

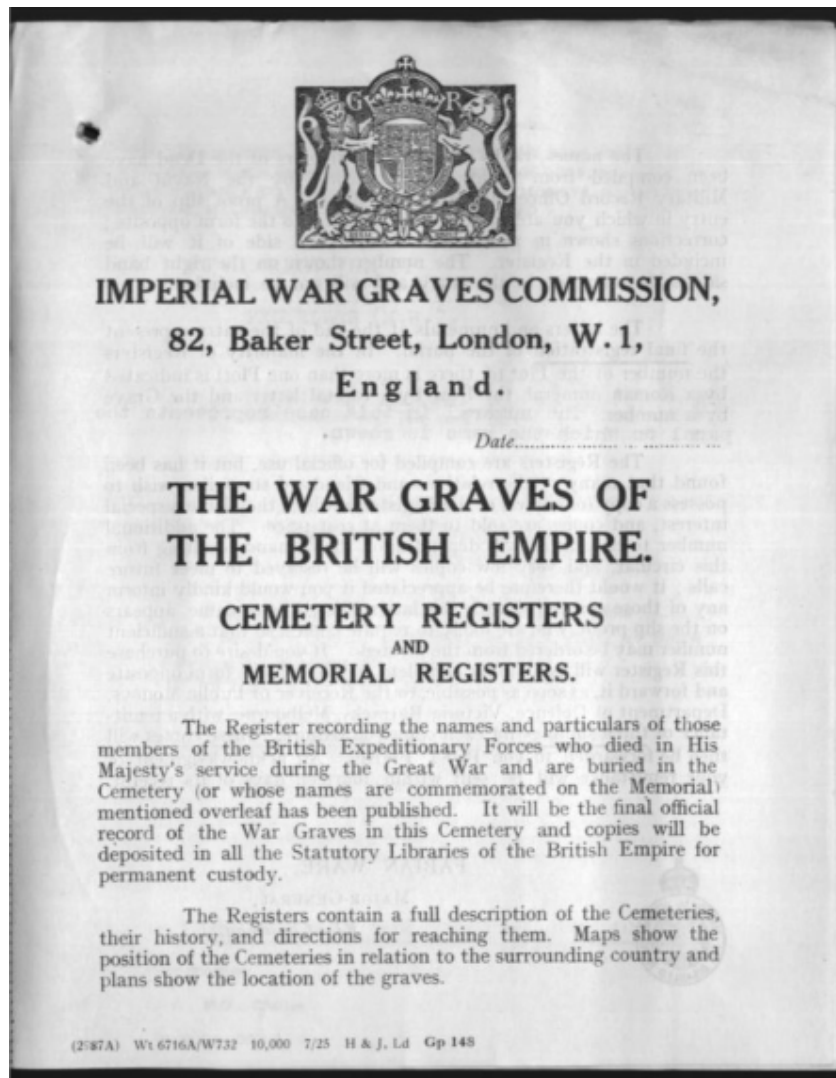


## Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

### KEEPING ALIVE THE MEMORY OF THE FROMELLES FALLEN

Patrick Lindsay asserts in FROMELLES: AUSTRALIA'S DARKEST DAY AND THE DRAMATIC DISCOVERY OF OUR FALLEN WORLD WAR ONE DIGGERS that he wrote his revised book: "For—The missing men of Fromelles and their families . . . may they, at last, find eternal peace."

But how can they when stakeholders connected with the Fromelles Management Board and the Australian Army's Australian Fromelles Project Group, the British Ministry of Defence, the Australian Department of Veteran Affairs and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, ignore the 1,131 missing and unidentified members of the 5th Division AIF from this battle known to be buried in the local area.



*The National Archives of Australia holds various records relating to wartime service which can be accessed electronically at <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/explore/defence/service-records/index.aspx>*

## V.C. CORNER AUSTRALIAN CEMETERY AND MEMORIAL, FROMELLES

**Official estimates currently indicate 191 Great War Diggers at Pheasant Wood await identification. However a mass burial site containing the bodies of over 400 unidentified Australian soldiers who died in the attack at Fromelles is close by and being left out of the recovery project, because the authorities want to arbitrarily limit the application of DNA and any testing programme that is likely to be implemented by LGC Logistics when it begins the process of analysis and matching.**

## **Breaking faith with the Fromelles fallen**

On 10 August 2009 Greg Combet, Australia's new Minister for Defence Personnel, Materiel and Science announced that full analysis and matching of DNA from the Australian and British World War One soldiers found at Fromelles would proceed. But the announcement was not made without controversy as the decision was preceded by an article published in The Australian on June 3, 2009, which suggested the prospects of DNA identification were plummeting as a result of dilly-dallying by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission which was responsible for tendering the DNA work involved in the recovery project. Concerns were also raised in the article about the appropriateness of DNA techniques which might be considered.

Indeed the report written by Leigh Dayton actually implied that fallen members of the 5th Australian and 61st (South Midland) divisions being recovered at Pheasant Wood, might be reburied in a new war cemetery anonymously due to the hurried way in which the archaeological excavation was taking place at that stage in the proceedings. Since then the Commonwealth War Graves Commission appears to have gotten its act together and made progress with respect to tendering as well as the circulation and distribution of its electronic news. In this context the Australian and British governments need to re-evaluate their approach to Fromelles.

If the collection of physical evidence during the recovery project is to be anything other than purely symbolic, the authorities need to release more information relating to the recently-concluded pilot study and the practicality of DNA comparison, because these aspects underlie the agreement to undertake a full programme of testing. More information is required on the anthropological, archaeological, historical and scientific techniques mentioned by Combet and Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd should now act in the public interest and fully inform the Australian community as to why the

Commonwealth War Graves Commission has not been given authority to identify all the fallen heroes from this particular engagement.

Now Prime Minister Rudd has reshuffled Federal Cabinet in the wake of the resignation of former defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon, Fromelles Discussion Group urges the Australian Government to broaden the recovery operation being undertaken by Oxford Archaeology and to direct Joel Fitzgibbon's replacement, John Faulkner and former Australian Council of Trade Unions' boss, Greg Combet, to monitor the project and make sure appropriate forensic techniques are adopted to improve the potential viability of DNA testing on the remains.

Combet, the architect of the ACTU's 2007 YOUR RIGHTS AT WORK campaign is particularly requested to take a fresh look at the venture which commenced last May. In conjunction with The Hon. John Faulkner MP and The Hon. Alan Griffin MP the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Combet should work toward having major stakeholders like the Australian Fromelles Project Group and the CWGC actually do what former Minister for Defence Science and Personnel Warren Snowdon MP and other public officials have previously suggested. That is to honour all those who so courageously sacrificed their lives on 19 and 20 July 1916 and went missing, and to rebury them without reservation and exception with the dignity they posthumously deserve while the present programme of disinterment is conducted and LGC Forensics is on site examining the remains.

Since the recovery operation being overseen by the CWGC is expected to be completed in September 2009 and the dedication of the new Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery appears to be scheduled for the 94th anniversary of the Battle of Fromelles on the 19th July 2010, federal ministers must act quickly to ensure the best possible results are achieved. It is obvious that the bravery and service of the missing can not be properly commemorated if inappropriate forensic techniques are employed, as was pointed out by science writer Leigh Dayton in her article titled "Fromelles DNA fears", which also highlighted the tight timeline for re-interment established by government. Only aggregation will ensure the project remains squarely on remembering the dead from this disastrous action which also led to the British 61st Division suffering 500 dead among its casualties during the fighting.

The new cemetery being constructed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission should be a poignant reminder of our past as well as the heroism of our forefathers, and the recovery of Australia's war dead from this skirmish should not be a matter of serendipity, happenchance or luck. Consequently the timeline should be extended and the authorities should take steps to enhance genetic typing. For as Doctor Alan Cooper, head of Adelaide

University's Centre for Ancient DNA is reported as saying when interviewed by Dayton about his concern for the prospects of DNA identification at Fromelles, "It's impossible to do genetic typing on DNA this old and this many in this short [period] of time."

Cooper, a leading expert in ancient human DNA, said he was concerned "inappropriate forensic DNA techniques would be tried to get a quick result." Predictably when one looks at the history of recent investigations into the burial pits, the fears expressed by Doctor Cooper and his colleagues could have been avoided if the offer they made to run a pilot study free of charge, had been taken up by the authorities involved instead of being ignored. Remember this was the laboratory which according to Leigh, "successfully extracted useful DNA from a sailor from HMAS Sydney, which was sunk in 1941 after a battle with the German commerce raider Kormoran."

Everybody knows the action at Fromelles was the first major battle involving Australian and British troops on the Western Front, it beginning just 19 days after the opening of the fateful Somme campaign. Also known as the Somme offensive, fought between 1 July to 18 November 1916, the Battle of the Somme, according to Wikipedia @ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Somme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Somme), was one of the bloodiest military operations of WWI, with more than 1.5 million casualties.

During the diversionary feint at Fromelles the 5th Australian Division suffered 5,533 casualties, of which 1,780 were killed. The 61st (South Midland) British Division suffered serious losses, with 1,547 men killed, wounded or taken prisoner; the worst affected being the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and the Gloucestershire Regiment which accounted for the majority of the casualties suffered by what had originally been a second-line or reserve unit of the United Kingdom's Territorial Force known as the 2nd South Midland Division. Lack of equipment and inadequate training meant the 61st Division was no more successful than the Australian brigades when it came to mounting and sustaining the attack.

In this context it would be completely unprincipled, immoral and unconscionable for the Australian Government to not include all of the 1,131 unknown diggers from this assault in the identification process, regardless of whether their bodies are interred in other cemeteries in the neighbourhood or in the burial pits which are the main focus at the moment. Fromelles might have been a decisive loss for the allies but there is no shame in that for the Fifth Division which carried out its orders and displayed great courage in the face of enormous danger and horrendous opposition from a strongly entrenched enemy. And it is on this basis that Fromelles Discussion Group petitions the Rudd Government to have the CWGC proceed with recovery at a

rate to maximize opportunities for identification of all the missing dead because contrary to the view of the office of the former Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, there are sound international, legal and humanitarian reasons to include all unknowns from this action in the project, and this is particularly the case now the mainstream media has carried news the Red Cross Museum intends to digitize the World War I section of its archives in Geneva.

In hindsight the attack had few redeeming features and little tactical justification whatsoever but there is no getting away from the fact the fighting was the worst 24 hours in Australia's history and recognition should be given to all who fought, regardless of where they lie in the neighbourhood of Fromelles. Politicians too easily forget the 5th Division losses at Fromelles were equivalent to the total Australian casualties in the Boer War, Korean War and Vietnam War. We should all uphold the memorable words penned in 1915 by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, MD the author of 'In Flanders Fields'. Reacting to the ordeal on the Ypres salient and the suffering he witnessed, McCrae wrote: **"If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow"**; and this appears to be what is happening in France at the moment, where the authorities seem to be more intent on abiding by imposed schedules than properly commemorating the fallen from this assault through a process of individual memorialization.

Perhaps the Minister for Defence Personnel, Materiel and Science can show us those sections of the CWGC Charter of Incorporation, Supplemental Charter and the Agreements the organization has negotiated with affiliate nations like Australia, which legally requires unidentified First World War Diggers to remain unknown, unnamed and anonymous when the means is available for their mortuary examination and identification. Because from where we stand the concerns that have been raised in relation to the excavation, the failure of the Australian Government to consider establishing an accounting command to help find the missing from catastrophic global conflicts like World War I and World War II on an ongoing basis and the official spin about this being cost prohibitive, is rather hypocritical considering the report published in The Australian on June 18 by national security editor Patrick Walters about the Defence Materiel Organization's management of a contract for 11 US-manufactured Seasprite helicopters which were supposed to operate from the RAN's Anzac frigates. Originally signed by the Howard Government in 1997 according to Walters, the project ran for 12 years with more than \$1.4 billion of taxpayer's money wasted on the Defence Department's botched acquisition.

Preferring to give the navy an anti-submarine capacity, the Federal Government finally scrapped the project in March 2008, Walters said. Contrast the termination of this contract and the colossal burden the Seasprite project placed on the public purse with the comparatively small cost of DNA testing the Fromelles fallen, particularly when recovery could have been supported by Australian forensic specialists like Doctor Cooper who would have made an outstanding contribution to the dig. Left without this capability because the Seasprites were junked, the RAN is now wanting to spend another \$1 billion on replacement helicopters to substitute for the Seasprites which apparently never saw operational service, according to Patrick Walters, having been returned to Kaman Aerospace Corporation in the US.

Poor contract management practices within Defence and the DMO arguably led to the termination of the Seasprite project and disappointingly the recovery of the missing of Fromelles is being hindered by official shortsightedness. Hopefully LGC Forensics will take the issues that have been raised in this Discussion Paper on board and when circumstances permit, go into bat to support aggregation. That is to have Australia's Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd MP and Britain's Prime Minister James Brown MP and the Director-General and Commissioners of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, bolster the recovery process. Logic and moral rectitude would suggest that all casualties should be treated equitably and have their rights recognized before the law.

---

Congratulations to Lambis Englezos for his inclusion in the 2009 Queen's Birthday Honours List, being appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for research into the burial pits at Fromelles and also to the Army's Australian Fromelles Project Group and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for the creation of new highly-interactive and enhanced websites, respectively titled ***Don't forget me Cobber*** and ***remembering***fromelles. How paradoxical though for the Australian Department of Defence to promote itself through the branding of ***Don't forget me Cobber*** when this is exactly what the Australian Fromelles Project Group is doing by not supporting the aggregation proposal being put by Fromelles Discussion Group.

---

In spite of descendant registers being established by Australia and the United Kingdom, hundreds of columns of newspaper text being published in the mass media worldwide since the beginning of 2008 and thousands of words of official spin on the subject of the mass grave at Pheasant Wood, the aggregated remains of dozens of missing Commonwealth soldiers connected with the Battle of Fromelles still await inclusion in the recovery process successfully contracted by Oxford Archaeology and LGC Logistics.

There is a certain irony in having the new web platform of the Australian Fromelles Project Group named ***“Don’t forget me Cobber”*** when that is exactly what the Australian Department of Defence, the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence and the CWGC which all have representation on the joint Fromelles Management Board, are doing with respect to the recovery of the missing soldiers killed at Fromelles. The fairly limited parameters established for the Fromelles project by the various governments, agencies and organizations involved though should not override the rights of Australia’s long neglected war dead.