

Lesson in probe for our lost warriors



EUREKA

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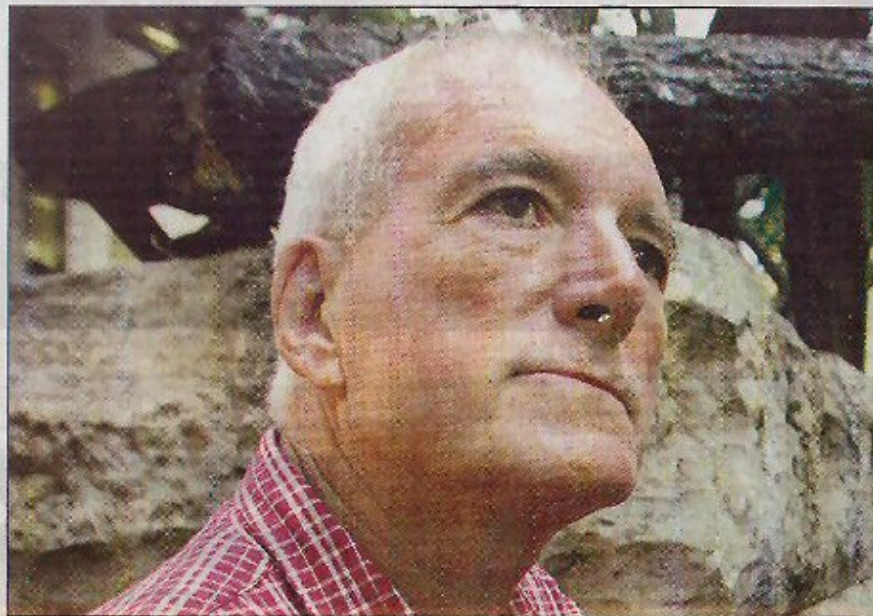
THIS is a tale of two Australian shipwrecks, one literal and one metaphorical. Both involve Australians killed in combat. Both involve scientists. Both involve passion. One is an example of getting it right, the other is not. Here's hoping a comparison of the two offers insight into how citizens, government, military and experts, in the future, can work together effectively to solve military mysteries.

Shipwreck No. 1: The Royal Australian Navy light cruiser HMAS Sydney, sunk in 1941 with a loss of 645 Australian sailors. For years, their relatives, as well as military historians and buffs have wondered where the Sydney sank after its engagement with the German commerce raider HSK Kormoran off the coast of Western Australia.

Thanks to a winning combination of solid intellectual spadework, the right technology and a highly experienced expedition leader, marine geologist David Mearns, we know. The wreck of the Sydney lies upright beneath 2468m of water, 112 nautical miles west of Dirk Hartog Island and 12.2 nautical miles southeast of the wreck of the Kormoran.

Shipwreck No. 2: The Battle of Fromelles, fought on French soil in 1916 with the loss of nearly 2000 Diggers. The question here is whether pits in an area called Pheasant Wood contain the bodies of nearly 170 Australian and 300 British war dead, listed as missing in action. Nobody knows.

The wrong technology and the wrong expedition leader, Glasgow University battlefield archeologist Tony Pollard, were selected. Pollard — well known for his BBC TV program *Two Men in a Trench* — is an expert in re-creating events at battle sites. He has no experience with mass graves.



Leader in his field: Forensic archeologist Richard Wright, whose offer of help was rejected

Clearly, both historical events are terrible. Aside from the frightful death toll at Fromelles, the Australian Imperial Force's first battle on the Western Front in World War I, and the lack of resolution in the matter of the pits, what sets these national tragedies apart is the manner in which Defence Department officials have sought answers.

As an aside, in each case little was done until impassioned members of the public gathered evidence and lobbied long and hard. Without their persistence, nothing — effective or ineffective — would have happened. To be fair to involved army and navy historians and their top brass, they've got plenty on their plates already, documenting, commemorating and protecting the remains of Australian war dead.

Nor are their intentions in question. They too want answers.

The critical difference in their handling of the Sydney and Pheasant Wood is the

openness in which decisions were made and communicated to all and sundry. From the word go, the not-for-profit Finding Sydney Foundation has maintained a website (www.findingsydney.com) that provides information about the Sydney, efforts to find it, the foundation, sponsors, updates, you name it. Defence permitted the foundation to make the contract between the department and the foundation available to registered media. And that includes what Mearns was contracted to do, for how much dosh and how he would do it. His relevant experience is there for all to see. Media calls to the foundation and its military officers are handled promptly.

Pheasant Wood? Nothing. All decisions are made inside Defence, the minister handling veteran's affairs, now Warren Snowden, is notified and he puts out a press release. In my experience, media inquires are clearly not welcome. Consultation with interested people and experts outside the inner circle is virtually nonexistent. The

result is that an offer from leading forensic archeologist Richard Wright and a team of Australian and British mass grave experts to do the job — through the not-for-profit group Recovering Overseas Australia's Missing — at no cost to the taxpayer, was rejected. Wright is a University of Sydney emeritus professor. He led the UN's team that discovered and exhumed remains from mass graves from the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, as well as the group that unearthed victims of the Nazi Holocaust in the Ukraine.

Instead, Pollard was paid \$150,000 to survey the site last year, and although his report — copyrighted to his group — was condemned as flawed and useless by specialists in mass grave geophysics and forensic archeology at Britain's Bournemouth University, Pollard was hired, for an undisclosed fee, to investigate the site later this month.

A key criticism of last year's "non-invasive survey" was that Pollard did not use ground penetrating radar to investigate the pits, as specified by the then minister Bruce Bilson. Rather he employed a ground phase reader, an instrument that's great for finding buttons and bullets a few centimetres deep but is incapable of "seeing" to the bottom of a deep pit.

Who knows. Perhaps, Pollard will deliver the goods. After all, he's essentially been paid to swot up on forensic archeology. It appears he's been given ROAM's proposal, including Wright's methodology. And, possibly to counter criticism that no Australian experts were involved, the Australian Army is sending along University of Sydney forensic archeologist Denise Donlon, an army reservist. We'll find out soon enough. The TV program *60 Minutes* hopes to send a crew to Pheasant Wood, and, not surprisingly, the BBC will be there too. Hopefully, they won't be filming another shipwreck.

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