

**In this edition:**

*

Reflection & some history

*

Peace Day

*

Some Numbers

*

Meet Marg O'Leary

*

Finding H. Nelson

*

St Clare's College Documentary**Project**

*

Don't Forget Me Cobber

*

Christmas from the Museum at Fromelles

*

WE PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

In November each year, we pause to remember, to reflect, to acknowledge the service of, and the losses of, those soldiers, seamen, and aviators, who served, and in too many cases, lost their lives. For us. Whether for King and Country, or for a personal reason, or a noble cause, we lost them. Many came home and carried the effects of their service for many years to come. We concentrate on those who fought at Fromelles in 1916. But we should also look at events after 1916, and remember that Fleurbaix (and Fromelles) were regained in 1918. But before it was regained by the Allies, it was almost lost. A brief outline of the events leading up to the retaking of Fromelles in 1918 can be done via newspaper reports that year.

On **23 March, 1918**, the Bendigo Advertiser reported on the **ENEMY ATTACK AT FLEURBAIX**. There was a heavy bombardment in the region of Fleurbaix in the early morning. This was followed up by the enemy infantry. There were rumours that there has been an employment of tanks by the enemy. The weather improved during the morning. It had been dry and tolerably clear.

The attack was delivered on the whole front, but particularly in the region of the ridges about St. Quentin, which appear to be the main objective.

At the outset there was a fierce bombardment, which, commencing at dawn, continued throughout the forenoon. Then the enemy infantry made a rush from a point in the neighbourhood of Croisilles, Bullecourt, Lagnicourt, in the north, to Roansoy, Hargicourt, in the south.

The German attack on the La Basse Canal, in the direction of Fleurbaix was developing in the coming week and a half. The Chronicle, Adelaide reported on **9 April, 1918** that the enemy was getting ready for a large offensive. But intermittent fogs and rain were impeding the German transport and delaying the resumption of the offensive. The long lull prior to the German offensive enabled the Australian Red Cross Society in France to prepare to meet all emergencies. The German newspapers admitted that their casualties in the West have been heavier than in any previous fighting.

Two days later on **11 April, 1918**, reports were made of the German attacks developing on La Basse and the canal, seven miles north of Lens, and in the direction of Fleurbaix, about eight miles north of La Basse and a couple of miles southward of Armentieres. The enemy had been shelling around and south of Armentieres for several days, employing gas shells very largely. The Germans were seen advancing under cover of a dense mist, which limited the visibility to a few hundred yards. Our patrols and sentries immediately opened fire, and the fire steps of our trenches were manned with the utmost promptitude. The bombardment had extended from La Basse to Fleurbaix, taking in half of the line held by the Portugese. A Reuter's correspondent at British headquarters stated that the battle which began at 8 a.m. yesterday between La Basse and Fleurbaix 'continues with unabated violence. An artillery duel extended southward to Arras. The Germans are also attacking between Armentieres and Messines. The gunnery is so terrific that the earth trembles, as though experiencing an interminable volcanic spasm.'

The enemy brought in a tremendous concentration of artillery, and is throwing in infantry in dense masses. Plainly he is making another desperate bid for a clean break through. Although our line was bent back to some extent between Armentieres and Bethune our men put up, and are still putting up a superb fight.

Every foot of the retirement is made in most orderly manner, and at heavy enemy cost. One of the finest features of yesterday's fighting was the retaking of valuable ground at Givenchy. Our counter attack was irresistible, and besides recapturing the village we took 800 prisoners.

American reinforcements had appeared in the British zone, where their presence would soon be felt in the fighting line. The enemy's northern flank is apparently trying to work along the Lys River, but the direction and extent of the southern advance is rather obscure. Conditions are difficult for the attackers, owing to the ground being porous at many places, and hence it is impossible to dig in. They must substitute breast works. The enemy is not astride of any important communications.

The German attacks and the Allied resistance continued, but by **23 April, 1918**, it was reported that the total Australian casualties in the whole five divisions during the recent offensive were less than the Fifth Division's casualties at Fleurbaix in July, 1916.

Just a fortnight less than six months later, it was reported on **4 October, 1918** in the Border Morning Mail and Riverina Times (Albury NSW) that the Hun were retreating on a wide front - Fleurbaix and St. Quentin had been captured, that Lille was being evacuated, and that the Australians were east of the Hindenburg Line.

General Monash telegraphed to Mr. W. M. Hughes as follows: The Australians today captured all their objectives east of the Hindenburg Line.

British troops have captured Fleurbaix (south-west of Armentieres), where the Australians had their first important battle in France in July, 1916.

The Germans are in retreat on a wide front north and south of the La Basse Canal (due east of Bethune). St. Quentin is now entirely held by the French. The Germans are now evacuating Lille.

The Kerang New Times in Victoria stated the outcome much more succinctly by publishing the following headline and article:

TOWN CAPTURED.

The British have captured Fleurbaix south of Armentieres.

THE ARMISTICE, AND PEACE followed soon after on **11 November, 1918**

On that day, at 11.00am, after battles fought over nearly 4 years, from 1914 to 1918, an Armistice - "a temporary stopping of warfare by mutual agreement; truce" - was declared on what has ever since become known as Armistice Day. It has become a day of remembrance, shared around the world.

Peace returned to Europe. Guns ceased firing. Rifles were put down. Church bells began to peal again, and families tried to find what was left of their property across the battlefields and villages of Western Europe, while also trying to locate lost family members. The Paris Peace Conference commenced soon after.

As would be expected, in the months following the cessation of war, reports were received on the returning home of soldiers who had been prisoners of war. One such report was published in the Daily Herald, Adelaide, on **5 December, 1918**, advising that the Heroes of Fleurbaix, Australian Soldiers were returning home. Repatriated Australians were arriving at Hull in big batches daily. Some of these brave Anzacs were captured at Fleurbaix, and they testified to the brutality of the Uhlan escort, which marched them to Lille. They also described the brutal treatment meted out to French citizens, who tried to give the Australians food. Many of these martyrs of militarism gave harrowing accounts of the bestial treatment of prisoners in dungeons at Fort Macdonald and Lille.

Paying particular attention to those who had served from South Australia, the report went on to state that the Fleurbaix prisoners included men of the 32nd Battalion (S.A.), who were captured on July 20, 1916, after the Germans had flooded the trenches between them and their supports when they were holding an advanced position which they had themselves taken.

By **9 December, 1918** it was being reported in London, that the majority of the Australian soldiers arriving at Ripon from Germany were captured at Bullecourt and Fleurbaix, and in minor engagements on the Somme. The majority, after being made prisoner, were compelled to work behind the enemy lines, within range of the Allied shells, until June 21, and were then removed after an intimation from their captors that reprisals were to be abandoned. Prior to their removal a long-range Allied shell caused 11 casualties, including seven deaths, among a working party of British prisoners, of whom four Australians were wounded. Signaller Dawkins, of the 56th Battalion, related that between November, 1916, and March, 1917, the British prisoners, including four Australians, were kept at Queant. For six weeks they were without a wash or a change of clothes. Their daily ration was a quarter of a loaf of bread and a litre (1 pint) of soup made from horseflesh and turnips. When removed to Ecourtin March, 1917, only 80 were left.

A number of these died, and the rest were taken to Germany sick and incapacitated.

One day short of three years after the Battle of Fromelles, now civilian Fred. W. Toll, former Lt.-Colonel, and Late Commander 31st Battalion, A.I.F. wrote 'to the Editor', and his letter was reproduced in a number of newspapers, putting on paper his own record of the events of Fromelles. On **18 July, 1919**, his letter went on to say in conclusion, that: "It may enlighten your readers to know that the special reason of the attack at Fleurbaix on July 19, 1916, was to draw off the overwhelming reserves of the enemy, who at this time threatened to smash our lines in the southern area, in which some of our own countrymen were fighting for dear life, that the Fifth Division was thrown into the vortex, with the result that it stopped the enemy's attacks, drew off his reserves, and caused considerable loss to his forces. I place on record the Battle of Fleurbaix as being the finest exhibition of bravery of Australian troops in France or Belgium. All honour to our splendid dead. I salute your memory, my comrades. - I am, sir, &c., FRED. W. TOLL, Lt.-Colonel. Late Commander 31st Battalion, A.I.F.

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In the United Kingdom, and in Australia **19 July was proclaimed to be celebrated as Peace Day**, to celebrate and mark the end of World War 1. Though November 1918 had marked the end of



fighting on the Western Front, negotiations were to continue at the Paris Peace Conference until 1920, with the 'high and tremendous task of settling the peace terms'. The Treaty of Versailles was not signed until 28 June 1919

On the morning of the 19th, thousands gathered in London, having arrived overnight. It was a spectacle never seen before, with nearly 15,000 troops taking part in the victory parade, led by Allied commanders Pershing (head of the US Expeditionary Force), Foch (Allied supreme commander) and Haig (British commander in chief), who saluted fallen comrades. Bands played, and the central parks of London hosted performances and entertained the crowds.

Image: the British contingent of the Victory Parade in Whitehall passing

the Cenotaph on Peace Day, 19 July 1919 © Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans.

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Here in Australia, following the recovery of soldiers' remains from the mass graves at Fromelles in 2009, families and our own Association have been busy trying to find connections to their own lost soldier. So it is worth remembering not just the loss of those we loved, but the work that has taken place via our own Association members, to try to locate families of those soldiers by reference to the following article:

689

That's the number of DNA donors sought, or yet to be sought by the Fromelles Association researchers since we first started assisting Unrecovered War Casualties – Army way back in 2011. No trifling effort by so many wonderful folk, some of whom have committed years to the effort, and some who for various reasons have found one or two donors and then "retired".

To each and every one who has assisted, we say a big **"THANK YOU"**!

Interestingly, in 2011, we started with two or three researchers who had relatives who had died at Fromelles, but over the intervening years the profile of our genealogical researchers has changed to one where overwhelmingly we have high skills (mostly) female researchers, who do not have a relative at Fromelles. This no doubt has been brought about by the need for more complex searches overseas. And, to be candid, as one of a very few males in this group, I must say that "our girls" can juggle many, many searches at one time – for myself three or four is about it!

For those lost so far from home.

Interesting stories, and there are so many one could almost write a book:
 The Vicar's wife who told Marg O'Leary to Bu...r off, when she was trying to contact her husband. Sadly the outcome is we have never closed that DNA loop.
 The wonderful lady who was married to the mt donor (thus the last of a DNA line) and was searching for a Y donor, but became unwell, asked "us" to chase to donor down, which we did, and got an identification, some months after she passed.
 The time an American donor, had his lawyers "look us over" because he thought it a scam?
 The occasion when yours truly, took a DNA kit to a donor's home some two hours' drive away, with a bunch of flowers, because the donor was worried about "doing" the test correctly. With that one, we "did get" an identification.

372

That's the number of donors found, and submissions made to UWCA. And for those who are wondering why we do not publish how many soldier identifications have been made by the Fromelles Association, I offer this explanation:-
 Firstly, it has never been a competition to see who has actually been responsible for identification, after all, this is a team, and everybody contributes.
 Secondly, UWCA often ask us to assist with a specific donor need, thus it can only be assumed that they already "hold" one of the two types of DNA required. And whilst it could be argued that "we closed the loop" It is also appropriate to recognise that others, who we do not know, have likewise contributed to the overall research and outcomes.

Royce Atkinson
 11/11/2019

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MEET ONE OF OUR RESEARCHERS - MARG O'LEARY, from Greta NSW.

Like a few of the original Fromelles Association researchers, I live in the Hunter Valley, in the tiny town of Greta since 2017. I came there from Nelson Bay when we (Tony an artist and me an occupational therapist, plus two old cats) retired to a garden with potential - but in the middle of a drought - and then a frightening bushfire a week ago - kids and grandkids all telling us to leave, so we did, overnight. All is well. We have since added ember guards to the gutters!



Family history has always been more than a hobby. I inherited it from mother and great aunt, back to when it was all footslog, Saturdays reading microfiche at the Mormon Church Family History Centre in Charlestown, making contact by airmail letters. I couldn't believe the luck when the great computer age of family history arrived. Now I work with my big computer, 3 screens, one for the XP computer that reads the large family history CD collections from the 90s.

Eventually I did the SAG Certificate and then the Diploma in Family History Studies.

I was volunteering at the Tomaree Family History Centre in 2013 when fellow volunteer Sandra Pride asked if I could help with her family Fromelles soldier - Downie Dodd, (on the German Death List and still missing). I have a much remembered missing soldier from the Somme of 1917, commemorated on the Menin Gate. Of course, I would help

I was on leave recovering from a hip replacement, so it gave the opportunity to refresh the search for Downie in Scotland.

Sandra is a talented Miss Marple. (We advanced the search but still no Y-DNA donor found). Then Sandra asked if I would like to help with other soldiers. She took me to a meeting – coffee lounge in Charlestown - with Royce Atkinson and researcher Heather Ling, and I was in. What a wonderfully dedicated group. Very supportive and encouraging. And what a challenge.

Sandra and I continue the research teamwork – she creates huge DNA charts by hand on large sheets of paper. She hands me the big tree on paper, and then I get it into the computer, and go from there. I also do the phoning when we find someone.

Over the years the number of volunteer genealogists has greatly increased, and my role has changed with Royce, and Ann Watson to coordinating and helping researchers, all states, many countries. Many with a family soldier. Lots of brick walls, but heaps of success.

For those lost so far from home.

You do need to be a detective. We deal with soldiers who seemed to have no parents, changed their names because they were too young or too old, and arrived by swimming from some other country. And just in case you think you are getting closer; they came from the part of Ireland where the records got burnt. The search for the living is another roller coaster. And a little more difficult each year.

But here we are at the end of another research year and the researchers are forwarding a great number of potential donors. How wonderful.

Future Goal: To have an individual story on every soldier on our data base.

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And it is not just our own researchers who are trying to connect with a lost soldier, as the following article will show.

FINDING H NELSON

From Max Kerr in collaboration with James Tait
The (New Zealand) Wellington War Memorials Project was set up to research and publish the stories of 97 men listed as killed during the First World War and remembered on five Wellington War Memorials. One of those memorials, now partly hidden in a grove of pohutakawa trees, was the one that was erected by the Mitchelltown Welcome Home Association in 1920, at the upper end of Aro Street.

Completion of the project for this memorial stalled for well over 12 months because of difficulty tracking down one of the soldiers remembered there. The missing man, listed as 'H Nelson', could not be found in any of the Army personnel files held by Archives New Zealand, nor did he appear in newspaper reports of the time or civil records such as school enrolments and birth, deaths and marriages. The project team discussed where he might be found and concluded that perhaps he had enlisted outside New Zealand. 'Where', was the question. We had no idea. We had struck what genealogists call a brick wall, and H Nelson became what could be called a cold case, put aside in the hope that a breakthrough would appear.

On the other side of the Tasman the Australians have been working for ten years to identify the bodies found in a mass grave outside the village of Fromelles in northern France. This had been the site of the brief but bloody battle of Fromelles, fought on 19 and 20 July 1916 when the 5th Australian Division, newly arrived in Europe and not yet tested in battle, was pitched against highly trained and skilled Bavarian troops well used to fighting on the Western Front. The Australians, with soldiers from the British 61st Division, attacked in broad daylight and over open ground, and they were mowed down by machine gun fire. The attack failed completely. The Australians suffered 5,553 casualties including 1,917 dead and 470 prisoners. It remains the worst 24 hours in Australian military history. When the battle was over, German troops took many dead from the field, removed their identification discs to pass on to the Red Cross, and buried the bodies nearby in neat rows in a mass grave whose location remained unknown until 2009.

James Tait, a Wellington-based genealogical researcher, began working with the Fromelles Project in 2018 to learn more about the New Zealanders who had been involved at Fromelles. His research took him to the Aro Valley Memorial and the War Memorials Project website where he saw that H Nelson was the one soldier we could not trace. The person he was researching was Henry Oscar Nelson, and James wondered if he was also the H Nelson who had been so elusive for us. At a meeting hosted by NZSG's Kilbirnie Branch, at the beginning of March, James introduced himself and told me about his work on Henry Oscar Nelson.

We compared notes and agreed that we might have struck gold. After our meeting I began searching with renewed vigour. Having two forenames rather than just a single initial made all the difference. In a few hours, I had assembled an exciting pile of material. James sent me the material he had uncovered, and from all of that, I wrote up a draft story. Then it was time to compare notes again. There were a few loose ends to tie up but for the most part, we had pretty much captured Henry's story. It was time to share it with others.

In Wellington, there was delight within the War Memorials Project Team that our lost man had been found. Across the Tasman, the Fromelles Project Team was similarly chuffed, and even better, one of Henry's descendants in Sydney wrote to say: 'It is good to see the recognition of Henry's service by his home country. A true ANZAC!'

In brief, Henry was the fifth child and fourth son of a Swedish father and Irish mother who married in Wellington in 1887. He was born in 1893 and spent his childhood in Mitchelltown at the upper end of Wellington's Aro Valley. After leaving school, he became a wood machinist and for three years was a member of the New Zealand Cadet Force. Early in 1915, the family sailed to Australia and settled in the town of Ryde, in Sydney's north-west. Henry again found work as a wood machinist. Perhaps recalling his time as a cadet, and perhaps influenced by other young men who saw war as an adventure, in mid-1916 Henry enlisted with the Australian

Imperial Force. He carried with him a letter of parental consent, signed by his mother because he was under age by 8 months, unlike his older brother Frederick who enlisted at the same time. The brothers were both posted to the 30th Battalion and arrived in Egypt in the first instance before moving on the northern France. They were among the fresh inexperienced arrivals who became casualties on their first day of fighting. We now know that Henry was killed in 20 July and for a time was simply posted as 'missing'. Frederick was injured on the same day with gunshot wounds to the thigh but was able to rejoin his unit in December 1916. Confusion about Henry's fate persisted for several months, exacerbated by a photo of soldiers in a German prisoner of war camp in Stuttgart, published in London's Daily Telegraph on 2 February 1917, one of whom Frederick said looked remarkably like his brother Henry.



Private Henry Nelson (Photo kindly supplied by the Nelson family.)

In March 1917, a note was added to Henry's army record:

Identification Disc received from Germany. No particulars were afforded except that Soldier was deceased.

On 10 March, the Australian Red Cross Society sent Henry's mother a letter to say that Henry's name had appeared on a German Death List issued in the preceding November. It told her that such lists were compiled from discs gathered by the Germans from men who had been killed and that, according to their usual practice, after the discs were recovered, the bodies would have been buried close to where they fell.

Private Henry Nelson, 20, had become one of the many who died at Fromelles and whose bodies were buried in unmarked graves. He is, though, named on Panel 2 of the memorial at V.C. Corner Cemetery which records the names of all the Australian soldiers who were killed in the engagement at Fromelles and whose graves were not known.

The Aro Valley Memorial was erected for 'Boys of the Mitchelltown School and district who served abroad in the Great War'. It lists Henry, as 'H Nelson', amongst the 19 who were killed and also includes Frederick (as 'F Nelson' with an asterisk beside his name to denote that he

had been wounded) in the listing of the other 90 from the Mitchelltown area who had also served. Although the Nelson brothers had left the area at the start of 1915, both were still remembered by the community where they spent much of their lives when the memorial was erected in 1920.

For the Fromelles Association, the search continues. Henry's story is now known and documented. The remaining challenge is to find and identify his remains in one of the unmarked graves so that he can be re-interred, with a headstone, in the new cemetery just outside the village of Fromelles. In addition, the Association is keen to promote research into the lives of other New Zealanders who also served in the battle at Fromelles as part of the Australian Imperial Force.

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THE ST CLARE'S COLLEGE WAVERLEY AND THE BATTLE OF FROMELLES DOCUMENTARY

Closer to home, historical research has led to one school in particular, taking steps to trace various soldiers of Fromelles, and to prepare a Documentary, the St Clare's College Waverley Documentary Project

Lily Whitaker was one of the four St Clare's College students who supported Patrick Lindsay to deliver the Commemorative Address at the Sydney Fromelles Day Commemoration this year. The students read some of the correspondence from families seeking information on their soldiers following the Battle of Fromelles, and the Commemorative Address gave some insights

For those lost so far from home.

and reflections on the prolonged and emotional experience that many families went through.

This project was recently featured in an interview by Alan Jones, on radio 2GB Sydney, with Lily Whitaker, on 21 October, 2019. It is well worth listening to if you can access the recording via the following link:

<https://www.2gb.com/alan-jones-praises-sydney-schoolgirls-tribute-to-wwi-soldiers/>

It was such a good interview, it was “repeated” on Sky News on Wednesday night 23 October, with “Alan & Richo” with Lily Whitaker in the studio, and you can see the interview via the following link:

https://www.skynews.com.au/details/_6096988666001

Well done to Lily Whitaker, Patrick Lindsay, and all involved.

More details of the St Clare's College Waverley Documentary Project is available at: <https://australianculturalfund.org.au/projects/the-lost-diggers-of-fromelles/>

Since the radio and television interview of Lily Whitaker, we have received a request from Michael Burden of St. Clare's College, asking for assistance to provide material for the documentary. Michael has been a rock of support for us in our search for our missing soldiers. His work started at the Cathedral School in Sydney and continues now at St. Clare's College, Waverley. His email is reproduced so that if you can assist, you can contact Michael Burden and arrange to provide any assistance you may wish to.

Hi everyone,

*Our planning for the documentary is in progress. We are looking for letters from mothers, wives, sisters that we can use in our documentary. We are also looking for connections with the families of **Harold Woodman, Alan Mitchell, Thomas Sheridan and Benedict Dunstan.***

If you can assist in helping us out please contact me on my current email address:

michael.burden@syd.catholic.edu.au.

Thanks so much.

Michael

---oooOOOooo---

And when we do stop, silently, to reflect on those we lost at Fromelles, we can look upon the evocative Cobbers statue, at the Australian Memorial Park at Fromelles, reproduced in the grounds of the Shrine in Melbourne, Victoria, and appreciate the words of Maureen Clifford, The Scribbly Bark Poet:-

WE WON'T FORGET YOU COBBER

A fog as thick as thieves rolled in, covering all that was there.

The sodden ground was cloaked with a miasma of despair.

The reek of blood, the stench of mud, and of cordite and shot permeated the damp darkness, to every muddied spot.

The bombardment kept up all night, it highlighted the wire.

Grotesque caricatures of men were backlit by the fire.

Some moved, some cried, others were still - around them battle raged though as the mist got thicker yet, no war gods were assuaged.

Men crept out, under cover, hidden by the swirling mist

to stealthily retrieve the wounded, give aid and assist

them back behind their own lines. They also retrieved the dead.

Cut them from the wires ...no prayers for them were ever said.

A call rang out, a ragged voice in pain pleading for aid.

For those lost so far from home.

A man cried for his Mother, somewhere another voice prayed.
And volunteers with stretchers lifted wounded from the ground
and doubled back towards their trenches with barely a sound.
"Please don't forget me cobber" came a whisper from nearby
and a soldier slithered into view , bad cut about his eye.
A useless leg was shattered, he said, resigned to fate
"I'm OK boys but won't you please do something for me mate."
His mate was badly wounded, and hope was looking dim,
two burly blokes lifted him up onto the canvas thin
and stretchered him off at a jog, heading back to the lines.
Whilst Simon and another crouched in a shell -holes confines.
"We won't forget you cobber - hold on now, we'll get you back"
for still the lines where these men worked were under fierce attack
Doubtless the German soldiers were firing into the dark



but every now and then a random shot still hit its mark.
These blokes saved many lives that night - two hundred plus I heard.
And from the generals at the top no voice of thanks was heard,
not that it was expected - they just did what must be done.
Long gone the expectation that 'A war might just be fun'.
They'd left Australia's golden shores one warm November day.
One bloke, an Aussie farmer came from down Byaduk way.
They buried him at Bullecourt - he never made it home

For those lost so far from home.

and Simon Fraser's spirit 'cross Fromelles' fields does still roam.
A statue stands where once was the German defensive line.
An Aussie soldier carrying a mate. His courage shines.

---oooOOOooo---

A voice called out from No man's land: "Please don't forget me cobber."

Forget you cobber?

No bloody way!

---oooOOOooo---



Our friends in Fromelles, at the Museum of the Battle of Fromelles, have done some decorating ahead of Christmas. Their ongoing work helps us to ensure our soldiers are not forgotten, as the history is shared with ever more visitors. We wish them, our members, and all our friends, a Christmas filled with family and remembrance of our lost soldiers. And may 2020 bring forth more identifications of the missing.

---1916—2019---

The Fromelles Association of Australia
13 Bromfield Avenue Toongabbie NSW 2146

E-mail: gvb456@gmail.com

Website: <https://fromellesremembered.wordpress.com>

President: Royce Atkinson : royceatkinson@hotmail.com

Vice-Presidents (Research): Marg O'Leary & Ann Watson

Secretary: Geoffrey

Benn : Phone: 0408

219 636

Treasurer: Bill Irvine



FROMELLES ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA

For those lost so far from home