



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Huge Blunder: The Slaughter At Fleurbaix*

BRIG.-GENERAL ELLIOTT'S LECTURE

Friday, 18 July, 1930

Lecturing on "The Battle of Fleurbaix" at the meeting of the Canberra sub-branch of the Returned Soldiers' League, at Acton Hall, last night, Brigadier-General Elliott stated that this battle, fought on July 19, 1916, cost the British forces more than 7,000 men.

"The whole operation," he said, "was so incredibly blundered from beginning to end, that it is almost incomprehensible how the British staff, who were responsible for it, could have consisted of trained professional soldiers of considerable reputation and experience and why, in view of the outcome of this extra ordinary adventure, any of them were retained in active command."

General Elliott continued that the Official War Historian (Capt. Bean) had been forced to utter a mild rebuke in relation to the battle, stating that the reasons for the failure at Fleurbaix seemed to have been "loose thinking and somewhat reckless decision on the part of the higher staff." General Haking, who commanded the attack had endeavoured to throw the whole of the blame on the infantry. He had reported that the artillery preparation was inadequate, and in other ways industriously laboured to cover his own faults. He had actually got away with it for a time. The blame in Australia had been thrown upon General McCay, who had been no more responsible than the humblest private in his force. His security in command had, however, been in no way shaken by the popular error, the authorities in the A.I.F. being, well aware of the truth.

General Elliott added that another particularly unfortunate result of the fight had been that the Australian soldiers tended to accept the often unjust judgement that the "Tommies" could not be relied upon to uphold a flank in a stiff fight. General Haking, in laying the blame for the failure of the attack on the infantry, had cast the first stone upon them to shield his own incompetence, and who could have blamed those who followed his lead?

The result of the action, said the lecturer, had been to cripple the 5th Division for months afterwards. The loss had not been only in numbers. Our finest officers, N.C.O.'s and men, many of whom were Gallipoli veterans, had perished there and for what purpose?

The battle had been intended as a feint to distract the attention of the German staff from Pozieres, and inasmuch as German records showed that for days afterwards the Germans expected a renewal of the attack, it could not have

been judged with certainty to have been effective. On the other hand, the value of the result, if there was any value attached to it, had been tragically disproportionate to the cost.

General Elliott said that the attack had been apparently suggested by Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Haking, who was in command of the 11th Corps of the British Army, and was responsible for the sector just south of the Anzac area at Fromelles. His plan provided for a gas attack, followed by an infantry attack to capture Sugar Loaf (a projecting bastion of the enemy's line) and also about 2100 yards of the enemy's trenches to the south. This plan had never materialised and others had been turned down. Finally, at a conference on July 13, alternative plans put forward seemed to have become mixed and a wretched hybrid scheme, which even might have been termed an abortion, emerged. The bombardment was to have begun on July 14, and was to have lasted three days, Haking's plans in general having been adopted. Haking, at this stage, had been under a totally wrong impression as to the artillery and munitions available.

Several blunders were made in connection with the assault: The first was the order for the attack, which cast aside all secrecy or surprise by ordering bombardments in increasing intensity up to the time for the assault. This policy might have been wise had no infantry assault been required, but under the circumstances, it had been suicidal.

The second blunder was that Haking had formulated a plan for the assault without full information on his subject. A third fundamental blunder was disclosed in the arrangements for the attack on the Sugar Loaf, which required the closest possible liaison and co-operation between the forces engaged upon the task, and in accordance with all the known rules of war, should have been entrusted to a complete unit. It was shown, however, that this bastion lay just on the junction of two different units, notoriously the weakest point in an attack or defence. Haking appeared to have been entirely oblivious to this fault, as not the slightest effort had been made to overcome the obvious difficulty.

A further blunder had been that there was very little time to prepare for the attack and there had been no force in reserve to repair initial errors. The objective had been limited to the capture of the enemy's front line and to his support lines which had been supposed to have existed, some 50 to 100 yards in the rear.

"One would have supposed," added General Elliott, "that it would have occurred to someone in authority to doubt if the supposed support lines really existed. Careful reconnaissance, if not mere inductive reasoning, would have disclosed this. There was some excuse for General McCay, since he had been but a few days at the front and did not know Haking's plans, but there could be no excuse for Generals Haking, Munro or Butler, who should have known all the facts."

General Elliott went on, that a more unsuitable site from which to launch a well advertised attack could hardly have been found on the Western front.

Yet another blunder had been committed by a number of gas cylinders being embedded in the parapet by Haking's orders. The enemy bombardment had exploded these, thus adding to the confusion and loss.

General Elliott stated that through out he had had grave misgivings as to the attack, having reconnoitred the site from all points of view. He added that Haking was entirely to blame that the attack was gone on with. The plans were his and but for his insistence they would have been abandoned. However, he could shelter behind the weakness displayed by Generals Munro and Butler and even by Haig.

Describing the failure of the attack General Elliott stated that German reports showed that our artillery preparation was not nearly heavy enough. "The slaughter in the battle was indeed terrible," he said. General Elliott added that the German losses appeared to have been less than 1,500.

Continuing, the lecturer said that to crown all, the enemy had obtained from a dead British officer, a copy of Haking's orders, which helped them to infer that the operation had been merely a local attack, which should not have worried them further.

A vote of thanks at the conclusion of General Elliott's lecture was moved by Dr. Mollison.

The motion was carried by acclamation.

Thanks were also extended to Mr. J. Mildenhall, who operated the lantern, which was used to illustrate various sections of the lecture.

At the beginning of the meeting, in introducing Captain Jackson, Mr. R. Rowe, president of the F.C.T. Branch, stated that Captain Jackson was one of the pioneers of the Returned Soldiers' League in Canberra and had been prominent in its formation before its revival in its present form in 1926. He had filled the position of president of the Canberra sub-Branch within six months of its foundation and had occupied that position for a considerable period.

Captain Jackson was warmly welcomed.

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Senator Sir William Glasgow and Senator Sampson.

Among those present were Mr. Roland Green, M.P., Colonel Butler and Major Ordish (R.M.C.).

* Page 3 of The Canberra Times on Friday, 18 July 1930 carried this account of the attack at Fromelles. Australian Newspaper beta LINK and citation are contained in this reference: <http://ndpbeta.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/2316550?searchTerm=fromelles>.