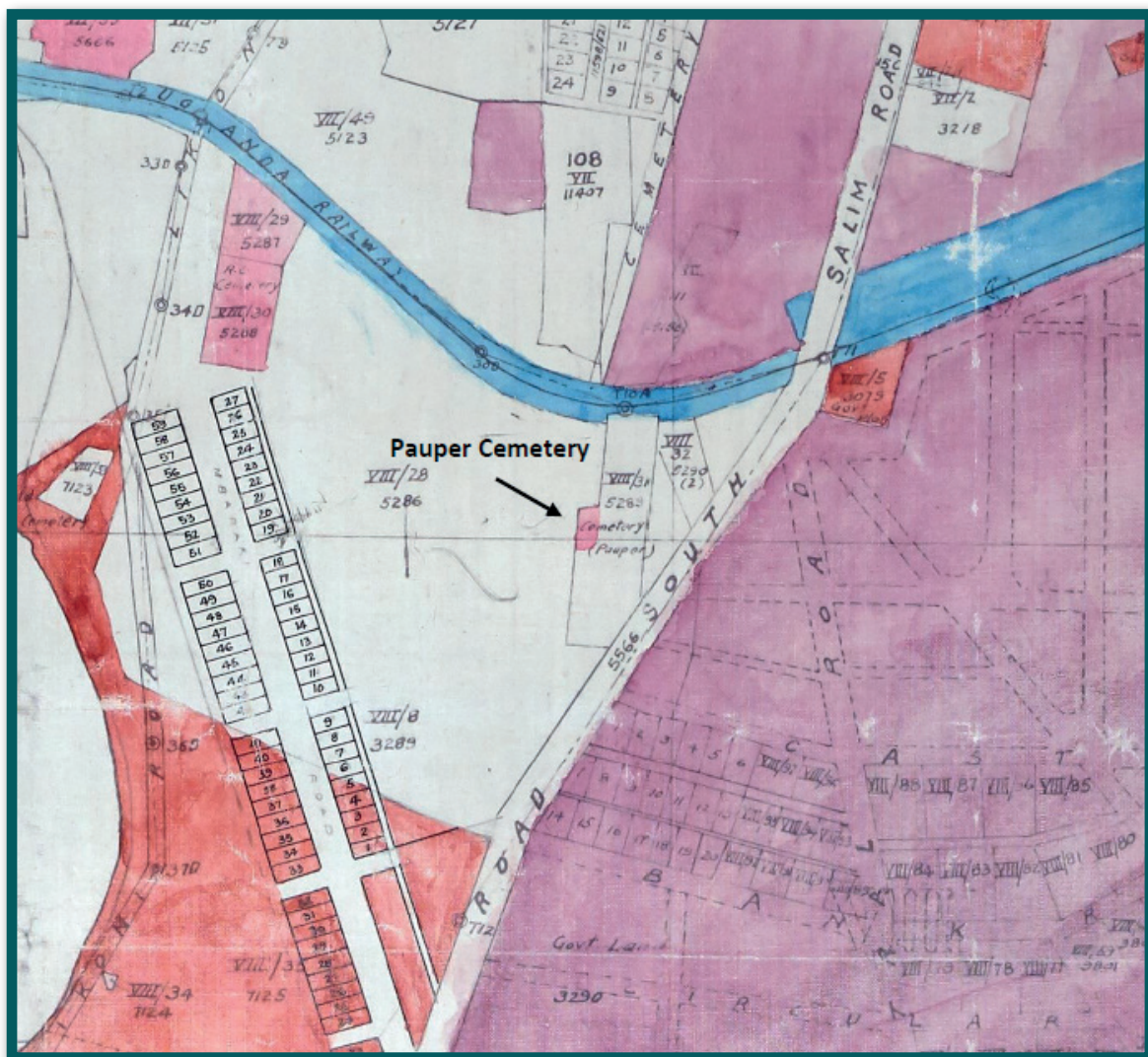
⁸ KNA, PC/COAST/1/12/285, Letter: Ag. Superintendent, Inland Revenue and Conservancy, to Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, 31/05/1917; Letter: Provincial Commissioner Mombasa to The Chief Secretary Nairobi, 03/07/1917.

⁹ KNA, PC/COAST/1/12/285, Letter: Provincial Commissioner Mombasa to Chief Secretary Nairobi, 08/08/1917.

¹⁰ KNA, PC/COAST/1/12/285, Letter: Provincial Commissioner Mombasa to Director of Public Works Nairobi, 10/11/1917.

From theoretical to spatial

What brought this theory to life and placed these sites in the Mombasa landscape were town planning maps now held at The National Archives of the UK. These documents had made their way back to the metropole within administrative correspondence and, although there is no way of saying they were ever directly associated with the Nairobi correspondence, there are ways in which the two can be aligned. Firstly, as the following 1921 map sections demonstrate, the pauper cemetery is clearly identifiable in the south of the island, just below the railway line (in blue). In a 1944 tour report completed by Colonel Buller, at the time the IWGC Inspector for Ethiopia, it was noted that the pauper cemetery was 'said to be a last war [First World War] burial ground containing "hundreds" of unmarked graves spread over an area of two or three acres'. Georeferencing and overlaying this 1921 map on modern satellite imagery of Mombasa clearly shows the position of the pauper cemetery, although it appears that the site has since been developed. At this stage it is unclear whether any part of the site is undisturbed.

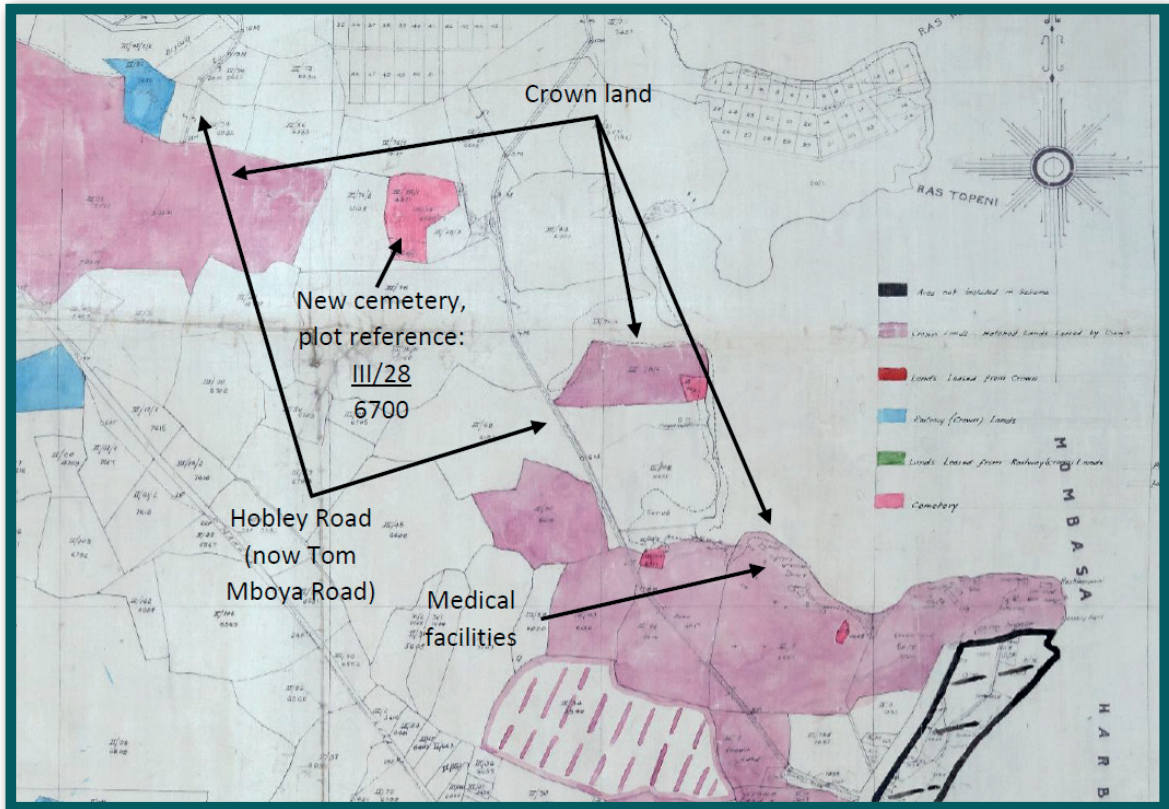


TNA, MR 1/814/1, showing south portion of Mombasa Island

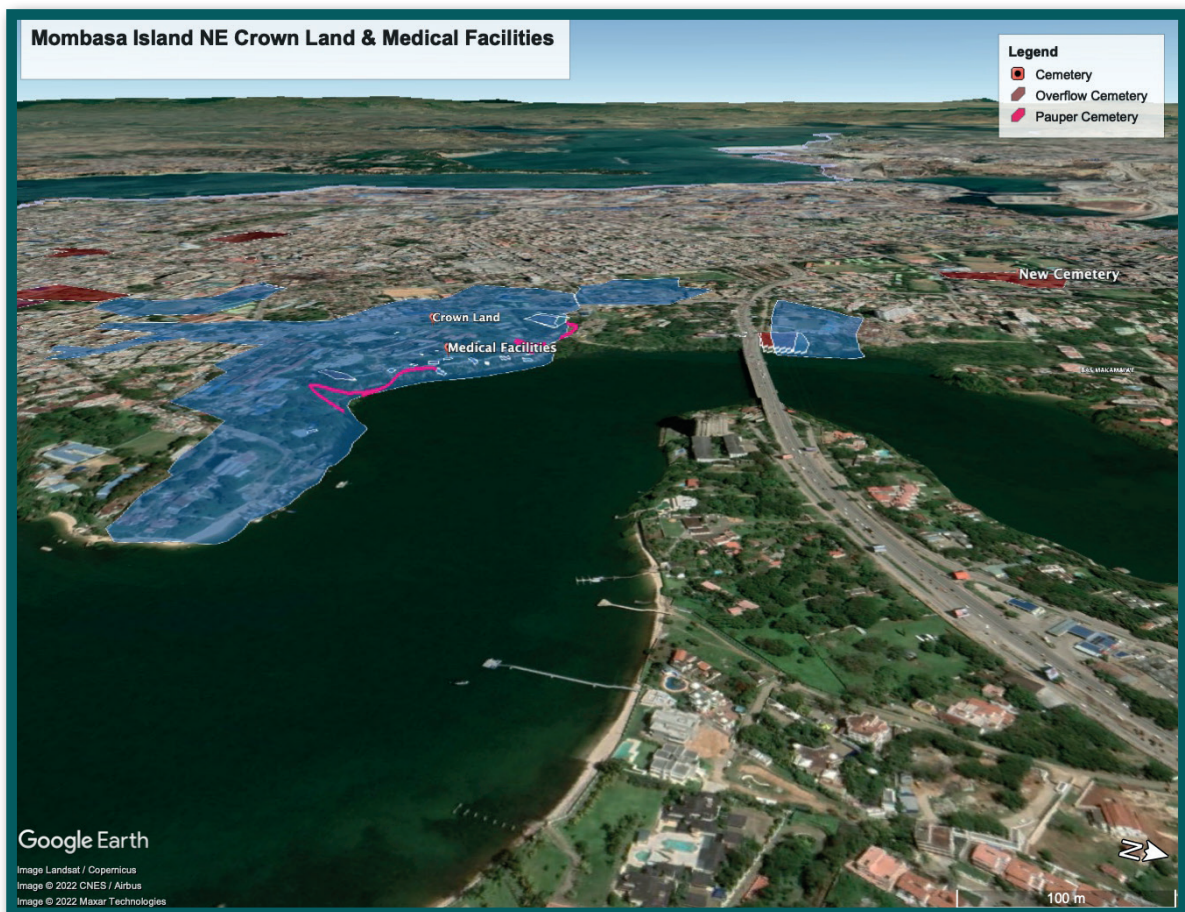


Secondly, although the location of the Carrier Hospital and its associated cemetery was never clearly identified, we do know that it was in the north of the island, partly on government land. We also know that an extension to that site in the spring of 1917 was permitted so long as it did not come too close to the north circular road.¹¹ Crown land is quite clearly demarcated on the following map in both the north-east and north-west of the island. To the north-west, it spans both sides of the Makupa Road (the modern day A109), spreading east into Makupa and Manyimbo (today's Tudor Mombasa) over the Hobley Road, and west to Shimanzi. To the north-east, in Tononoka, it again spans both sides of the Hobley Road, albeit at a much lower point. Interestingly, it is in this latter area that the 1921 map refers to medical facilities as well as a mortuary and two cemeteries. Although it is impossible to say with confidence at this stage that this was the site of the Carrier Depot Hospital, it is at present the most likely candidate.

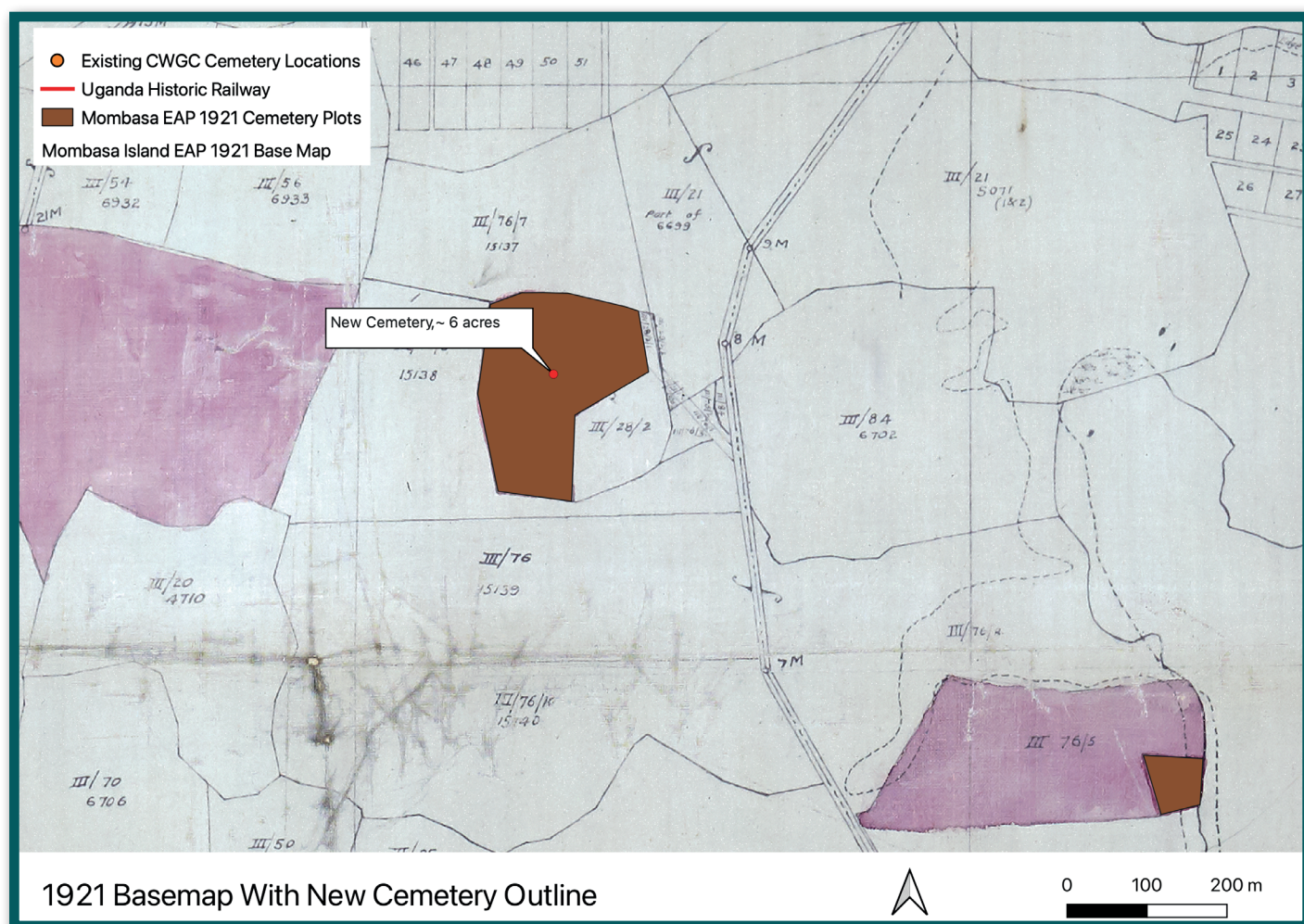
¹¹ See handwritten letters on KNA, PC/COAST/1/12/285, Letter: MLB Deputy Assistant Director of Military Labour, to C.W. Hobley, Provincial Commissioner Mombasa, 21/05/1917.

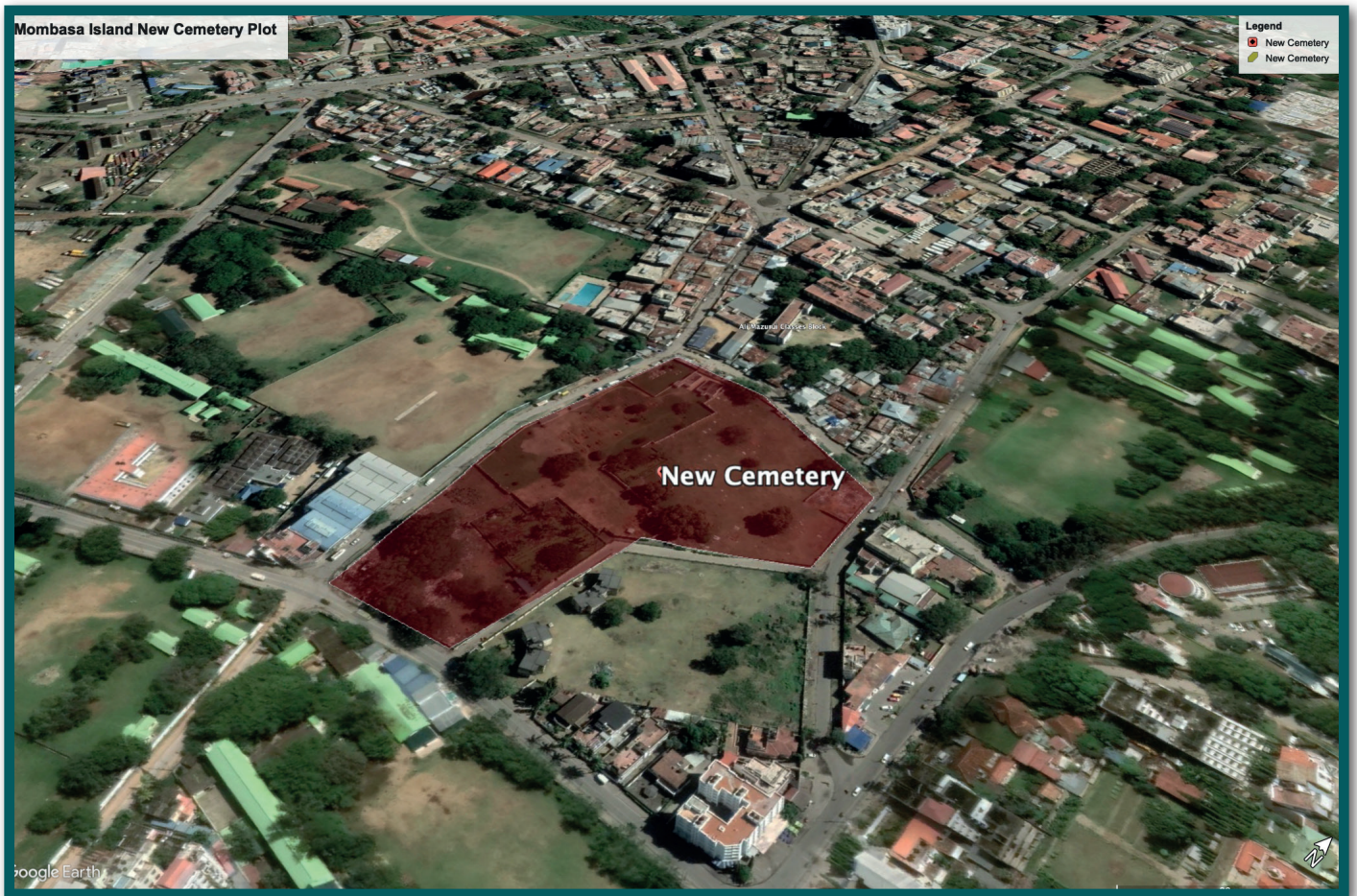


TNA, MR 1/814/1, showing crown land in north portion of Mombasa Island



Finally, returning to the land purchased for a new cemetery in the summer of 1917, the referenced plot number is easily found on the town planning map. Studying the overlay again, this is clearly the still-extant Manyimbo Civil Cemetery, appended to which is the CWGC Manyimbo War Cemetery containing Second World War dead. Buller's 1944 report painted a fairly chaotic picture of the wider site, describing it as a 'large unfenced African cemetery with plots allotted to Missions. Parts are crowded and being used a second time.... C.of.E., Mohammedan and Pagan, R.C's are scattered over Municipal cemetery'. To complicate matters further, this land is still operated as a civil cemetery. This historical and current use presents obvious problems when it comes to the hope of identifying specific graves. Nonetheless, what can now be said categorically is that this site provided the final resting place of many carriers who died in the hospitals of Mombasa during the First World War.

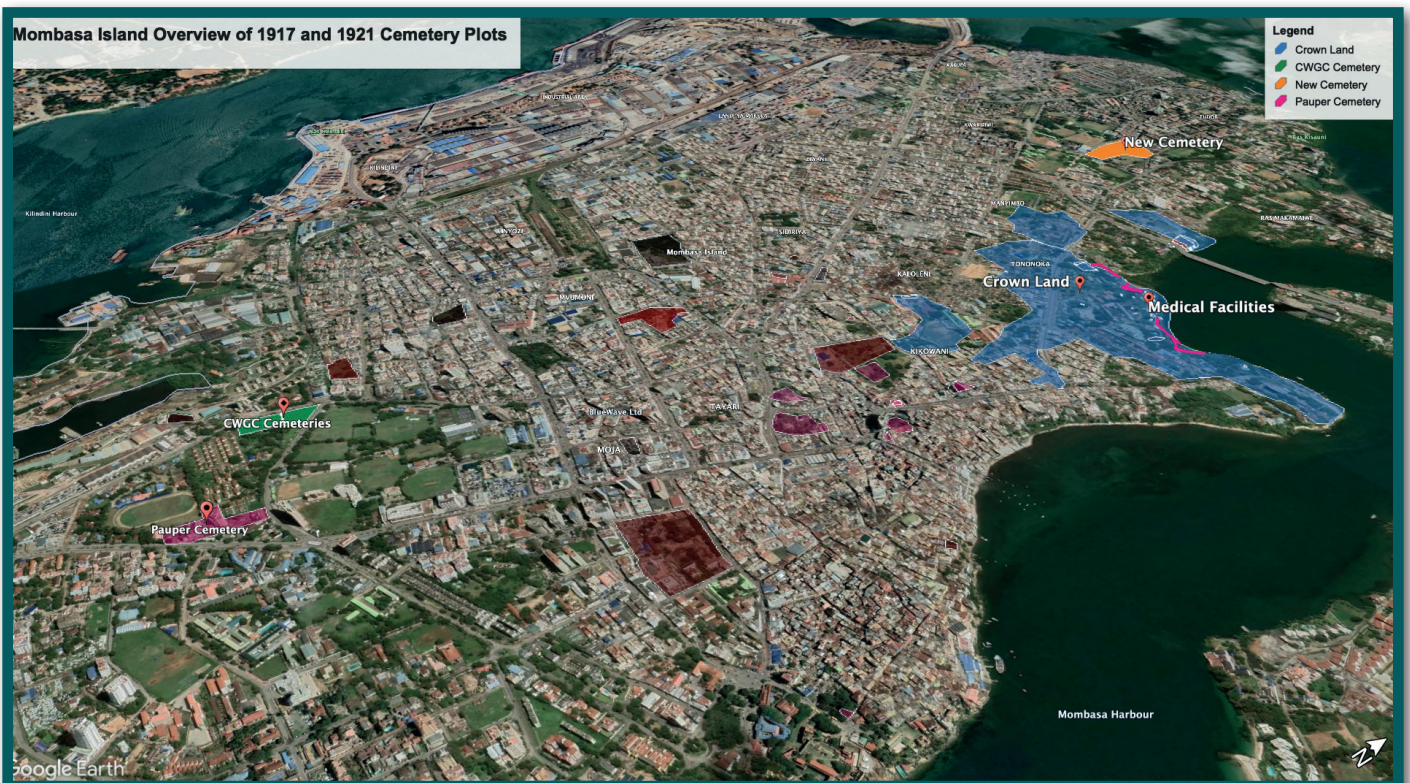
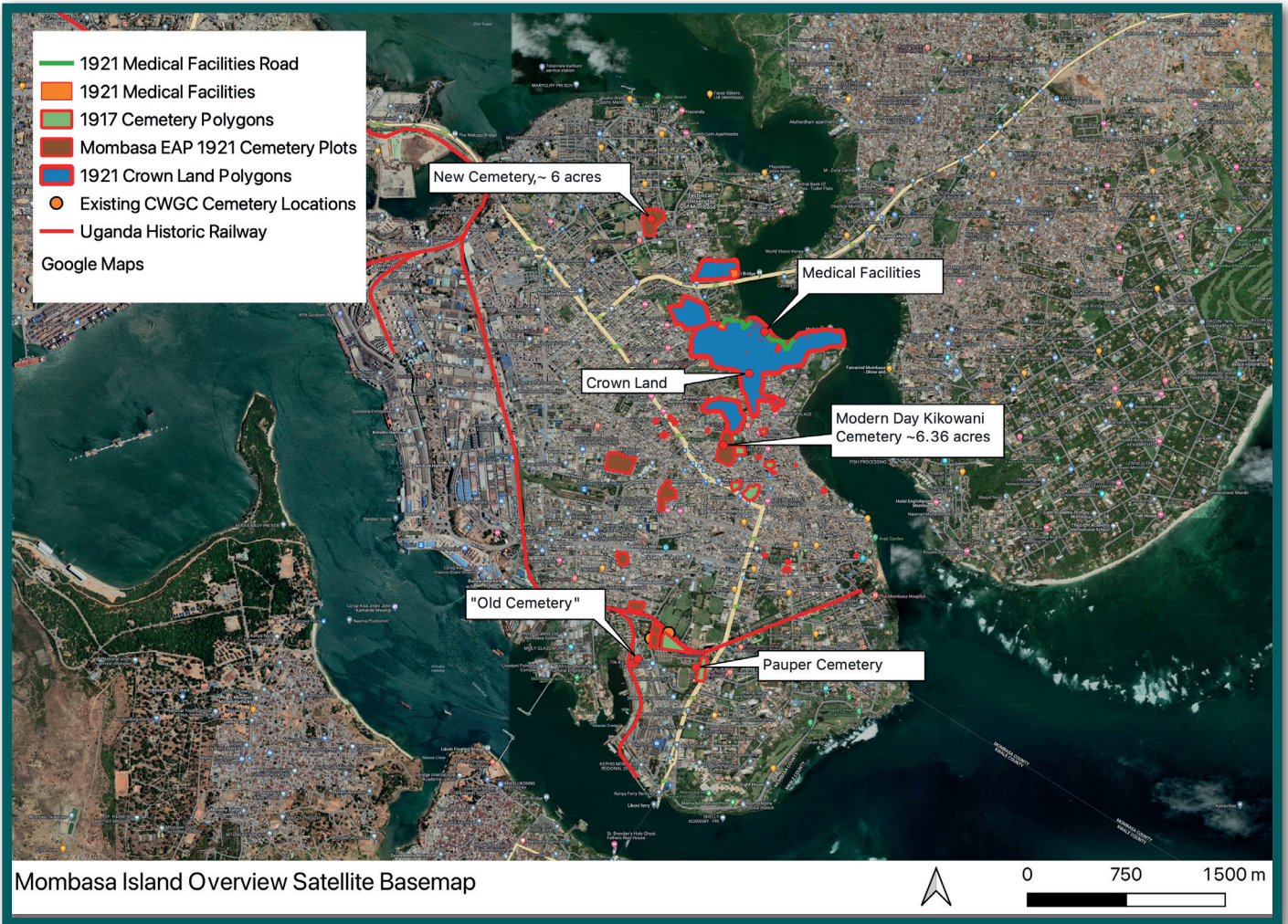




Conclusions

While this report does not pinpoint individual carrier burials, we can now say with confidence that some of these men – likely thousands of them – were laid to rest in the two cemeteries identified. While one of those sites appears to have been comprehensively developed, the other remains a cemetery to this day and even contains a Second World War CWGC plot.¹² Work to identify further cemeteries in Mombasa is ongoing, particularly the small site associated with the Carrier Depot Hospital. These developments will be communicated with the Group as they become available. Moreover, discussions will be held with the Group regarding how to suitably memorialise these sites.

¹² See <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/2019409/mombasa-manyim-bo-war-cemetery/>



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**MORE
INFORMATION**

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