

## **"A sacred duty": locating and creating Australian graves in the aftermath of the First World War**

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The First World War was the cause of widespread trauma and devastation. Industrialised warfare on such a massive scale was unprecedented, and the resultant deaths and casualties across all nations were shocking. 416,809 Australians volunteered to fight with the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War; 156,000 of these men were wounded, gassed or taken prisoner during the conflict, and returned home bearing the physical and emotional scars of war.<sup>1</sup> Roughly 60,000 never returned to Australia – killed in the distant lands of Turkey, France, Belgium, and Palestine. In line with the policies of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), founded in 1917, the Australian government would not repatriate the bodies of its soldiers.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the government claimed primary responsibility for the dead, and at the end of the war, it faced the enormous task of ensuring the remains of Australian dead were adequately cared for.<sup>3</sup> But by early 1919, the location of the bodies of a large number of these men remained uncertain. The first major responsibility of the government to bereaved families was to locate, identify and rebury their war dead.

This aspect of Australia's involvement in the aftermath First World War is rarely examined in scholarly literature. There is a large body of scholarly work devoted to the experience of the battlefield and death in combat, and a growing body of literature dedicated to the impact of battlefield death on the on the bereaved back home. Scholars have placed particular emphasis on how death in the First World

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<sup>1</sup> Australian War Memorial, "First World War 1914–18", accessed 15 February 2015, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww1/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Charter, Imperial War Graves Commission, 10 May 1917, NAA, A11804, 1926/181.

<sup>3</sup> Booklet, 'Graves of the Fallen: Imperial War Graves Commission', Rudyard Kipling, circa 1919, NAA, A11804, 1926/181.

War disrupted traditional mourning practices in Australia.<sup>4</sup> Since colonial times, graves had traditionally been the focal point of mourning in Australia. After the war the sheer distance between mourners and the graves of their loved ones had a drastic effect on shaping new mourning practices for Australians at home.<sup>5</sup> Bart Ziino has argued that the wartime bereaved sought continuity with colonial traditions despite this distance, and created imaginative ways to connect with the distant graves of their loved ones. The rise of new commemorative rituals, in Australia and internationally, and the notion of pilgrimages to battlefield cemeteries have also been the subject of scholarly work.<sup>6</sup> However, there is little information to bridge these two bodies of literature. The process behind the transition from rudimentary battlefield cemeteries to tranquil contemporary cemeteries is rarely examined in any detail in its own right.

This essay will explore the evolving role of Australian forces in the creation of contemporary cemeteries on the Western Front. Responsibility for the construction and maintenance of cemeteries and memorials for all soldiers of the British Empire, regardless of rank, ultimately fell to the IWGC.<sup>7</sup> However, within this wide international framework, there was a distinctive Australian presence. Different fronts required different approaches when it came to the recovery of Australian war dead; on the Western Front the Australian graves effort was large-scale and distinctly military.<sup>8</sup> Two key organisations were responsible for this work from 1919 to late

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<sup>4</sup> See Pat Jalland, *Changing ways of death in twentieth-century Australia: war, medicine and the funeral business*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2006; Tanja Luckins, *The Gates of Memory: Australian people's experiences and memories of loss in the Great War*, Perth, Curtin University Books, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See Jalland, *Changing ways of death*; Bart Ziino, *A distant grief: Australians, war graves and the Great War*, Crawley, University of Western Australia Press, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See Bruce Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: walking the battlefields of the Great War*, Lieden, Cambridge University Press, 2006; Jay Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: The Great War and European cultural history*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Jay Winter, *Remembering war: the Great War between memory and history in the twentieth century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Charter, Imperial War Graves Commission, 10 May 1917, NAA, A11804, 1926/181.

<sup>8</sup> Memorandum, AIF Headquarters to 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Division Headquarters, 17 February 1919, AWM25, 135/29. The scale, nature and location of combat all played a role in shaping the graves effort. Like Gallipoli, combat on the Western Front was significantly less mobile than fighting in Sinai and Palestine. Fighting and dying took place in close confines and this hindered the recovery and adequate burial of the dead during the war. Consequently, there was a significant number of missing bodies on both of these fronts. However, with the Western Front being both allied territory and a recently active battle front, access was significantly less complicated in a political and logistical sense, which enabled a large-scale military graves effort.

1921: the Australian Graves Detachment (AGD) and the Australian Graves Services (AGS) in France and Belgium. This essay examines the logistics of each unit, the personal experiences of the men involved, and the manner in which their efforts were portrayed to Australians at home.

## **Australian Graves Detachment**

The Australian Graves Detachment was formed in February of 1919 and started work in April of the same year. Under the command of Major John Mott, the AGD was based in Villers-Bretonneux and the surrounding area. The unit consisted of 1,100 men, drawn from each of the five Australian divisions, tasked with locating, identifying and reburying Australian war dead on the Western Front.<sup>9</sup> Initially, service with the AGD was voluntary. Some men considered themselves duty-bound while others, with new wives or families located nearby, volunteered for practical reasons.<sup>10</sup> However, where the required numbers could not be drawn from volunteers, men were detailed to the unit based on their repatriation status: those who had served for the shortest amount of time were put forward for service with the AGD.<sup>11</sup>

The AGD faced a formidable task: 46,048 Australian servicemen had lost their lives fighting on the Western Front. In early 1919, it was estimated that the location of the remains of "considerably less than half" of these men had been recorded.<sup>12</sup> Owing to a lack of preparedness for either the duration of the war or the realities of modern warfare, burial and graves registration practices throughout the war had been far from consistent. The AIF was ill-equipped to adequately manage the large number of bodies that resulted from prolonged, static, industrialised conflict. Burial

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<sup>9</sup> War diary, Australian Graves Detachment, 18 March 1919, AWM224, MSS611; War diary, Australian Graves Detachment, 6 April 1919, AWM224, MSS611.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Private Frederick Podmore, "Local and General", *Gundagai Times*, 25 June 1920, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Memorandum, AIF Headquarters to 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Division Headquarters, 17 February 1919, AWM25, 135/29.

<sup>12</sup> Memorandum, AIF Headquarters to 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Division Headquarters, 17 February 1919, AWM25, 135/29.

and identification procedures were created in hasty response to the prevailing conditions. The dual identity disc system – whereby one disc was removed from the body with all other personal effects, and the other left on the body for the purpose of later re-identification – was not introduced until September of 1916.<sup>13</sup> By this time, many bodies had been buried without sufficient identification. Moreover, soldiers did not necessarily comply with existing burial procedures. There was no guarantee that men would wear their identity discs, and those responsible for burying dead soldiers under fire were liable to make mistakes; there were instances in which soldiers removed all personal effects from their comrades and failed to leave adequate identification with the body. Though these men were reported killed, their bodies might never be found and identified, causing anxiety and distress for relatives back home.<sup>14</sup>

The nature of the conflict on the Western Front militated against fledgling burial procedures.<sup>15</sup> Many bodies could not be recovered from the battlefield during heavy fighting, and corpses were left where they lay in no man's land, exposed to continued shelling, while bodies buried in marked and registered graves could be disinterred or destroyed as the conflict raged continually over the same stretches of ground. Even when burial information existed, locating the grave again was by no means certain. The 27th Battalion was able to acquire a camera and took photographs of their comrades' battlefield graves, but despite this effort to document their location, not all were found after the war.

*[Image 1: The battlefield graves of Private Horace Pottinger and Private Ernest Reynolds, both of the 27th Battalion.<sup>16</sup> Following the Armistice, their graves could not be located and both men are commemorated on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial (AWM J00013).]*

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<sup>13</sup> Circular Memorandum, Brigadier-General Sir Fabian Ware, Directorate of Graves Registration & Enquiries, to Headquarters 4th Australian Division, 2 March 1917, AWM25, 135/27.

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum, AIF Headquarters to 4th Australian Division Headquarters, 26 September 1917, AWM25, 135/27.

<sup>15</sup> Letter, 'Registration and Care of Graves', Brigadier-General Sir Fabian Ware to War Office, 23 January 1917, NAA, A458, P337/6 PART 1.

<sup>16</sup> The names of both men are commemorated on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial.

The AGD used existing burial information – such as it was – to plan their searches. Ideally, burial records would include a map reference, a battlefield cemetery, or a nearby landmark for orientation. The battlefield was then systematically searched. Divided into 500-yard squares, each square was closely and thoroughly examined. Indications of graves or bodies in the area were “conspicuously marked” and once the whole square had been searched, bodies indicated by markers were carefully exhumed.<sup>17</sup>

Exhumed bodies were identified by whatever means possible: identity tag, personal effects, any letters or notes in their pockets, or by uniform and colour patch.<sup>18</sup> Identifying remains was often difficult, and, in some cases, impossible. Australian Graves Detachment soldier Private William McBeath noted finding 18 bodies in a grave with no crosses. Only four of these bodies had any means of identification.<sup>19</sup> Once found, remains were wrapped and bound in a sheet of hessian, with identification information on it, and transported for burial in a designated cemetery. Where bodies were exhumed close to the cemetery, they were carried on a stretcher. When this was not possible, bodies were loaded onto a horse-drawn wagon and carted in loads to the cemetery.<sup>20</sup>

AGD personnel prepared these cemeteries under the supervision of a surveyor. Using picks and shovels, these men were responsible for digging graves, reburying bodies, and erecting a cross over each grave. Original crosses were placed over graves where possible; if not, a temporary cross was furnished until official headstones could be erected.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Letter, Corps Burial Officer Lieutenant Quentin Spedding to AIF Headquarters, 4 April 1919, AWM18 9966/1/21.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the search for identification, see “Welcome home to Private Frank Pepper”, *Raymond Terrace Examiner*, 5 December 1919, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> William Frampton McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger William Frampton McBeath in the years 1918 – 1919 of World War One: Pte W.F. McBeath 61661 58<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Reinforcement Australian Imperial Force*, Shepparton, N.E. Harrison, 1994, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Letter, Corps Burial Officer Lieutenant Quentin Spedding to AIF Headquarters, 4 April 1919, AWM18 9966/1/21.

<sup>21</sup> Memorandum, Official Secretary E.A. Box to Secretary, Prime Minister’s Department, 9 October 1919, NAA, A2489 1920/7838.

[Image 2: AGD personnel preparing to transport recently exhumed bodies (AWM A02498).]

[Image 3: Men of No. 5 Company AGD digging graves in the Villers-Bretonneux Cemetery (AWM E05494).]

Once the remains had been properly reburied in an official IWGC cemetery, AGD personnel photographed all identified graves. These photographs were then sent to the next of kin of the deceased, along with information about the cemetery where the specific grave was located. This part of the AGD's work was particularly important to the bereaved. A photograph proved their loved one had a grave and had had a proper burial, which gave anxious families – unable or unlikely to travel to the battlefields in person – some measure of comfort. In this manner, as Bart Ziino has written, Australian soldiers serving with the AGD acted as agents on behalf of the bereaved.<sup>22</sup>

The men of the AGD lived and worked in the wasteland of the battlefields. Corps Burial Officer Quentin Spedding described their accommodation at Villers-Bretonneux as “not palatial, nor ... over-adequate”, and noted the men should be “moderately comfortable”.<sup>23</sup> Accommodation was generally rudimentary. Depending on where they were working, men lived in huts, tents, or in what was left of buildings. Conditions could be damp and unpleasant, and men sometimes used straw to make themselves more comfortable.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the old Western Front continued to be a precarious place to work. The battlefields were littered with barbed wire, shell holes, trenches, unexploded shells and other devices. Rose Venn-Brown – an Australian woman in charge of a nearby YMCA tent, who worked closely with AGD – wrote that “Bombs and mines go off all day and night at unexpected moments ... one has to be very careful where one steps – otherwise likely to go up at

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<sup>22</sup> Ziino, *A distant grief*, p. 84-85.

<sup>23</sup> Letter, Corps Burial Officer Lieutenant Quentin Spedding to AIF Headquarters, 4 April 1919, AWM18 9966/1/21.

<sup>24</sup> “Our soldiers in France: the graves detachment”, *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 3 July 1919, p. 2.

any moment."<sup>25</sup> Venn-Brown was not exaggerating. Bombs (as hand grenades were called) and shells were a real danger to the AGD and to others living or working near the battlefields. Will McBeath noted instances of French civilians being injured when bombs and shells went off; one young French boy had both hands blown off, "fooling around with a Mills bomb".<sup>26</sup> Members of an English unit working nearby were killed accidentally when an unexploded shell went off, and three members of the No. 1 company of the AGD were injured in a similar incident.<sup>27</sup> While the AGD was not engaged in active combat, they undoubtedly worked in a dangerous environment.

The daily work of the AGD was also physically demanding. Men were exhuming, lifting and transporting bodies, digging graves in the hard soil, reburying the dead and erecting crosses. This work could be exhausting, particularly when large numbers of bodies were uncovered. In one "hard week's work", Will McBeath noted that 200 bodies had been buried.<sup>28</sup> Physical injury was a risk. Writing from his hospital bed in May 1919, Sergeant Roy Cummings noted that the 20 British and Australian patients in his ward were "all in with accidents".<sup>29</sup> Cummings himself was recovering from a crushed foot. The men of the AGD also had to contend with the illness and disease that ravaged civilian populations in the wake of the war. Rudimentary accommodation and physically taxing work exacerbated illness amongst the group. Both Private William Bridge and Private Clarence Shepley died of disease while serving with the AGD.<sup>30</sup>

The living and working conditions for the AGD were tough and the pressures of poor infrastructure, combined with performing a physically taxing job in a

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<sup>25</sup> Letter, Rose Venn-Brown to [unidentified], 18 June 1919, Venn-Brown, R (Civilian, YMCA and Red Cross), AWM, 2DRL/0598.

<sup>26</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Routine Order No. 33, Major J.E. Mott, Commanding AIF Graves Detachment, 27 April 1919, AWM25, 707/21 PART 1; McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> "In France: with the Australian Graves Detachment", *Great Southern Herald* (Katanning), 26 July 1919, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Letter, Officer i/c Base Records AIF to Mrs E. Richie, 19 May 1919, NAA, B2455, BRIDGE W J; Letter, Officer i/c Base Records AIF to Mrs A. Shepley, 20 July 1921, NAA, B2455, SHEPLEY CLARENCE BRUSHFIELD.

dangerous, dreary environment, revealed tensions within the ranks. This patchwork of men from different military units and backgrounds – including veteran soldiers who had volunteered for the task, and men detailed to the unit who had never seen frontline service – were thrown together to create a new unit, with no sense of cohesion or identity. The conflict was over and the AGD would not be engaged in combat as a combat battalion; yet nor were they simply a labour battalion. Tension within the unit hinged on this distinction between soldier and worker. In the first few weeks of working, two strikes for better conditions had occurred in the AGD. “We refused to work until we had better means for handling the bodies, had better food & cut out all ceremonial parades,” McBeath wrote. “You can not do a hard week’s work & then go & play parade ground soldiers.”<sup>31</sup> McBeath described his fellow AGD personnel as “the roughest mob I have ever seen”, and claimed that “they would just as soon down tools as not.”<sup>32</sup> Evidently, many members of the AGD understood themselves as workers more than soldiers, with the associated right to strike and to demand better working conditions.

However, the propensity to complain and demand better conditions was largely attributed to new recruits, like McBeath, who had been detailed to the AGD and had never seen combat. Sergeant Sydney Wigzell, a veteran soldier serving with the AGD, noted that many men detailed to the unit were “the last men who left Australia”, and that they were dissatisfied with their clothing, pay and food. He was frustrated by the attitude of these men “who never saw a shot fired [and] bore none of the discomforts of the trenches or of the risks of war.”<sup>33</sup> Wigzell unquestionably identified as a soldier, not a worker. He had volunteered for the task of recovering the dead, and believed that there was none “more fitting to perform it, than their mates who were beside them when they fell.” Wigzell understood the task of exhuming and reburying Australian war dead to be “a sacred duty” of soldiers to their fellow comrades; for men like Wigzell, the new recruits were decidedly *not*

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<sup>31</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> “Our soldiers in France: the graves detachment”, *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 3 July 1919, p. 2.



soldiers, and he lamented their role in this "sacred duty".<sup>34</sup> This tension was not uncommon in the wider AIF, in which volunteers rather than professional soldiers formed the majority. The work of a soldier, for many Australian servicemen, was just another form of employment.<sup>35</sup> Within the AGD, however, the tension between soldiers and workers assumed a new significance. Working in the absence of conflict – in a role that was heavily invested in by the bereaved, and regarded by many AGD personnel as a strictly soldierly duty – new recruits who had never seen combat would remain new recruits.

While men like Wigzell framed their experiences in terms of sacred duty and honour, exhuming corpses was gruesome, grisly work that exacted an emotional toll on many men. Soldiers came across the bodies of friends or relatives in varying states of decay. Will McBeath knew he was working in the area where his friend was buried, and later noted in his diary, "I took up Richie Nicholls' body."<sup>36</sup> McBeath did not offer much detail about exhuming Richie's body but his experience cannot have been pleasant: Richie Nicholls had died on 18 August 1918 from wounds to the neck and side sustained from a shell blast.<sup>37</sup> McBeath disinterred his remains almost a year later.<sup>38</sup> In a letter to Hilda Prowse, Henry Whiting expressed relief that his brother and cousin had been buried decently, and had not needed to be disinterred like the bodies he worked with each and every day.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps part of the relief Whiting felt stemmed from the fact that he himself would not have to uncover their bodies.

Some men did acknowledge that their duties could be objectionable and unsavoury. Staff Sergeant Reginald Solling described it as a "rather an unpleasant job",<sup>40</sup> while Sydney Wigzell noted that it was, "a gruesome and very sorrowful

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<sup>34</sup> "Our soldiers in France: the graves detachment", *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 3 July 1919, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Nathan Wise, *Anzac Labour: Workplace cultures in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 8-32.

<sup>36</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Letter, Officer i/c Base Records AIF to Mrs I. Riley, 17 February 1919, NAA, B2455, NICHOLLS RICHARD EDWARDS.

<sup>38</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> Letter, Private Henry George Whiting to Hilda Prowse, 17 April 1919, AWM, PR05609.

<sup>40</sup> "Australians buried in France: Work of the Graves Detachment", *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 28 July 1919 p. 2.

task".<sup>41</sup> Will McBeath wrote to his mother, "I cannot say I am exactly in love with the job."<sup>42</sup> However, these men were largely silent regarding their day-to-day lives and specific, detailed descriptions of their experiences are mostly absent from personal accounts. While McBeath described some of the undoubtedly confronting situations he encountered in his time with the AGD, he did so with brevity. Finding 12 men buried in a single shell hole, for example, was simply described as "a dreadful mess".<sup>43</sup>

Private Henry Whiting, however, wrote home about his work with the AGD in a rare descriptive letter. While Whiting emphasised the necessity of the work and his willingness to do it, he made its emotional toll clear. "It is heartbreaking to see the way the poor fellows are buried," he wrote, "perhaps I should not tell you."<sup>44</sup> He encountered mass graves and bodies buried in a tangled mess in shell holes or trenches, with "dozens of them just in one big lump with all their coats, equipment, gas helmet and all". Whiting described coming across an English soldier and an Australian soldier buried together. He wrote that "The Aussie's head was blown clean off and sticking in his steel helmet and stuck in the middle of the Tommy's back."<sup>45</sup> He described corpses in varying conditions and states of decay: "The men we have raised up ... have been killed 12 months and they are far from being decayed properly, so you can guess the constitution one needs. I have felt sick dozens of times." While veteran soldiers had seen death in combat, the daily work of the AGD was markedly different. The sad, steadily decomposing bodies they saw were a world away from the rhetoric of sacrifice, and of a dignified death in the service of king and country. Henry Whiting noted, "We will be a hard-hearted crowd when we get back, after the sights we see and the many thousands we will have raised by that time."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Our soldiers in France: the graves detachment", *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 3 July 1919, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 36

<sup>43</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> Letter, Private Henry George Whiting to Hilda Prowse, 17 April 1919, AWM, PR05609.

<sup>45</sup> Letter, Private Henry George Whiting to Hilda Prowse, 17 April 1919, AWM, PR05609.

<sup>46</sup> Letter, Private Henry George Whiting to Hilda Prowse, 17 April 1919, AWM, PR05609.

Men sought different ways to cope with the confronting and distressing nature of their work. As Wigzell's letter suggests, notions of duty to both fallen comrades and the bereaved were enough to sustain some of the AGD. Roy Cummings thought that it was "the least thing a man could do for his brothers and mates". Though he would rather have returned home to Australia, Cummings's sense of obligation to his dead comrades sustained him, especially considering that "it is only luck that a man isn't there with them to-day."<sup>47</sup> Henry Whiting was also able to endure his gruesome work "knowing that we are identifying Australian boys who have never been identified," which would set the minds of many mourners at ease.<sup>48</sup> Sydney Wigzell noted, "it is most certainly a gruesome and very sorrowful task, but we recognise that it is a sacred duty that must be done."<sup>49</sup>

But not all men took comfort from notions of obligation and honour. Rose Venn-Brown noted encountering "drunks" around the camp - though they reportedly did their utmost to sober up in her presence.<sup>50</sup> Venn-Brown also noted that the camp had "to try to cope with an influx of questionable women from Paris and Amiens" on an almost nightly basis. Tensions arose between French soldiers and members of the AGD over local French women, and Venn-Brown recorded an instance when she intervened to prevent them from fighting one another with bombs (hand grenades).<sup>51</sup> Violence also occurred within the AGD. Private Alexander Simula was court martialled and sentenced to prison for violently assaulting fellow AGD member Private Ogilvie with a knife while intoxicated.<sup>52</sup> Accounts of this type of violence among the AGD are, however, rare. If they did occur, they were not well documented, and Simula seems to have been the only man court martialled while with the AGD. A more common problem was reckless behaviour, particularly when

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<sup>47</sup> "In France: with the Australian Graves Detachment", *Great Southern Herald* (Katanning), 26 July 1919, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Letter, Private Henry George Whiting to Hilda Prowse, 17 April 1919, AWM, PR05609.

<sup>49</sup> "Our soldiers in France: the graves detachment", *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 3 July 1919, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Letter, Rose Venn-Brown to [unidentified], 30 June 1919, Venn-Brown, R (Civilian, YMCA and Red Cross), AWM, 2DRL/0598.

<sup>51</sup> Letter, Rose Venn-Brown to [unidentified], 1 August 1919, Venn-Brown, R (Civilian, YMCA and Red Cross), AWM, 2DRL/0598.

<sup>52</sup> Court Martial, Private Alexander Simula, No. 4 Company Australian Graves Detachment, 4 July 1919, NAA, A471, 11367.

it came to handling live bombs. One frustrated entry in the AGD routine orders stated: "It has again come before the notice of the C.O. that men still persist in the dangerous practice of throwing live bombs ... this practice must cease immediately." Men were informed that bombs were not playthings, and injuries resulting from this behaviour would be listed as self-harm.<sup>53</sup> The prevalence of this behaviour suggests a kind of reckless fatalism among men trying to cope with distressing and difficult work.

However, it is important not to overstate cases of bad behaviour within the AGD. As Venn-Brown noted: "When one thinks of what they are doing, and the conditions in which they live, it is astonishing that there is so little drunkenness."<sup>54</sup> Men of the AGD also pursued alternative, and more legitimate, forms of entertainment to cope with their work. Venn-Brown offered books, newspapers and games, and ran dances almost every night in an attempt to combat the issue of "questionable women". She served afternoon tea daily to officers and men, and made every effort to brighten up the lives of AGD personnel.<sup>55</sup> A nearby YMCA cinema provided entertainment, as did swimming in the canal and attending concerts run by the AGD's Kangaroo concert party. A variety of sports were also popular, and the AGD regularly competed against one another and against other graves units working nearby. "We are well in for sport," Henry Whiting wrote, "but we need it here to relieve his [*sic*] mind from the work."<sup>56</sup>

*[Image 4: AGD personnel taking a break for some tea in a YMCA tent with an unidentified female civilian, probably Rose Venn-Brown (AWM E05486).]*

*[Image 5: The Kangaroo concert party of the AGD (AWM E05444).]*

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<sup>53</sup> Routine Order No. 24, Major J.E. Mott, Commanding AIF Graves Detachment, 18 April 1919, AWM25, 707/21 PART 1; Routine Order No. 45, Major J.E. Mott, Commanding AIF Graves Detachment, 9 May 1919, AWM25, 707/21 PART 1.

<sup>54</sup> Letter, Rose Venn-Brown to [unidentified], 30 June 1919, Venn-Brown, R (Civilian, YMCA and Red Cross), AWM, 2DRL/0598.

<sup>55</sup> Letter, Rose Venn-Brown to [unidentified], 18 June 1919, Venn-Brown, R (Civilian, YMCA and Red Cross), AWM, 2DRL/0598.

<sup>56</sup> Letter, Private Henry George Whiting to Hilda Prowse, 17 April 1919, AWM, PR05609.

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While the men of the AGD sought ways of coping with their distressing and confronting work, bereaved Australians also tried to cope with the loss of their loved ones. Families at home created new and imaginative ways to connect with distant graves they might never see, and the AGD was crucially important in facilitating the link between mourners and graves.<sup>57</sup> Their efforts were communicated to Australians in several ways. When a loved one's grave was located, identified and concentrated in an official IWGC cemetery, the bereaved received direct personal correspondence, including a photograph, details of the location of the grave, and the name of the closest train station.<sup>58</sup> However, given that over a third of Australian servicemen killed in the First World War had, and still have, no known grave, not all families received this small comfort.<sup>59</sup> The effort to photograph every Australian grave was also time-consuming, and gave little indication of the wider progress of the Australian graves effort. Consequently, newspapers were an important source of information on the progress of the graves effort overseas.

Newspaper coverage of the AGD peaked and waned throughout their service on the Western Front. The formation of the unit generated a flurry of articles. These articles were similar – if not identical – in content, all of them based on a report from the Official Correspondent in London. They broadly outlined the purpose, structure and location of the unit, and gave a strong sense of the enormity of the task it faced. Noting that the AGD would work in an area where Australians had “most fought”, these articles made it clear that the purpose of the AGD was to find Australian dead, though they also noted that the AGD “would also be responsible for British graves in

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<sup>57</sup> For more on the efforts of the bereaved to foster a connection with the distant graves of their war dead see Ziino, *A distant grief*.

<sup>58</sup> Memorandum, 'Australian Burials', AIF Headquarters to 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Division Headquarters, 4 March 1919, AWM25, 135/2.

<sup>59</sup> “No known grave”, *Wartime: the official magazine of the Australian War Memorial*, 23 (2003), p. 14.

the areas allotted".<sup>60</sup> There was, perhaps unsurprisingly, no mention of the remains of enemy soldiers.

This initial flurry of articles emphasised the notion of Australian soldiers' responsibility to their fallen comrades. They stressed that, while the work would take time, volunteers for the unit were in no short supply, and that the work of recovering Australian war dead was "regarded as a sacred duty by all Australians to their fallen comrades". The emphasis on the voluntary, military, national and almost heroic nature of the graves effort is reflected in the headlines chosen to accompany this information. "Graves of our heroes: the last resting places of Australians in France: completing the records" read the *Farmer and Settler* in Sydney. The *Newcastle Morning Herald* read, "The fallen brave: recording their graves: special Australian unit", while the *Capricornian* in Rockhampton wrote, "Graves of fallen heroes: new Australian unit". The *Daily Herald* in Adelaide touched on a popular sentiment: "A sacred duty: new Australian unit to locate Australian graves".<sup>61</sup>

Subsequent newspaper coverage of the AGD was more subdued. Press coverage largely consisted of letters from AGD personnel published by friends and family. However, only one of the letters published received widespread republication in a variety of Australian newspapers. This letter, written by Private Reuben Deans, echoed the sentiments expressed in the earlier articles, particularly the idea of sacred duty to fallen comrades, and the voluntary – indeed honourable – nature of participation in this work. Deans wrote: "I can safely say it is a great

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<sup>60</sup> See: "A sacred duty: new Australian unit to locate Australian graves.", *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 14 April 1919, p. 5; "Graves of the fallen: Australian Detachment Begins Work", *Daily Observer* (Tamworth), 14 April 1919, p. 1; "1000 Grave finders: will erect crosses and take photos", *Geelong Advertiser*, 14 April 1919, p. 4; "Graves of our soldiers", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1919, p. 7; "Australian graves in France: work of completing the records", *West Australian*, 14 April 1919, p. 4; "The fallen brave: recording their graves: special Australian unit", *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 14 April 1919, p. 5; "General war news: Australian graves: investigation in France", *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 15 April 1919, p. 5; "Graves of our heroes: the last resting places of Australians in France: completing the records", 17 April 1919, p. 2; "Graves of fallen heroes: new Australian unit", *Capricornian* (Rockhampton), 19 April 1919, p. 14.

<sup>61</sup> "Graves of our heroes: the last resting places of Australians in France: completing the records", *Farmer and Settler*, 17 April 1919, p. 2; "The fallen brave: recording their graves: special Australian unit", *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 14 April 1919, p. 5; "Graves of fallen heroes: new Australian unit", *Capricornian* (Rockhampton), 19 April 1919, p. 14; "A sacred duty: new Australian unit to locate Australian graves", *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 14 April 1919, p. 5.

honour for me to stay behind and do my share for our own diggers, who are lying just underneath the soil." Seeking to give comfort to the bereaved, Deans hoped that they would "be greatly relieved to know that the graves of their dear ones are being carefully attended to."<sup>62</sup> Judging by the response of "A Sorrowing Mother", published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Deans's letter evidently did provide some comfort. She wrote that Private Deans was "quite right ... that the relatives of the fallen will be relieved to know that our dear ones are receiving decent burial at the hands of their comrades." She thanked Deans and the men of the AGD for "their nobleness of mind in voluntarily lengthening their separation from their own relatives for the sake of their fallen comrades."<sup>63</sup> Other letters published during this time offered some insight into the reality of the work and the experiences of the men, including references to the devastation of their surroundings, the prevalence of injury, and the tensions between new recruits and volunteers.<sup>64</sup> However, even these letters were firmly couched in terms of honour and a sacred duty to fallen comrades, suggesting the wider importance of these notions both to Australians at home and to men serving with the AGD. Press coverage thus painted a picture of the AGD's effort distinctly different from the one experienced by the men of the unit.

The demobilisation of the AGD in August of 1919, consequent on the wider demobilisation of the AIF, sparked the publication of several more articles.<sup>65</sup> This brief, relatively limited coverage tended to focus on the success of the effort; several articles cited 8,000 buried and 7,000 photographs distributed to families.<sup>66</sup> However, the work of recovering Australian remains was far from complete when the AGD was demobilised, and these articles also signalled the next stage of the Australian

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<sup>62</sup> "Diggers' graves on the battlefields", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 July 1919, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> "Diggers graves: to the editor of the Herald", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1919, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> See: "In France: with the Australian Graves Detachment", *Great Southern Herald* (Katanning), 26 July 1919, p. 2; "Australians buried in France: Work of the Graves Detachment", *Barrier Miner*, 28 July 1919 p. 2; "Our soldiers in France: the graves detachment", *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 3 July 1919, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Memorandum, Official Secretary E.A. Box to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 9 October 1919, NAA, A2489 1920/7838.

<sup>66</sup> See: "Anzac memorials: on the world's battlefields", *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 10 December 1919, p. 13; "Exploring battlefields: reburial of soldiers' bodies", *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 13 December 1919, p. 7; "Australian graves in France", *South-Western News* (Busselton), 14 November 1919, p. 1.

graves effort on the Western Front. A small unit would remain to continue the search for Australian dead: the Australian Graves Services – France and Belgium.

### **Australian Graves Services – France and Belgium**

The demobilisation of the AGD revealed a certain degree of trepidation regarding the graves of Australian servicemen, particularly among Australian military and government officials. When it came to the graves of soldiers, there was a distinct sense that the IWGC was neither able nor inclined to look after Australian interests adequately. "Experience has proved that we cannot rely on the Imperial Graves Organisation functioning as effectively as is considered desirable," General Birdwood wrote to the Minister for Defence in July 1919, citing delays in communication with families through the IWGC as compared to the AGD. Continuance of the Australian graves effort would ensure "the preservation of Australian interests ... in France and Belgium".<sup>67</sup>

With the approval of the Minister for Defence, the newly formed Australian Graves Services (AGS) began their work in early September.<sup>68</sup> When the AIF was finally demobilised, AGS operations were overseen by the High Commissioner's office in London.<sup>69</sup> Full provision was granted for the organisation to continue to operate as a military unit and volunteers were required to consent to remain on active service overseas for at least two years.<sup>70</sup> The unit was initially under the

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<sup>67</sup> Letter, General Birdwood to Minister for Defence G.F. Pearce, 18 July 1919, AWM25, 755/12.

<sup>68</sup> Letter, General Birdwood to Minister for Defence G.F. Pearce, 18 July 1919, AWM25, 755/12. For the purposes of this essay, the Australian Graves Services France and Belgium should be understood as distinct from the wider operation of the Australian Graves Services in London; this organisation was broadly responsible for recording and photographing the graves of Australian servicemen on all fronts, as well as erecting monuments to them. The scope of the wider organisation is outlined in: Memorandum, Official Secretary E.A. Box to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 9 October 1919, NAA, A2489, 1920/7838.

<sup>69</sup> Memorandum, Official Secretary E.A. Box to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 9 October 1919, NAA, A2489 1920/7838.

<sup>70</sup> Australian Imperial Force Orders, 5 August 1919, AWM25, 755/12.



command of Captain Quentin Spedding, formerly of the AGD, but was later taken over by Major George Phillips in early 1920.<sup>71</sup>

The Australian Graves Services originally consisted of 75 men, the majority of whom were volunteers from the AGD.<sup>72</sup> Yet it was a distinctly different unit from the AGD. The number of personnel had decreased dramatically, but there was a seemingly contradictory increase in the geographical scope of the organisation's work; the AGS in France and Belgium was responsible for the Australian graves effort across the entire Western Front – not just the areas near Villers-Bretonneux in France.<sup>73</sup> The second difference, and the reason for the change in size and scope, was a significant shift in the nature of the work to be performed. Divided into different sections – inspection, reburial, photographic, monument and memorial cross – AGS personnel took on a more administrative, investigative and supervisory role, with particular emphasis on maintaining accurate Australian burial records and resolving conflicting burial reports. AGS personnel were not responsible for the exhumation of Australian soldiers. Rather, the AGS worked closely with British labour companies responsible for exhuming and reburying remains – requesting that these labour companies perform exhumations when required – in order to ensure that all Australian dead were correctly identified and reburied.<sup>74</sup> While photographing relocated and identified graves to send to the next of kin continued to be a priority, the AGS placed greater emphasis on communicating with families in addition to sending these photographs. AGS personnel corresponded directly with families, and

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<sup>71</sup> Minute, Late Commandant AIF Headquarters R. Jackson to Secretary, Department of Defence, 15 December 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>72</sup> Australian Imperial Force Orders, 5 August 1919, AWM25, 755/12; War diary, Australian Graves Detachment, 1-19 August 1919, AWM224, MSS611. This source states that 33 members of the AGD continued to serve with the AGS.

<sup>73</sup> Letter, General Birdwood to Minister for Defence G.F. Pearce, 18 July 1919, AWM25, 755/12; Memorandum, Official Secretary E.A. Box to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 9 October 1919, NAA, A2489 1920/7838.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum, Official Secretary E.A. Box to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 9 October 1919, NAA, A2489 1920/7838.

acted as a point of contact and guidance for family members endeavouring to visit the graves of loved ones.<sup>75</sup>

The expansive geographic scope and reduced personnel of the AGS lessened pressure on existing infrastructure, and men stationed in towns like Amiens in France and Poperinghe in Belgium had access to decent accommodation and services.<sup>76</sup> The shift from physical labour to a more supervisory and administrative role also meant men of the AGS did not work as heavily or extensively on the battlefields as their predecessors. While the inspection section personnel were required to search thoroughly for traces of Australian remains, they were not responsible for the more dangerous and gruelling physical tasks, which fell instead to labour companies and reconstruction gangs working in the area.

However, like the men of the AGD, AGS personnel still encountered some of the inherent dangers of the old battlefields. "The hazardous nature of the work can be imagined," wrote Sergeant Leonard Holmes, a photographer with the AGS, "when it is understood that they were working on ground which was infested with unexploded shells and Mills bombs ... which, at the slightest contact, [were] liable to explode."<sup>77</sup> Though not responsible for exhumations, AGS personnel were still required to conduct a thorough search of all corpses for signs of identification, a "highly objectionable" task.<sup>78</sup> This work was not only "horrible and repulsive to any but idealists", it was also dreary and repetitive.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, while some members of the AGS had access to decent infrastructure and services, others lived and worked "in the middle of cheerless barren plains in cold huts".<sup>80</sup> In the early stages of the AGS, men stationed at Villers-Bretonneux lived in huts that "were poorly

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<sup>75</sup> Memorandum, Official Secretary E.A. Box to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 9 October 1919, NAA, A2489 1920/7838.

<sup>76</sup> "To the memory of the Australian dead", *Sunday Times* (Sydney), 6 Feb 1921 p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> "The unknown dead: graves section at work: volunteers' arduous task", *Riverine Herald* (Echuca), 23 August 1921, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum, Acting High Commissioner M. Shepherd to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 24 June 1921, NAA, A457, M404/7.

<sup>79</sup> "With the Graves Men: Fine Fellows at a Hard Task", *Richmond River Herald*, 24 December 1920, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> "Australian dead: efficiency of Graves Section - careless British work", *Daily Observer* (Tamworth), 2 November 1920, p. 2.

constructed and badly ventilated and totally unfit for housing" and had limited access to medical care and assistance.<sup>81</sup>

One visitor to the battlefields noted that the lives of the AGS "if less dangerous, are more monotonous than under war conditions. They lack the comforts which came in wartime."<sup>82</sup> Men located in larger towns might have been "able to enjoy the comforts of a hotel and the social distractions which any town offers,"<sup>83</sup> but their comrades living around the ruins of smaller towns had no such relief, and entertainment was scarce.<sup>84</sup> In early 1921, papers and other reading material were donated – by the newspapers themselves and by anonymous donors – to help relieve the monotony, making "brighter and happier the leisure hours of the members of the Australian Graves Services" and easing their sense of isolation with tales of home. These basic comforts served another crucial purpose: they reminded these Australian servicemen that they were "not entirely forgotten" by their fellow Australians, even in the absence of the "stimulating influence of hostilities".<sup>85</sup>

Isolation and lack of entertainment were likely contributing factors to instances of bad behaviour amongst this unit, particularly in the early stages of the organisation around both Amiens and Villers-Bretonneux in France. A court of inquiry held in March 1920 found that "drunkenness was a common and frequent occurrence among the men and no disciplinary action was taken to check it" and alleged that on at least one occasion drunken AGS personnel "wantonly discharged many shots from a revolver to the imminent danger of others", also without incurring disciplinary action. Captain Allen Charles Kingston noted that when he took command of the area near Villers-Bretonneux, not only were "the men ... constantly getting drunk" but "the majority ... were a bad lot and very inefficient.

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<sup>81</sup> Findings of Fact, Court of Inquiry, 3 April 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>82</sup> "Australian dead: efficiency of Graves Section – careless British work", *Daily Observer* (Tamworth), 2 November 1920, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> "To the memory of the Australian dead", *Sunday Times* (Sydney), 6 Feb 1921 p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> "To the memory of the Australian dead", *Sunday Times* (Sydney), 6 Feb 1921 p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> "Australians burying their dead", *The Register* (Adelaide), 15 March 1921, p. 6.

They were neither dependable nor reliable."<sup>86</sup> Two members of the AGS in Amiens, under the command of Lieutenant William Lee, "openly and publicly managed and controlled Estaminents ... and served drinks over the bar while wearing A.I.F. uniform." One of these men was allegedly "keeping women of ill-repute there for the use of soldiers". The inquiry also found that "women of ill-repute were notoriously and openly occupying huts with the men at the camp of Villers-Bretonneux." Furthermore, these men were failing in their duties. The court of inquiry found "that the work of the Amiens section was carelessly and negligently performed".<sup>87</sup> Several personnel, including Captain Kingston and Lieutenant Lee, were removed from duty and, under the command of Major Phillips, the AGS was restructured to improve efficiency, resolve administrative and logistical issues, and eliminate inappropriate behaviour.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, another court of inquiry was later convened to again investigate the administration and performance of the unit.<sup>89</sup>

Personal conflicts plagued the AGS, and the notion of soldierly identity, and being a soldier, once again proved contentious. Unlike the AGD, however, soldierly identity in the AGS was not framed in opposition to the notion of being a worker. In the absence of intense, routine, dangerous physical labour, this binary assumed a different character: soldierly identity was defined in opposition to being a civilian. The importance of being a soldier was most strikingly evident in the case of Major Alfred Allen. Allen was the Northern Inspector with the AGS and was responsible for the Australian graves effort in Belgium.<sup>90</sup> He had served throughout the war in the Australian Red Cross, but had never seen frontline combat. This proved problematic for some members of the AGS. Staff Sergeant Percy Gray, working with the photographic section in Villers-Bretonneux, penned a strongly worded letter to

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<sup>86</sup> Evidence given to Court of Inquiry, Captain A.C.W. Kingston, 30 March 1920, NAA, MP367/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>87</sup> Findings of Fact, Court of Inquiry, 3 April 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>88</sup> Findings of Fact, Court of Inquiry, 3 April 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>89</sup> Memorandum, Secretary, Department of Defence to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 2 December 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>90</sup> Prior to the March 1920 Court of Inquiry, Allen's title was Chief Inspector of the AGS. When the unit was reorganised following the recommendations of the March 1920 Court of Inquiry, he became the Northern Inspector; Exhibit C, evidence given to Inquiry by Major Alfred Allen, 31 March 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

the Secretary of the Returned Soldiers Association regarding "a so-called 'Major' Alfred Allen", arguing that it was utterly unacceptable this "camouflaged civilian" should be placed in charge of veteran soldiers who had "done their 'bit'". While Gray and his fellow soldiers were "enduring ... privations and shedding our blood for King and Country", Allen had allegedly occupied a safe and well-paid role, conveniently joining the AIF after the cessation of hostilities. Allen's role of authority over military men was "a sort of joke amongst the Imperial officers".<sup>91</sup>

Gray's complaints were inherently contradictory. After berating Major Allen for a lack of "soldierly bearing", Gray promptly argued that military administration and discipline in the AGS were unnecessary. "The war is now over and we are practically living as civilians over here," he wrote, suggesting that any attempt by Major Allen "to carry out things along military lines" would cause problems.<sup>92</sup> While soldierly experience and military bearing were considered essential in a leader, continued military discipline in the absence of conflict was evidently not. Gray's contradictory complaints reflect the challenging and unfamiliar nature of the place between soldier and civilian occupied by the AGS. Gray's concerns are indicative of the ways in which men of the AGS struggled to reconcile these competing identities and make sense of their position.

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In the main, tensions and issues within the AGS did not filter through to newspapers in Australia. Some articles referred to early issues with the administration and organisation of the unit, conceding that "at the start there were a few mistakes made, such as wrong burials." However, newspapers were keen to point out that any issues had "been rectified now".<sup>93</sup> Other articles expressed dissatisfaction with the broader graves effort, though not with Australian personnel. Allegations of the carelessness of British groups, including failing to discover

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<sup>91</sup> Letter, Sergeant Percy Gray to Secretary, Returned Soldiers' Association, 17 April 1917, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>92</sup> Letter, Sergeant Percy Gray to Secretary, Returned Soldiers' Association, 17 April 1917, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>93</sup> "Australia's dead", *Adelong and Tumut Express*, 19 August 1921, p. 4.

Australian remains or cutting bodies in half to raise their numbers, were published alongside glowing accounts of Australian care, thoroughness and efficiency.<sup>94</sup> Major Allen, in particular, had shown himself to be "determined that no Australian hero shall remain 'missing' if it is at all possible to locate him", in contrast to supposed British negligence and indifference.<sup>95</sup> Glowing reports were also written about the men of the AGS. One visitor to the battlefields was "struck by the magnificent devotion and spirit of a handful of diggers". The men - who had "cheerfully signed on to undertake the task" - diligently searched all remains for identification, despite the fact that "decomposition is still far from complete".<sup>96</sup> They were all soldiers with "good records as fighters", who had "stayed on to ... perform a labour of love for dead comrades."<sup>97</sup>

Rumours that the AGS was to be demobilised, and later official confirmation to this effect, sparked a panicked wave of newspaper articles and letters to the prime minister. In early 1921, Major Phillips had noted that a lack of information on the AGS meant that their work had "not been fully realised or recognised by the majority of people in Australia"; this lack of knowledge was made abundantly apparent in the

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<sup>94</sup> "To the memory of the Australian dead", *Sunday Times* (Sydney), 6 February 1921, p. 3; "Missing 'diggers': bodies discovered in France", *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 1 November 1920, p. 5; "Australians in 'lost' cemeteries: remarkable stories from France", *Daily News* (Perth), 10 March 1921, p. 6; "Australian dead: efficiency of graves section: careless British work", *Daily Observer* (Tamworth), 2 November 1920, p. 2; "Australian dead: exhumations in France", *Daily Observer* (Tamworth), 29 October 1920, p. 2; "'Lost' cemeteries: Australian dead in Belgium", *Examiner* (Launceston), 29 March 1921, p. 5; "AIF graves: large numbers of missing identified: graves wrongly marked", *Riverine Herald* (Echuca), 3 November 1920, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> "Australians in 'lost' cemeteries: remarkable stories from France", *Daily News* (Perth), 10 March 1921, p. 6; see also "AIF Graves: new discoveries", *Maitland Daily Herald*, 17 January 1921, p. 5; "Lost graves: Australians buried", *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 18 January 1921, p. 5; "Lost cemeteries: burial grounds of many Australians", *Geelong Advertiser*, 18 January 1921, p. 4; "Graves of the AIF: discoveries of bodies", *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 22 January 1921, p. 3; "Lost cemeteries: diggers' graves discovered", *Advocate* (Burnie), 1 February 1921, p. 4; "Graves in France: the unfinished work: protests made in England", *Riverine Herald* (Echuca), 17 September 1921, p. 2; "Australian War Graves: protest from Mr. Oxenham", *Recorder* (Port Pirie), 17 September 1921, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> "With the Graves Men: Fine Fellows at a Hard Task", *Richmond River Herald*, 24 December 1920, p. 7; "The unknown dead: graves section at work: volunteers' arduous task", *Riverine Herald* (Echuca), 23 August 1921, p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> "Australian dead: efficiency of Graves Section - careless British work", *Daily Observer* (Tamworth), 2 November 1920, p. 2.

frantic response to this report.<sup>98</sup> Various organisations and individuals expressed concern over the removal of Australian soldiers from the role of exhuming bodies. Mr F.R. Lloyd noted in a letter to the prime minister that "some amount of distress has been produced by the statement that your Australian War Graves Work is to be discontinued." He asked that this work continue "in the interests of the many relatives of men whose bodies have not yet been found". While Lloyd understood that "economy has to be practised in various directions", he did not believe that the recovery of the remains of Australian servicemen was one of them.<sup>99</sup> Mr M. Leonard believed he spoke for all Australians when he requested that the government "retain the services of our own men ... till this work is complete". No other organisation could display "the thoughtfulness and sacrifice" that Australians had, these men having made "drastic efforts to see the resting places of those who were all to them in the hope of soothing the pain, which in some cases is a living death".<sup>100</sup>

A cablegram from the high commissioner to the prime minister noted that there appeared to be some confusion regarding exhumations, and that it was proving "difficult to make clear even to Australians in London that Australian Graves Services have never done any actual exhumation work."<sup>101</sup> Responses of this nature were sent to concerned parties, and published in newspapers.<sup>102</sup> An article in the *Argus* noted that "The Australian Graves Services had never done any actual exhumations," and that the withdrawal of these men "was consequent on the completion of the photography and other duties."<sup>103</sup> The battlefields had been thoroughly searched since the end of the war "in some places twenty times" and the

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<sup>98</sup> "Australians burying their dead", *The Register* (Adelaide), 15 March 1921 p. 6; see also "Painful Disclosures", *Zeehan and Dundas Herald*, 14 October, 1921, p. 3; "The Australian Graves Service: reasons given for Continuation", *The Recorder* (Port Pirie), 13 October 1921, p. 3.

<sup>99</sup> Letter, F.R. Lloyd to Prime Minister William Hughes, 19 September 1921, NAA, A457, W404/7.

<sup>100</sup> Letter, M Leonard to Prime Minister William Hughes, 19 October 1921, NAA, A457, W404/7.

<sup>101</sup> Cable, High Commissioner's Office to Prime Minister's Department, 28 September 1921, NAA, A457, W404/7.

<sup>102</sup> For letters, see NAA, A457, W404/7: Letter, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department to F.R. Lloyd, 8 November 1921; Letter, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department to M Leonard, 9 December 1921; Letter, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department to Hunters Hill Town Clerk, 7 November 1921; Letter, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department to Secretary, New South Wales School Teachers' Federation, 7 November 1921; Letter, Secretary, Prime Minister's Department to the General Secretary, Sailors' & Soldiers' Fathers' Association, 23 October 1921.

<sup>103</sup> "Exhumations in War Area", *Argus*, 11 October 1921, p. 8.

effort to recover and identify Australian remains would continue.<sup>104</sup> A selection of Australian experts would stay on with the IWGC to continue to protect Australian interests.<sup>105</sup> While they would be officially discharged from the AIF and employed by the IWGC, "the question of whether these experts were under civilian or military control was, so far as concerned their duty, a matter of minor importance."<sup>106</sup> Mr Lloyd and his fellow Australians were assured that "the tracing of bodies of Australian Soldiers is a matter upon which reasonable expense must not be spared." The response to the demobilisation of the AGS revealed the extent to which the public invested in the *idea* of Australian soldiers caring for Australian dead – even if they had not invested in the actual men, or the realities of their work.

Negative articles were rare. One, written by a disaffected former member of the AGS, ex-Lieutenant William Lee, argued that the small number of Australians employed in the AGS prevented them from adequately monitoring British labour companies, and that graves and cemeteries were neglected and in a terrible condition.<sup>107</sup> This negative portrayal generated a flurry of correspondence among the offices of the prime minister, high commissioner, and minister for defence. A public response to Lee's article was suggested, and it was disapprovingly noted that his allegations as to the state of certain cemeteries did not "warrant a painful press discussion".<sup>108</sup> The public face of the graves effort evidently needed to be closely managed in order to shield the bereaved from reports that might cause trauma and distress.

The effort to protect the bereaved was particularly apparent when ex-Lieutenant Lee requested a second Court of Inquiry into the AGS be held in Australia. A Department of Defence minute paper noted that "The nature of such an enquiry would no doubt be very distressing to relatives of deceased soldiers,"

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<sup>104</sup> "Our missing soldiers: searching battlefield area: bodies continue to be found", *Northern Star* (Lismore), 24 November 1921, p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> "Our missing soldiers: searching battlefield area: bodies continue to be found", *Northern Star* (Lismore), 24 November 1921, p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> "Exhumations in War Area", *Argus*, 11 October 1921, p. 8.

<sup>107</sup> "Australian graves in France: General Birdwood's report: to the editor of the Age", *The Age*, 3 November 1920.

<sup>108</sup> Internal correspondence, Department of Defence, circa August 1920, NAA, MP367/1, 446/10/1840.



particularly given that "the condition of bodies after long burial would become the subject of evidence."<sup>109</sup> The request was flatly denied. Acting Prime Minister Joseph Cook's response to the release of unofficial reports suggesting that the AGS was to be demobilised also revealed concern for the bereaved. Cook tersely noted that, "it was most regrettable that such publicity should have been accorded in terms so distasteful to [the] feelings of relatives of missing soldiers."<sup>110</sup>

However, the impetus behind managing the publicity of the AGS was not driven entirely by the interests of the bereaved. The effort to recover the remains of Australian servicemen held social and political weight, and it was essential that coverage of this effort promote a sense of efficiency and effectiveness. The scandalous misbehaviour and poor practice of soldiers in the early stages of the AGS revealed the need to manage the perception of the unit. The March 1920 Court of Inquiry remarked that, unless the discipline of the unit improved, "this work intended to sanctify and hallow the memory of the dead must develop into a serious scandal bringing humiliation and disgrace upon Australian Forces."<sup>111</sup> This had to be avoided at all costs. Scandal and humiliation were themselves undesirable, but they also possessed the potential to hinder, disrupt or even prevent this work from taking place. Succeeding and being seen to be succeeding were equally important in enabling this work to continue unhindered.

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*[Image 6: Bodies exhumed from the battlefields awaiting re-burial in the Adelaide Cemetery in France (AWM E05432).]*

The loss of 60,000 men during the First World War had far-reaching impacts on Australians, and the effort "to sanctify and hallow the memory of the dead"

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<sup>109</sup> Minute, Department of Defence, 27 November 1920, NAA, MP367/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>110</sup> Cable, Acting Prime Minister Sir J. Cook to Acting High Commissioner M. Shepherd, 8 September 1921, NAA, A457, W404/7.

<sup>111</sup> General Remarks, Court of Inquiry, 3 April 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

occupied a place of special significance.<sup>112</sup> Understanding the process by which battlefield cemeteries were transformed into contemporary cemeteries gives insight into the nuances and complexities of this work, and the relationship between the battlefield and Australian society in the immediate postwar years. It elucidates the role of Australian forces in this wider international process, and highlights the relationship between the experiences of the men charged with this task and the way their work was represented for Australians at home. There was a fundamental gap between the notion of the sacred duty of soldiers and the daily realities of the men of both the AGD and AGS. The portrayal of their work fostered and emphasised these powerful notions of duty and honour, yet the nature of the work, and the men performing it, often belied these lofty ideas.

It is apparent with regard to both units, however, that this disconnect was not only deliberate, but necessary. In the early stages of the graves effort, a bereaved English mother travelled to her son's battlefield grave. Unable to enter the area while the AGD worked, she waited until they finished for the day and stole into the Adelaide cemetery. Upon finding what was left of her son lying in a bag waiting to be reburied, she fainted, and was later hospitalised with shock.<sup>113</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that the Australian bereaved were given sanitised portrayals and protected from information that might cause trauma rather than engender comfort. Australian mourners had to be spared this suffering, not only for the sake of their own comfort and protection, but to foster public confidence in the work of the Australian graves units. This confidence enabled these units to continue their work without additional impediments, allowing the gradual transformation from battlefield cemeteries to peaceful, tranquil cemeteries that would engender comfort of their own accord. The deliberately sanitised portrayal of the work of the Australian graves units suggests the public and political importance of the task with which they had been charged. Despite the efforts of the men of the AGD and AGS, over a third of Australians killed in the First World War still have no known grave. The work of these men to recover, identify and rebury Australian war dead, offers a stark and poignant reminder of the

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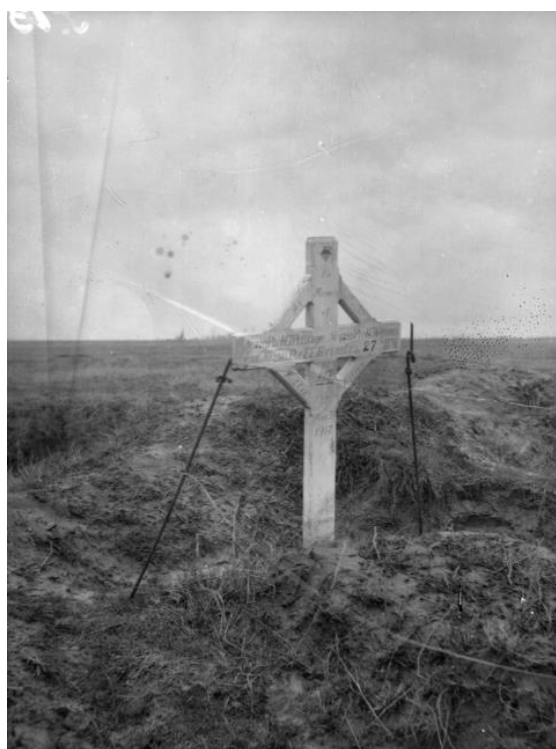
<sup>112</sup> General Remarks, Court of Inquiry, 3 April 1920, NAA, MP376/1, 446/10/1840.

<sup>113</sup> McBeath, *Diaries of Graves Detachment Digger*, p. 36.

impact of the First World War – an impact that continued to resonate long after the guns had stopped firing.

**Images to be inserted:**

Image 1: J00013



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

J00013

Image 2: A02498



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A02498

Image 3: E05494



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E05494

Image 4: E05486



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E05486

Image 5: E05444



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E05444

Image 6: E05432



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E05432