



Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Discussion Group

Battlefield Archaeology Comes of Age



Of the 18,000 or so Australians who went missing during the Great War in France and Belgium according to the registers of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 11,062 are named at Villiers-Bretonneux, while others are commemorated at Menin Gate or lay buried at V.C. Corner and at Souchez, Laventie, Fleurbaix, Bois-Grenier and Sailly-sur-la-Lys. Menin Gate lists the names of 6,176 men who died in Flanders and have no known grave. So great was the need for graves after the Battle of Fromelles that other French and Flanders cemeteries like Ration Farm Military Cemetery at Armentières, Aubers Ridge British Cemetery and Le Trou Aid Post Cemetery, also contain A.I.F. graves.

Burial pits such as those located at Pheasant Wood might prove to be repositories of a great amount of physical heritage and artefactual evidence dating from the First World War and therefore deserve preservation. Consequently the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the British and Australian authorities who are currently liaising with the French Government over the missing soldiers of Fromelles, should stop dragging their feet and move toward a full recovery operation to prevent further public criticism of the delay in exhuming, identifying and correctly commemorating any remains that might be found and to do this in such a way as to optimize the potential forensic and archaeological evidence which might be acquired.

Fromelles is a significant military heritage site and the CWGC should be more proactive when it comes to conserving such burial pits and honouring the fallen of the Western Front, considering this is not the first time such sites have been discovered. It can do this by embracing the responsibilities outlined in its charter of incorporation and the various treaties which have been negotiated to facilitate the very work the Commission's founder Fabian Ware was concerned about when he arrived in France in September 1914. Ware commanded a British Red Cross Unit and realized that graves would be lost if registration was not properly organized. To achieve this an Agreement Between His Majesty's Government and the Government of the French Republic

relative to the Graves of British Soldiers in France was drawn up and subsequently the document entered into force on 26 November 1918. When it was established the Imperial War Graves Commission was given the power to honour the memory of British soldiers who had fallen on the field of battle in French territory.

Notwithstanding the above underlying aim, Grant Triffett of the Fromelles Discussion Group suggests Article 2 of the treaty empowered the Imperial War Graves Commission to remove British soldiers found in isolated graves immediately, and it also recognized the organization as the sole authority charged with the care of British military graves in France. Implicit in the treaty then he said, is the right of the Commission (as it is now known) to create new military cemeteries with a view to the ultimate grouping together of isolated graves, the consolidation of already existing British battlefield cemeteries and to systematically lay-out cemeteries and to erect monuments and memorials.

Mr. Triffett went on to explain that in Paris, on the 31st of October 1951 the Governments of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, India and Pakistan, and the Government of the French Republic further agreed in respect of British Commonwealth war graves in French territory, that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission would retain the right to make all arrangements necessary for the laying out of permanent cemeteries and to construct and maintain memorials, but it was also given the power to create and maintain temporary cemeteries and have in its possession the necessary equipment to collect, identify and give temporary burial to remains and to transfer them to permanent cemeteries. Noteworthy was the fact this treaty reiterated the proposition the Commission was the sole authority permitted to carry out these operations and in fact he continued, "the Agreement plainly directed there was to be no exhumation or repatriation without the express authorization of the Commission".

Another member of the group, Mr. Alan Bennett stated that "In granting the right to exhume, transport and rebury the remains of British soldiers who fought on the Western Front, this particular treaty also stipulated that the CWGC should not 'be subject to French laws and regulations concerning permits for the burial, exhumation and transfer of remains'. Article 12 of this particular treaty makes provision for the formation of a joint committee 'to represent the Commission in French territory in dealing with [the] civil and military authorities concerned, and in particular to exercise in the Commission's name any or all of the rights granted to it by the present Agreement. This Committee shall be competent to perform in the name of the Commission and within the limits of the powers delegated by the latter, all civil acts necessary to enable it to fulfil its purposes.'" Article 9 of the treaty clearly empowers the organization to make 'all necessary facilities for transport, accommodation of personnel, setting up of offices, storing of material and procuring labour', with of course prior consultation with the French authorities.

Alan Bennett commented further on the CWGC's treaty obligations, suggesting that "Nowadays the public is constantly told the Commission only has responsibility for marking and maintaining war graves and consequently, there is considerable debate over the rights and functions of the organization and whether treaty articles are

applicable to the work currently being outlined in the context of Pheasant Wood. Regardless of this, the Fromelles Discussion Group argues the Commission should act in the accord with these foundation documents. Documents which were presumably acted upon in September 2006 when the remains of 5 Australian soldiers who had fought in the Battle of Polygon Wood, Belgium, were discovered and re-interred. And in June 2001 when twenty 1st World War soldiers were found in a shallow common grave having been forgotten after the Battle of Arras on Easter Monday, 9th April 1917". Mr. Triffett added, "In the above cases the Commission acted decisively to activate the process of recovery and the period taken to complete the task was minimal."

"But in the case of Pheasant Wood the authorities have thus far failed to expedite the comprehensive exploration and scientific and forensic analysis of the graves of the British and Australian soldiers that were killed, or actually made provision for the recovery of their remains in a timely fashion," he argued. Fromelles Discussion Group member Bob Sutherland suggested that in his view the Commission seems to be unable or unwilling to grasp its statutory responsibilities or to give strong direction, and the delay up to this point was a direct and unnecessary result of government intervention and the pig-headedness of some of the personalities involved. "Rather than speak in a substantive and authoritative way to the international community, the organization permits what in general can be described as scant and superficial information to emerge from various subsidiary groups like GUARD, the Australian Army History Unit and the British All-Party War Graves and Battlefield Heritage Group, satellite agencies which presumably contract to care for and maintain graves within the borders of affiliate nations, domestic parliamentary ministers of the crown, their advisers and departments. Yet according to SourceWatch (a project of the Center for Media and Democracy), the British All-Party War Graves and Battlefield Heritage Group was primarily established to promote an understanding of battlefield heritage and assist the CWGC in its work," he said.

"Granted the Commission works in 150 countries around the world and budgetary constraints mean its activities are restricted, but this has probably been the case since inception", Sutherland supposed. "After all when the Imperial War Graves Commission was first established prior to the end of WWI it was calculated that just £10 per individual was needed for the purposes of commemoration. Little wonder such groups as ROAM are becoming disappointed with the apparent lack of progress being made at Fromelles, particularly since the Australian taxpayer has already forked out \$150,000 and the trial dig is likely to cost considerably more." This is not meant to be criticism of British archaeologist Doctor Tony Pollard or his team from the Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division [GUARD], Sutherland proffered. "It is of the tendering process and the need for Government in this country to be more transparent", he suggested.

Perhaps a partial answer to the question of delay Triffett implied might be sought in statistics relating to the dead and missing of the Great War found in Crosses of Sacrifice by J. C. Waters. Echoing the words of Waters, the Fromelles Discussion Group believes Australia should regard as eternal its responsibility toward researching and locating missing soldiers from such conflicts. Members of the Fromelles Discussion Group wish to direct the gaze of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the

Australian Government toward Pheasant Wood, where new evidence shows many of our missing remain to this day.

Triffett contends that since the burial pits at Pheasant Wood are said to constitute the largest mass grave found on the Western Front to date, the CWGC should implement the full array of modern interdisciplinary methods and techniques available for recovery, including DNA matching and initiate strategic planning to cover the exigency of other mass graves being found as well. Especially since at least one eminent battlefield archaeologist supports this view and common sense would suggest there are still as yet other undiscovered mass graves from the Great War located in France and Belgium. Obviously the identification of the large number of soldiers missing or buried as unknown from the World War One, is both complex and disconcerting.

Indeed Sutherland starkly reminds us of the tragic dimensions of the Great War when referring to *Crosses of Sacrifice*. He said the book furnishes something of an insight into the dilemma facing the Commonwealth War Graves Commission over mass graves like the one found at Fromelles, irrespective of the structure it adopts to fulfill its mission in the future. "Waters tells us the Australian dead and missing in France and Belgium up to the British official date of the termination of World War One—that is, 31 August, 1921, was 46,012. "When the long drawn-out agony of War ended and Peace came from what Waters reported, 24,000 Australians were posted as missing."

"In some instances the CWGC has slipped up as with Menin Gate where some have been duplicated", Bob Sutherland said. "And in other cases the Commission's registers contain errors or omissions because of the lack of documentation collected. For example, many soldiers listed in registers as unidentified, have insufficient Next-of-Kin details; and clearly, this is a product of either poor decision-making with respect to leaving this kind of information out, or the sheer burden of compiling the data proved insurmountable. Many unidentified soldiers had their identification discs removed prior to burial due to misunderstandings about the process of clearance by their mates or suffered desecration on the battlefield or on burial, were frequently exposed due to shell fire and other detonation."

In France and Belgium alone the total number of unknown Australians buried in cemeteries was 7,130. According to Sutherland, "these unidentified soldiers are listed either as A Soldier Of The Great War or An Australian Soldier with the accompanying inscription "Known unto God" . . . men whom Waters described as being lost as the tide of battle surged." For the most part Waters empathized, "somewhere in No Man's Land, or in enemy territory where their comrades could not reach them; somewhere holding until the last some vital outpost; some, perchance, annihilated at the very mouth of enemy guns."

The memorial to some of these missing Australian dead are carved in stone on the imposing Menin Gate memorial located in what was then the town of Ypres (now Ieper), situated in Belgium while those from the Battle of Fromelles are commemorated at VC Corner Cemetery. Altogether, there are 54,895 names listed on

Menin Gate and it should be pointed out, those that were recovered have been interred in permanent cemeteries established on the battlefields.

World War One was undoubtedly a tumultuous event. This upheaval cost the lives of millions of men from the combatant nations and according to Waters at its highest stage, "daily absorbed seven million pounds of British money." Bob Sutherland quoting Waters verbatim explained that, "Calculated in the Empire's men, it swept away nearly 700 every 24 hours continuously for four years and three months. Even our own Australians were killed or died of wounds or sickness at the rate of nearly 50 a day."

From the outset, the grave clearance teams and then the newly-established Imperial War Graves Commission had a daunting task. "In France and Belgium in the years following the Armistice, upwards of 250,000 bodies were exhumed and reburied." Back then the organization had the expertise to conduct this work and organize the manufacture of hundreds of thousands of headstones, many of them for men who have not been identified and therein lies a problem for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission or its representatives when trying to argue these kinds of activities are not within its jurisdiction.

When speaking about the issue of the missing, Fromelles Discussion Group members were of the same opinion that Waters had summed up the predicament perfectly. Talking about human losses, Waters had said: "Men had been buried everywhere in those shell-torn areas." Half a million apparently, "went out into the fog of battle never to return—300,000 of them never to be found, and 170,000 found but not identified." And out of the 527 cemeteries in France and Belgium created and managed by the Commission which contain bodies of Australian soldiers from the 1st World War, now look at the cemeteries that have a Fromelles connection. "Consider the following statistics and think about modern developments in forensic archaeology and the capacity for specialists like trained osteologists to identify disarticulated remains in burial pits", Bennett said in conclusion. "One only has to contrast this data with current policy to realize the CWGC is caught between earlier bureaucratic denial and the growth in public understanding of the potentiality of DNA matching and other forms of forensic testing." He said in regards to Pheasant Wood, "the burial pits require the adoption of benchmark practices which optimize recovery as well as the amount of scientific information which might be collected and if this is not done there will be further public clamor about the approach currently being proposed".

As it is Bob Sutherland suggests, "Any time a member of the public (whether interested in military history or not), raises the issue of DNA matching or other forms of forensic testing, the Commission reacts as if it is being asked to desecrate cemeteries by permitting the construction of multi-storey car parks." Perhaps a more enlightened attitude should be adopted by the CWGC and the various governmental instrumentalities involved in the proposed trial dig at Pheasant Wood. Instead of throwing money to limit and delay exploration, the Australian Government unilaterally, should be seen to lead the way by providing funding to bolster the application and enhancement of this type of testing. That is, to make new technologies like DNA matching available for use at Pheasant Wood.

3190 Sergeant Edward Joseph Morley, from Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, is listed as having No Known Grave and is commemorated at VC Corner, the only all-Australian cemetery on the Western Front. Morley, who was a civil police officer was listed as missing in action on the 19th July, 1916 and later reported killed by a Board of Inquiry. He does not appear in the list of missing contained in Patrick Lindsay's *Fromelles: The Story of Australia's Darkest Day*. Sergeant Morley was a member of the 60th Battalion and just



MEMORIAL PLAQUE: Sgt. E. J. Morley—One of the names of the missing of Fromelles can be found in the Avenue of Honour at Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, which consists of 281 Canadian elms— Courtesy of Bob Sutherland.

might be one of the fallen buried at Pheasant Wood. According to an eyewitness account, Morley hopped over the parapet at Fleurbaix and fell just outside the Australian wire. Reverend J. F. Gilbert of the 60th Battalion A.I.F. wrote with regard to an official enquiry, that "It may seem strange that men can be killed and their bodies not be recovered, but it must be kept in mind that most of the men who fell on the 19th July, fell on grounds that are still in dispute, and that cannot be traversed except by night, and then only very stealthfully, and only by a few at a time. Very few even of the Officers who were killed on that date were ever brought in for burial." Given that Morley's identity discs were removed by a Sergeant Simon Fraser while out on a wiring party, then it would have been impossible to identify Morley's remains correctly when clearance became an option, if indeed by this stage any remains survived the constant artillery bombardment. Indeed, from what one gleans from the Red Cross Records artillery was most likely the cause of his demise. Sergeant Fraser was a respected soldier who is depicted on a bronze sculpture entitled 'Cobbers' located at the Australian Memorial Park close by VC Corner Cemetery.

Even though Sergeant Morley might not be one of the Pheasant Wood missing his fate clearly demonstrates the difficulties associated with recovering human remains during and after a battle and the importance of applying DNA matching to skeletal remains found on heritage sites such as Fromelles. If he is not located in the burial pits because the 60th Battalion suffered the majority of its casualties against the machine guns at the Sugarloaf and supporting artillery on the right flank of the battle, he will probably remain missing.

Cemeteries in which the Diggers from the Battle of Fromelles in 1916 are known to be placed
Cabaret-Rouge British Cemetery at Souchez: 53 Identified—67 Unknown—7,533 Other British
Laventie Military Cemetery: 5 Identified—0 Unknown—431 Other British
Rue-David Military Cemetery at Fleurbaix: 86 Identified—266 Unknown—544 Other British
Rue Pétilon Military Cemetery at Fleurbaix:

270 Identified—22 Unknown—1,218 Other British
Sailly-sur-la-Lys (Canadian): 19 Identified, 0 Unknown, 294 Other British
V.C. Corner (Australian only) at Fromelles: 0 Identified—410 Unknown—0 Other British
"Y" Farm Military Cemetery at Bois-Grenier 91 Identified—72 Unknown—657 Other British

It is important to keep in mind there are some discrepancies between the figures given in this data from **Crosses of Sacrifice** and the **Guide To Australian Battlefields of the Western Front 1916-1918** written by John Laffin. The cemetery information, viz. names are also taken from Waters and may have changed, particularly those located in Belgium.

The Fromelles Discussion Group has formed no opinion on whether there should be a monument or permanent cemetery constructed at Pheasant Wood as this is currently extraneous to the search for the missing soldiers of the 5th Australian Division and the British 61st Division.



PHOTOGRAPH: Sgt. E. J. Morley, 60th Battalion, KIA -Battle of Fromelles. Grave location Unknown.
Courtesy of Bob Sutherland.



PHOTOGRAPH: Evelyn Morley (née Ewart, of Launching Place, VIC, wife of Sgt. E. J. Morley— Subsequently remarried Roy Earle who was killed in WW2 as a P.O.W., when the Japanese transport he was on was torpedoed. The Montevideo Maru, with a total of 1051 Australian soldiers and civilians, was sunk by the American submarine, USS Sturgeon on July 1, 1942. Evelyn never married again after such grievous loss.