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INSTITUTE PROCEEDINGS

The recovery of bodies from the Battle of Fromelles

an address¹ to the Institute on 23 March 2010 by **Major General M. P. J. O'Brien, CSC**² Officer-in-Charge, Australian Fromelles Project



The bodies of 250 British and Australian soldiers killed during the Battle of Fromelles on 19-20 July 1916 and buried en masse by the Germans at Pheasant Wood, have been exhumed and re-buried individually with full military honours in a new military cemetery at Fromelles. DNA collected from the bodies before re-interment is being used to assist with identification. Mike O'Brien describes the project.

In the 1997/1998 Summer issue of *United Service*, the then Royal United Service Institution of New South Wales published the proceedings of its November 1997 Seminar, *The Battle of Fromelles 19/20 July 1916: a post-operations analysis*. Under the presidency of Major General Gordon Maitland, the Institution had conducted a detailed analysis of the battle. Participants in the seminar examined the strategic purpose of the battle and individuals researched the parts played by many key participants (Allied and German) in the battle. Recent events should cause scholars to re-visit this valuable analysis of the battle.

The Battle of Fromelles

Nineteen days after the commencement of the July 1916 Allied offensive on the Somme, a diversionary attack was conducted on the Aubers Ridge some 70 km to the north, centred on the village of Fromelles. Two divisions attacked the entrenched German lines: the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division, a British Territorial division; and the newly arrived 5th Australian Division. It was the first major Australian engagement on the Western Front.

The attack was not successful. In this one evening, the 5th Division sustained 5533 casualties and the 61st about 1500. There were 1780 Australians killed-in-action and 1329 British. No ground was captured from the opposing 6th Bavarian Reserve Division. Because many of the Allied soldiers' bodies were either in German positions or no man's land, some 1329 Australians and 326 British soldiers killed were missing after the battle. The quantity and intensity of the casualties and the unusually high proportion of missing had a huge effect on the small Australian population when the full extent of the battle became known. If one looks at the 'Death Notices - Killed-in-Action' in Australian newspapers on 19 July in the 1920s and for many years afterwards, you cannot be unaffected by the outpouring of family grief for the killed and missing. Now that some newspapers of the period are 'on-line' and easily searchable, I can

recommend these columns as a direct way of measuring the extent of the distress caused by this battle across the nation.

The battle, initially known as the Battle of Fleurbaix after the town where most Australians had been billeted, remained in the Australian memory for the rest of the First World War. Charles Bean, the Australian official historian, headed to Fromelles to visit the battlefield immediately after the 1918 Armistice. The grisly task of recovering human remains and trying to identify them commenced very soon afterwards. Some soldiers were identified, but the great majority was not. The now picturesque Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery at VC Corner close to the centre of the Australian front line had 410 soldiers – all of them Australian, all unidentified – buried there. The wall of this cemetery lists 1294 names of those missing and other memorials in France add to this total.

Was the Battle of Fromelles forgotten or 'covered-up'? Official dispatches by General Haig after the battle and after the Somme Campaign certainly understate Allied casualties and exaggerate their achievements, but such mis-statements could be partly excused for not providing solace for the enemy. After the war, the official historian wrote of it in considerable detail and his account stands the test of time. Unit histories and the Australian 5th Division's history do the battle justice. Loved ones remembered the battle and a small number of direct descendants – a sister, a daughter – and others still do. It is fair to say that few Australians in the 21st century share this memory or knowledge.

Discovery of a Burial Site near Fromelles

And so it may have remained, but for several people, none with particular military connections, who became interested in the battle. Pre-eminent among them was an immigrant teacher of Greek extraction, Lambis Englezos. Lambis had met veterans of the battle and developed a curiosity and enthusiasm for it. As he studied it further, he was particularly interested in the large number of Australian casualties that was unaccounted for by known burials. He wondered whether there might be undiscovered burial sites.

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Here was a two-part problem. Perhaps bodies had been buried together – if so, where? Was any supposed location going to be exact? The second issue was even more difficult: had such burial sites been found and emptied by graves recovery units after the war? The documentation for recovery was notoriously incomplete and inaccurate.

Lambis approached the Army Historian and put a case that a group burial site might exist behind the German lines. He was asked to provide evidence for that belief. A panel of expert historians examined the evidence he assembled on several occasions over several years. It is a testament to Lambis' tenacity (and that of his co-workers) that he accepted this approach to prove his case. Prove it he did – eventually, using a series of air photos from the Imperial War Museum, he showed the panel in 2006 that a series of large pits had been dug by the Germans after the battle and filled in several days later.

The Army is responsible for the recovery of its dead. In 2007, the Army Historian commissioned Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) to non-invasively investigate the site of these pits at Pheasant Wood, close to the village of Fromelles. The GUARD team looked at the surface of an area that apparently had never been cultivated, to see whether there had been post-1918 site disturbance of the type that would have been caused by graves recovery activity. The GUARD report concluded that the site was likely to be undisturbed. It also found a remarkable small medallion on the site. It recommended that a trial archaeological excavation of the pits be undertaken to confirm whether human remains were present and if so, to estimate their number and condition.

The Army Historian also commissioned an archival study conducted by Peter Barton, a well-known military historian. On several occasions, Peter visited the Bavarian State Archives in Munich and the Red Cross Archives in Geneva. In Munich, he found extensive records of many aspects of the battle: indeed, the undisturbed archive had many shelf-kilometres of relevant records. It became clear that the Germans had meticulously recorded the battle and aspects of burials of their own and 'British' soldiers afterwards. At the same time, Australian records were also carefully examined. The rich vein of records at the National Archives of Australia and the Australian War Memorial were mined. The records of the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Soldiers Team were particularly useful. It was clear from these records that the Germans had returned the personal effects of many Australian soldiers to their relatives through the Red Cross in Geneva. In passing, it is worth remarking that the Australian written records (the great majority of which are 'on-line' for the First World War) are a significant advantage we enjoy. Sadly, most of the British counterpart documentation was destroyed by enemy action in the Second World War.

The Australian Army then funded an exploratory excavation of the Pheasant Wood site in June 2008 with the cooperation of the British and French Governments.

GUARD again undertook this process. Government control ensured that the outcomes and procedures used met the highest archaeological and other standards. The process was slow, methodical and reverent. Careful excavation confirmed that five large pits contained human remains – perhaps as many as 400 in all – and that those buried were Australian and British.

What was the next step? Two governments had to consider and agree a course of action and gain French approval. Should the bodies remain where they lay? Should they be recovered and individually re-buried? There were advantages for either approach. Both the British and Australian Governments chose the latter course that ensured that the number of bodies would be known and perhaps some identified. A new war cemetery would be needed. In all, the procedure chosen was the one that would have occurred had the bodies been found in 1919 – should 90-odd years make a difference?

Exhumation of the Pheasant Wood Site

In 2009, Oxford Archaeology was contracted by the British and Australian governments to undertake the exhumation of the Pheasant Wood site. A separate contract was let with LGC Forensics to conduct DNA³ identification processes. Management of this joint project was assigned to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, who was also responsible for the construction of a new cemetery near the site⁴.

Oxford Archaeology constructed a full forensic laboratory and a temporary mortuary at Pheasant Wood. Over a period of several months, all human remains were carefully removed from the burial pits and extensively examined and documented. Two hundred and fifty sets of remains were found and stored awaiting the construction of the new cemetery. Over six thousand artefacts, many very fragile, were also excavated.

The governments had agreed that every reasonable effort would be made to identify the remains. LGC Forensics endeavoured to extract viable DNA from each body recovered. However, identification through DNA would only be possible if matching DNA from a suitable surviving relative could be obtained.

A careful analysis was conducted to determine, as far as possible, the identity of those Australians more likely to be buried at Pheasant Wood. It produced a list of over 190 names of individuals with a high probability of burial at the site. The Army also conducted an extensive campaign publicising the need for relatives to come forward to provide DNA samples. This appeal was extended beyond the 'likely' 190 and encompassed all those related to soldiers missing from the battle. To date, more than 2196 relatives have contacted the Army on behalf of 708 missing soldiers. Behind the scenes, a small but dedicated team at Army Headquarters constructed standardised family trees for each soldier so that DNA experts could choose likely persons to provide

³Deoxyribonucleic acid

The Pheasant Wood burial site is subject to winter inundation and was found unsuited for a cemetery.

suitable DNA match samples. This was a large and complex undertaking.



Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery – computer simulation of how the new cemetery will appear [Photo: Department of Veteran Affairs]

Re-burial in Fromelles Military Cemetery

In late January 2010, re-burials commenced at the new Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery. Each of 249 soldiers was buried separately and with due reverence in the military tradition by a joint Army contingent from Australia and the United Kingdom. Those present at the first and subsequent burial days found the ceremonies deeply moving. One soldier remains to be buried on the date of the dedication of the cemetery on the battle anniversary, 19 July 2010.

In March 2010 a Joint Identification Board, which I cochaired, had its first meeting in London. It considered a range of historical, anthropological, archaeological and DNA evidence on each of the bodies that had been found. Where this evidence was clear and convincing, the body was identified. In some other cases, bodies could be identified as either British or Australian soldiers, though not named.

Seventy-five Australian soldiers so far have been identified by name. A further 128 have been identified as unnamed Australian soldiers. Three British soldiers have been identified as unnamed and 44 individuals remain 'known unto God'. Further identification boards will occur as further DNA samples are returned from existing family contacts and others that later may come forward.

Conclusion

This has been a major and most satisfying project. Nothing of this nature has happened previously. We have seen tenacious curiosity rewarded. We have watched some of the world's highest-achieving archaeologists, forensic anthropologists and DNA analysts become far more intimately engaged than they first realised. We have had remarkable cooperation between three nations. We have had great and international community support.

We must always remember, though, that the most important people in this venture are the soldiers who sacrificed their lives and their loved ones who grieved for them.

Lest we forget.

Acknowledgements

All undertakings of this sort are team efforts and I would like to thank all the British and French authorities for their unwavering assistance. Madame Demassiet (the owner of the burial site) and Monsieur Hubert Huchette (Mayor of Fromelles) deserve particular mention. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission and its manager David Richardson have done excellent service. The Australian Ministers responsible (both in Defence and Veterans' Affairs) have given every support. My small team in Canberra, led by Lieutenant Colonel James Brownlie, has worked innovatively, hard and long. We would, of course, have had no success without Lambis Englezos. To all those, and the many I have not named, goes the credit for this undertaking.

Author: Major General Mike O'Brien, national vicepresident of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia, graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1968 into the Royal Australian Infantry Corps. He saw operational service as a platoon commander and intelligence officer in Vietnam and later wrote the history of his battalion (Conscripts and Regulars: with the Seventh Battalion in Vietnam 1967-68 and 1970-71 - published in 1995). His extensive military career included regimental, staff, training, equipment acquisition, engineering and logistics postings, culminating in his appointment as Support Commander-Army. He was awarded a Conspicuous Service Cross for services to Defence procurement. His last task before retiring in 2001 was to review the Australian Army's wider use of history. He has been a visiting fellow at the Australian National University's National Graduate School of Management; and, for more than 20 years, has been an elected non-executive director of a mediumsized cooperative financial institution. He works as a consultant, is a board member, runs an antiquarian book store and writes local and military history. [Photo of General O'Brien: Mike O'Brien]

Further Reading

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