



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

191 Private Henry Bell

Former Secretary of the Bendigo Rose Society, 191 Private Henry Bell, 29th Battalion, 8th Infantry (Tivey's) Brigade, AIF was born and bred in Bendigo, Victoria where he attended Corporate High School. Brother of John J Bell, Head Teacher, 1317 Leichardt State School, Henry embarked in Melbourne on H.M.A.T. "Ascanius" on 10-NOV-15, after which he disembarked in Suez on 7-DEC-15; later boarding a ship in Alexandria 16-JUN-16, arriving Marseilles 23-JUN-16, ex "Tunisian". When attesting to serve in the military forces of the Commonwealth of Australia, Bell was described as being Church of England, and having blue eyes and a dark complexion. His name appeared in the list of First AIF soldiers believed to be buried at Pheasant Wood, when it was released on 2 April 2009 by former Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, the Hon Warren Snowdon, MP. Barbara and Helmut are currently waiting on the work of the Joint Identification Board to conclude to discover whether this significant relative will be individually memorialized by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, a particularly touching assignment considering Helmut had relatives in the Bavarian army during this period.



WEDDING PARTY

[L-R] Henry Bell at the wedding of his brother, John James Bell and his wife, Mabel Mary Bell (née Arblaster) on the 18th April, 1906. Mabel Mary was the only professional female photographer in Bendigo at the time of her marriage to John.

—Discovering My Great Uncle Henry Bell—

From the time I was a child, my mother told me about her uncle “Harry” who was killed in Fleurbaix, France during the First World War. As a young girl holidaying with her maiden aunts’, mum had to ‘salute’ each morning, a photograph of “Harry” in uniform. She didn’t really understand why she was instructed to salute daily the photo of her uncle that her aunts’ had proudly displayed on the wall, but she understood that it was imperative that she carry out this ritual or she’d be reprimanded.

I can also remember being shown by my mother a small album of beautiful postcards that were written by “Harry” mainly to his sisters’ during the war. This album included several cards from relatives sent while holidaying, plus some from

mum’s cousin, Ken (Harry’s nephew) who also fought in the war in France but fortunately returned home safely. I never really read them but mainly enjoyed looking at the lovely scenes that were depicted on the front! However, as time passed I occasionally glanced at the postcards and read a little of what was written on the back. My mother had also carefully kept in an old trinket box, several letters written by her parents years ago, plus a few from Uncle “Harry”. I’d briefly read those too, although not at length. After my mother’s death in 2004, I acquired these cards (which were no longer in an album) and letters. Along with various other pieces of family memorabilia I’d collected, including a photograph downloaded from the internet of “Harry” in uniform, they were stored in a safe place until such time as I felt the inclination to browse through them again.

Another thing I can remember my mother telling me with a smile about years later, was that Uncle “Harry”, according to her father, had quite the reputation of being a “ladies’ man” when he was younger! He had an eye for a pretty face and liked women.

By the time Harry enlisted in the army he was in his late 30's, so by that stage he was certainly not a young man, unlike many of those whom he fought beside.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that things changed dramatically for me in the space of less than a week and that now I confess to having somewhat of an obsession with my great uncle, Henry Bell who was fondly known as “Harry”. [I didn’t know his real name was “Henry” until a few years ago, as he always referred to himself as “Harry”, as did everyone else. Several years ago, my husband and I tried to find his name in the War Memorial in Canberra, but of course, we were looking for Harold Bell



191 Pte. Henry Bell

(Story written by Barbara Abt to commemorate great uncle Henry Bell who is depicted above at a family wedding.)

from Bendigo and had no success. Shortly after, we discovered his name was in fact, "Henry" we found his photo on the War Memorial website].

Henry was one of 12 children born to Henry and Jane Bell in 1876. Sadly, only 8 children reached adulthood and of those, only 2 were males – Henry and my grandfather John James who was born in 1877. My great grandparents and their 5 children, the youngest merely 11 months of age, left Liverpool, England on 18th September 1871 bound for Melbourne, Australia aboard the Duke of Edinburgh ship which was part of the White Star Line. Their fare cost 75 pounds. I can't help but think how brave it was of them to have embarked on such a voyage at that time!

Recently, I received a phone call from a distant cousin informing me that Henry, it seems, was one of the soldiers expected to be found buried at Fromelles! I was amazed, stunned! Remarkably, it appears he was believed to be one of the 'lost' 250 soldiers whose body has laid undiscovered for almost a century! No recognition, no individual burial, no knowledge of him or his mates whom he fought beside, laying deep beneath the ground! It was truly incredible. Emotions and affection for this uncle I never knew, flooded over me and I needed to find and read the postcards and letters again that I'd stored in a wicker chest. One by one I placed them again in an album, the letters in plastic sleeves, and sat down to read them all several times. In doing so, I began to know my great uncle. It was almost as though he was reaching me from the grave, telling me his thoughts and feelings, and I discovered that he wrote very well. The sense of family connection that I felt towards him grew and I understood through these letters, the relationship he shared with my grandfather, his brother. In my grandfather's letters it hurt to read the concern and anguish that he experienced while his brother was so far away, facing the conflict and the horrors of war. I empathised with my grandfather's sense of frustration at not being able to do more here, feeling helpless, mentioning wanting to join Harry over there in the Western Front. My grandfather had a wife and four children and worked as sole teacher/headmaster of a school in Leichardt. Henry had less responsibilities here than my grandfather, although he too was married, worked as an Insurance Agent and had no children. It was heart-rending to learn that some of my grandfather's letters were written long after Henry had been killed and it took many agonizing months before learning that Henry was officially declared "missing in action". Until then his family clung to a shred of hope that he may still be alive, perhaps even taken as prisoner of war? It is impossible to imagine the pain "Harry's" family must have endured, like so many others also waiting for news, any news, of a lost loved one. I learned that my grandfather wrote weekly to his brother and of the deep respect and affection they shared. Through Henry's cards and letters, apart from many where he'd just basically written "*he was well, longing to get mail, hoping family here were all well*" etc., I discovered that he enjoyed reading an article in the 'Bedigonian' that his sister had sent him. He commented on various things and as I read his correspondence my eyes were riveted to the page, not wanting to miss a single word. Not surprisingly, he mentioned keeping a diary to which he said he had just added "*something to it that will interest you all and perhaps a little later I will be able to let you know about*". "Harry" enjoyed writing letters, mentioning in one "*this is the fifth and I've got as many more to write*". He also wrote "*we could, of course, say lots of things but then they would only be rubbed out when they go through the censor's hands*". In his personal diary he was able to write things that couldn't be censored. Sadly, there has never been any knowledge of what happened to his diary and perhaps it may have fallen into German hands? What became of it is a mystery, but one thing is for certain, it would have been truly fascinating to read!!

Through "Harry's" correspondence, I learned that he loved cakes and sweets and was intending on "*gorging*" himself when he received a parcel of long awaited

goodies from home. I also discovered that he suffered from rheumatism and the camp at 'Brighton Beach' he thought was the *"hardest place"*. He mentioned marching in various locations in Egypt but said that at 'Brighton Beach' his knee went *"pretty lame"* so Lieutenant Johnson who was marching behind him offered to carry his rifle but Henry wouldn't let him. Henry writes, *"He wanted to know what was wrong with me, I told him my leg was a bit crook for the time, anyhow when we got here they gave me a light job for awhile. We've got great officers. They were picking out all those with rheumatism so I kept clear of 'Catona'."* [Not sure of the name he wrote here]. He goes on to say: *"It means probably some sort of a job here or home again if bad and that would be no good to this chick."* *"Brighton Beach' was tough"*, he suggests. *"I lost enough sweat out there to start a young canal, every day I was ringing (sic) wet with perspiration and strange to say it didn't take me down in condition at all, I weighed myself the other day and I weighed 12st 12lb; not a bad weight, eh; The sand at Brighton Beach was the worst I've been in and that is where we had that pearler of a sand storm"*. He comments on the weather too saying, *"It's a stinging hot day today. It's a bit better now and up to a few minutes ago the flies were brutal. The bally things seek out all the cool spots like we do"*. Apparently another time he was *"hauled out of the canal after the wreck of the 'Alouette' by some of the Indian Troops"* who he'd been *"great pals"* with. He mentions *"they helped me to the hospital and some of the Indian soldiers lent me one of their big coats and a shawl, I looked a pet with just a shawl around my hips and a coat on."* "Harry" obviously had a sense of humour that is evident throughout his cards and letters. In the same letter written on 7th May 1916, he said: *"Well we havn't (sic) moved yet, but it will come when we least expect it, we will be marched off one of these times and won't know where to till we are on the boat and then we won't know our destination till we land there, that's military work & I suppose it's just as well its so, even then the German rotters get wind of things, one crowd here I believe were well to prepare for a night march and when they got on the go were marched on board. It wouldn't do to tell no fellow to (sic) much. I believe we are as bad as a lot of old women for talking, but what can you expect May (my grandmother) when there are such things as Insurance Agents in the army. Our packs are always packed ready with the things we have to take with us. Viz. pair socks, change of under clothing, overcoat, carry all, towl (sic) & soap, all issue stuff, we are not allowed to take private stuff. So you see we could get off at very short notice."* He adds, *"There was some pretty good war news in our raj today so one of my mates was saying. The British & French both have been putting in good work. Some of the other brigades here have some pet names for us such as – Chocolates & Pets and the latest is The Gentlemen of the Desert"*. *"I suppose all of that will drop when we are shoulder to shoulder."* In yet another card he mentions getting their helmets and colours, *"the helmets are just the thing for this hot weather"* he writes. *"Our colours are black and gold – they don't look bad on our tunics"*. Like my grandfather and my uncle Ron, who years later became a prominent rose breeder, I also discovered that "Harry" was interested in both roses and poultry, and was secretary for each of these organisations.

To say that I have found these cards and letters extraordinary, would be something of an understatement! What I do feel, however, is that I have somewhat come to know both my uncle "Harry" and my grandfather who passed away in 1933. My husband and I intend visiting Fromelles for the 94th commemoration service on July 19th 2010, when the new cemetery is officially opened and where my great uncle will be officially laid to rest, with military honours, along with his fallen comrades. The re-interment of the "missing" soldiers will be taking place early in 2010, with the exception of one soldier who will be anonymously re-interred on 19th July. While in France, Helmut and I intend to visit the grave of another relative, Captain Charles Arblaster at the Douai Communal Cemetery. He fought, was injured and taken POW at the Battle of Fromelles.

In the period of 12 hours from 19th – 20th July, the 5th Division had 5533 casualties which consisted of 1917 killed in action or died of wounds. 3146 were wounded and 470 taken as POWs'. 216 were from the 29th Battalion, 19 of those are among the "missing soldiers of Fromelles". Henry Bell is one of them.

As to how my great, or to be precise, 'grand' (a term rarely used these days) uncle was killed? Red Cross documents contain several statements from witnesses. Private O'Shannassy stated, *"I saw him killed by a shell about the same place as Haslan – In a German Trench at Fromelles as we were coming back to the 1st line"*. Another statement read: *"Bell was killed at Fleurbaix on the 19th July 1916. On the morning of the 20th or 21st July, in the daylight, I went out with others to fetch men from No-Man's-Land under cover of mist. I brought Bell in, and placed his body with others. He was afterwards moved to the back for burial. I am not able to say how or where he was buried. I did not see him killed. Eye witness: Yes, that Bell was dead. Description – About 5' 9". Thickset. Medium to dark hair, thin on top, moustache. Informant thinks he was married and came from in or near Ballarat. Informant: Pte. David Edney 29th AIF. And one more statement from H. P. Downer 29th Btn. "I saw the casualty killed in the second line of German trenches at Fleurbaix on the 20th July, 1916. Casualty was in the trench which we just occupied when he was destroyed by H.P. shell. The body was not buried"*.

That was how Henry Bell met his fate and with great sadness I reflect upon the cruelties of war, the senseless and tragic loss of so many lives.

There is one other thing that has puzzled me, and that is the photo on the internet of Henry Bell in his uniform. It appears on several sites but the image that bears his name doesn't have any resemblance to the photo that I have of "Harry" when he was best man at my grandparent's wedding. In order to see "Harry's" features more clearly, we scanned and enlarged the wedding photo and compared it to the image of Henry in his uniform. It is difficult to believe that the photo in the archives is of the same man as in the wedding photo that I have..... but I may be wrong? I can see in my photograph of Henry the same "Bell" characteristics that I saw in both my mother and my uncle. Also, the soldier in the image from the archives resembles a man perhaps in his mid 20's, not someone nearly 40 years of age. The eyes on both are different and one has a moustache and the other doesn't. Mind you, Harry may have shaved off his moustache when he enlisted in the army? However, even the Department of Defence agree that both photos do not appear to be of the same man?

"Harry's" nephew, my uncle Ron Bell, passed away in November 2008 aged 93 years. He was the last remaining male "Bell" member in our family, so unfortunately there are now no longer any males to pass the name onto for future generations.

The photo that I keep in my album, the photo I have been gazing at so often lately, I know without a doubt is Henry Bell. It was taken on 18th April 1906, when he was best man to my grandfather, John James Bell. That image staring back at me with a hint of a smile, is "Harry", my great uncle, who was once obviously, a handsome man. "Harry" who now has, and always will have, a special place in my heart.

WRITTEN BY BARBARA ABT, NOVEMBER, 2009



Depicted in the two photographs above are Jane Carruthers Bell and Henry Bell, Harry's parents, holding grandchildren.

Notification of Henry Bell being deceased was received by Army Headquarters in London on 13-MAR-17. News of his name being contained in a German death list was apparently conveyed to his widow by means of a letter prepared by the Australian Branch, British Red Cross Society dated 12th December, 1916. Commissioner Jas. A Murdock commiserated with Henry's next-of-kin, his wife Mrs Dorothy Isabel Mills Bell: "Please accept my heartfelt sympathy in your sad bereavement, and while I know too well at the present time the loss of your husband seems irreconcilable with everything, yet, in the near future, knowledge that he died bravely fighting for the Empire, will be some compensation to you in your great loss."

Digitized by the National Archives of Australia, Henry's personnel dossier contains a copy of Army Form B 103. That is a Casualty Form—Active Service which shows that some of the belongings of 191 Private Henry Bell, including his identification disc, were forwarded to HQ, and presumably then on to his family in Australia. Killed on the German side of the trenches and buried in the vicinity of Fleurbaix, Bell was the subject of a Court of Enquiry wherein it was determined he had died on 19-JUL-16, and unless he is found among those exhumed from Pheasant Wood, he will continue to be recorded as missing.

Biographically Z23 Captain Charles Arblaster, 53rd Battalion Machine Gun Squadron, is also of interest in the context of Fromelles according to Barbara and Helmut. Having attended Inglewood State School, Melbourne High School and Royal Military College Duntroon from where he graduated on 2-OCT-14, 1st Lieutenant Arblaster saw action on the Gallipoli Peninsula with the 8th Light Horse Regiment and gained promotion in the field, according to a report by Lieutenant Colonel L. C Maygar, after participating in the bloody fighting at Walker's Ridge and the famous charge across the NEK on 7-AUG-15. Captain Arblaster was wounded on 26th September 1915 at Chunuk Bahr, taken to Malta

by hospital ship, "HS Gloucester Castle" where the bullet was extracted. A medical board assembled on 27-OCT-15 recommended Arblaster recuperate in England, he arrived there per "HS D'Italia" on 29-OCT-15, and admitted to 3rd London General Hospital and subsequently transferred on 13-DEC-15 to No. 5 Australian Auxillary Hospital. Captain Arblaster who had had more than three years service in the CMF, rejoined his unit in Egypt on 26-FEB-16, transferring to 53rd Battalion on 11-MAR-16 in time to take part in the Battle of Fromelles, where on 20-JUL-16 he was taken POW. **"DIED OF DISEASE, Sepsis, 24-JUL-16."** Born at Pennyroyal, Victoria, Captain Arblaster is BURIED 1276, Douai Communal Cemetery, FRANCE.

Charles Arblaster was Barbara's mother's 2nd Cousin.



Research by Barbara Abt has led to many revelations about her family's background as well as the writing of this story about 191 Private Henry Bell.