



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Postwar agreement exposes government complicity

With the trial dig at Pheasant Wood being imperiously stage-managed by the Army History Unit and Federal politicians in Australia scrambling to express great sympathy and condolences over the casualties of Fromelles, all members of the international community need to ask why the unearthing of human remains in this German-dug mass grave is still so controversial, particularly as it means the British and Australian governments will have to get their acts together and reconcile the differences in their approach to these long forgotten men. The difficulty of having the case for the existence of a mass grave at Fromelles substantiated, the need to present findings to a Panel of Investigation and years of lobbying by Lambis Englezos in order to convince indifferent bureaucrats of the existence of these mass graves, should now be analyzed in the context of news from Age correspondent Paola Totaro, that there has been an undisclosed postwar agreement not to launch specific searches for the missing. The refusal of the authorities to fulfill treaty obligations with respect to the exhumation, transportation and reburial of war dead, should also be reconsidered in this context.

Now, after 92 years buried together in the pits at Pheasant Wood, this tragedy is being compounded by the seemingly ad hoc approach being taken to the unearthing of the missing soldiers. A previously unknown group titled Fromelles Evaluation Group (FEG) appears to have been hastily thrown together to forge a diplomatic solution to the dilemma of human remains being found and there are other problems with site management as well, with individual members of the AHU presuming to speak on behalf of our elected officials in order to dictate the framework of recovery. Exorbitant sums of money have already been expended preparing for the trial dig on a grab bag of consultants by the Australian Government and there is little doubt, that in the current social and political climate there will be an ongoing flurry of activity meant to justify the archaeological techniques and procedures being adopted by GUARD as well as the controlled and sanitized way in which background information is being circulated.

The Fromelles Discussion Group asks all families and relatives not to forget the shameful manner in which the authorities initially handled the request for this investigation and the obstacles placed in the way of Lambis Englezos. It is important to remember there has already been disgrace aplenty at Fromelles, as suggested by Nine News' Europe correspondent James Talia who said on 29 May 2008 that Fromelles was an extraordinary story. "It's a story of extraordinary bravery, appalling cover-up and moving redemption for all of us", he said in reference to sacred places on the Western Front.

According to Talia, "The Battle of Fromelles in [July] 1916 was a blow our young, small nation simply couldn't handle. Coming as it did just months after the disaster of

Gallipoli, the appalling losses were airbrushed from contemporary news reports and, in large part, from Australian military history.” Press reports according to Talia were censored and played down and in the end, Fromelles should not just be dismissed as one general’s folly but indicative of the way many Australian casualties were incurred during the Great War.

Families and relatives consequently should remember that a form of censorship is still alive and well and evident in the official pronouncements concerning the dig. Be assured that public pressure is already producing results, so please don’t be deterred from having a say, especially when speaking with a united voice on behalf of these truly neglected soldiers, as this will contribute to the debate and help the government actually focus on what is important. It is important to question the authorities when Fromelles has so conspicuously been left out of our history and criticism about the GUARD tendering process and AHU involvement, has been raised in the community by the Fromelles Discussion Group and others in the media. The public is clearly not being told about the methods being adopted by GUARD, or the science behind the dig and is yet to be given any definitive statement on the government’s intentions with respect to this historic site, other than one ludicrous news report that concrete might be poured over the burial pits to protect its heritage value between this and any future excavation. If this is the case it would thoroughly ruin the site and destroy remaining evidence which would be a major blunder in itself when the soldiers themselves can no longer tell their story. But as Christina Spittel suggests in an article titled *‘Battlefield Archaeology’* which accompanied a feature about recent excavations at Polygon Wood published in Issue 40—*Wartime magazine: the ground might speak for the soldiers, if turned and properly “interrogated” by professional archaeologists.* This is perhaps the crux of the problem. The ground will only be able to reveal its secrets if world’s best practice is adopted and the agencies controlling the dig permit it to by diligently recording their findings for other more experienced members of the international community to interpret.



PHOTOGRAPH: “Brothers-In-Arms”—Studio Portrait, Broadmeadows, Victoria, 1915. [Depicted are [Left to Right]: 981 Pte. A. Forster of Melbourne, Victoria; 982 Pte. W. G. Gardner, of Costerfield, Victoria; and 990 Pte A. P. Montague Wardell, of Goroke, Victoria, wearing unglamorous calico fatigue hats after enlisting in the 24th Battalion AIF. Originally from Plaistow, England, Forster was killed in action on 12-DEC-1915 at Lone Pine at Gallipoli, while Gardner died of wounds on 30-JUL-16 at Pozieres on the Somme and Wardell who originally came from London, England, was killed on 19-JUL-1916 during the diversionary Battle of Fromelles while serving in the 60th Battalion].
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Since the individual careers and reputations of members of the AHU, FEG and GUARD will be forged from the relics and bones of these soldiers during excavation, relatives and descendants should be given knowledge of the composition of the groups involved, as well as information about the qualifications of all who participate in the dig, whether they represent the Australian and British governments, are seconded from their respective Departments of Defence, or deployed by the GUARD team to carry out the work.

Rumours are already circulating that when battlefield archaeologists from Scotland's Glasgow University were commencing the limited excavation, Lambis Englezos was initially refused access to the site and the media were corralled behind crime scene tape and because of this and other concerns, the Fromelles Discussion Group questions whether the dig is actually being carried out under the auspices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, or simply being relegated to that part of the bureaucracy in this country most amenable to achieving the outcome desired by officialdom. Because nowhere on the website of the AHU (beside the electronically recurring motif 'PROTECTING ARMY HERITAGE/PROMOTING ARMY HISTORY', can members of the Fromelles Discussion Group find any reference to the organization being responsible for the recovery of skeletal remains discovered in mass graves, such as those that are being disinterred at Pheasant Wood.

Surely the responsibility would be the preserve of the CWGC itself or perhaps more appropriately a properly constituted Commonwealth-French Joint Committee operating under the auspices of that organization, which is after all what is prescribed in *Article 12* of the 1951 treaty relating to war graves of Commonwealth soldiers found in French Territory. Although this is not really possible is it, if the news broadcast by Paola Totaro on the 31st May 2008, is correct. That there was a postwar agreement that precluded Commonwealth governments like Australia and Britain from giving effect to such international agreements.

The article titled '*Grave at Fromelles unearths political minefield*', shows how governments can resist the wishes of the populace through hidden agendas - and, thus, neglected by the authorities and forgotten by their countrymen, the missing of Fromelles still await recovery, with a Federal Government still dithering and not sufficiently up to speed to give true leadership on this important matter.

According to information in the public domain the Army History Unit is responsible for the following and since the Federal Government has refused to put together a more professional and experienced international recovery team, the Fromelles Discussion Group wants clarification of the postwar agreement cited by Totaro and how the AHU came to be given management of the trial dig, when this would seem to be extraneous to its stated role and function.

Indeed the Army History Unit declares the following core functions on its website and appears to operate separately to the Army recovery unit, although both probably work in conjunction with each other and have been established under the auspices of Australia's Department of Defence:

--Responsibilities of the Army History Unit--

- Developing policy and programs for the collection, conservation, interpretation and promotion of Army history;
- Managing Army's museum network;
- Army's heritage fleet;
- Army History Research Grants;
- Military History Publishing Program;
- Chief of Army's Annual History Conference;
- Coordinating the implementation of the *Archives Act* and administering access arrangements;
- Developing policy, and providing corporate support and advice for cultural heritage collection, and a corporate focus for issues involving the Australian War Memorial.
- Sponsoring and providing secretariat services for both the Army Military History Project Committee and the Battle Honours Committee.

What the Australian Government and the AHU have to take on board though is that there is a growing number of questions being raised about the trial dig at Fromelles and the interplay between the agencies involved. There has been conjecture over what seems to be a rather questionable tendering process, and views emanating from Canberra and the archaeological dig, differ in relation to what options might be considered now that remains have been found. This of course only compounds the tragedy and confuses the community, as do the constant platitudes about dignity and respect.



PHOTOGRAPH: Miniature Medal Group belonging to Col. R. E. Roth, AAMC MID
Medal group comprises the Order of St Michael and St George, the Distinguished Service Order, the Order of St John of Jerusalem, Queen's South African Medal with six clasps, 1914/15 Star, British War Medal 1914/1920, Victory Medal and the Colonial Auxiliary Forces Officers Decoration, with an unidentified medal missing as shown by the fragment of ribbon at the end of the bar depicted.

Born in Brighton, England in 1858 and educated at University College School, Roth studied medicine at University College and Hospital, subsequently receiving a commission in the Medical Staff Corps, Military Forces of New South Wales in 1894. Roth served in South Africa where he was mentioned in despatches and awarded the Distinguished Service Order, gained promotion to Lieutenant Colonel in 1909 while serving in the Commonwealth Military Forces in NSW and then commanded the 5th Field Ambulance, Australian Medical Corps at Gallipoli. He was promoted to Colonel in February 1916 and served in France as Deputy Director of Medical Services for 1 ANZAC Corps and then 2 ANZAC Corps, being wounded during the Battle of Fromelles, after which he was invalided to Australia in November 1916.

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It was after all bad enough having Lieutenant-General, *later* General Sir Richard Haking GOC XI Corps, who gained the unenviable reputation of being a butcher during the Great War, dismiss objections to the proposed frontal attack at Fromelles, without now exacerbating the situation by further procrastination. This does not honour the dead or offer much comfort to relatives or descendants, especially when considered in the context of claims that the Department of Defence is trying to resource the excavation without being provided additional funding by the Commonwealth to

supplement its annual budget.

Thankfully there is a consensus forming in spite of the postwar agreement mentioned by Totaro, that the missing of Fromelles should be identified and reburied. This means the Federal Government should move toward disclosing its intentions and recover the skeletal remains of our countrymen in accord with the provisions of international and humanitarian law, as these neglected soldiers have captured the public imagination and should still have legal standing as nationals, regardless of where they lie in foreign soil.

Therefore the Fromelles Discussion Group supports the complete exhumation of all skeletal remains in a timely fashion, the identification of the dead through forensic and other scientific means including DNA testing and their eventual re-interment with military honours. But only after the authorities have had time to consult widely to ascertain the wishes of the families of the deceased and the general community.

Identification of course can only be achieved by means of a fully-fledged archaeological survey and the adoption of world's best practice when it comes to maintaining the integrity of this mass grave because as Totaro says, the community's social and cultural expectations have changed dramatically over recent years, and the public now realizes the historical significance of this find and the need for a bit more good, old-fashioned scrutiny of the operation.

The Fromelles Discussion Group is proud that our advocacy of a process for identifying and reburying these neglected soldiers has been supported by Lambis Englezos, Tim Whitford and national RSL president Bill Crews, although the latter sensibly has again reminded relatives that some bodies might not be identifiable even with DNA technology. There must be deterioration in some subsurface layers and also a possibility that unidentified corpses might have been placed in the pits without being recorded by the Germans, given the fact there was artillery involved, which would have made it very difficult to retrieve the bodies of the fallen.

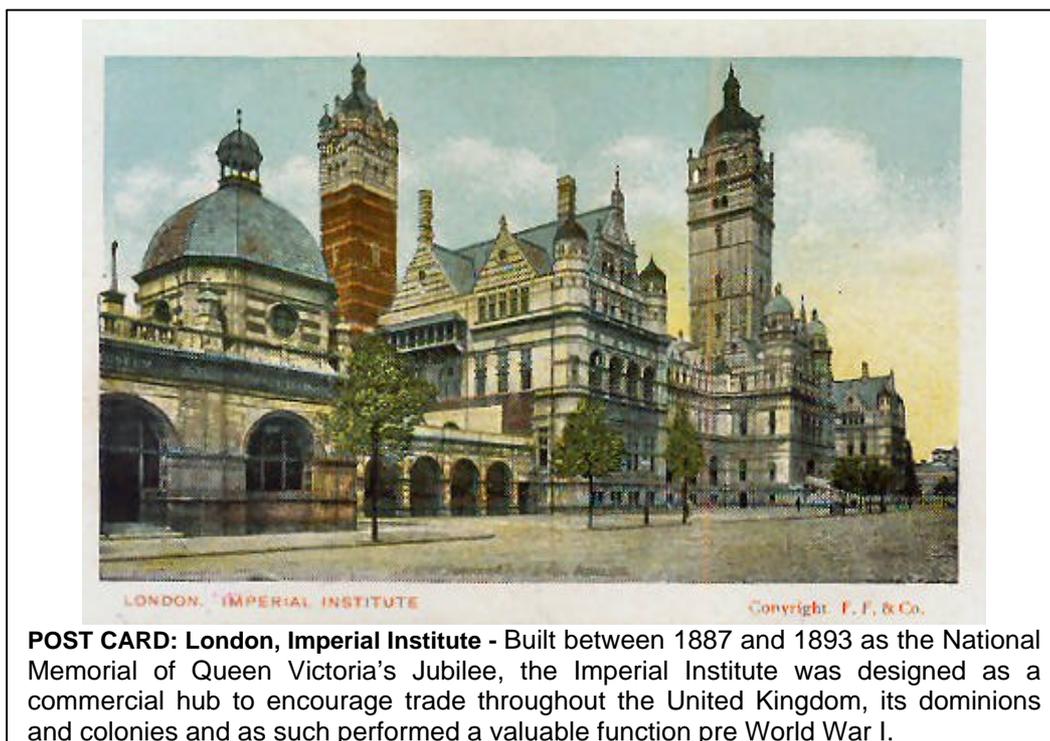
Nine News correspondent James Talia was not far off the mark when he suggested Fromelles was a disgrace. It is true there is no shortage of sacred places and extraordinary stories relating to the Western Front, viz. Poziers to the Australians and Verdun to the French. However, Fromelles is unique and not just because of the appalling losses and now that Totaro's article has been circulated and widely published in Australia and the media in the United Kingdom is beginning to publicize the excavation and report on findings, the Government should review its policy processes and facilitate more open public administration. Because with renewed interest in the Western Front in general and the Battle of Fromelles in particular, comes a heavy responsibility. One that hopefully will pay the debt that is due these forgotten soldiers, highlight how reprehensible this action was and also inspire future generations to become involved in searching for other mass graves to honour the dead.

'Fromelles dig inspires other searches', distributed by theage.com.au on June 1, 2008, reports the Fromelles mass grave site has already spurred several British researchers to undertake investigations into other burial pits to the west of Pheasant Wood, which

may still contain hundreds of soldiers from the Great War. As interest in Haking's catastrophic folly grows and the international community realizes the extent of such military blunders during WWI, an increasing number of battlefield detectives will follow Lambis Englezos, British author Mike Senior, aircraft restorer Chris Carleton-Smith and amateur historian Jim Spence, in searching for the missing and to give such men the acclamation they deserve.

For as James Talia reflects, tens of thousands of Australian and British troops were sent on suicidal assaults like Fromelles to meet their deaths and there was horrific slaughter right across the Western Front. *"Consider this"*, he says. In *"just one day, more Australians were lost at Fromelles than died in the Boer, Korean and Vietnam wars combined. It is possibly one of the most tragic statistics one could possibly imagine."* And that according to the Fromelles Discussion Group is the most ignominious aspect of this debacle, that the soldiers were not just treated as cannon fodder by British generals, but that their own government failed to look for them in the period of economic austerity which followed the Great War and ultimately abandoned them to their fate without proper recognition of their deeds of heroism and it is upon this background of neglect, that we must revisit the mythology surrounding Gallipoli and Australia's military involvement in the subsequent campaigns on the Western Front.

Although it has been fascinating watching events unfold at Fromelles, not all is well with the management of the project as months have lapsed and there has been no plan for recovery forthcoming or leadership and concerns about the lack of objectivity of those responsible for supervising the dig is intensifying. Fromelles has been an exercise in media management and therefore one has to question why the AHU divulged information about the postwar protocol to Totaro when this completely undermines the authority of the CWGC, has the potential to embarrass the newly-elected Labor Government and contradicts claims the unit is working under the auspices of the Commission while undertaking the dig.



Deliberately ambiguous and misleading statements by participants involved in the limited excavation leads one to question the strategy of the Department of Defence and the outcome that is intended, irrespective of the wishes of the Australian people who we believe, still expect full recovery as the Rudd Government has consistently said every effort would be made to identify them.

Might the Fromelles Discussion Group remind the AHU the German burial party detailed to inter the remains of these Allied soldiers apparently did so by segregating bodies on the basis of nationality and as a result, there seems little need for any further delay in moving toward a full recovery operation, whether this is done under the auspices of the CWGC, the FEG, the AHU or any other makeshift, official group that might now be created to fill the void left by the failure of national agencies, to uphold those permanent international arrangements which are still in force in relation to the recovery of Commonwealth war dead in French territory. It is simply a matter of the Australian and British governments being sufficiently committed to providing the extra funding necessary to the CWGC to complete the process of recovery, identification and proper commemoration of these recently discovered men.

In concluding this paper the Fromelles Discussion Group would like to ask what GUARD and the AHU have done with the remains of the thirty soldiers that were uncovered during the excavation period, given the CWGC was supposed to be on site and involved in the trial dig and it is the responsibility of this organization to process war dead. Surely after being forgotten for all these years the remains are not going to be covered over and expected to wait for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn and allow them to be disinterred and honoured.

IT HAS TAKEN TOO LONG ALREADY.