



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Call for government action on missing of Fromelles

MASS GRAVES ARE ALWAYS AN EMOTIVE ISSUE AND WILL LIKELY REMAIN SO AS AUSTRALIAN AUTHORITIES MOVE TO BURY THE FORGOTTEN WAR DEAD OF FROMELLES UNDER YEARS OF BUREAUCRATIC RED-TAPE AS DEMONSTRATED AT THE LAUNCH OF PATRICK LINDSAY'S REMARKABLE TEXT ON THE SUBJECT. The True Story of Australia's Darkest Day, the search for our fallen 1st World War heroes from the Fromelles battlefield deserve more consideration than this and once again, it is up to the public to demand action by the Federal Government with respect to framing policy to ensure the site is properly investigated and the remains of those who might be buried there, are identified without prejudice or regard to nationality.

Members of the public who attended the launch, including one associated with the Friends of the 15th Brigade, voiced the opinion that "Keynote speeches by Lambis Englezos (the instigator of the project), Tim Whitford_who was mentioned in an article in the Herald Sun last July and leading author Patrick Lindsay, were generally well received. Speakers provided background on archival inquiries made prior to the book being compiled, furnished the audience with information on research that had already been completed, and highlighted the need for what was described as a comprehensive and systematic exploration of Pheasant Wood using the latest in archaeological and forensic technology."

Delangré Farm, where many of our heroes from Fromelles are purportedly buried, was part of a major battlefield and tremendously important to understanding Australia's involvement in the Western Front campaign. Patrick Lindsay described the tenacious engagement as Australia's worst military disaster and according to Mr Bob Sutherland, "the final resting place of those who disappeared is worthy of further scientific examination and veneration, because this is as much hallowed ground as the Gallipoli Peninsula which many of the fallen had previously survived."

"Perhaps more so because on 19 July 1916, the Diggers suffered an estimated 5,533 casualties out of the approximate 7,000 who attacked, with almost 2,000 being killed in one night. No wonder the curiosity and interest of the participants in the book launch was piqued by the surprise appearance of retired Major-General Mike O'Brien,



POST CARD: "Kindest Regards" —
PRINTED by Gale's Studio Ltd, England,
this memento is dated 07/11/18. Private
collection of Alan Bennett.

who wondered whether one could rightly apply the term "mass grave" to this Great War killing field. Sutherland, an amateur military researcher who supports the recovery, identification and burial of those who fell in this particular blood bath, says the Federal Government should take the matter in hand and honour the fallen as is expected by the relatives of those concerned.

"Although much of the address of Mike O'Brien reiterated what had already been disclosed and reported on by author Patrick Lindsay, there are several issues which need to be addressed."

"Former Major-General Mike O'Brien asserted the time frame for undertaking a more thorough investigation of the site in north-eastern France would be 5 years or more and by insinuation suggested, success would depend upon gaining international co-operation for a limited scientific dig outside the pits designated as the most likely burial place for the ill-conceived battle of Fromelles. Appointed to mount a limited expedition in the northern Summer of 2008 by Roger Lee, the Head of the Australian Army History Unit, O'Brien intends to liaise with the Australian and British governments as well as the French authorities and all the personalities involved, to find out exactly what can be achieved."

Another amateur military history researcher, Mr Grant Triffett, who has followed the progress of Englezos and his team with growing interest, acknowledged that Lambis should feel more buoyant now the Commonwealth Government has conceded the location of the burial pits had been verified and importantly, O'Brien asserts it is more than likely that remains are still present. "It was great to finally have Lambis Englezos vindicated and his work accepted by Government. It should have welcomed the work Lambis was undertaking and acted more swiftly to lend support to excavate the grave trenches in this locality before this", he remarked.

"Hopefully there will be other outcomes from this project as well. For one thing a renewed public interest in Australia's military heritage, because, although retired Major-General O'Brien has conceded the veracity of Lambis' findings on Pheasant Wood and appears sympathetic to the project, he seems blithely unaware of how difficult it is to undertake such research. Research which will become even more difficult in the future as many historical records relating to this period are being lost. It is with disbelief that we learned that some of the records Lambis located and tabled with the authorities to establish his credibility and case have since gone astray."

"In the context of previous obstructionism by the Commonwealth Government it should be asked why there has been so much delay in tackling the British and Australian burials in the vicinity of Fromelles, when there is so much support on the ground from the French community itself", Triffett continued.

"I know its a real problem for Government", remarked Triffett. Considering Great Britain and Empire, which were part of the Entente Powers, had nearly 9 million men mobilized during the Great War and there was something like 3.1 million casualties, with 191,000 becoming POW's or going Missing according to figures from one

source, one can understand why the previous Federal Government dreaded the prospect of becoming involved in such excavations. In fact, according to John Laffin's Australians on the Western Front, there were about 18,450 Diggers that have no known grave on the Western Front—although many of these soldiers have an unidentified grave in the established cemeteries."

"Be that as it may", commented Triffett. "Diplomacy of course does have a role and would not be unwarranted. However, the last thing needed at the moment is more bureaucratic intrigue and egos and consequently, diplomatic channels should be used primarily to promote international protocols for the recovery of the missing from this conflict and by so doing, help to encourage best practice with respect to honouring the dead as common sense would suggest there must be other mass graves in existence."

Sutherland said, "O'Brien's assertion there are no international treaties or legal instruments to support the forensic investigation of Pheasant Wood is difficult to grasp as is his suggestion the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is not charged with the responsibility for conducting the recovery of the fallen. Difficult indeed", he explained "when Wikipedia is considered. *The Free Online Encyclopedia* reports there were over 40 million casualties during the 1st World War. That figure of course included military and civilian and in this context it is unimaginable not to have protocols in place to support such inquiry."

He continued, "In total the Entente Powers (also known as the Allies) lost more than 5 million soldiers and the Central Powers about 4 million and although casualty statistics will vary considerably between sources, it is usually commonly accepted that Australia lost 55,000 killed, missing in action or died of wounds."

Mr Sutherland then referred to there being a Commonwealth War Graves Commission Annual Report for 2005-2006 which is the principal source used in obtaining the number of total war dead. "The totals though include 2,005 military deaths during 1919-1921 and nobody would be surprised to learn a 1922 War Office report revised the total losses for Australia as 59,330 war dead.

"Thus, when one realizes countries like Belgium and France have considerable experience of retrieving skeletal remains and ordnance on land that has been fought over in this era, then one understand the problem of procedure in dealing with the missing is not insurmountable. The situation is only compounded when bureaucracy lacks the will to give due and proper recognition to avoid setting a precedent, even though other mass graves must have been unearthed subsequent to the work of the various army burial units up to the end of 1921, which I believe was the official end of grave registration.

According to Grant Triffett, the process of conducting military research is also compounded by the rate at which this country's military heritage is being destroyed by the various agencies charged with its conservation and preservation. Consequently, Triffett calls on the Federal Government to audit depositories such as



POST CARD: Lewis gun protecting defences—Printed by Atlas Press, Melbourne, Victoria. During the 1st World War this image was used to rally support for the Australian Comforts' Fund and was originally titled, 'Lewis gun in action in the front trenches.' From the private collection of Bob Sutherland, Member of the Fromelles Discussion Group and from a series titled "OUR BOYS AT THE FRONT", which was authorized by the Department of Defence.

the National Archives of Australia and to put a stop to the perversity wherein important military records are being wantonly culled and destroyed by means of an archaic disposal system which fails to take into account community research needs or the desires of specialized interest groups whose views are usually ignored."

Concluding Mr Triffett said, "The Australian Government is morally bound to honour the memory of our fallen on all battlefields and this includes Fromelles, but this can only be achieved with greater transparency than has been encountered up to date on the subject of those sacrificed in the inglorious battlefield known as Fromelles." Expediting a full forensic examination of the burial pits located outside Fromelles should not pose much of a problem for the newly-elected Rudd Labor Government, particularly when it has already gotten its head around the challenge of returning soldiers from Iraq.