

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Missing in action: Australia's World War I Grave Services, an astonishing story of misconduct, fraud and hoaxing*

by Marianne van Velzen

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Those privileged to have visited the former battlefields of northern France and Flanders will recall the shock and sense of loss when confronted with thousands upon thousands of white neatly-arranged headstones in military cemeteries, marking the last resting places of the combatant victims of World War I. Few would have reflected on how those remains got there and how they were identified – where possible. Now Marianne van Velzen has revealed a great part of that story.

The battlefield dead on both sides were usually either hastily buried in pits or left where they fell in no-man's land. What was to become the Commonwealth War Graves Commission evolved from the 1915 British Red Cross Graves Registration Commission, later subsumed by the British Army. Commonwealth soldiers' graves were registered by this unit, which also had the task of establishing formal cemeteries; an Australian Imperial Force (AIF) Australian Graves Detachment was established to assist in this work.

In November 1918, an estimated 160,000 bodies still lay in the battlefields, while the burial pits of many others would have to be located. Of AIF losses of around 50,000 men, 40,000 were 'missing in action' and in 1919 the Australian Grave Services was established to try to reduce this list of missing men and to create memorials to them. The soldiers who volunteered for this unit had a range of motives. Some wanted to do what they could to find and give a decent burial to their mates. For others, returning to Australia was not part of their post-war plan. There were rogues amongst the saints, and the activities of the latter give the book part of its secondary title.

Whether rogue or saint, the work of the unit was horrific and demanding. The unit's living conditions varied from relative comfort in the Belgian sector to barely adequate in the two camps in France. The battlefields were largely as the armies had left them and the bodies they unearthed were frequently decomposed – described by one soldier as 'bags of slime'; frequently, the remains were not intact. After being searched for distinguishing materials that might identify them, they were reinterred in temporary graves. It would be surprising if mistakes were not made, but van Velzen suggests that 'phantom graves' were created, containing no remains but bearing the name of a missing soldier.

However, the bulk of her book revolves around the uninspiring officers of the Australian Grave Services, who seemed to spend their energies engaged in spats

or revenging slights, real or imagined, committed by their fellows. Directed from Australia House in London under the oversight of the High Commissioner, former Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, neither he nor his administration emerges well. There were two inquiries into the conduct of these officers and those in charge of detachments in France – the first, in March/April 1920, triggered by complaints to the AIF by an embittered soldier who had served in the unit; and the second, ordered by the Minister for Defence in December that year, to get to the bottom of persistent stories about bad behaviour and 'hoaxing'. Neither inquiry seems to have resolved much, except ending the careers of some of the officers involved.

In a military unit there are no bad men, only bad officers; and the Australian Grave Services seemed replete with those. Discipline, control of stores, and oversight of the use of military equipment, were lax. Petrol and spare parts turned up in the black market, and an entire ambulance went 'missing'. Many of the men formed relationships with French women and some had interests in licensed taverns and in prostitution rings. It would have taken superb leadership to stamp out all these abuses in the conditions the unit worked under, and that was not on offer.

So, this seemingly was not the finest hour of the AIF and van Velzen has pursued these issues with a journalist's zeal. This, I think, misses the major issue. Far from the ambience of Australia House, the work went on. In the absence or unconcern of their officers, the non-commissioned officers, rogues or not, clearly persuaded their men into continuing their grim and often disgusting task. By the end of 1921 when the unit was disbanded, the number of Australians listed as 'missing in action' had been reduced to 11,000. We know that other discoveries have been made since, especially near Fromelles.

A 75 per cent success rate in the conditions under which they laboured was an outstanding result for the men of the Australian Grave Services, and their work contributed so much comfort to the families of the soldiers whose bodies they recovered and, where possible, identified. Corruption and sharp practice aside, under the circumstances I would not have begrudged these men a *vin ordinaire* or two and a cuddle in a warm bed with a complaisant *demoiselle* before resuming their grim task the next day, and the day after, and the day after that, to the end of their service.

Ian Pfennigwerth