

FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF THE FIRST AIF INC

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Historical context for commemorating the 19 July 1916 Battle of Fromelles in Hyde Park

The Battle of Fromelles in northern France, the first battle involving Australian troops on the Western Front following the withdrawal from Gallipoli. It was a tragic disaster, with 2,152 Australian soldiers killed and died of wounds in the lead up to the battle and as a consequence of the battle. 1,815 were killed during combat and 299 died of wounds after the battle. In addition, there were more than 3,380 Australian soldiers wounded and 482 taken prisoner (42 of whom died of wounds or other causes), totalling 5,533 casualties. 814 British soldiers were killed or died of wounds at, or because of, the Battle of Fromelles. The British High Command described these 2,971 deaths as occurring during an "important raid" in which 140 prisoners were captured. German casualties were 469 killed and 978 wounded and 204 missing.

Following the Armistice in November 1918, Sir John Monash focussed on repatriation of the Australian soldiers and Lt. General Talbot Hobbs, who had commanded the 5th Australian Division from December 1916 to October 1918 was promoted to command Australian Corps. During this time General Hobbs chaired an Australian *Battle Memorials Committee* and was appointed to select sites, prepare designs and arrange for construction of battlefield memorials to the Australian divisions, before he relinquished command of the Australian Corps in May 1919.

The 5th Division Memorial at Polygon Wood, completed by October 1919, means that the information for the divisional memorial plaques was finalised, presumably in consultation with the divisional commanders, and was available for the Battle Clasps Committee's considerations (March to May 1919) and were settled *before* the Battlefield Nomenclature Committee was formed (August 1919) and *before* the Australian Official History was published (1929), and reflected the divisions' views of significant battles and is clear statement of what the veterans of the 5th Division wanted memorialised.



AWM image of 5th Division bronze plaque made to be mounted in honour of the soldiers of the 5th Australian Division who fought in France and Belgium from 1916 to 1918. (Donor LTGEN J.T. Hobbs October 1920).

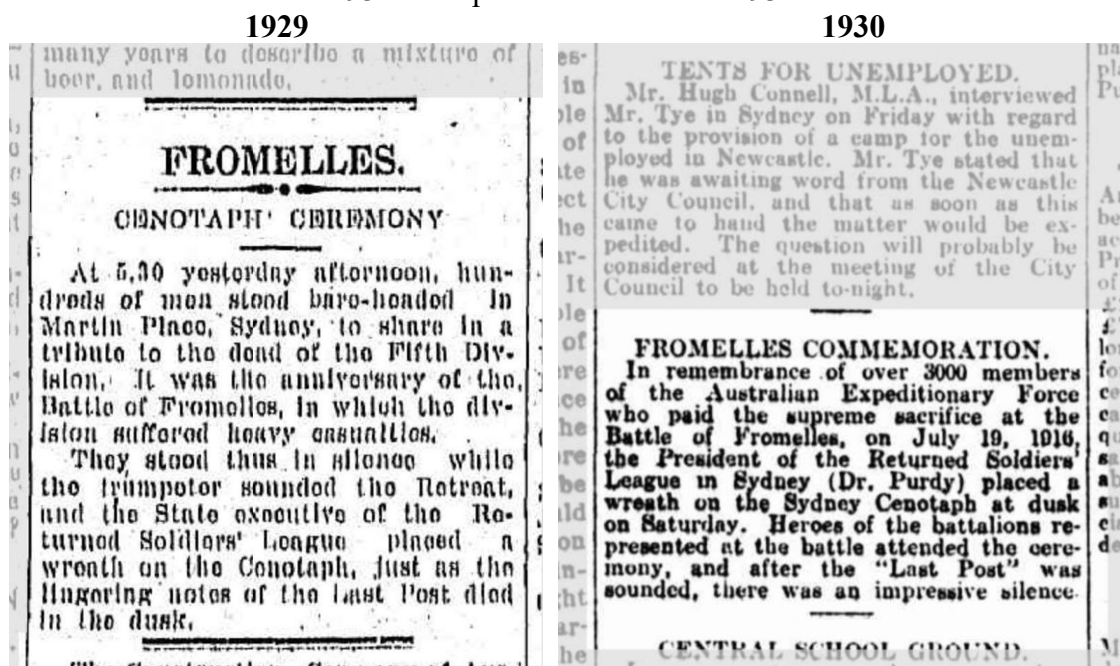
By May 1926, 11 of the 12 Battalions of 5th Division had claimed or had been recommended to claim 'FROMELLES' as a Battle Honour (8th Brigade's 29th, 30th and 32nd Battalions; 14th Brigade's 53rd, 54th, 55th, and 56th Battalions; and 15th Brigades 57th, 58th, 59th and 60th Battalions, - the only Battalion which was inexplicably not indicated was 31st Battalion). Unfortunately, the *Report of the Battles Nomenclature Committee* (BNC Report June 1920) misclassified a number of battles involving Australian troops and the Minister for Defence, through the Governor-General requested a number of revisions to UK Army Orders dealing with Battle Honours. Such revisions effectively needed the support of the War Office in the UK as well as the Governments of the Dominions.

On 29 July 1926 three of Australia's most distinguished soldiers, Lieut.-General Sir John Monash, Director-General of Repatriation and Demobilisation, Major-General Sir Brudenell White, Chairman of the Commonwealth Public Service Board and former Chief of the General Staff from 1920 to 1923, and Lieut.-General H.G. Chauvel, Chief of the General Staff met to discuss their recommendations regarding Battle Honours to the Defence Minister, Major General Sir Neville Reginald Howse VC. Among those claims under France and Flanders, were **Fromelles**, Thilloys, Mouquet Farm, Lagnicourt, Hamel, Chuignes, Mont St. Quentin, and Peronne. Their advice stated that:

*In view of the opinion of the Minister that no claims should be pressed except in the case of Engagements considered of extreme importance to Australia, we recommend that this list be further curtailed by the **omission** of the following:-
(inter alia) **Fromelles**, Mouquet Farm, Thilloys, Lagnicourt.*

The implications of the decision not to pursue a Battle Honour for Fromelles were far reaching, as the Australian Official Historian Charles Bean advised the Trustees of the Anzac Memorial Building in on a list of Battle Areas for inscription in October 1934, which was during the years when the 12 Volumes of the Official History were being progressively released in 1921-1942. It is probable that he recommended they be guided by the BNC Report in the absence of a completed Australian history.

Meanwhile, newspaper records indicate that a commemorative wreath in remembrance of the Battle of Fromelles was placed on the Cenotaph in Martin Place, Sydney well before the new Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park was constructed in 1932 and opened in November 1934.



Left: From the "Maitland Daily Mercury" of the 20th July 1929.

Right: From the "Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate" of the 21st July 1930.

Credit: 'Trove' newspaper archives.

Interestingly, the “Record of The Parade and Ceremony”, organised by the 5th Division, 1st AIF Association, in 1966 asserts that “Fromelles” was one of the Battle Honours inscribed on the Regimental Colours.

This was 40 years after “Fromelles” had been omitted from the Battle Honours list and is a fairly clear statement that the 5th Division, 1st AIF Association still thought that Fromelles should have been recognised as a Battle Honour and that they did not consider the sacrifice at Fromelles to be adequately recognised.



Belatedly, recognition of Fromelles as a peer of significant Australian battle areas has occurred with the Cobbers Statue in the Australian Memorial Park in Fromelles (1998), Fromelles inclusion on the Australian War Memorial, Hyde Park Corner, London (2003), the planting of a remembrance tree at the Shrine of Remembrance and later the replica Cobbers Statue in Melbourne (2008), and soil from Fromelles being included in the *Soils from 100 Significant Military Sites* in the Hall of Service at the Anzac Memorial in Sydney (2018). In addition, the 19th July Commemorations in Fromelles, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and inclusion in the Australian History Curriculum have also raised awareness of the Battle of Fromelles. The discovery and recovery of the remains of 250 soldiers killed in the Battle of Fromelles and their exhumation and re-interment in 2010 in the new *Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery* and the stories of the men, their families and the science that has facilitated identification of 181 of the soldiers, has also significantly contributed to greater recognition of the Battle of Fromelles.



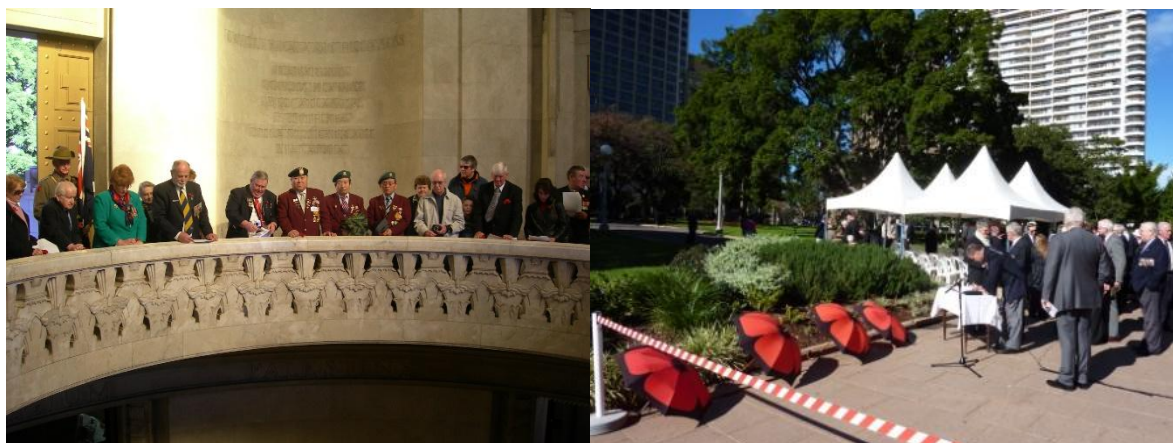
Each year the Trustees of the Anzac Memorial have honoured the request of the 5th Division veterans to always remember their service and the sacrifice of their comrades on 19 July 1916, and the Trustees continued to place wreaths on behalf of the 5th Division Association at the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park Sydney, however interest in Sydney in the Battle of Fromelles diminished with the declining number of 5th Division veterans and by 2005 less than 25 people attended.

In 2006 interest in the Battle of Fromelles increased. About 25-30 people attended the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Fromelles, where the Trustees placed a wreath on behalf of the 5th Division Association at the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park Sydney. About a third of those attending were members of the FFFAIF.



Fromelles Day Commemoration in the Western Front alcove in 2006

The Trustees of the Anzac Memorial in July 2006 approved FFFAIF to place wreaths on behalf of the 5th Division Association for the Fallen at Fromelles and the Missing at Fromelles at the annual Fromelles Commemoration Service. Since then, FFFAIF, in collaboration with the staff of the Anzac Memorial, has helped organise the annual Commemoration of the Battle of Fromelles, honouring the Trustees, commitment to the veterans.



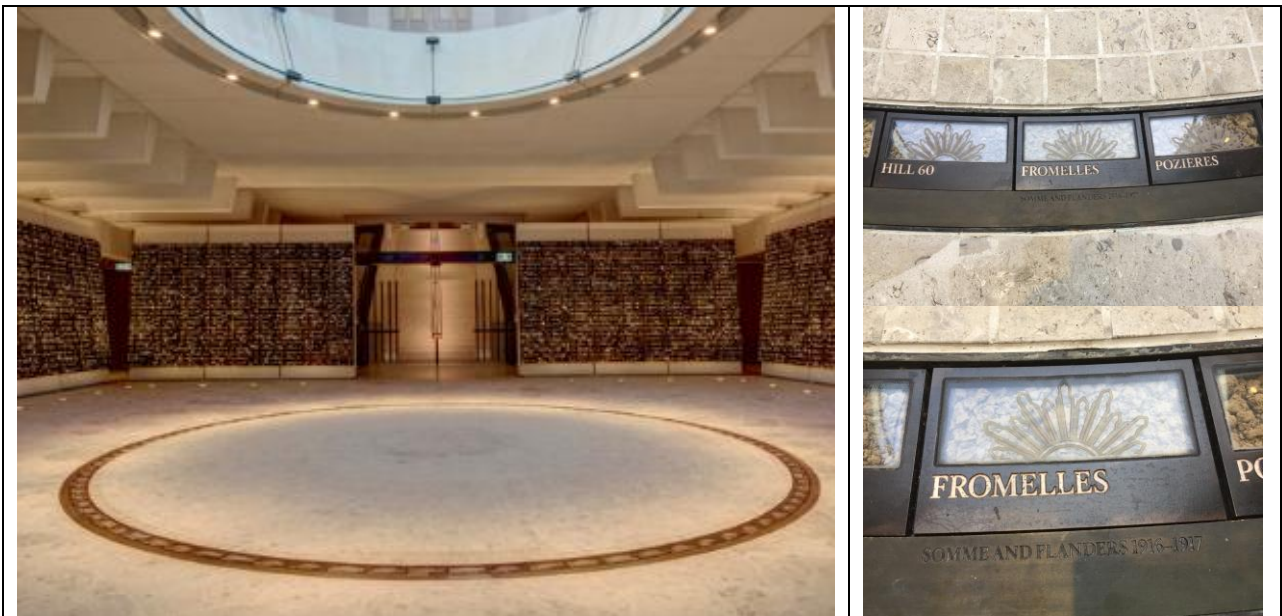
Fromelles Day Commemoration in the Western Front alcove in 2008 and on the Eastern Forecourt in 2009

To mark the Centenary of the Battle in 2016, the Fromelles Commemorative Procession was incorporated, re-enacting the 1966 final parade of the veterans of the 5th Division on the 50th anniversary of the Battle from the Archibald Fountain to the Anzac Memorial where the Trustees of the Anzac Memorial were requested to always remember on 19 July the sacrifice of the 8,100 soldiers of the 5th Division Killed in Action during the First World War and those who had died since. In addition, Solemn Vespers were conducted at St Mary's Cathedral.



2016 Commemoration Procession and Commemoration on the Northern Forecourt

The Commemorative Procession has proven popular and has been a feature of subsequent commemorations and grew in numbers each year to about 200 dignitaries, senior military and civilian emergency services, descendants and representatives of ex-service and descendant organisations, participating supported by an Australian Army Flag party, Pipers and flag bearers from the French Veterans.



The Anzac Memorial Centenary Extensions opened in 2018 incorporated the soil from Fromelles being in the *Soils from 100 Significant Military Sites* in the Hall of Service.

Following the opening of the Anzac Memorial Centenary Extensions in 2018, in 2020 the Commemoration moved from the Forecourt into the Auditorium, however with the COVID pandemic, the size of the commemoration had to be restricted, and in 2021 to the laying of a single wreath by the Anzac Memorial staff. Since that time, smaller Commemorative Services have continued to be held in the Auditorium.

Jim Munro
President, May 2026