

Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Opinion on the leadership of James Whiteside McCay during the Battle of Fromelles differs as one would expect and so the controversy about his command of the 5th Division which was re-invigorated by Joyce Sanders, continues with this contribution from noted Australian military researcher, Ron Austin. Ron operates Slouch Hat Publications as a joint venture with wife Sue and tends to give McCay the benefit of the doubt when dealing with his role in the planned attack at Fromelles, meant to draw German troops away from the Somme offensive which was being played out along a broad front.

Speaking at the Annual Fromelles Service at the Shrine of Remembrance in 2005, Austin accepts the position known as the Sugarloaf was well defended and that German troops were prepared for the bombardment and subsequent attack, and consequently there was little hope of the 5th Division gaining ground or subduing the well entrenched garrison which was opposing them. Granted the veteran soldier had to live down the reputation of being uncaring, reckless and aloof, but, according to Austin, McCay was perhaps unfairly relieved of his command through being judged by his peers as being unpopular, and his health was an issue as well. Conceding that Birdwood had declared McCay as unsuitable for appointment as a general officer commanding, Austin reminds that he was supported by Monash and most of the brigade commanders who served under him, including 'Pompey' Elliot, the officer in charge of the 15th Brigade while McCay was alive.

McCay was undoubtedly shaped by the era in which he trained and this is no more evident than the loyalty he displayed in what the Australian Dictionary of Biography described, as the two years in which he was appointed to Salisbury Plain, where he "trained and supplied reinforcements and controlled movements during demobilization."

From Austin's viewpoint, McCay was dogged by bad luck and was quite astute militarily. The problem was that McCay did not get the opportunity to show his true potential, although he did in some measure redeem his tarnished reputation after demobilization in August 1919 while supporting post-war reconstruction in Australia. On his return McCay let his legal practice go and accepted appointment as a business adviser to the Commonwealth Government, after which he chaired a 1919 Victorian royal commission on high prices and became deputy chairman of the State Savings Bank of Victoria.

It was unfortunate then that McCay had so much difficulty working harmoniously with subordinate staff, although this problem probably stemmed from the fact he was a practical soldier with a tremendous intellect, and well established moral code and values, as shown by the fact he often led his troops from advanced positions in the field. By all accounts McCay was a firm disciplinarian, being raised by classically-educated Presbyterian parents who encouraged him to excel at school. McCay spoke several languages, attended Castlemaine State School, Scotch College in Melbourne and entered Ormond College, University of Melbourne before buying Castlemaine Grammar School in 1885, according to the Australian Dictionary of Biography which can be accessed through <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100216b.htm>.

McCay completed his law degree in 1892, was prominent in his local community and domestic affairs, and being something of a radical in his early days, he actually questioned the wisdom of sending troops to the Boer War, which apparently damaged his reputation politically during this early part of his career. Having worked for Federation, he gained the Federal seat of Corinella in March 1901 as a protectionist supporter of Sir Edmund Barton and soon earned a reputation as a defence specialist who supported the establishment of a national militia, although only in amended form to ensure the proposed force would only be used domestically in the defence of Australia itself.



Thus, McCay was something of a paradox and that is why some historians like Austin suggest McCay was deserving of some praise as a commander if not admiration, because unlike Haking he had some redeeming features at least and was loyal. McCay had shown courage while in the field, and to some he had exhibited an uncommon strength of character, especially while shouldering the burden of responsibility for the disaster which had occurred at Fromelles even though strictly speaking, he may not have had much control over instigating, planning or directing the feat, as it had already been postponed by higher command and even at one point underwent further review. According to one source a member of Haig's staff advised both Charles Monro of the British First Army and Richard Haking XI Corps the operation was not needed, but Haking who was a very

tenacious soldier, insisted on trying to capture the high ground on Auber's Ridge. Ultimately the decision to attack was left to Monro and in spite of further delay and uncertainty, the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division (Territorial Force) and the 5th Australian Division were committed and mown down by the German formation they were opposing.

ANNUAL FROMELLES SERVICE
SHRINE OF REMEMBRANCE
19 JULY 2005
RON AUSTIN, RFD ED

“Distinguished Guests, Friends of the 15th Brigade and Visitors:

Today we have assembled here to Commemorate the 15th Brigade's fearful induction into the realities of warfare on the Western Front. Today is the 89th anniversary of the Battle of Fromelles, and this year is also the 90th anniversary of the ANZAC Landings at Gallipoli. With your indulgence I wish to link the two anniversaries together.

The landings at Gallipoli have often been described by historians as 'lost opportunities', and indeed, there were on several occasions on that fateful 25th April, chances to consolidate the positions at Anzac and at Cape Helles that were squandered. It is far too easy to attempt to sheet home blame for events that are far beyond our understanding. As spectators far removed from the action, can we ever understand the flow of events on a battlefield. In the Army we use a term to describe the confusion that occurs almost without exception, in every battle fought over the ages — it is 'the fog of war'.

The 'fog of war' during the Landings at Anzac was thickened by the inability of commanders to control the battle due to the unfamiliar and difficult ground that swiftly broke up the landing battalions into small groups. Enemy sniper fire soon removed platoon and company leaders, in the case of the 7th Battalion, the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel HE 'Pompey' Elliot was an early casualty, as were nine of his officers with five of them being killed. Elsewhere on the Gallipoli battlefield, poor communications rendered the decision making difficult for commanders at all levels.

While many men were heroes, some men, bereft of leaders, decided that a safer option was to withdraw from the deadly Anzac heights. At one stage during that eventful day Colonel James McCay, the commander of the 2nd Brigade, confronted some such men in a gully and forcibly persuaded them to return to the fighting. A 7th Battalion signaller who had accompanied McCay, later wrote: That incident in the gully was trivial in itself, but considered in the perspective of the whole operation that day, could have produced irreparable disaster. To me, whatever, repute good or indifferent may afterwards have been attached to McCay, he has always been the essence of a brave man, and has probably had to carry the baby for mistakes of others higher up. McCay saved Anzac that day. I tell that story as McCay later reappears as the GOC of the 5th Australian Division.

Continuing with the Gallipoli theme, I wish to briefly dwell on one of several minor feints carried out on 7th August in support of the operations at Lone Pine, with a view to drawing Turkish reserves away from both Lone Pine and the New Zealand attacks taking place on the northern ridges. Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon Bennett's 6th Battalion was given the task of attacking via underground tunnels, the Turkish positions at German Officers' Trench. The first attack resulted in that attacking wave being slaughtered, HQ 1st Division then ordered a second attack, with similar results. A third attack was then ordered, but sanity finally prevailed and the attack was postponed. The ironic twist to this tale is that Divisional HQ was very well aware that

even if the 6th Battalion had taken the enemy position, come daylight they had little hope of retaining it as it was enfiladed by Turkish machine-guns from both flanks.

We now move on to northern France, where on 19 July, the 5th Australian Division, along with the 61st British Division undertook an operation across the marsh-like ground at Fromelles. This was the first occasion in the war that an Australian division had undertaken a formal attack against an entrenched enemy. The 5th Division was commanded by Major-General McCay, a senior militia officer and politician, who was highly regarded by Monash, but was seen as overly harsh and stubborn. The three brigades of the 5th Division were the 15th commanded by 'Pompey' Elliott, the 14th led by Colonel Pope of the famous Pope's Hill at Gallipoli, and the 8th Brigade, generally known as 'Tivey's Chocolates' and led by Brigadier-General Edwin Tivey. Although the division had been formed in Egypt in February 1916 from unused reinforcements, following the collapse of the Gallipoli campaign, the brigades had a leavening of many Gallipoli veterans in their ranks, and most of the respective battalion and company commanders had served at Gallipoli. However, despite the six months training which included several months in France, the units were untried in battle.

While the Anzacs had been engaged at Gallipoli, the British, French and Germans had become immersed in a war of attrition, with vast trench lines snaking across the countryside of northern France and Belgium. Within the French Army the 'cult of the attack' was dominant, and similarly with many British generals. It was believed that only by constantly hammering against the enemy lines, could a significant breakthrough occur. Fromelles had already seen such fighting in 1915, and the nearby dominant Aubers Ridge held by the Germans was a constant reminder of the need to achieve some success. The loss of 20,000 British soldiers killed during the Somme attack on 1 July 1916, highlighted the need to apply pressure elsewhere, hence the direction from Sir Charles Monro GOC 1st Army to Lieutenant-General Haking GOC XI Corps, to undertake the limited attack using two division supported by artillery, with a view to prevent the Germans withdrawing units from the existing lines and despatching them to the Somme.

The task given by Haking to McCay and the British GOC Major-General CJ Mackenzie, was poorly defined, and inadequately planned as it did not have any significant objective, and as events soon showed, the artillery support that was so vital to the success of any operation conducted across open ground against well-defended enemy trenches and concrete pill-boxes, was lacking both in the preparatory phase and during the battle itself. Yet by contrast to the pitiful artillery support available at Gallipoli, the quantity of shells



PHOTOGRAPH: Lieut. Col. D. McFie McConaghy CMG DSO MID—Enlisting with the rank of Captain after qualifying as an accountant, he participated in the landing at Gallipoli, saw action at Lone Pine, and was promoted to Major and given command of the 55th Battalion which he led during the Battle of Fromelles in 1916. [Buried in France at 185 Namps-Au-Val British Cemetery—Memorial Panel 159. He died of wounds on 09-APR-1918]. Courtesy of the AWM which retains Copyright.

was bountiful, but this bounty soon proved to be an illusion. The guns of the 4th and 5th Australian divisional artillery failed to suppress the enemy guns and failed to destroy the enemy positions to be assaulted. Even worse, the bombardment immediately prior to the attack, fell to the rear of the enemy wire and dugouts, leaving some stretches of enemy line almost untouched.

Despite the hurried preparations for the attack, the Australians having but a few days to accustom themselves to the area being attacked, left the lines at from 5:45 to 6 p.m. on 19 July. What happened over the coming hours explains why we are here today commemorating the Battle of Fromelles. On the right flank the British 61st Division suffered heavy casualties while assembling for the battle in their open trenches, and failed to fully support the 15th Brigade to their left on the other side of Sugarloaf salient.

The Australian brigades made some gains, and by 6:30 p.m. had ventured behind the German front line, and commenced to dig in the heavy mud. The central Australian formation was Pope's 14th Brigade, which included the 54th Battalion, commanded by Walter Cass, a decorated Gallipoli veteran; the 14th quickly captured the first line of enemy trenches, and attempted to consolidate their hold by vainly digging into the water filled trenches. Brigadier-General Tivey's 8th Brigade's advance on the far left unnecessarily hindered by artillery shells from the Australian guns falling amongst the attacking troops. However, Lieutenant-Colonel Toll's 31st Battalion made rapid gains and captured some Germans who were sent to the rear.

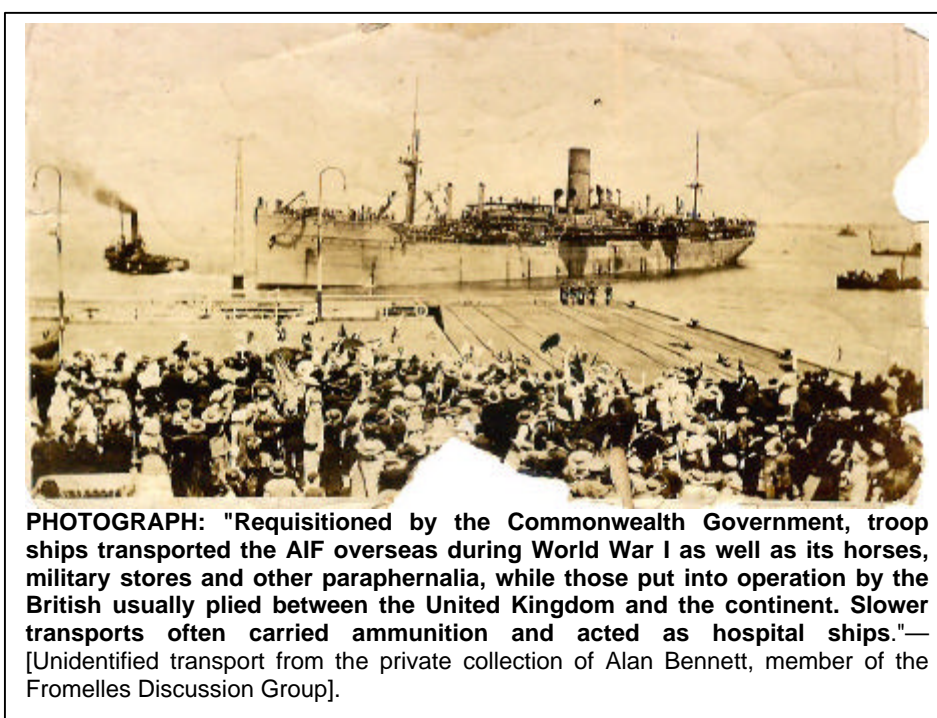
The attack by 'Pompey' Elliott's 15th Brigade with Major McCrae's 60th Battalion on the right flank, the 59th Battalion, on the left, with Lieutenant-Colonel Jackson's 58th (which was the result of the reorganized 6th Battalion) in support. Unfortunately, the Australian guns failed to neutralize the Sugarloaf, and when the 15th Brigade attacked at 5:45 p.m., the Victorian troops were cut to pieces as they attempted to penetrate the enemy's wire defences.

From then on the battle descends into our familiar 'fog of war'. Communication between the attacking battalions, to their brigade HQs and to the HQ of the 5th Division, was difficult due to the nature of the ground, and the need to rely on runners to bear messages as telephone lines were often shredded by shell fire. Elliot incorrectly believed that his troops had reached the German line, and by 8 p.m., it was clear from messages from the British 184th Brigade that the attack against Sugarloaf had failed. A renewed and futile attack was ordered for 9 p.m. using the 58th Battalion. It was not until 5:05 a.m. on the morning of 20 July, that the fighting ceased. The 5th Division, and the 15th Brigade in particular had suffered heavy losses in what was a mere diversionary attack with vague aims. This dismal episode was one that was to be repeated across the Western Front on other occasions, but Fromelles was of particular significance to the AIF, and the 15th Brigade in particular. Casualties in the 5th Division totalled over 2,000 killed or died of wounds, over 3,000 were wounded, 470 taken prisoner. The 15th Brigade suffered the most killed – 824 or 38% of the Australian deaths. The majority of the burials at Fromelles are unknown, as shown by the Memorial Wall at VC Corner. However, recently there has occurred through the efforts of Lambis Englezos and other Friends of the 15th Brigade, a possible breakthrough in identifying some Australians who may have been buried by the Germans after the battle.

In summary, the Fromelles battle can best be described as needless, but how many other actions of the Great War, large or small that took place at Gallipoli and the Western Front were also needless? When military disaster occurs, it is human nature to hunt for someone to blame. In the case of Fromelles, many have blamed the obvious target — General McCay, however, having examined many battles of the

Great War, I have tended to become extremely cautious in freely laying blame, lest I let my writing lapse into a polemical mode. The stress and confusion that exists at any brigade or divisional HQ during a battle, brought on by poor or misleading communications and the accompanying 'fog of war' is something few undergo. Before we apportion blame, we should ask, bearing in mind that not one of our AIF generals had fought a battle under Western Front conditions, whether or not any other general would have acted differently to McCay? The answer at that stage of the war, is probably NO. Nonetheless, it is important that we carefully examine such battles in the hope that subsequent generations may be spared from any such mistakes. That we are assembled here today in this hallowed area, remembering the sacrifice made by heroic officers and men of the 15th Brigade, shows that their sacrifice was not totally in vain, and certainly not been forgotten. LEST WE FORGET!"

Courtesy of Ron Austin, RFD ED



This shows, according to Ron Austin who has published numerous texts on unit formations of the AIF, just how open to interpretation military events such as Fromelles and the leadership of crucial officers in the field, can become when the fury of battle has subsided and the horrendous losses are calculated. In this context if you accept the premises which underpin this address are accepted, the courage and bravery of the man is beyond question, but he was abrasive and possibly foolhardy and if Austin is right, then there were times McCay suffered resentment and blame for the actions and decisions of others, and this quite unjustly.

Austin would be the first to point out that both Krithia and Fromelles were tempests of fire and on both occasions it could be argued, Australian forces were subsumed under British generalship, and let's not forget Lieutenant-General Richard Haking suffered a head wound on 14 September 1914 and was probably looking for a quick fix on the Somme to enhance his own reputation. Under the tactical control of the British XI Corps, McCay had little choice but to follow orders, accept the hurried and ill-conceived plans of others and work toward supporting his troops to reach the objectives that had been set, and this without an effective artillery barrage that was meant to be delivered to soften up the frontline trenches of the enemy.

Putting his sense of superiority aside Fromelles would have been just another attack to McCay and he would have weighed the danger of the operation relative to the outcomes desired for the Somme Offensive and also presumably, he would have considered what intelligence was available on the forces opposing the Australians and carried on, possibly believing he had been ordered to do so and in complete conformity with his pre-war training in

the Militia. After all, this was why he fought so vigorously at Krithia, was appointed C.B. and awarded the Légion d'honneur and used his influence to escape a medical board hearing to review his health.

Basic summary information on McCay, Sir James Whiteside can be found on **re-member**: a database of all Victorian MPs since 1851 at <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/re-member/bioregfull.cfm?mid=535>, and at <http://www.firstworldwar.bham.ac.uk/bibliography/generals/index.htm> which is supported by University of Birmingham, http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/whoswho.asp?whosWhold=mccay_james&showpopup=false under the domain name australia's prime ministers and <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-leaders/ww1/generals-aif.htm>, which has material on AIF Generals including General Sir John Monash GCMG, Field Marshal Lord Birdwood and General Sir Brudenell White, with links to the ADFA and listings of other Australian Military Forces Generals, Lieutenant Generals, Major Generals, Brigadier Generals, et cetera.

In keeping with the approach taking by Austin in his address is the background on McCay posted by <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/James-Whiteside-McCay>, and The Long, Long Trail at http://www.1914-1918.net/bat_fromelles.htm concerning 'The Attack at Fromelles'. The Long, Long Trail has very good links to biographical information on the British commanders responsible for the assault, including Commander in Chief Douglas Haig, British First Army commander General Charles Munro, General Richard Haking who was given command of XI Corps and usually held responsible for the fiasco at Fromelles, James Whiteside McCay and Major-General Colin John Mackenzie, although the material on Monro is derived from the web site of The Queen's Royal Surrey Regimental Association at <http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/colonels/036.html>, the detail on Richard Haking from Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Haking as is that relating to McCay at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_McCay and that on Mackenzie from the Centre for First World War Studies at the University of Birmingham found at <http://www.firstworldwar.bham.ac.uk/donkey/mackenzie.htm>.