

Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Political Minefield Unearthed

Fromelles Discussion Group member Grant Triffett recently approached Miranda Ramsay, Communications Department @ theage.com.au and obtained a referral to Paola Totaro, author of the news report, 'Grave at Fromelles unearths political minefield', which disclosed the fact that a secret postwar agreement existed between Australia and Britain, not to go searching for missing casualties of the First World War, as a means of invalidating treaties which were designed to support the recovery of missing Empire soldiers and empower the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to act in French territory. Paola subsequently attributed the release of this information to army historian Roger Lee who has been heavily involved in the Fromelles dig and largely been responsible for managing the publicity surrounding the excavation, and asked whether the group might be interested in setting out a series of questions which might shed some light on the ADF's strategy at Pheasant Wood.

Below are two communications pertinent to this contact which gave the group an opportunity to further detail its thinking on this subject and allowed us to ponder the motivation behind the political machinations of the Army History Unit. The first Email dated 11 June 2008 reflects criticisms espoused by Totaro and the second, is a response to receiving news that Paola had not been officially invited to attend the ceremony held at the site on June 13. A ceremony attended by Marie-Paul Demassiet, also Australian researchers Lambis Englezos and Tim Whitford and, of course, the Australian ambassador to France, David Ritchie, British Major-General Matt Sykes, Patrick Lindsay the author of the well known book on Fromelles, the backhoe operators and an assortment of other officials for want of a better word.

One of the few highlights of this whole tawdry affair being the wonderful generosity of Marie-Paul Demassiet, who, together with her late husband, Pierre Jean Georges, farmed the land on which the burial pits are located. Madame Demassiet who lost two uncles in the Great War and who had kindly permitted and sanctioned the trial dig as the custodian of the land in which the remains were found, has since offered to donate the area as a permanent cemetery to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as she now feels the land belongs to the soldiers. This magnanimous gesture should be formally acknowledged by the Australian Government.

However in saying this the Fromelles Discussion Group reminds Australian and British authorities as Michael Warner has done in an article titled 'Fromelles to eternity' published in the Herald Sun on Saturday, June 14, 2008, the finding of a mass grave has ignited a new debate over what should happen with the Diggers who are buried at Pheasant Wood.

Granted we do not know how many BEF soldiers are buried on site strictly speaking, but the Australian Government is morally bound to consult a broad demographic

including the families and relatives of those interred. It is required to act in the interests of the deceased and not to abnegate its responsibility with respect to identifying the soldiers killed during the Battle of Fromelles as to do so, would be a complete repudiation of the principles which underlie the CWGC as well as the years of work undertaken by Lambis Englezos and Tim Whitford and the dead themselves, which would then constitute a body of loyal men twice abandoned. The soldiers should be properly laid to rest.

EMAIL from Grant Triffett, Member of Fromelles Discussion Group to Paola Totaro, Europe correspondent *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Dated: 11 June 2008 12:14:24 PM

Dear Paola,

I appreciate your reply to the enquiry I forwarded through Miranda Ramsay. The postwar agreement you mentioned in the article titled 'Grave at Fromelles unearths political minefield' and attributed in your Email to Roger Lee of the Australian History Unit, interests us because we have been trying to lobby the Australian Government to implement the treaties which underpin the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the very organization which is supposed to act in cases like Pheasant Wood. Members suspected there was some unspoken (possibly unwritten) protocol that accounted for the reluctance of the Howard Government to investigate the claims of Lambis Englezos, and which now explains the partisanship of those managing the trial dig.

Even though there has been a great amount of publicity over the limited excavation once human remains were found, much of that reporting has been fairly insubstantial, superficial and lacking in detail, and particularly so in view of mounting criticism of the way the project has been planned, resourced, supervised and handled. In spite of the flurry of activity in the media since skeletal remains were confirmed, the Australian public is being told very little about what is actually happening, although as Patrick Lindsay the author of **Fromelles: The Story of Australia's Darkest Day** would say, the ducks which appear relatively calm on the surface of the water, are paddling furiously underneath.

Fromelles is interesting from a number of viewpoints and consequently, we are pleased to hear that you are considering further reporting on the matter especially when you have the experience and investigative skills to do so in a more substantive way. Members of the Fromelles Discussion Group have attempted to question processes involved in the dig and as our website **FromellesDiscussionGroup.com** outlines, we have kept the Prime Minister The Hon Kevin Rudd MP, the Minister of Defence Science and Personnel, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Army History Unit and a number of related community organizations like the RSL, informed of our views and activities. It is our declared position that things don't quite gel, particularly when one considers the way some vested interests are operation, and the lack of openness and transparency which has become apparent.

Putting all this aside though, the main reason for trying to make contact was to ascertain whether we could post a copy of your article on our web site. If approval is given, the material would be incorporated as a newspaper clipping on our Notice Board. Should you be willing to allow this, we would be grateful if you could let us know what information you might want included. Usually we would write a very brief introductory paragraph including a credit like the following:

"Reproduced with permission of Paola Totaro, Europe Correspondent, The Sydney Morning Herald".

The article was picked up widely but still has interest for us. Should you have the time the group hosts a number of Discussion Papers designed to lobby the Federal Government in regard to the adoption of world's best practice in exhuming, identifying and reburying the missing in cases like Fromelles and there are in our opinion many questions which remain unanswered. For example, besides calling on the government to take action over Fromelles and promoting the rights of war dead, the Fromelles Discussion Group contains a document titled '*Questions addressed to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Australian Government in relation to the burial pits at Fromelles*', an '*Open Letter to the PM*' and resources which you might find useful. The site hosts links to the Australian Treaties Library, Campaigners for War Grave Commemorations and other bodies and organizations, as well as the 1918 and 1951 treaties which are supposed to still be in force concerning Commonwealth war dead found in French territory. Indeed, we are about to post material based on the article you published.

Members would be happy to help you set out a series of questions which might shed light on the ADF's strategy during the trial dig, although you already seem to have an understanding of what is happening. This request actually anticipates material we are already drafting. However the main problem that we see in trying to achieve this, is that we do not have a physical presence in Fromelles and can only really speak to what we know.

Of course, there are some who seem to be able to insinuate knowledge that is not in the public arena and this always intrigues us. It is because of this and the lack of depth in most media bulletins that we speak about Fromelles being an exercise in media management and spin-doctoring - issues which you yourself have raised in the Email forwarded today.

As I said, if members can help they will. Questions should start with the lack of transparency over the tendering process, the confidentiality of the report compiled by Tony Pollard and the GUARD team after the initial non-invasive survey, the process by which inexperienced personnel were hired to undertake the limited excavation being concluded at the moment and, of course, the reasons why Roger Lee told you about the postwar agreement between Australia and Britain not to search for the missing of the Great War, when this completely undermines the authority of the CWGC, has the potential to embarrass the incoming Labor Government and contradicts claims the unit is working under the auspices of the CWGC while undertaking the dig.

Here we have a situation where the Rudd Labor Government like its Liberal predecessor, is reluctant to implement treaties which underpin the CWGC and in support of this now, Roger Lee, the head of the Army History Unit appointed to oversee the limited excavation, either inadvertently or deliberately suggests there is a protocol which negates the very instruments upon which the CWGC is based. When The Hon Warren Snowdon MP Member for Lingiari and Minister for Defence Science and Personnel (I believe it was him), referred to the possibility of the repatriation of remains it was not very long before members of the AHU on site at Fromelles, were observed on network news reports here in Australia, declaring there would no such option countenanced by the authorities. This either supports your obfuscation theory, or, at a minimum, demonstrates that not all is well with the management of the project and the lack of objectivity of those responsible for supervising the dig. This difference in approach obviously reflects the interplay of various competing interests, and this is something which does not augur well for the future recovery process.

Deliberately ambiguous and misleading statements by major players leads one to question the strategy of the ADF and the outcome that is intended, irrespective of the wishes of the Australian people who we believe, expect full recovery.

Regards Grant Triffett & Bob Sutherland

EMAIL from Grant Triffett, Member of Fromelles Discussion Group to Paola Totaro, Europe correspondent *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Dated: 11 June 2008 11:56:51 PM

Dear Paola,

There is not much I can add to what was said in my last Email. I don't understand why you haven't been invited to the ceremony? But then, that is probably only to be expected in view of what we discussed.

Perhaps you should look at the article titled '*Leave Diggers in Peace*' by defence reporter Ian McPhedran, published in the Herald Sun on page 10 today. The article informs the public that the Australian soldiers lying in a mass grave in France should be left in peace.

It suggests this is the view of "**descendants and the RSL**" and goes on to canvas and quote one descendant who has previously received some media coverage, and also the RSL national president, Bill Crews who appears to have changed his mind on what should happen. Perhaps while you are at Fromelles you should ask why the RSL has reversed its position? Previously Bill Crews was quoted in the media as supporting identification of the deceased, although he reminded families and relatives that not all of the fallen might be identifiable through DNA testing.

Why would the national RSL president change his position on this issue when earlier media reports have suggested the remains of the soldiers lie in clay, a situation which has probably helped preserve them?

Why would the national RSL president change his position when up to thirty bodies have been unearthed and only a tooth or some other fragment is needed to undertake forensic testing? Why would the RSL have changed its position when the German burial party detailed to inter the remains of these Allied soldiers apparently did so by segregating bodies on the basis of nationality? If this is the case and we believe it is, why is there so much ambiguity about which burial pits contain the skeletal remains of Australian soldiers?

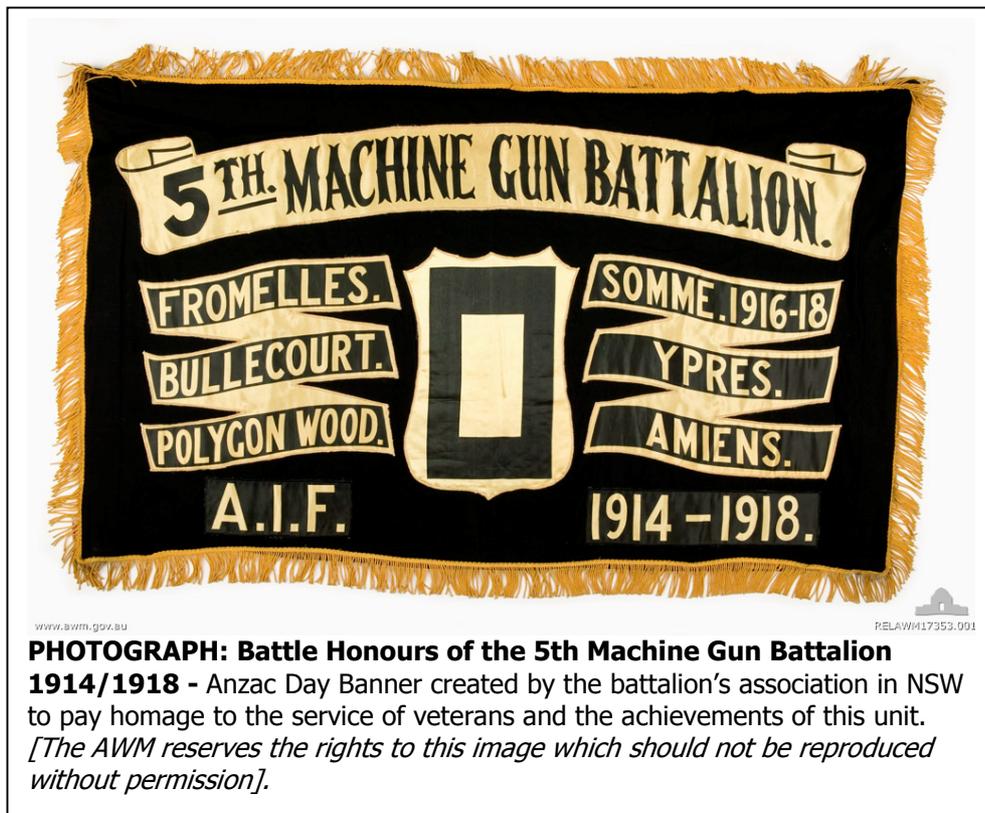
How can the ADF get away with such selectivity when it comes to inviting the media to the site and making misleading and ambiguous assertions about how difficult it would be to identify the skeletal remains that have been found? Of course, the notion of building a memorial on site would obviate the need to undertake further examination of the site, let the Federal Government off the hook with respect to public clamour about DNA testing and also ensure the status quo is maintained. In effect the CWGC and the various governments involved, would no longer be embarrassed by not implementing the treaties which underpin the CWGC and instead, the organization would be upheld as the keeper of permanent Commonwealth cemeteries in French territory.

This might also mean that the Australian and British governments have successfully circumvented the investigations at Pheasant Wood, discouraged more searching by amateur historians and energetically pursued resolution in terms of the

protocol mentioned by Roger Lee, the head of the AHU. Perhaps the reason might also have something to do with the fact that many of the missing from the Great War already lie in the permanent cemetery system regulated by the CWGC and governments of what ever persuasion, understand that if an exception is made at Fromelles and DNA testing allowed, the international community might want to have this option applied elsewhere.

Building a memorial would be the cheapest option for the Australian Government and also the most politically expedient in that it would demonstrate the authorities will not sanction the application of this technology across the board. Good luck during your visit.

Regards Grant Triffett



PHOTOGRAPH: Battle Honours of the 5th Machine Gun Battalion 1914/1918 - Anzac Day Banner created by the battalion's association in NSW to pay homage to the service of veterans and the achievements of this unit. *[The AWM reserves the rights to this image which should not be reproduced without permission].*
