The Last Great Escape: Recovery of 1st Lt. Ewart Sconiers, an American WWII Bombardier Imprisoned at the Stalag Luft III POW Camp

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Gdansk

Location

Abstract

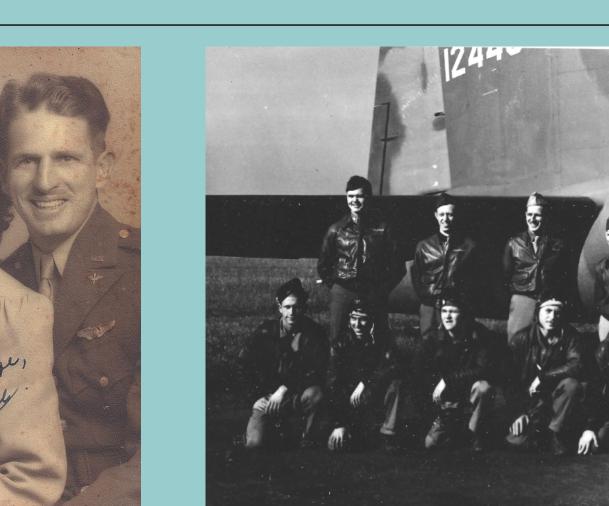
Like many POW/MIA recovery efforts, locating 1st Lt Ewart Sconiers required research, planning, a survey design & method, persistence, and good old-fashioned luck. While imprisoned at the Stalag Luft III POW camp in Germany (now Poland), complications from an injury sent Sconiers to a hospital in a neighboring town-where he died. His burial occurred in a nearby municipal cemetery. After the war and during the Soviet occupation, the aboveground cemetery features were "erased" and memories of the American POW's grave faded. In 2012 Ohio Valley Archaeology, Inc. (OVAI) volunteered its time and equipment to conduct a geophysical survey in the cemetery, now a park in Lubin, Poland. Results of the survey work, along with WWII-era aerial photography and graveside imagery, identified two areas of interest excavated by OVAI in 2015 under contract with DPAA. Trench 2 at the edge of the cemetery uncovered the graves of infants. Trench 1 revealed seven grave features with fourteen burials within or scattered between the features. Bone distribution patterns and evidence of an intrusive trench excavation suggested an upper set of graves had been removed. Concurrent with our excavations, Sconiers' grave marker was discovered in a recently-posted online photograph from a French military cemetery in Gdansk, Poland. A positive identification was then confirmed by DNA tests through the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System.

Background

On October 12, 1942, a B-17 Flying Fortress nicknamed Johnny Reb Jr. was shot down in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Lorient, France. Its crew, including bombardier 1st Lt Ewart Sconiers, was captured and imprisoned at Stalag Luft III- a German prisoner of war camp in the Province of Lower Silesia, Poland. This prison was made famous by the 1963 Hollywood movie, The Great Escape, which depicts the organized (and successful) excavation of escape tunnels by imprisoned Allied airmen. During his confinement, Sconiers purportedly received a concussion, and may have ruptured an eardrum, after slipping and falling on ice. Sconiers died from his injuries after being taken to a local Reserve (municipal) hospital in Luben (today's Lubin, Poland). His burial in the POW section of the nearby municipal cemetery-first row, grave 7-was witnessed by American officers from the POW camp. Sconiers' grave site was eventually lost after the surface components of the cemetery were destroyed during the Soviet occupation of Poland, after which the area was converted into Allies Park.



Sconiers and his wife Bobelle. They were married in 1941, shortly before he enlisted.



The crew of the B-17 *Johhny Reb*. Sconiers is standing, back row, second from right. He won the distinguished Service Cross for helping to land this plane after the pilot was killed in heavy fire and the co-pilot wounded.



Stalag Luft III POW camp. A look across the barracks area. In the background is a grain elevator. The light colored sandy soil, easy for tunneling, is very distinctive in this photo.

A view of the Allies Park area (former municipal cemetery) from the air today (below, left). Though the cemetery was razed by the Soviets after WWII, the property was not developed and remained as a park. Some of the WWII-era landscape features remain, including a railroad (mentioned by the burial detail) and the hospital where Sconiers was reportedly admitted. The arrangement of park paths differs from the original layout of cemetery roads, but the overall shape of the park/cemetery remains the same.





New Graves New Graves Cemetery Roads



The Evidence

Locating Sconiers' grave amongst thousands of others first required OVAI to re-establish the layout of the cemetery. Burial detail accounts indicate that his grave was located at the "back" of the cemetery near the railroad. Photographs taken by the Germans during the burial process show small pine tree rows (perpendicular to the graves) and a stand of larger birch and pines (parallel with the graves)--Sconiers was buried at the edge of the cemetery, in the first row...seventh grave in from the end.

The April and December 1944 aerial imagery (left) show important cemetery details we thought would be useful for identifying Sconiers' burial site. Not only are the grave rows visible, but the April 1944 aerial shows what appear to be recently excavated graves in two areas in the west central part and far eastern part near the railroad. There are also rows of what appear to be small trees parallel to the grave rows in three or four areas and a stand of tall trees parallel to the northern side near the railroad.

The railroad is important because it is mentioned to be in close proximity to the burial site by a burial witness. In fact, one of the American officers who attended the burial remembered being able to see the faces of German soldiers passing by in boxcars on the railroad.

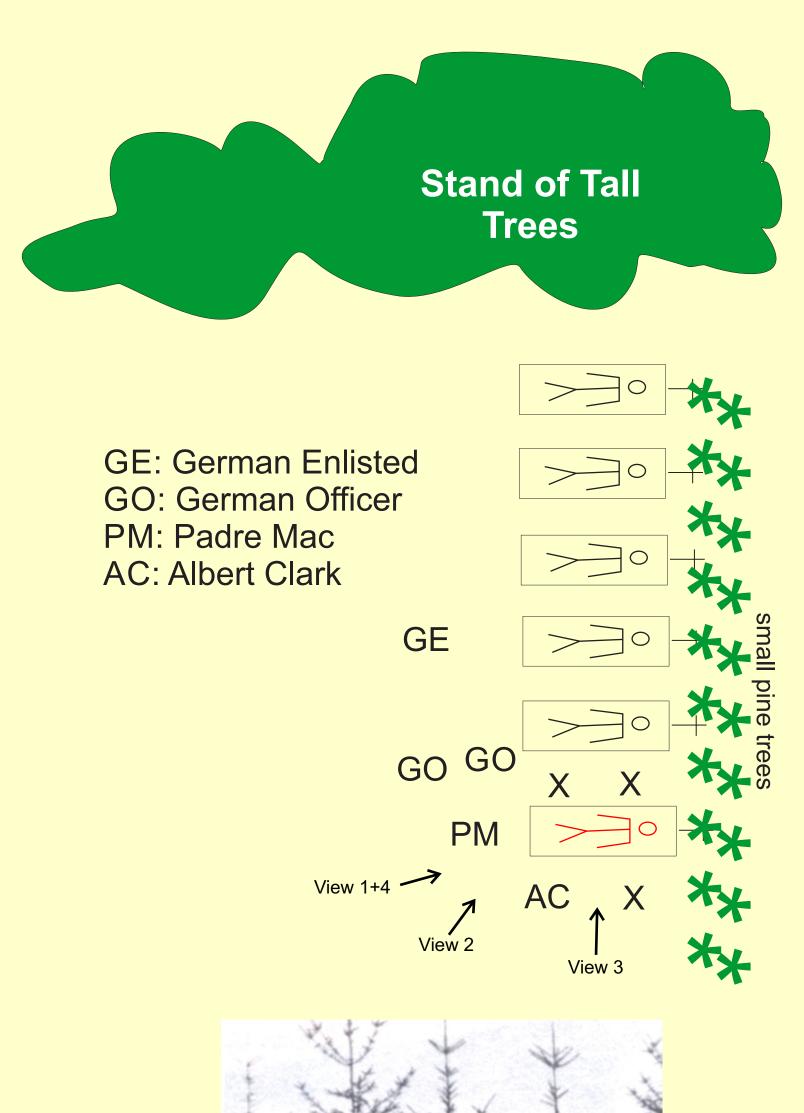
> The background trees visible in photographs taken by the German's of Sconiers' burial ceremony (right) correspond with vegetation patterns evident in the 1944 aerial imagery (left). In Views 1, 2, and 4, there is a row of small pine trees running parallel to the grave rows and perpendicular to Sconiers' casket . In View 3, however, there is a stand of tall birch and pine trees perpendicular to the grave rows and parallel to Sconiers' casket. Based on grave row orientation visible in the aerials. Views 1, 2, and 4 point roughly east and northeast as depicted in the burial schematic. View 3 is pointing north across the graves in the row. Using these details, plus the witness account of the grave being at the "back" of the cemetery and near the railroad, Sconiers's grave must have been placed near the eastern edge of the cemetery where there's a stand of tall trees to the north.





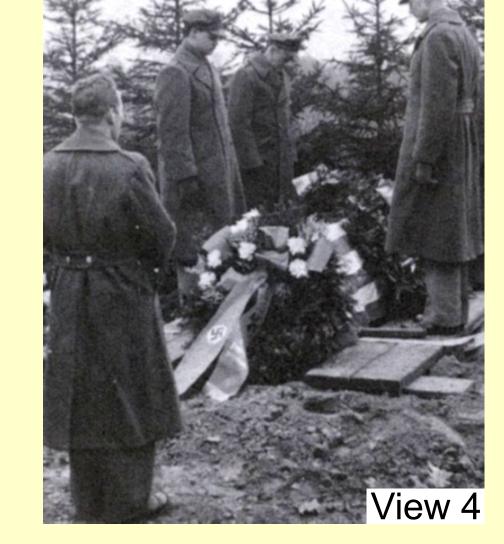


Burial Detail Schmatic









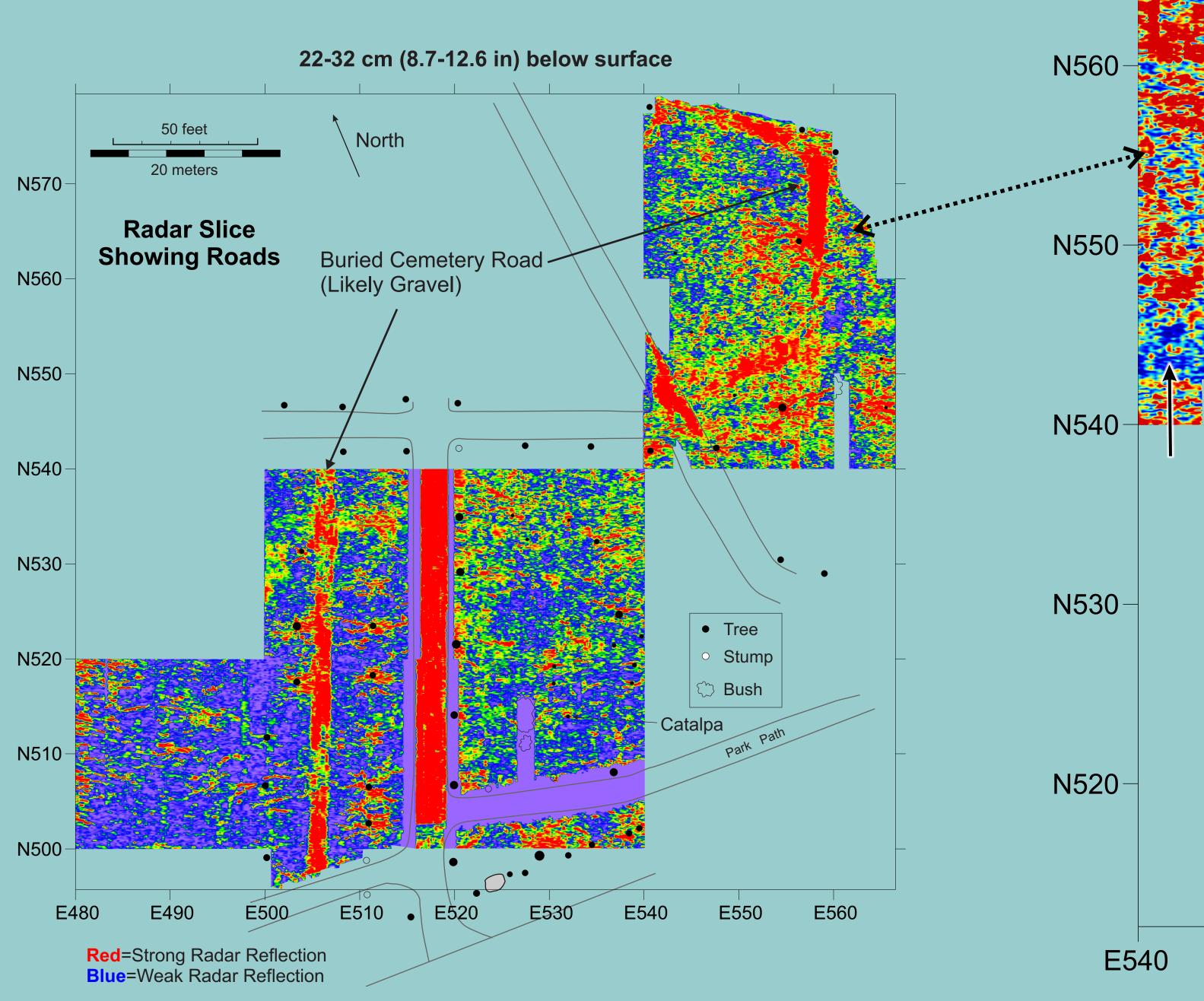
In 2012, OVAI volunteered its time (with crowd-sourced travel funds raised by Pamela Whitelock, niece of Sconiers) to conduct a geophysical survey within Allies Park in an attempt to locate graves--and hopefully find row 1, grave 7.

Given the information gleaned from the 1944 aerial photographs and the photos of the burial detail, the northeast corner of the cemetery/park seemed the most likely to contain Sconiers' grave.

Magnetometry, earth resistance, and ground penetrating radar were all tried in two locations--at the very northeast corner of the park and around an American Catalpa tree thought by some to possibly be located near Sconiers' grave.

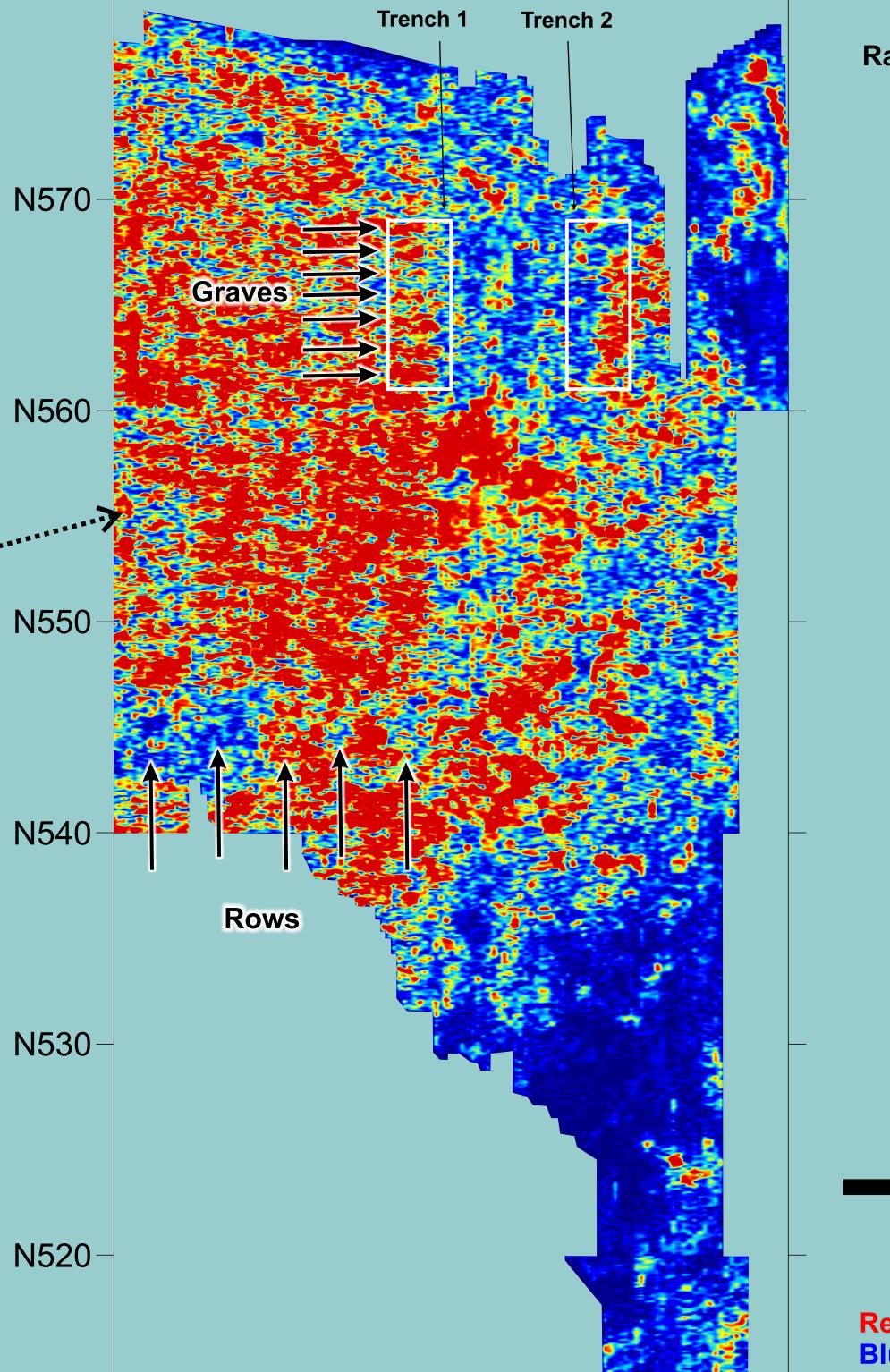
No graves were detected in the magnetic and resistance data, but the radar detected graves, and-more importantly-evidence of the original gravel cemetery roads that were now buried 20-30 cm below today's ground surface.

Most importantly, the radar detected the road at the northeast corner of the cemetery where Sconiers was likely to be buried, and rows of graves were visible there in the radar data. These data were used to propose two excavation trenches (right) to identify his grave and recover his remains. Trench 1 was located just inside the cemetery road, over the first row of graves. Trench 2 was positioned outside the road, between the road and the edge of the cemetery along the railroad. In the original radar data it was difficult to tell if graves were present between the road and the railroad, but new data collected in 2015 found better evidence of graves in this area.



Proposed excavation trenches on a deep amplitude slice map

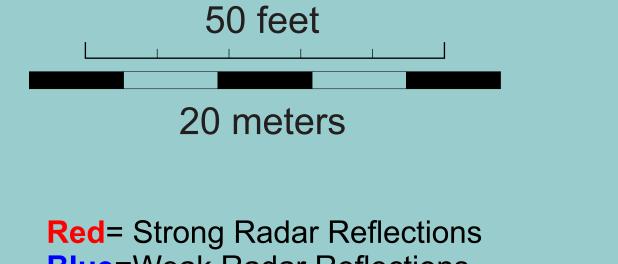
showing individual graves within the first row of the cemetery inside and outside of the cemetery road near the railroad tracks.



E550



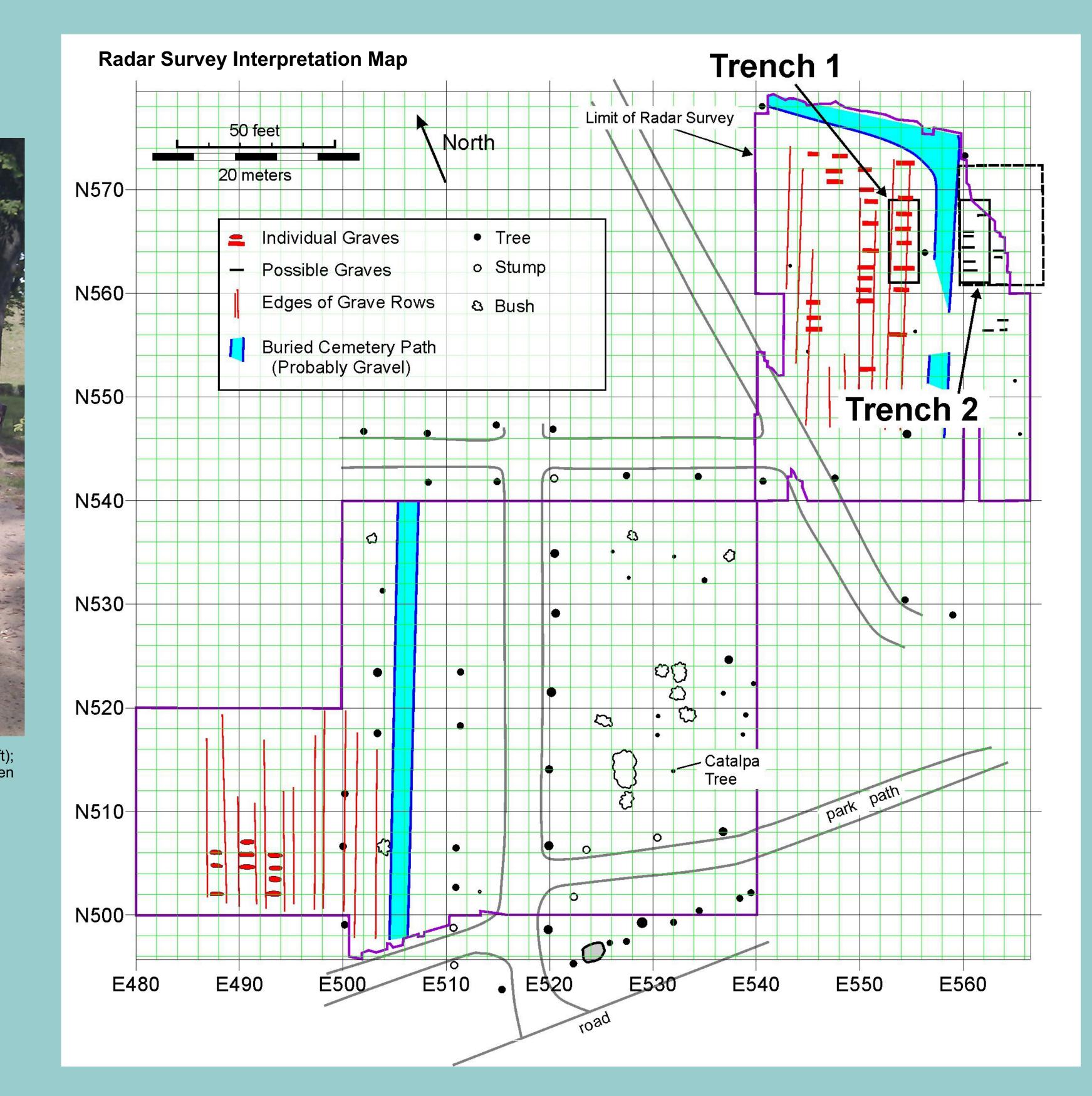
The 2012 team: Dr. Jarrod Burks, geophysics (left); Szymon Serwatka, local research (middle); Stephen Marks, interpreter and local logistics (right)



Blue=Weak Radar Reflections

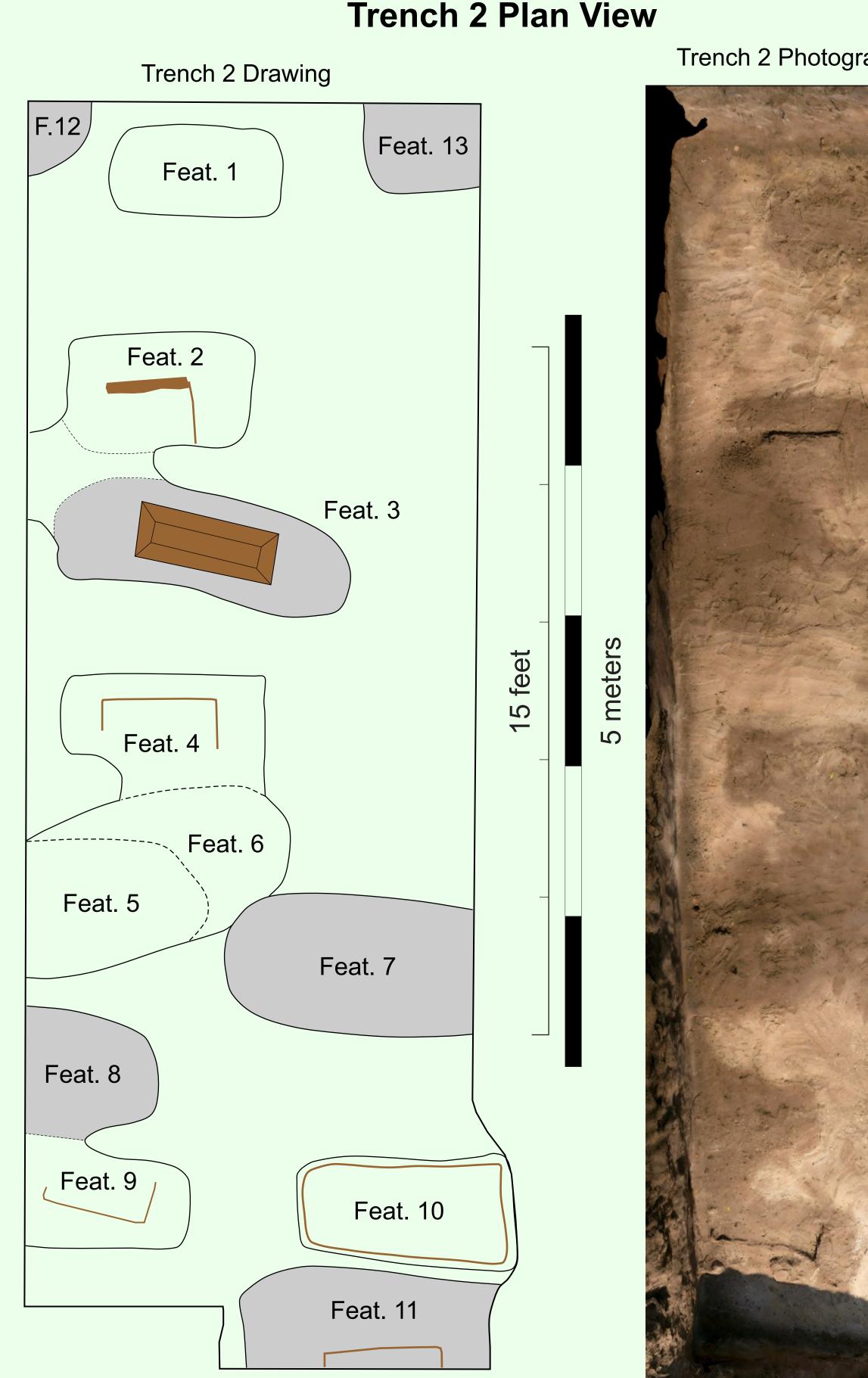
2015 Excavations

The 2012 geophysical survey resulted in the identification of individual graves, possible graves, and buried pathways or roads associated with the 1944 cemetery layout. The buried path in the northeast corner is an important clue to help position Trench 1 because it places the first row of graves to the east in the back of the cemetery, which corresponds with an eyewitness account- First row, grave 7, in the back of the cemetery. But this assumes the eyewitness perceived the pathway to be the back edge of the cemetery. A set of smaller and more subtle grave-like anomalies, however, was detected east of the buried cemetery pathway. Which row of graves in this area is the one referred to by eyewitness? The presence of a row of possible graves between the road and the outer edge of the cemetery (to the east) necessitated a second trench, Trench 2.



In 2015, OVAI returned to Lubin under contract with DPAA to excavate the two trenches (Trenches 1 & 2) thought to be likely locations for Sconiers' grave. The excavation work started in Trench 2, so that there would be a enough room to work if both trenches were open at the same time. A backhoe was used to strip off the top 50-80 cm of darker soil--actually, sand. At about 80-100 cm below surface, a much lighter colored sand appeared and the grave shaft fill became readily apparent. From there, the excavation proceeded down by hand after the trench plan views were documented.

In **Trench 2**, 13 features were uncovered, including adult-szied and smaller graves. Some of the smaller graves contained the outlines of child-sized coffins in plan view. These were left in place. All adult-sized graves were excavated (those in gray). An infant's coffin was found in Feature 3 (and was left in place), the burial in Feature 7 had been exhumed, and nothing was found in the other features. Given the number of child-sized graves in Trench 2, it was clear this area of the cemetery was used for burying children and infants--some of which were buried in adult-sized graves.



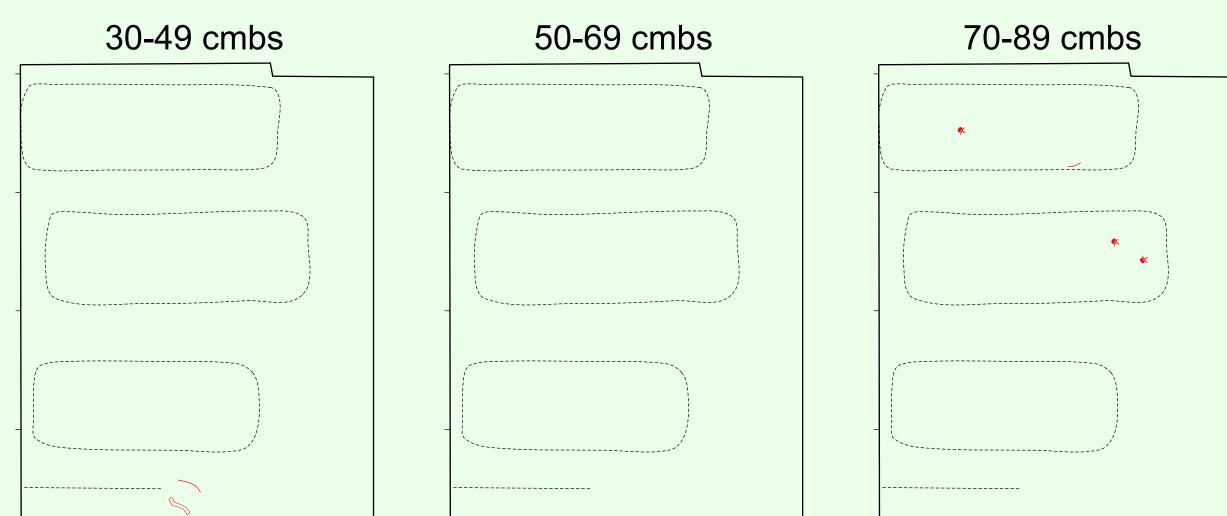
E560

E570

Trench 2 Photogrammetry Orthophoto-Mosaic



Trench 1 Excavation: Depth Sequence



2012 Survey





Coffin Wood Excavated Feature to the right shows plan views of the grave features at various depths. The backhoe excavated on this

trench started at the north and proceeded down to about 80 cm without any problem, exposing the tops of two graves. The backhoe then moved back to start in on the middle of the trench and it immediately encountered osseous material in top 30 cm of sediment.

Excavation of **Trench 1**, located to

the inside of the road, exposed seven

adult-sized grave shafts. The drawing

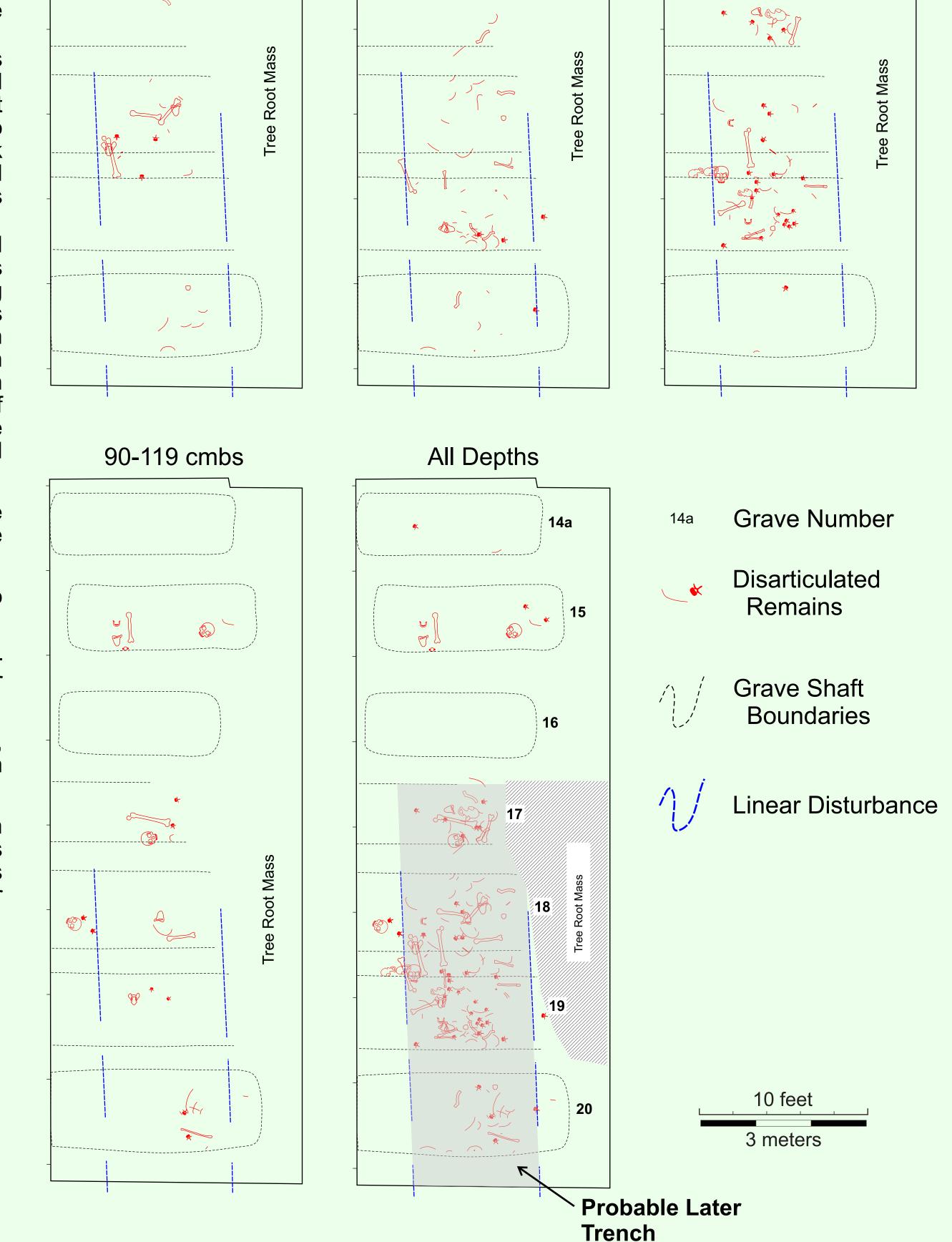
Excavation then switched to all hand work and the locations of all elements were piece plotted before being removed. Disarticulated osseous material was found within and between grave shafts. Continued excavation encounetred fragments of coffins and in some cases full or partial sets of articulated remains at the bottoms of the grave shafts. These findings revealed four aspects of burial site formation:

(1) Each grave shaft was used multiple times with more recent burials above older burials;

(2) The more recent burials intruded into and disturbed older burials; (3) The more recent burials were comingled with the remains from earlier burials, and

(4) Remains from some burials, regardless of age, were removed from their burial contexts.

It appeared as if a later trench had been cut across some of the graves in this row, including what we thought was grave 7 (Sconiers' possible grave) near the middle of Trench 1.

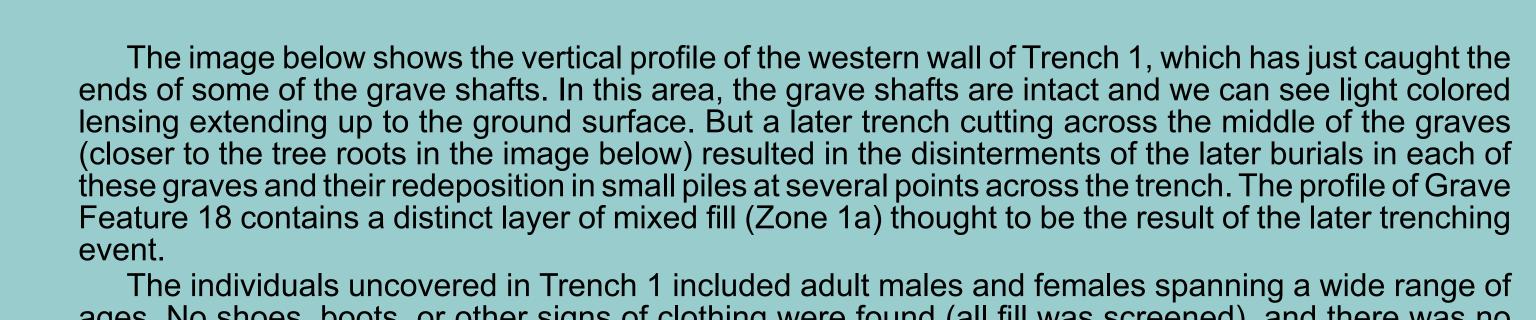




Trench 1 Findings

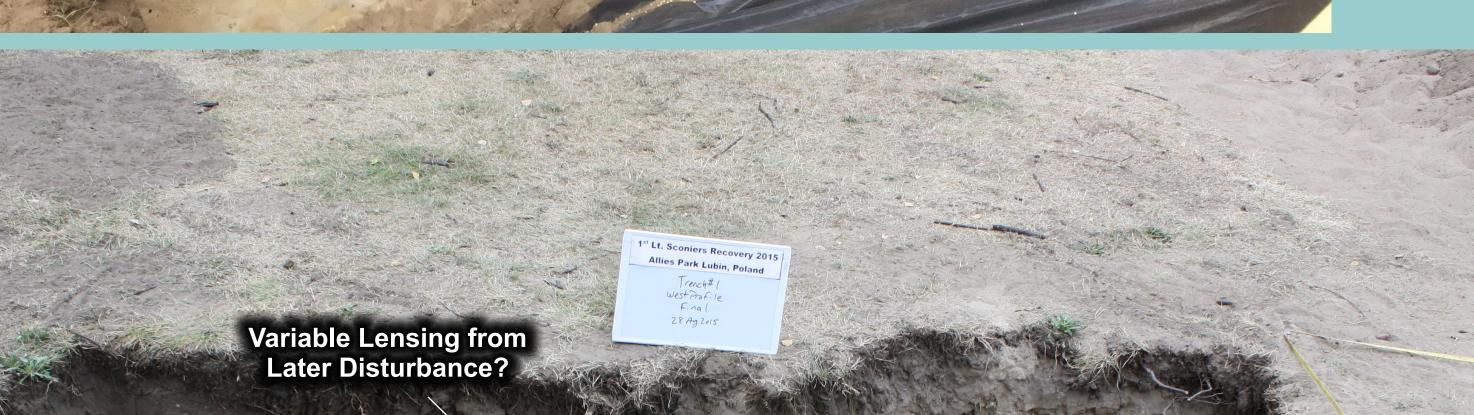
2015 Excavations

clothing.



The individuals uncovered in Trench 1 included adult males and females spanning a wide range of ages. No shoes, boots, or other signs of clothing were found (all fill was screened), and there was no indication that any of the 13 individuals were POWs. A field analysis of the remains by a forensic specialist working for DPAA showed that none of the individuals fit the profile for Sconiers. However, it is possible that remains were removed were removed from this site during the later trenching event.





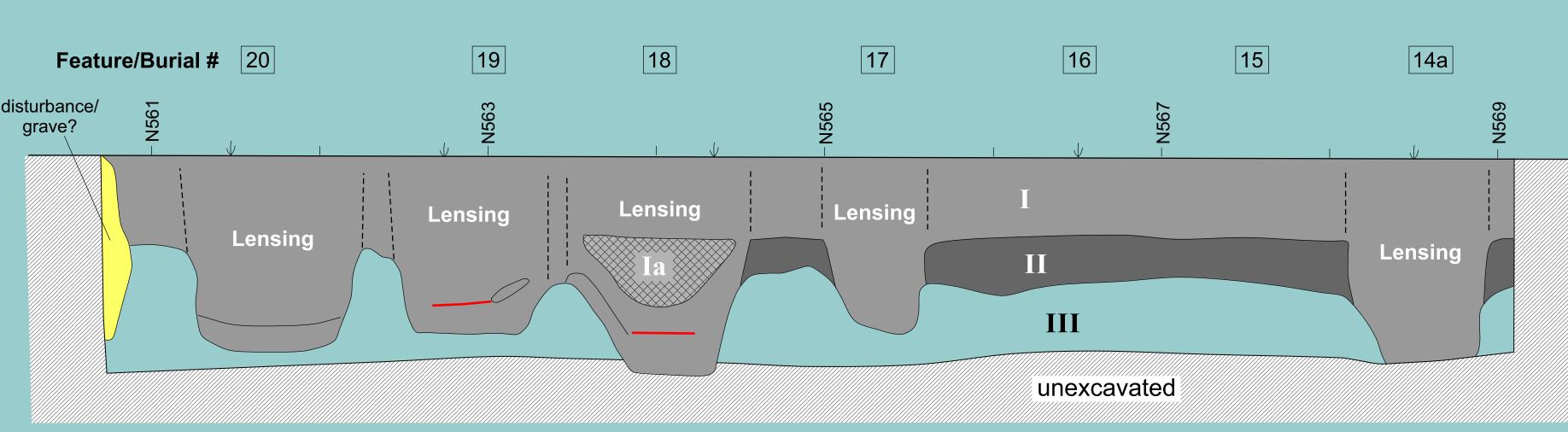
Based on the photographic evidence and eyewitness accounts, Sconiers was likely interred in Grave Feature 17 or 18 but was removed at some point after his initial burial. The removal effort is probably the source of the disturbance visible in the excavations. While the field team was in Poland excavating, a chance find on the internet by Marilyn Walton, one of the project's citizen historical researchers, located an intriguing grave marker in a different cemetery....

Sconiers Coming Home

All of the grave shaft fill was screened through 1/4 inch mesh, which produced hundreds of objects--most of which were archaeological in nature. However, a number of grave related items were found, including several sets of coffin screws, a rosary, and symbol of a bell. Since this cemetery was reportedly linked to the nearby municipal hospital, one wonders if the It is possible, if not likely, tha encountere gowns or other nondescript

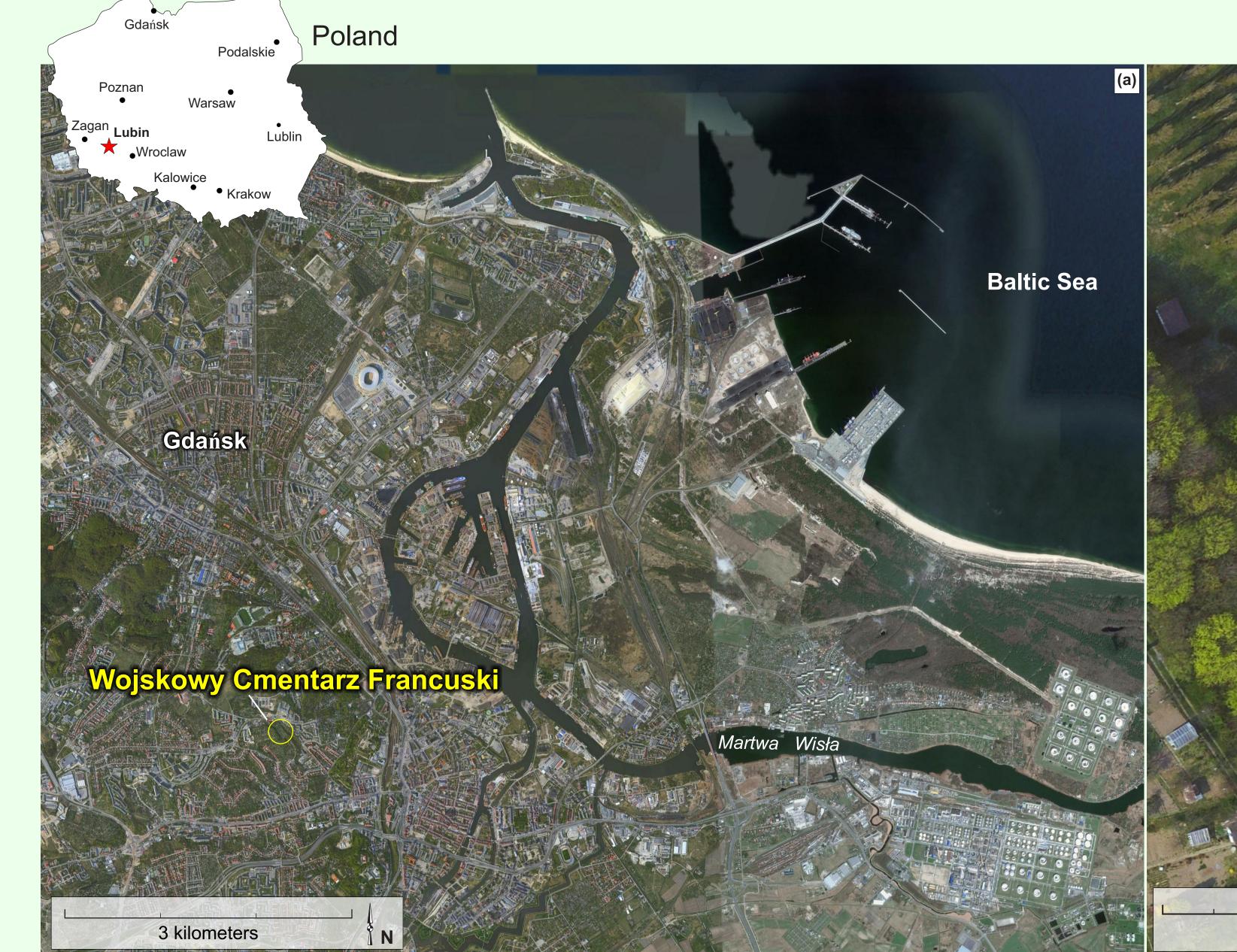


The profile at the southern end of Trench 1 (left) shows what appears to be intrusive disturbance from a large post-burial excavation. This disturbance was also visible in planview and extended northward through Grave Feature 17 (what we thought might be Sconiers' grave) from the southern end of our excavation (blue dashed line in planviews above). It is likely this trench-like instrusion disturbed the remains and caused the disarticulated distribution of osseous material within and between Grave Features 17, 18, 19, and 20. It appears that an attempt was made to redeposit remains into each of the grave shafts, but some end up scattered between graves.



— Coffin Wood

I. 10YR 4/4 Sand with roots and organics. A Horizon/zone of disturbance.
Ia. Disturbance, area of mixed fill, perhaps from trenching event postdating primary burials.
II. 10YR 3/4 Sand. Slightly darker horizon, could be archaeological midden. Graves cut through this layer.
III. 10YR 8/3 Fine sand. Very light colored, fine sand parent material.







parade, speeches, a memoria flyover.





eft: Four fellow Stalad t III POWs attende the burial of 1st Lt Ewar Sconiers in Lubin, Poland (above). At the t here descendants of the four original witnesses attend to Sconiers' reburial next o his mother at the Southwide Baptist Church in his

Recovery and Reburial

It turns out the disturbance and trenching we thought we had detected in Trench 2 did in fact happen. Sconiers' remains were moved to a French military cemetery in Gdansk, Poland probably in the 1950s (a,b,c above). Though the name displayed on the grave marker used the French spelling for "Edward," his marker (c, above) differed from those around him, most of which included "Died for France" beneath the names. The remains in the "Sconiers Edouard" grave were exhumed and positively identified by DPAA through physical examination and DNA testing by the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System.

In January 2018, 1st Lt Ewart T. Sconiers finally made it back home. His remains were flown into Tallahassee, FL (d), and were driven as part of a big caravan of family members and others to his hometown of DeFuniak Springs, FL. In the following days festivities such as a parade (e), tree planting, and a symbolic presentation of his remains to his mother (the house she lived in after his death that was purchased by Sconiers' widow).

A funeral with full military honors was had at the family's church. The story of his life, death, and recovery was recounted to the hundreds in attendance, while those "Promise Keepers" who persisted in the quest of his recovery were assembled at the front of the church (f). As Sconiers was lowered into his final resting place, he was attended by the descendants of those soldiers who first saw him buried in Lubin some 74 years before, to the day (g).

