Military disaster at Fromelles remembered

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This month marks the centenary of the first engagement of the AIF on the Western Front – at Fromelles, just east of Lille near the Belgian border, on 19 July 1916.

The engagement was a disaster for the Australian and British troops – the worst night in Australia’s military history – with the AIF suffering 5533 casualties (1917 dead, 3146 wounded and 470 captured). This is more than the combined Australian casualties for the Boer, Korean and the Vietnam wars.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN LAWYERS AT FROMELLES

My research, which draws heavily on Elizabeth Olsson’s study suggests there may have been only one South Australian lawyer, Private Herbert Peirce, in the battle. Pierce served with the 32nd Battalion of the 8th Brigade of the 5th Division of the AIF. The 32nd Battalion, which was formed in July 1915, comprised South Australian and Western Australian enlistees who trained in Adelaide before embarking for Egypt and then the Western Front on 18 November 1915. Whilst two other South Australian lawyers, Arthur Colville and Rudolph Heuzenroeder, enlisted in the 32nd, it is likely that they did not arrive at the Western Front prior to the engagement at Fromelles.

WHY THE ENGAGEMENT TOOK PLACE

The engagement was not intended to break decisively through the German lines. It was planned as a ‘feint’ to hold at Fromelles all of the opposing Bavarian Divisions so that they could not send reinforcements to the Somme. However, the Bavarians (who included a dispatch rider named Adolf Hitler) had the higher ground, and an observation post secreted in the church tower in Fromelles, enabling them to determine the AIF strategy well before the engagement.

WHY IT WAS A DISASTER

It was a disaster for the British and Australians because the assault involved getting troops across a no-man’s land that was covered by Bavarian machine guns, often from three directions. The artillery barrage before the assault was almost totally unsuccessful in neutralising the guns – which scythed through wave after wave of attacking Australian and British soldiers. Further, the Bavarians had been in position at Fromelles for a year longer, were better fortified and had perfected their plans for the inevitable counter-attack.

By comparison, the Australian force, in particular, included many troops who had no previous battle experience. For example, the Bavarian trenches that the 32nd Battalion were ordered to capture and hold turned out to be trenches that had been abandoned a year before because they were flooded. They held them, as ordered, but spent the night shoveling out mud, before succumbing to the Bavarian counter attack. The Australian officers who had studied the aerial reconnaissance maps in preparation were not yet sufficiently skilled to read them accurately.

WHO WAS TO BLAME FOR THE DISASTER?

The British officer in charge of the offensive, General Sir Richard Haking, had been asked by Field Marshall Haig to provide the ‘feint’. However his superiors equivocated about whether to proceed given the inauspicious weather at the time and left the decision to Haking. He was bullish in the extreme and was not concerned about the likelihood of large causalities.

Part of the British and Australian line from which the assault was to be launched was commanded by an Australian, Brigadier General Harold (‘Pompey’) Elliott – a Melbourne lawyer who had served in the Boer War and with great distinction at Gallipoli. Elliott’s experience and courage could not be questioned. On the day before the assault he asked one of Haking’s staff, Major Howard, to accompany him to the front line pointing out that the operation had no hope of
success. Howard’s comment was that it would be a “bloody holocaust’.

Thereafter the Australians dubbed Haking ‘the Butcher’. A large part of their contempt for him was because he had led a very similar operation at neighbouring Aubers 14 months before against the same opposing forces, with a similarly disastrous outcome.

**THE LEGACIES OF FROMELLES**

Most, but not all, of the legacies of Fromelles were negative.

The impact of the 32nd Battalion was profound as 224 members died, 494 were injured and 90, including my grandfather, were captured in the engagement. Commanding officer, Lieut. Colonel Coghill, previously the principal of Woodville High School, was immediately relieved of his command and sent back to Australia. The morale of the Battalion was crushed and it was relegated to a subsidiary role for most of the remainder of the war.

The taking of 470 Australian prisoners at Fromelles galvanised the Australian Red Cross, which established a Prisoners of War Department in London staffed by three women led by Mary Chomley, the daughter of a Victorian County Court Judge, and assisted by a ‘Miss Duncan of Adelaide’. Chomley led a very efficient unit which, between July 1916 and the end of the war, sent 395,595 food parcels and 36,339 clothing parcels to the 4000 Australian prisoners in Germany and Turkey. Thus the survival rate of Australian POWs was more than 90 percent, in circumstances where large parts of Germany were suffering from famine as a result of the British naval blockade of German ports.

In addition, Chomley corresponded with many Australian prisoners, taking food orders, passing messages and news and keeping up morale. She was one of Australia’s unsung heroes of WW1.

**THE PHEASANT WOOD CEMETERY**

The most enduring legacy of Fromelles has been forged by the efforts of Lambis Englezos, a Melbourne schoolteacher. In 2002 Englezos visited the Memorial to Australian soldiers at VC Corner at Fromelles. He was disturbed by the fact that the number of Australians buried there (410) did not tally with the number of Australian soldiers reported missing in the engagement (1299).

He made enquires, pressed for answers and, still unsatisfied, kept pressing. He was initially met by great resistance from the Australian government which, after several enquiries, commissioned independent research by Peter Barton from the Red Cross in Geneva and the Bavarian Military Archives.

Barton’s research confirmed Englezos’ belief that the Germans had collected the corpses of 165 Australian soldiers from the battlefield in a mass grave in Pheasant Wood near Fromelles. As a result, a specialist team including forensic archaeologists exhumed bodies from an area of the wood.

In total, 250 bodies believed to be Australian and British soldiers were recovered. They were buried in a new cemetery at Pheasant Wood. It is the only exhumation performed and the only new cemetery created since the First World War. Through painstaking DNA matching with relatives of the missing soldiers more than 120 of those bodies now bear a name over their graves.

One of the two commemoration ceremonies on 19 July this year will be at the Pheasant Wood Cemetry. Some children and many grandchildren of Australian soldiers who fought in the engagement will be there, including a number of current SA lawyers thinking about their grandfathers. It has been a great privilege to honour their memories and to reflect on the role of the legal profession – then and now.

(Endnotes)

1 From the Bar to the Battlefield; South Australian Lawyers who served and survived the Great War, compiled for the Law Society by Elizabeth Olsson

2 Presentation by Roger Freeman Historian of 32nd Battalion Keswick Barracks 2012

3 Mary Chomley “Final Report of the Prisoners of War Department of the Australian Red Cross Society” (1919)