

Grave of officer missing since 1940 identified in France

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The previously un-named grave of an Officer from Kent, who served with the 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards, has been identified and rededicated in his name more than 85 years after his death.

A rededication service for 2nd Lieutenant Ronald Douglas Elmer Speed was organised by the MOD's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC), also known as the 'War Detectives'. The service was held at Warhem Communal Cemetery, France, yesterday (27 March 2026).

2Lt Ronald Douglas Elmer Speed (courtesy of the Speed family)

JCCC Caseworker, Nicola Nash, said:

I am grateful to the researcher who originally submitted evidence suggesting the location of the grave of this Officer. It was wonderful to see the descendants of 2nd Lieutenant Speed attend the service in the place of his parents and siblings, who were devastated when Ronald was lost. We will remember them.

Second Lieutenant Speed, 1919 - 1940

Ronald was the only child of Douglas Charles Leyland Speed and Myrtle Deering, both of Kent. He grew up on his family's estate, Knowlton Court, which was near Goodnestone in Kent. He was educated at St. Aubyn's Preparatory School in Rottingdean, East Sussex before going to Eton College. With both his father and Grandfather serving as British Army Officers, it was no surprise that in June 1937, Ronald successfully passed the Army Entrance Examination and entered the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. On 26 June 1939, Ronald was gazetted as a Second Lieutenant and was subsequently posted to his first choice of regiment, the Coldstream Guards. By December 1939, he had joined the 2nd Battalion and embarked for France to join the British Expeditionary Force.

On 1 June 1940, Ronald was serving with one of four companies holding the line of Hondschoote Canal, close to Warhem. During the morning, this position was subject to heavy enemy shell and mortar fire, and his company was forced to retire. During the engagement, a shell exploded close to the spot where Ronald was standing and was later seen by his men lying mortally wounded. Sadly, the intensity of the battle meant it was impossible for any members of his company to examine him. The location of Ronald's body was never discovered, and he was subsequently listed as missing.

Recently a case was submitted to the CWGC claiming that Second Lieutenant Speed was buried in Warhem Communal Cemetery, France. The grave in question was originally recorded as belonging to an unknown Second Lieutenant of the 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards. Ronald was the only officer of this rank and regiment still missing from this particular action near Dunkirk.

The service today was supported by serving soldiers from the Coldstream Guards.

2Lt Speed's family with the military party (Crown Copyright)

Nephew of 2nd Lieutenant Ronald Douglas Elmer Speed, Hugh Sturges said:

It was such a nice surprise to find out about Ronnie's final resting place, whose portrait has been sitting above the dining room table for years. We were so grateful for the lovely service and all the effort put in by everyone.

The headstone was replaced by Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). Director of the Commemorations at the CWGC Richard Hills said:

We are honoured to rededicate the grave of Second Lieutenant Ronald Douglas Speed, who is buried in a previously unidentified grave at Warhem communal cemetery in France. His newly engraved named headstone ensures he is appropriately commemorated, now and for generations to come. We reaffirm our commitment to care for Second Lieutenant Speed's grave in perpetuity.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/grave-of-officer-missing-since-1940-identified-in-france>