

HEROES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

'Hearts at peace under an English heaven'

-from *The Soldier*, by
Rupert Brooke, 1887-1915

Work to recover hundreds of British and Australian soldiers – brave men from Norfolk and Suffolk among them – who were interred in a mass grave in northern France during the first world war is well under way. **MID-NORFOLK MP KEITH SIMPSON**, a Commonwealth War Graves Commissioner, recounts his poignant journey to visit the site and his hope that the men will finally receive the honour they deserve.



Mass war graves Excavating one of the burial pits at Pheasant Wood, Fromelles.
PHOTO: TIM LOVELESS/OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGY

We arrived at Fromelles, 30 kilometres west of Lille, about midday. Courtesy of Eurostar we had left St Pancras at 9am UK time. As we arrived I thought about my grandfathers who had served in Belgium and France during the first world war. Like other soldiers, if and when they had leave home it took at least 24 hours by route march, train, cross channel ferry and train to reach home and the same for the journey back to the front.

As a Commonwealth War Graves Commissioner I had been invited to visit the site of the mass graves of Australian and British soldiers killed in a failed attack on July 19, 1916, and buried by the Germans days later.

Another small but important fact from this battle – among the German defenders serving in the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment was one Corporal Adolf Hitler. Unfortunately he survived the battle.

Fromelles is a small village almost completely destroyed in the war and now rebuilt. Indeed as I looked over the village and the surrounding countryside it was virtually impossible to imagine how badly damaged the area was by 1918.

The six mass graves dug by the Germans are on the edge of the village and were identified in 2007. It was thought they contained up to 500 bodies of soldiers from the Australian 5th Division and the British 61st Division. Australian and British defence ministers decided to put in place a recovery process and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was asked to oversee the project and prepare a military cemetery to bury those recovered.

The actual recovery of the bodies was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology.

At the recovery site we found an area resembling a building site. The CWGC project manager David Richards talked us through what we would see and Professor Margaret Cox, from Oxford Archaeology, explained their role. Other commissioners included the defence advisers from the Australian, Canadian, Indian and South African High Commissions and former senior British military officers.

Our first visit was to a large plastic tent where the last bodies were being recovered. Inside was the excavated area in which a small team were carefully uncovering two skeletons.

These archaeologists were dressed in protective clothing to prevent contamination of DNA. From the beginning of the recovery it was hoped that by retrieving any DNA, usually from teeth or small bones, it might be possible to identify the bodies.

As we watched the team at work I was struck by just how sensitively they were handling the remains. At all times they never

forgot they were handling human remains. Some had experience of working on more recent mass graves in Kosovo and Bosnia.

We were told the initial estimate of the likely number of bodies buried had been reduced to 250. Out of six mass graves two were found empty.

A considerable amount of research had been undertaken in German military archives to establish how the bodies were originally recovered and buried. Many had been left lying in the open for several days after the attack. The German divisional commander ordered them to be collected, any personal documents removed and the bodies wrapped in blankets or ground sheets and buried head to foot in two layers in the four mass graves.

The conclusion was that under the circumstances the Germans buried the Australian and British dead with respect.

As we watched the work on these two bodies one of the team showed us a recovered item. It looked like a small cardboard tube, and indeed it was, with lettering down the side.

He very gently withdrew a glass

phial in which was a dark liquid. It was an iodine phial from a soldier's first aid kit.

I have seen bodies being excavated at archaeological sites before, including medieval and Roman. I was more moved at Fromelles because this was within my timeline and the recovered artefacts were familiar to my generation.

We moved from the grave site as the team leaders wanted to show us the very important process by which the bodies and artefacts were cleaned, reassembled and where possible identified.

And this was the next impression I gained from my visit to Fromelles. The field team were drawn from different disciplines with archaeologists, anthropologists, osteoarchaeologists, surveyors, forensic pathologists, radiographers and odontologists all working together.

Everything recovered was photographed, labelled, cleaned and catalogued. At the end of the process the remains of the bodies were placed in a mortuary awaiting final burial at a new military cemetery.

We watched the work of the expert who examined all the recovered remains and artefacts with a digital x-ray. He showed us one skull that had suffered considerable trauma as a result of shell fire and the skull still contained two shrapnel balls.

Some of the most moving artefacts were cap badges, buttons, rugs, crucifixes, compasses and boots. Looking at the remains of a military boot I was taken back to the Roman fort at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall where similar military boots have been recovered.

Our final visit was to the site in the centre of Fromelles where the new military cemetery is being prepared, as yet a builder's site.

The CWGC has undertaken very serious work to make sure the site will not be damaged by weather, and the building materials and horticulture would blend in with the local environment.

So what now? After all the remains and artefacts have been examined and catalogued and DNA assessed a verification board will attempt early next year to see if it is possible to establish any identification of remains.

Defence ministers, the CWGC and experts are keen to downplay expectations. It will be very difficult to positively identify bodies. A best estimate is a few identified bodies with named headstones, the majority established as either Australian or British unknown, and a minority known only unto God. These will be buried in the Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery.

The cemetery will formally be opened on July 19, 2010, the 93rd anniversary of the 1916 attack in which these brave men were killed. I hope to be there to honour them.

Moving reminder of life at the front



→ The phial of iodine, above, found at the burial site at Pheasant Wood, Fromelles. It was inside a small cardboard tube. It is an amazing survival from a soldier's first aid kit.

→ Left, a leather coin purse, containing eight Ottoman Turkish coins, three English coins, one Dutch guilder, two French francs and one 25 centime piece, was also found at the site. Among other artefacts to be recovered were cap badges, buttons, rugs, crucifixes, compasses and boots. PHOTOS: OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGY/MD/PA