

Identification of the Diggers from Pheasant Wood with named headstones

Background

During the past decade, the Battle of Fromelles in French Flanders has been in the news. Firstly, research undertaken by Lambis Englezos AM in 2006 revealed that there were a significant number of Australian soldiers killed in the battle but not accounted for in burials by Australian or British troops. After advocacy by Lambis and a team of supporters, in 2007 an archaeological team from Glasgow University led by Professor Tony Pollard confirmed the location of a mass grave where German Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment soldiers had buried the bodies of Australian soldiers after the battle. As part of this, enquiries were made of the archives of the Bavarian Infantry Regiment in Munich.

In 2008, The *Australian Fromelles Project Group* was established within the Australian Army Headquarters and an Historians Round Table meeting convened in November 2008 to establish the list of those soldiers who are most likely to be buried at Pheasant Wood. A *Working List* of 178 names of soldiers thought to be buried by the German after the battle was compiled based on evidence in their Service Records and the Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau files held by the National Archives of Australia and the Australian War Memorial and from genealogical research. Further investigations of the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva in 2009 added a further 13 names to the *Working List* (191 names).

An archaeological excavation by Oxford Archaeology in 2009 recovered the remains of 250 soldiers who were then buried with full military honours in the new *Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery* in 2010. World class archaeological and anthropological analysis combined with cutting edge DNA matching with DNA from soldiers' relatives has led to 173 of these 250 soldiers (69%) being identified by name and having their own named headstones.

- There are 235 Australian soldiers who are known to have been buried by the German soldiers following the Battle of Fromelles or have German documentation in their service records.
- With 173 of the 250 soldiers buried in the *Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery* now being identified, by difference, there are 77 graves (250-173) for soldiers whose identities have not yet been matched with DNA from relatives or with artefacts or anthropological studies.
- So far 39 soldiers whose names were not on the Fromelles Project Working List of 191 names have been identified by matching with DNA from relatives.
- At present, there are 52 Australian soldiers whose names were extracted from the German lists inspected in Geneva by Peter Barton but for whom DNA contributed by relatives does not match that of unidentified soldiers buried in the Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery.
- While some of these 52 soldiers might have been buried by the Germans near Pheasant Wood and there may be disconnects in their family trees (e.g. adoptions, mother remarried and child adopted the step-father's name etc), perhaps most lie in unnamed graves, or were buried elsewhere in unnamed or unmarked graves. What is known is that their identity tags and / or some personal effects were collected by German soldiers for intelligence analysis and in accordance with the Geneva and Hague Conventions repatriated through the International Red Cross network to the Australian soldiers' families.

There are at least a further 15 (250-235) soldiers that were not on the Working List and whose remains were reinterred in the *Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery* whose identity is not known. These soldiers are amongst the list of the Australian soldiers killed in the Battle of Fromelles with no known grave.

Identifying the 77 unidentified soldiers in the *Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery* remains the challenge that can only be solved now by matching the soldier's DNA with that of a descendant.

Some of the attendees at the Fromelles Day Commemorations are relatives of soldiers killed in the battle, others are descendants of veterans of the battle who returned to Australia and some will be researchers or archaeologists involved in the search for the “missing” soldiers of Fromelles. Following is an update on the progress of the identification process.

Update on identifications

The 2023 Fromelles Identification Board revealed the names of 7 more Australian soldiers who have their names inscribed on individual headstones.

Rank	Given Names	Surname	Service No.	Unit	Brigade
Sergeant	Oscar Eric	Baumann	10	32nd Battalion	8
Private	Maurice James	Claxton	1239	32nd Battalion	8
Private	Walter Allen	Grace	1537	31st Battalion	8
Private	Edwin Charles	Gray	20	32nd Battalion	8
Private	Richard James	McGuarr	3873	55th Battalion	14
Private	Alexander Russell Robert	Page	1082	32nd Battalion	8
Corporal	William John	Stephen	2772	55th Battalion	14

A list of the names of the 236 Australian soldiers known to be buried by the Germans after the battle including the names of the 173 soldiers identified as buried in the Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery so far is available from enquiries@ffaif.org.au.

	Thought to be buried by the Germans from Archive lists	Identified with named head-stones	Identified from Original Working List	Identified from Munich & Fromelles Database research	Identified but not on Working List
Soldiers identified	235	173	126	8	39
Soldiers recovered		250			
Source of soldiers' names		69%	73%	5%	22%

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PS: Anyone who believes that they are related to one of the Australian soldiers who are still missing from the Battle of Fromelles are invited to register their details with Unrecovered War Casualties – Army at <https://army.govcms.gov.au/forms/uwc-a-online-registration-form> and to contribute DNA samples.