



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

From the desk of General James Whiteside McCay located in his former solicitor's office in Castlemaine, Victoria, comes the following address from Joyce Sanders. Given on Anzac Day the speech is perhaps fitting as McCay was given command of the 5th Division AIF after the Second Battle of Krithia where it has been reported, he was a competent commander who showed courage while leading the 2nd Australian Brigade when wounded. Following the evacuation of Gallipoli, McCay accompanied the 5th Division to France where it entered the trenches in mid-July 1916 with only a week to become accustomed to the harsh conditions before being ordered to participate in the ill-conceived Battle of Fromelles. "Ultimate responsibility for which", according to TvWiki: *the free encyclopedia*, "lay with the commander of the neighbouring British XI Corps, Lieutenant General Sir Richard Haking, but McCay wore much of the blame, some deserved, some not."

Having attended prestigious Scotch College and Melbourne University where he attained a law degree which enabled him to practice as a solicitor, it was not unexpected McCay's military career would hold promise as indeed it did, beginning with the Victorian Rifles in 1884, command of the 8th Regiment in 1900 and the 2nd Australian Infantry Brigade with the formation of the 1st AIF. Previous to this McCay had been elected to the Victorian Parliament and as TvWiki records, in March 1901, he won the Federal seat of Corinella in the first Federal Parliament where he was for a period, feted as a Minister for Defence with considerable responsibility at the national level. In 1918 he was made a Knight Commander of St. Michael and St. George (KCMG) and was subsequently given other accolades as well.

The story is continued by Joyce Sanders who reminds us of the controversy surrounding McCay, writing as she does from McCay's home town in beautiful country Victoria, Australia. Controversy which is reflected in the writings of Robyn Corfield and Christopher Wray, who adopt different positions on his First World War military involvement and show just how open to interpretation command decisions on the battlefield or similar events can be historically. While Corfield offers up spirited criticism of McCay, Wray adopts a more sympathetic approach, thus reinforcing the sentiments expressed by Sanders, who reminds us that McCay seemed destined early on to have a distinguished military career and make his mark as a commanding officer. For example, the Fly Leaf of **Sir James Whiteside McCay: A Turbulent Life**, published by Oxford University Press in 2002, records that "despite his determination and personal courage, by 1918 he [McCay] had been relegated to a training command in England and was reviled by the many who served under him."



HEROES

"I wish to acknowledge and honour the presence of veterans today, and veterans' families. I am often asked what my own military connection is, considering the accent I am left with after 40 years as an Australian, so I will just briefly say that, other than five years at the Australian War Memorial, I am the daughter of a Major in the American 8th Air Force serving in World War II.

In 2008, we mark many significant anniversaries in Australian History. For the Vietnam War, this year marks the 40th Anniversary of the Fire Support Bases **Coral** and **Balmoral** which played such an important role in that conflict. For World War I, this year marks the 90th anniversary year of the great 1918 battles that finally led to the War ending, and of course, **most importantly**, we are marking the 90th anniversary of the **end** of that war itself. Leading to that end, we have the amazing success of Australian soldiers at Villiers-Bretonneux on this exact day, April 25th 90 years ago, the battle that made a hero of Pompey Elliott, and shortly afterwards, on the 31st of May, 1918, we celebrate the Australian Army Corps finally coming under command of an Australian, John Monash. A month later, we have the 90th

anniversary of the Battle of Hamel in July 1918, where Monash put his engineering skills to work, allowing 90 minutes for that battle to be won (and in fact it took 93) making a hero of John Monash....and it's wonderful to see a book out now called *Monash, the Outsider Who Won a War* that gives him credit for winning WWI single-handedly, however *slightly* exaggerated that might be. The truth is that Monash was a hero, and it would be difficult to find anyone to dispute that. So this year we'll celebrate the 90th anniversary of a 90 minute battle.

But I want to talk about other kinds of heroes today ... some accidental heroes, and some real heroes behind the lines. And to take you *back* to these forgotten heroes, we need to step back to forgotten events in Castlemaine near the end of the Gallipoli campaign. To be exact, we need to take you back to the 19th of November, 1915.

On that November evening in 1915, this crowd wasn't here in Mostyn St., but instead, imagine yourselves over at the train station.....there were several thousand of you there that evening to meet a returning hero back from Gallipoli. Castlemaine residents cheered and shouted as the 7:30 train pulled into the station. The soldiers from the Castlemaine Camp formed an honour guard and the Army band played. School children sang the national anthem and then the hero, who had just finished a reception with the Prime Minister before he boarded the train in Melbourne, was carried over to the Town Hall in Lyttleton St. where the seats had been removed to make more room for the crowd to pack in. The Mayor and State Attorney-General Harry Lawson (soon to be State Premier) were there to introduce the hero and the crowd listened for three hours to his urging of young men to join up and his tales of the fighting at Gallipoli.

Who was this Castlemaine hero and why have we forgotten him now? There are no streets named after him, no statues, no corner- stones of buildings with his name on them. That forgotten name is James McCay. He began life in Castlemaine as the son of the local Presbyterian minister, and he was a student at Winter's Flat Primary School, until he won a scholarship to Scotch College. When James had finished as Dux at Scotch College (a year ahead of John Monash who was Dux there a year later) he returned to Castlemaine to be headmaster of Castlemaine Grammar, up near Hargraves and Doveton Streets, while traveling down on the train to do legal studies in the City. Eventually he set up a legal practice in Barker St. that became McCay & Thwaites in the building that now houses Soldier & Scholar bookshop. From there he went on to politics, representing Castlemaine in State Parliament, and then as our very first representative in the new Federal Parliament. When World War One broke out, James was quick to secure a commanding role and was there at the Gallipoli landing on this day 93 years ago. But he was wounded leading an unsuccessful battle (but then, most battles were unsuccessful at Gallipoli) and was shipped home to recuperate. So that makes him the first soldier to come home to Castlemaine and by the time we see him at the train station, he is already *General* James McCay, and you can just imagine how every citizen wanted to hear from him what it was *really like* at Gallipoli, from someone who was there to see it all. We made him an instant hero.

This fame followed him back to the front and gave him command of the 5th Australian Division, the division that soon found itself sent to fight Australia's first battle in France, near a tiny village called Fromelles. The Australians were fresh from Gallipoli and considered too green to be sent to the Somme itself, so our soldiers were sent to a quiet area near Armentieres nicknamed "The Nursery" where they would be broken in as soldiers, as though Gallipoli hadn't counted for anything.

But only days after James McCay arrived with his 5th Division, they were asked by the British in command to prepare for battle as they were needed as a distraction for the German troops, to keep them up North while the *real fighting* was going on down at the Somme.

This little diversion at Fromelles meant sending the Australian soldiers, along with a British division, out to face the Germans who had been in their position on the high ground for a year and a half, long enough to build underground concrete bunkers with all amenities, including electric light and recreation rooms with pianos and all mod-cons. But the worse part was that the Germans commanded a salient, which means a high protrusion out over the line from which they could watch all Australian movements and fire machine guns from 3 sides.

A lot of Australian officers could see that this was a very bad idea. Pompey Elliott, one of McCay's brigadiers, pleaded with the British commanders not to go on with this battle. But James McCay was in charge of the Australians, and apparently he said nothing.

The soldiers were sent out, over flat ground, in broad daylight, to face the guns. At one point, Pompey Elliott believed his men had taken the German trenches because none of them returned. But that was because they had all been shot.

Part way through the battle, both the Australians and the British were to send out a new wave of soldiers in a 2nd assault. But the British changed their minds and cancelled their half of the assault, and sent a message through to James McCay. The question today is whether McCay understood the message, or whether he failed to understand the importance of the message to his men, as he did not pass on the message until almost an hour after he received it, by which time his men had already left the trenches. It seems that our James McCay did not relay the message on to Pompey Elliott in time to stop him sending his men out all alone, on another impossible charge.

Of the thousands of Australian soldiers now out in no-man's land, some had actually captured the first German line, but once they had cleared it of the enemy, they left it because they had been instructed to take the *second* German line, which unfortunately turned out to only be a drainage channel through the fields, so they tried to fill sand bags with the sticky channel mud to shelter behind. Meanwhile, the Germans crept back into their 1st line through their communication trench, thus cutting off the Australians from their own line.

Once the whole action was abandoned, the engineers began to try to dig a communication trench out through no-man's land to rescue their men, and they dug frantically all through the night.

By dawn, many of the Australians still hadn't received the message that the whole action had been abandoned, only realizing when they saw other groups running back for their own line, at which time they had to decide to run for it, in broad daylight, under machine gun fire from above, and trying to leap over that first trench occupied again by the Germans. Some made it to the engineers' new rescue trench and when they didn't see it, the soldiers jumped up and pulled them in.



PHOTOGRAPH: Member of the 60th Battalion, 15th Brigade, 5th Division.

When it was all over, there were still 5533 Australians lying out in no-man's land either wounded or dead. A young private dodging through shell holes looking for his officer encountered a German officer who asked to arrange a truce to bring in the wounded and dead. The private brought back the news of the possible truce to the Australian lines, but when the request for a truce arrived at command headquarters, our James McCay was the officer who said no. It's true that the British rules said *No Truces*, ever since that embarrassing Christmas Truce of 1914 where the opposing soldiers climbed out of their trenches and sang Christmas carols together. But the question is whether or not James McCay *could have* made a decision to break the rule for the sake of 5000.

For the next three days, there were amazing acts of bravery among the Australian soldiers, under fire, searching the shell holes of no-man's land for their mates. A 40 year old Victorian farmer didn't stop bringing men in for the whole 3 days, rescuing 100s.

Because of James McCay's decision, the military cemetery at Fromelles is quite different from all the others on the Western Front. 400 of the soldiers killed at Fromelles lay unburied for 2 ½ years, so that at the end of the war they could only be buried unidentified in a mass grave. 1299 names on the cemetery wall are listed simply as missing. After the War there was a huge business in Battlefields Tourism, which sounds gruesome until you remember that back in Australia there were 1299 mothers who wanted to believe that their boys were just wandering around over there somewhere, just lost their memory, and needed their mothers to come find them.

Just this past year, we've received news of the discovery of another mass grave where the Germans possibly buried a missing 170 of our Australian soldiers after the battle. But the news comes too late for those mothers.

James McCay acquired an unfortunate new nickname after the Battle: *The Butcher of Fromelles*. Even though he was seen by higher command as simply following their orders, and he was officially cleared of any wrong-doing, the reputation followed him. Even his obituary in the Melbourne papers in 1930 called him "about the most detested officer in the AIF".

The real heroes who emerge from the Battle of Fromelles are those engineers who did nothing more than dig, and those ordinary soldiers who risked their lives to bring in their wounded mates.

Today, there are statues of Australian soldiers all over the Western Front, sometimes a soldier charging with fixed bayonet, sometimes a young soldier weighed down with pack and ammunition. But at Fromelles the statue is different: it's of a soldier, modeled on that farmer, rescuing his mate on his back, because *he* was the hero in this battle."

Courtesy of Joyce Sanders

Additional Notes

- 1299 Australian soldiers were listed as missing after Fromelles.
- Among the dead: 12 sets of brothers, 2 sets of father & son, Richmond football player Bill Nolan, Geelong player William Landy, Carlton's George Challis, and St. Kilda's Hugh Plowman. Others included Anthony Wilding, a Wimbledon champion for 3 years running 1910-13, a young poet Geoffrey McCrae, but there were also bankers, farmers, solicitors, teachers and shopkeepers.
- The official communiqué put out by the British was: *Yesterday evening South of Armentieres, we carried out some important raids in which Australian troops took part. About 140 German prisoners were captured.*
- It was the greatest loss of life in a single night in Australian history.
- Pompey Elliott recommended a VC for the 21 year-old major who led the 2nd attack, but it was refused because Elliott slighted the British for not attacking.
- 496 Australians were captured by the Germans.
- *Hitler's Bunker* still stands in the German line at Fromelles where he was a 27-year-old Lance Corporal.
- Australian soldiers were still receiving instruction on how to use Mills bombs/grenades *during the actual battle*. They had likewise just received the Lewis guns they were to use, and some soldiers had only been in the line for two days.

Sir James Whiteside McCay died on October 1, 1930 and further information about him can be found on <http://infao5501.ag5.mpi-sb.mpg.de:8080/topx/archive?link=Wikipedia-Lip6-2/716102.xml&style> as is background on the Australian 5th Division (World War I) <http://infao5501.ag5.mpi-sb.mpg.de:8080/topx/archive?link=Wikipedia-Lip6-2/416511.xml&style>. The article on Lieutenant General Hon. Sir James McCay: 21 December 1864-1 October 1930 found at <http://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/~rmallett/Generals/index.html> and the official history of the 5th Division titled simply **The Story of the Fifth Division** might also be useful. Originally written and published in 1920 by Captain A. D. Ellis MC, this book underwent a facsimile reprint, has been reprinted in Paperback form in 2002, 2004 and offers further insights into McCay as it purports to be an authoritative account of the Division's activities in Egypt, France and Belgium. There is also a mini-biography at <http://gutenberg.net.au/dictbiog/0-dict-biogMc.html>, the Online Dictionary of Australian Biography. Just scroll down the 'Mc' list to McCay, Sir James Whiteside (1864-1930).

Christopher Wray in **Sir James Whiteside McCay** describes McCay as being a martinet who demanded efficiency, while coldly unsympathetic to the needs of his men. This, according to Wray, was the popular opinion in the trenches and among families back home in Australia, where he was perceived as something of a villain given McCay's actions at Krithia (Helles on the Gallipoli Peninsula) and subsequently, during the forced march from Tel El Kebir, Ferry Post and the Suez Canal where it was felt McCay let down the 5th Division comprising the 14th, 15th and 8th brigades by not changing orders that emanated from GHQ or making the arrangements necessary to make the trek less gruelling.

Wray, alludes to survivors of the battle describing McCay as the Butcher of Fromelles; a theme taking up by other authors, including Robyn Corfield in **Hold Hard, Cobbers**: Volume One 1912-1930. Corfield is more damning than Wray and in fact in his story of the 57th and 60th Battalions, he says this in his biographical notes on McCay titled 'Butcher McCay': ". . . over seventy years later every veteran in recalling those grim days, never failed to comment on the 'Butcher' in tones of great bitterness." Indeed, Corfield makes the point when discussing McCay, that "McCay's achievements at school, in teaching, in law and politics tell of the man's drive, ability and all consuming ambition with the attendant arrogance of those who *know* how clever they are." Moreover, according to Corfield, "By 1907 [McCay] was given command of the new Australian Intelligence Corps, and within five years had offended just about everybody and was sacked in March 1913. At the outbreak of the war he was given charge of censorship. Doubtless with his legal background and acute intelligence he was well aware of the power he held, and the information he had access to. This must have been of great use in silencing his critics, as he did, when the war was over."

Insofar as the battle itself is concerned, the time discrepancy can be explained in the following way. Brigadier-General Charles Carter, CO of the 184th Brigade (part of the 61st British Division), became aware at 7:52 p.m. on the evening of the engagement, that his troops could not take the Sugarloaf and would therefore have to discontinue the attack. Around this time Carter sent Brigadier-General Harold [Pompey] Elliot, who was commanding the 15th Australian Brigade, a message via General Colin McKenzie of the 61st Division, there would be another attempt on the Sugarloaf.

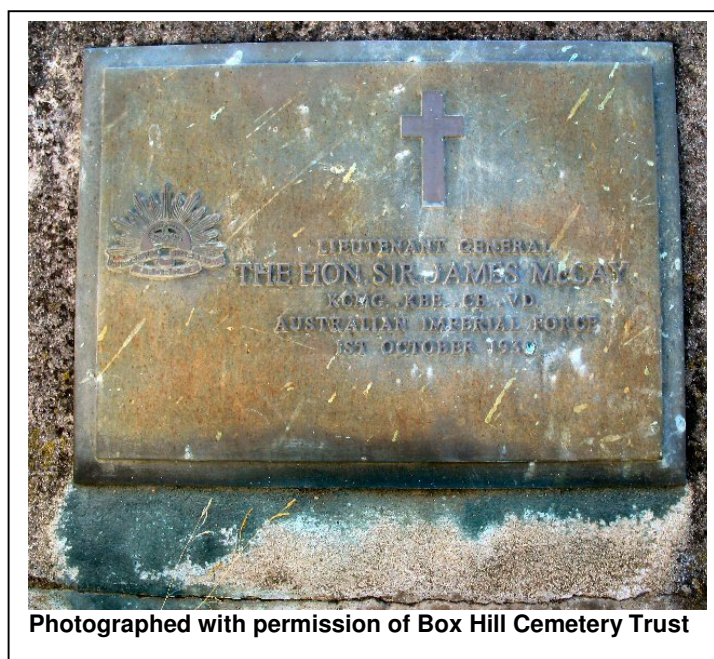
Lieutenant-General Richard Haking (GOC XI Corps) received first hand news of 61st Division failure and advises General McKenzie to abort the 9 p.m. attack and orders him to try again next day.

But at 8:30 p.m. Haking neglects to relay news of the cancellation to McCay. McCay's counterpart in the 61st Division, Colin McKenzie, does at this time though inform McCay with the following message: "Under instructions of Corps commander am withdrawing from captured enemy line after dark." McCay and his headquarters staff appear to have either ignored or missed the importance of this message about the cancellation for whatever reason.

Brigadier-General Pompey Elliott, who had previously objected to the attack at Fromelles, was left at 9 p.m., the scheduled start of second phase of the assault, duly ordering the 58th Battalion into the fray without having received any notification of the cancellation by McCay, who had earlier been informed of a change in plan, however indirectly this may have been conveyed.

The two companies of the 58th Battalion, led by 21 year old Major Arthur Hutchinson, duly attacked at 9 p.m. as requested, only to be mown down by the German garrison defending the Sugarloaf salient. Hutchinson seeking to provide momentum to the attack, rose and went forward alone. Riddled, he died on the German wire trying to inspire his men to follow.

McCay died in 1930 as has been said, his wife predeceasing him in 1915. McCay had two daughters, one of whom entered a religious order. The other, Beatrix, a barrister, married Sir George Oswald Reid, who became a member of the Victorian Parliament. It should be kept in mind that though McCay was seemingly absolved of blame for Gallipoli and Fromelles by the military authorities, he appears to have then been overlooked for further promotion. In the aftermath of Fromelles McCay's military career appears to have stalled as did Hakings, although he did receive a number of honours as linked documents to this address clearly show. In January 1917 however according to Corfield, McCay was actually relieved of his field command and moved to administrative command of the AIF depots in England.



Photographed with permission of Box Hill Cemetery Trust

On Page 235 of his book Wray refers to some Melbourne newspapers being critical of McCay and after his death apparently, the Bulletin had little compunction describing him "as a born soldier and a brave man' with 'a fine brain of the academic type'", but it also felt compelled to refer to him as being detested within the AIF. Interestingly there does not appear to have been a mention of McCay in **Who's Who** in the years immediately prior to his death, although two of his brothers appear and it is worth remembering, McCay would have needed to co-operate for an entry to be included.

The newly-published book by Peter Pedersen titled **The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front**, Penguin Group, 2007 is also somewhat critical of McCay although concedes that McCay was a victim of orders he could not realistically refuse. Especially in the context of what noted military historian Ron Austin points out about the stress and confusion that can be found at any brigade or divisional HQ during a battle—something which is brought on by the unremitting intensity and ferocity of constant fighting.