



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Pheasant Wood requires world's best practice in forensic archaeology

The Battle of Fromelles was the first major action by Australian troops on the Western Front during World War One and by all accounts the attack was an unmitigated disaster. Fifth Division soldiers, together with the British 61st Division, both of whom were inexperienced formations, went over the parapet and met withering artillery and machine gun fire decimating their ranks to the tune of 6,559 men killed, wounded and missing, including 490 Diggers captured.

Even though a nucleus of the 5th Division were battle hardened by their experience on the Gallipoli Peninsula, the Australian troops and their British counterparts never stood a chance against well entrenched superior German forces. As a result of this action, many men were left to perish in No Man's Land and in German positions after the failed attack and therefore it was left up to the enemy to retrieve and dispose of many of the dead. Fromelles ruined the 5th Division as a fighting force in the short term and symbolically for the AIF, this battle was a brutal introduction to the reality of warfare on the Western Front, which was locked in stalemate becoming a killing ground for all involved.

This is the reason so many of our troops were left unidentified or remain missing and why the Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group is so interested in the burial pits at Pheasant Wood, together with so many others in the community who are also concerned about the apparent lack of initiative shown by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) and other inter-governmental agencies and departments to finalize arrangements for the exhumation and identification of those who lay at this location.

One recognized authority on this battle is well known Australian military historian, author and member of the Friends of the 15th Brigade, Robyn Corfield, who described this raid by Allied forces in the following way in his *Don't Forget Me Cobber: The Battle of*



POST CARD: Produced by Vandyck Studios, Launceston, Tasmania, this image poignantly shows AIF burials in a battlefield cemetery—Private collection of Alan Bennett. [The problem on the Western Front was such graves were often lost as a result of the ravages of artillery. 36223 Gunner Sydney Herbert Louis Norman died of disease on 20/10/1918, aged 45. He was the son of Reverend James and Jessie Marsh Norman of Longford, Tasmania. Buried in the Brookwood Military Cemetery, Surrey, England—Plot No.:4, Row: K, Grave 9].

Fromelles—An Inquiry. On flat farm land west of Lille on the night of the 19/20 July 1916 our Diggers and their British companions, “faced a German Division outnumbering [them by] two to one. By dusk on the 20 July the Allies had 2,436 dead and 4,123 wounded and had not taken a single yard.” According to Corfield, “The Germans had 501 dead, 943 wounded. The figures tell their own story.”

Ninety years later the search for the missing still goes on encumbered by bureaucratic red tape, lack of transparency, interpersonal politics and failure with respect to upholding international treaties designed to facilitate the exhumation, transportation and reburial of remains that might be found in unmarked graves. This was demonstrated on 7th February 2008, according to the Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group. Grant Triffett, a spokesman for the group, commented on these issues when referring to the article which appeared in the electronic media in Australia quoting Glasgow University’s Dr Tony Pollard, who is about to head a 15 man team of forensic archaeologists from Australia, Britain and Belgium to begin a partial excavation of possible graves that have been located just outside Fromelles.

Triffett said “Pollard who gave no details of the composition of the team referred to, conducted the initial geophysical survey of the site at Pheasant Wood found by Lambis Englezos and his supporters. However, according to a story in the Australian Defence Report of Saturday, 3rd March, 2007, Pollard was inappropriately qualified in mass grave archaeology and furthermore has been the subject of criticism, within the international archaeological community for his methodology.”

“Ignoring public pressure to have any bodies located exhumed and reburied in permanent cemeteries, Pollard now puts a unique spin on the process outlined for recovery in an attempt to justify further delay. Although members of the Fromelles Discussion Group are grateful to AAP for distributing the information provided by Dr Pollard, there is no reason for delay because of the treaties which have operated since 1918. Bob Sutherland another member of the group, points out that back in February 2007 The Hon. Bruce Billson, MP Minister assisting the Minister for Defence, said the Australian Government was working closely with French authorities and in collaboration with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. “But the community never gets feedback from the latter organization which has sole authority to conduct these operations, and to authorize or delegate the work to other appropriate agencies”, he said.

Instead of regular updates and public discussion remarked Sutherland, “The community is kept in the dark on this emotive and important subject”.

“Commenting on his previous survey of Pheasant Wood, Pollard fails to address key issues and now admits he has pin-pointed the exact spot where the missing soldiers lie”, remarked Sutherland. “Having been led by the nose to this conclusion by Lambis Englezos, one is completely bewildered by the suggestion that he will excavate the site and then cover back over any remains that are found.”

Triffett added, “The obvious question which needs to be addressed is why the Commonwealth War Grave Commission has not acted already to recover these

soldiers remains, when its role in carrying out such work is protected by statutes embodied in the 1951 Treaty which was agreed to by the nations concerned. The Fromelles Discussion Group believes the whole situation is frustrating because the newly-appointed Defence Science and Personnel Minister, Warren Snowdon, has stated the work at the Pheasant Wood site is being planned under the auspices of the Commission which we argue should have acted more swiftly to support the project”, Triffett explained.

“To think the best Dr Pollard can do is suggest there will be further delay and describe the forthcoming dig in terms that would shock many in the general public, is absurd as it shows no respect for the fallen or their relatives and descendants who have waited long enough for closure”, he said.

“Forensic archaeology must be terribly haphazard if the article ‘Red tape may delay WWI diggers reburial’ is anything to go by, Discussion Group member Alan Bennett reflects. “Dr Pollard might consider world’s best practice to be the use of mechanical excavators to uncover the remains found in the burial pits that have been reported as the use of such equipment would probably disturb the ground below the surface and cause untold damage to any remains buried underneath and our members believe it would seem an inappropriate method of recovery.”

Triffett explained, “This is not a political decision. The matter should be referred to the CWGC for direct action, rather than continue to have politicians procrastinating about the problem of reaching agreement with the French and British authorities, when treaties have already been negotiated and exist for this purpose.”

“This is what is causing so much resentment in the community”, said Triffett.

Sutherland added, “Local expertise had been offered at no cost to the taxpayer according to Sydney lawyer Chris Bryett, President of the group known as Recovering Overseas Australia’s Missing (ROAM). He scoffs at the suggestion that Pollard’s GUARD team is being engaged again given the criticisms levelled at this report, and Warren Snowdon MP and the Australian Government should take note rather than dismissing such legitimate



concerns out of hand, particularly when as we have previously said, there is so much support for this investigation within the French community.

“Breaking news in dribs and drabs is one thing, but at some point Dr Pollard and the Australian, British and French authorities, should think of the families of the missing at Fromelles and understand that further delay, is not in the best interests of the countries concerned, or of the relatives of the missing”.

Alan Bennett suggested, “The Fromelles Discussion Group questions whether the Pollard team is sufficiently skilled to complete the task, particularly when the method of recovery as described, advocates the use of heavy machinery—not an ideal situation by any means for a mass grave site”.

“Should the Government not listen to local concerns or address issues being raised, the GUARD team need to show compassion and complete the task of recovery in the most dignified, timely way and that is the view of the our group. Considering the remains might not be that deeply buried, recovery should take place in April if remains are found as the missing of Fromelles controversy has gone on for too long”.