Introduction

On 19 July 2010, in the small village of Fromelles, northern France, thousands of Australian, British, and French nationals witnessed the reburial of an unknown soldier of the First World War. He was the last of 250 Australian and British soldiers to be interred with full military honours following the excavation of mass graves in nearby Pheasant Wood in 2008. Inside the newly created Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery, descendants of the Fromelles soldiers read from the letters and diaries of their relatives, breathing life into their long dead sentiments and concerns about the war. In an adjoining field an overflow of thousands more viewed the event via television screens under a scorching sun. Millions more watched on as it was televised around the world.

Almost a century before, on the evening of 19 July 1916, soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) 5th Division, alongside members of

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1 From the shadows to the light. This is the inscription at the entrance of the Musée de la Bataille de Fromelles.

the British 61st South Midland Division, were ordered to attack the German stronghold known as the Sugar Loaf. The diversionary tactic was ordered by the British High Command to prevent German troops from moving southwards to engage in the main offensive taking place on the Somme. The attack was a complete failure. When the battle concluded the following morning, the Australians had suffered horrendously and gained little ground. The events of 19 and 20 July 1916 and the resulting 5,533 AIF casualties marked a disastrous introduction to fighting on the Western Front.3

Fromelles was the AIF’s first major battle in France. Culturally it has been caught between the legend of Gallipoli and the slower-dawning horrors of the Western Front. As early as 1919 Fromelles had become marginal or even absent in the midst of more elaborate acts of remembering that took place in the aftermath of the First World War, with Gallipoli remaining the central focus of national remembrance. Until the discovery and excavation of the mass graves, this continued to be the case for Fromelles, missing from the national narrative of the war, despite its staggering costs. Yet for a century, those intimately affected by the battle of Fromelles and its memory, the returned servicemen and their families, continued to remember and commemorate spiritedly. These carriers of memory, from the time of the attack in 1916 onwards, represent a significant source of historical agency which to date has yet to be explored.

Much of the recent literature on Fromelles has preferenced battlefield analysis, alongside the discovery and recovery of the soldiers.4 This article reorients the focus to those who sustained a memory of Fromelles in their private and public activities, from 1916 to the present. Who was remembering Fromelles, what was the nature of their remembrance and what were the significant trends in their commemoration? There are three distinct phases in the commemorative arc from 1916 to the present. First, remembrance was predominantly private and localised, driven by returned servicemen and families amidst anxious concerns that Fromelles was being forgotten. Second, a resurgence of interest in war memory, in conjunction with persistent familial remembrance, saw Fromelles enter a public commemoration phase from the


4 For an excellent overview of the battle see Corfield 2009. For details of the recovery process see Lindsay 2007, Lee 2010 and Summers (ed.) 2010.
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1980s. Finally, extending this analysis beyond recovery of the Fromelles soldiers reveals a major reconnection between Fromelles and Anzac, as the battle has secured a place in the Anzac rhetoric and public discourse, no longer forgotten, but reconfigured as entirely consistent with the Anzac story.

**Familial Remembrance: 1916 onwards**

The story of Fromelles is one that has been shaped by those determined to remember at levels below the state—especially those with familial connections and returned servicemen. In the years immediately after the Battle of Fromelles bereaved families sought both private and public means to acknowledge their grief. On successive anniversaries of the battle Australian newspapers were filled with ‘In Memoriam’ columns. For many Australian families, as Pat Jalland (2006) and Bart Ziino (2007) have suggested, the ritual of placing such notices enabled mourners to begin to acknowledge the deaths, which at the same time publicly exposed the magnitude of private remembering.

From 1917 onwards ‘In Memoriam’ columns in the metropolitan newspapers swelled on 19 and 20 July. On the first anniversary of Fromelles, Melbourne’s *Argus* (19 July 1917) printed four columns on the front page; two years later the notices extended to five columns in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (19 July 1919), while in 1920 Adelaide’s *Advertiser* (19 July) ran four columns of notices. Although these notices expressed individual remembrance, they also exposed what Jay Winter (1995, 29) refers to as ‘communities in mourning’.

The persistent nature of remembering remained largely with the families of Fromelles soldiers for decades. One such example is poignantly articulated by the family of Private Joseph Hart, a twenty-year-old jeweller from Sydney. Hart joined the AIF as a signaller and arrived in France in June 1916, having spent the previous months training in Egypt. The following month, almost a year after his enlistment, Joseph suffered a fatal head wound at Fromelles; his body lay caught between the Allied and German front lines.5 Joseph was one of the 1,917 men killed in action at Fromelles. His parents, Victor and Rae, bore their loss for decades. Each anniversary, ‘In Memoriam’ notices expressed the simplicity of familial remembrance: ‘in loving memory of our dear son, grandson and brother’.6 Over the years the sentiment

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5 Private Joseph Hart, Red Cross Wounded and Missing files, 1DRL/0428.

remained unchanged, yet those remembering would fade with the passing of time, until only his elderly sisters remained. With minimal absences his family honoured his memory in this way until 1983.

Violet Gibbins placed ‘In Memoriam’ notices in honour of her brother, Captain Norman Gibbins, but she also sought to honour his memory by more public means. As principal at the Osborne Ladies’ College, Blackheath, New South Wales, Gibbins initiated a tree-planting memorial, a distinctly Australian initiative, on 20 July 1925 to commemorate her brother. Students planted twenty-five trees to honour her brother and pay tribute to the men of the 55th Battalion and others who had died at Fromelles. Memorials such as this, whether stone or organic, Jay Winter (1995) argues, served as sites for collective mourning and in some instances substitute graves for the missing, where mourners could reflect on their private grief.

The inscription beneath the cross reads: ‘With my soul’s homage and my heart’s utmost love to my beloved and deeply mourned brother’. Violet Gibbins. [AWM P03788.003]

Veterans’ Remembrance: 1916–1980

Returned servicemen placed ‘In Memoriam’ notices too, as did the various battalion associations. The Returned Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA), later to become the Returned and Services League (RSL), alongside the battalion associations, emerged as prominent agencies in organising wreath-laying ceremonies and reunions which formalised commemoration of Fromelles within their repertoire of annual services. The reunions fluctuated between sober moments of reflection and, as the 30th Battalion preferred, occasions ‘devoted […] mainly to festivities’ rather than sombre speechmaking. The events were well attended, some even registering record attendances decades later. As late as 1947 the 53rd Battalion Association ‘Whale Oil Guards’ continued to hold their annual ‘smoke and Fromelles’ commemoration night.

Though the dedication to remembering remained strong among returned servicemen, Fromelles received minimal coverage in the newspapers: typically only bland acknowledgement of the anniversary or commemorative services, which on occasion were entirely forgotten. The perceived anonymity of the battle in the post-war landscape led many Fromelles veterans to petition for greater acknowledgement in the public sphere. One way they achieved this was to write letters to the editor. As early as 1917 the letters provide a revealing insight into how the returned servicemen articulated their experience of war and placed Fromelles in the wider context of Australia’s First World War experience.

Those who authored letters were motivated by a sense of duty to the memory of the men who did not return, and to offering an historical account of the battle to those mourning the dead of Fromelles. A letter penned by ‘Fleurbaix’ in the Sydney Morning Herald (17 July 1919, 7) argued that the battle ‘must be emphasised and impressed on future generations of Australia […] their proper place given to them in Australian history’. Writing as early as 1917 ‘LMC’ even chose to question the brevity with which C. E. W. Bean recorded the battle in the official histories, which was why ‘Fleurbaix [was]
little understood by Australian folk’, he argued. Overwhelmingly many of the letters resonated with an anxiety that Fromelles had achieved little purchase on the national consciousness.

From 1919 onwards appeals for greater recognition of Fromelles began to appear in metropolitan newspapers. While enabled in part by a relaxation in censorship restrictions post-armistice, those appeals were much more a response to the confusion and ignorance that had surrounded the battle since 1916. It was not journalists who were moving on the issue, but returned servicemen, like Senior Chaplain James Green, who attempted to address supposed public ignorance. Green (1919, 7) called for the ‘veil of mystery’ to be removed and set about deconstructing the battle for *Sydney Morning Herald* readers. He declared that what had been reported as ‘a lively skirmish’ was rather a ‘glorious action [that] should take its place in the list of outstanding Australian battles’.

Dr Charles MacLaurin (1919, 7) responded to Green’s assessment and hoped he could complement his piece with ‘essential facts’. Fromelles, he argued, was an ‘orgy of blunders and calamity’, and the result of ‘half-trained and half-disciplined soldiers’. At heart MacLaurin nursed the same concerns as Green, but hit a nerve with his version of events. Passionate debate played out on the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in response to MacLaurin’s comments. J. Williams (1919, 12) charged that MacLaurin’s assessment was ‘incorrect and unjust’, while another correspondent argued that accounts of Fromelles were best not written by non-combatants dealing with hearsay. A ‘Herald Digger’ (1919, 7) submitted a lengthy letter in which his opening statement was symptomatic of the Fromelles problem: ‘to many Australians the Fleurbaix battle is something rarely spoken of. We hear of Lone Pine, Pozières, Passchendaele, Villers-Bretonneux, and others, yet the Fromelles fight is never mentioned.’

In 1929, the thirteenth anniversary of the battle, a commemorative editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted Sir James McCay’s thoughts of

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11 ‘Battle of Fleurbaix’, *Advertiser*, 3 November 1917, p. 9. At the time the battle was referred to as Fleurbaix, the town closest to the Australian base; on other occasions it was referred to as Fromelles, the town behind the German line, and as it is now popularly known.

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Fromelles. McCay outlined that the failure was not, as General Douglas Haig asserted, due to insufficiently trained infantry. Like many veterans, McCay’s memory of Fromelles was scarred by the heavy losses and the ‘unflinching courage’ displayed by the AIF, memories which sat uncomfortably alongside Fromelles as a failure and its lack of recognition. With the publication of Bean’s third volume of the Official History, McCay expressed the continuing hope that recognition and acknowledgement would be forthcoming for the Fromelles veterans. Comparable recognition to other Western Front battles like Pozières or Ypres never eventuated, but the survivors and mourners of Fromelles extended a commemorative thread throughout the years, quietly and purposefully.

The memory of Fromelles was also sustained within the pages of the RSL journals, in which several articles traded in memories and encouraged the persistence of remembering within the veteran community. The articles also marked an evolution in the way Fromelles was understood. In 1949 John W. Martin of the 30th Battalion wrote the first of his three articles on Fromelles that appeared in the RSL journals Reveille and Mufti over a thirty-year period. ‘Memories of Fleurbaix’ restated much of Bean’s account and framed it comparatively with the brevity of General Haig’s initial dispatch. Martin’s (1949) article encouraged the belief that Fromelles had contributed to the overall success of the Somme. Nine years later he was more inclined to dwell on the costs of the action. Able to provide greater detail of the battle, he poignantly stated it was only when the vast columns of the dead and wounded appeared in the papers, that Australians were aware of the AIF involvement (Martin 1958).

The final article, ‘Massacre at Fromelles’, published in 1980, illustrated a significant shift in the way veterans were recalling Fromelles. Opening with ‘the inexperienced Australian Division’, the article endorsed a contemporary understanding and contradicted the earlier emotional debates that refused to see the infantry slandered (Martin 1980, 6). This transition was

13 Sir James McCay was the 5th Division’s General Officer Commanding (GOC) at Fromelles.


15 Reveille (New South Wales) and Mufti (Victoria) are the journals of the Returned and Services League state branches.
also reflected in an earlier article of 1966. The damning headline of ‘Almost 6000 were mown down for nothing in futile battle of Fromelles’ ushered in a new understanding of Fromelles, now free from a heroic context and firmly ensconced in a tragic one.16

The post-war anxiousness exhibited by many of the returned servicemen was fuelled by concerns that Fromelles had been forgotten. Unlike the battles of the Somme in 1916 and 1918, which gained prominence in the national memory, Fromelles remained in the shadows. The Australian experience of the First World War had been shaped into a nation building triumph. Bean’s report of Fromelles, in the Official History, had also been criticised for its soft approach in dealing with battle mismanagement, preferring instead to focus on digger characteristics that typified the Anzac legend (Thomson 1994). The futility of Fromelles and its absence from this rhetoric symbolised a disconnection for those who survived from the evolving Anzac legacy. Pursuing recognition in this way validated their haunting personal memories and acknowledged their contribution to the war.


Over the last thirty years the Fromelles narrative has been bookended by a striking shift from relative obscurity to high public profile. Re-engagement with Fromelles was a result of individual agency and government involvement, both of which can be attributed to a renaissance of interest in war memory. In Australia we see this occurring in two ways. Anzac Day reassumed a central role in Australian civic culture as it emerged from the commemorative wasteland of the late 1960s and 1970s. In part this can be credited to the hyper-nationalism that surrounded the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988 and the ‘entrenched indigenous opposition’ to Australia Day.17 The palatable alternative, fuelled by the new nationalism, was for a national day grounded in heroic struggle and sacrificial bleeding (McKenna 2010). Anzac Day embodied that premise.

Within this cultural landscape public perceptions of war changed too. Noted French historian Pierre Nora positioned the ‘memory boom’ of

16 ‘Almost 6000 were mown down for nothing in futile battle of Fromelles’, Mufti, 3 September 1966, p. 5.

17 For an expanded discussion on this topic see McKenna 2010.
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the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the atrocities of the Holocaust and the commemoration of trauma, but which more recently has expanded to include any reconnection with the past (cited in Winter 2006, 18, 19). The *nouvelle histoire* expounded by Nora (1989, 24) saw ‘memory […] promoted to the centre of history’ and afforded historians new opportunities to explore the way in which history is remembered at a personal, local, collective and ultimately national level. ‘The task of remembering’, Nora noted (1989, 15), ‘makes everyone his own historian’. With this, new understandings emerged regarding the impact of war experienced on the battlefield. The traditional high diction tropes of heroism and valour were replaced by trauma and victimhood as the personal horrors of war were revealed. This, as Christina Twomey (2013) contends, was a significant factor in the reinvigoration of Anzac, and one that generated a renewed ‘sympathy’ for the Anzacs. First World War veterans were revered as national icons and families, buoyed by an interest in genealogy, were eager to place their ancestors at the heart of this powerful myth of nationhood.

After almost a century of direct personal remembrance, the responsibility for remembering Fromelles fell to the next generation. Individuals like Robin Corfield, who produced the definitive history of Fromelles in *Don’t Forget Me Cobber: The Battle of Fromelles 19/20 July 1916, An Inquiry*, (2009), sought to capture the experiences of his father and grandfather who had both fought at Fromelles (R. Corfield, personal communication, 1 September 2010). It would be in those pages of meticulously researched text that Melbourne schoolteacher Lambis Englezos found the initial clues regarding the missing Fromelles soldiers. He had found a discrepancy in the numbers. Of the 5,533 Australian casualties, 1,335 soldiers had no known grave. At VC Corner only the names of 1,299 soldiers are listed. At Villers-Bretonneux thirty-six were listed as missing. After further scrutiny Englezos believed a total of 191 soldiers were missing (Corfield 2009). The credibility of this calculation was confirmed by the details recorded in the Red Cross Wounded and Missing files. Intrigue had led Lambis Englezos to seek out the remaining Fromelles servicemen after reading a few paragraphs about the battle in Peter Charlton’s *Pozières* (1986).

Over the following years Englezos developed close relationships with the Fromelles veterans—the ‘19th of July men’, as he called them—that made Fromelles distinctly personal for him. Forging this link with the men only fuelled his determination to commemorate and remember them (L. Englezos, personal communication, 30 August 2010).

As veterans passed, families continued the practice of organising commemorative events. In 1991, on the 75th anniversary of Fromelles, a ceremony was held at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance. Robin Corfield, together with Englezos and Jacqui Todd, the daughter of Jack Kirfield, a Fromelles veteran and past secretary of the 60th Battalion Association, founded the Friends of the 15th Brigade. Its aim was to restore and maintain the commemorative practices particular to the brigade, echoing those initial services started by the battalion association in 1922. At Englezos’ behest, the first of many commemorative trees were planted in the Shrine grounds the same year, all dedicated to the various battalions that fought at Fromelles. Remarkably, it was the first acknowledgement of Fromelles in the Shrine grounds at that point (Corfield 2009).

This grassroots agency in commemoration resulted in significant developments in the Fromelles story. Englezos’ championing of the missing soldiers was evidence of the renewed commitment to Anzac that was fostered between generations. His sense of ‘knowing’ the long dead men and his demand to find the soldiers was an expression of that connection (L. Englezos, personal communication, 30 August 2010). Ultimately it was his sense of responsibility to the men that would mobilise Englezos to push for the discovery, exhumation and reburial of the Fromelles soldiers, even against significant official inertia. While much of the agency for the rehabilitation of Fromelles was driven by descendants, veterans and individual campaigners, Fromelles remained in the shadow of Pozières for military historians. Outside Bean’s Official History it had only courted paragraphs and chapters, as a footnote to the broader evaluation of the First World War and in particular the Western Front. Although never expressly overlooked, as an unsuccessful feint Fromelles did not seem to warrant the attention quickly directed at the longer and even more costly fighting at Pozières.  

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19 Email correspondence with Lambis Englezos, 30 August 2010; Corfield 2009, pp. 432–433.

20 Recent titles by military historians include Peter Pedersen (himself a descendant
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The last decade however has witnessed a steady growth of published work documenting Fromelles. Early mentions were cited in Bill Gammage’s *The Broken Years* (1974) and Patsy Adam-Smith’s *The Anzacs* (1978), giving voice to the soldier’s recollections, but it wasn’t until the discovery of the Fromelles soldiers that historical evaluation increased, with the bulk of titles published post 2010.\(^{21}\) The exception to this is historian Ross McMullin who has been a long-standing advocate of Fromelles, and has written widely on the subject since 1996 through his research interest in Pompey Elliott.\(^{22}\) The phenomenon of Fromelles predominantly preoccupied the interest of social and cultural historians.

Official engagement with Fromelles occurred in a broader commemorative context. To mark the 80\(^{th}\) anniversary of the end of the First World War the Howard (Liberal) government embarked on a memorial-building programme across the Western Front. Sculptor Peter Corlett was commissioned to memorialise the Battle of Fromelles. The bronze, entitled *Cobbers*, depicted Sergeant Simon Frazer of the 57\(^{th}\) Battalion carrying a wounded member of the 60\(^{th}\) Battalion across No Man’s Land to safety. On 5 July 1998 the Australian Memorial Park at Fromelles was officially opened by the then Minister for Veterans’ Affairs Bruce Scott and was attended by four surviving First World War veterans.\(^ {23}\) Together with the Fromelles Memorial Park, which cost $160,000,\(^ {24}\) the Australian Government’s Le Hamel memorial of Fromelles soldiers, *Fromelles: French Flanders* (2004), Peter Burness, *Fromelles and The Somme: Australians on the Western Front—1916* (2006), Peter Barton, *The Lost Legions of Fromelles* (2014), as well as the aforementioned text by Roger Lees of the Australian Army History Unit.


(1998), costing $1.3 million, joined memorials at Bullecourt (1992 and 1993) with the purpose of commemorating the ‘triumph of the Australian spirit’ across the Western Front (Pedersen 2004, 123, 124). The pivotal shift in refocusing attention from the Turkish Peninsula to the Western Front came in 1993 with the decision to exhume a body from Adelaide Cemetery to be interred in Canberra as Australia’s Unknown Soldier. The growing interest in Fromelles can be seen as integral to the wider agenda of commemoration occurring on the Western Front.

As Bruce Scates (2006, xxii) acknowledges, ‘Australians discovered their nationhood’ at Gallipoli and the peninsula remains ‘to this day a compelling statement about what it meant (and means) to be Australian’. The Western Front was different. The devastating consequences of an industrialised war and prolonged trench warfare occupied a darker place in the Australian imagination. The Gallipoli campaign had cost 26,111 Australian casualties (including 8,141 deaths). On the Western Front the casualties were 132,000 with 46,000 deaths. In 2008 the national commemorative focus included the Western Front for the first time and an Anzac Day service was held at the national memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.

With greater emphasis on the Western Front experience in Australian commemorative narratives, Fromelles was now reframed as the worst twenty-four hours in Australian military history, not least because of historian Ross McMullin’s (2002) persistent advocacy of that device. The sentiment is widely endorsed by the Australian public, politicians and the media today.

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25 ‘Three days of ceremonies will commemorate end of WW1’.

26 For the most recent scholarship on Western Front commemoration see Joan Beaumont, ‘Australia’s Global Memory Footprint: Memorial Building on the Western Front 1916–2015’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 46, no 1.


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The significance of framing Fromelles in this context enabled the battle to sit comfortably alongside other celebrated battles within the Anzac narrative. At the 2006 anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan in Vietnam, John Howard (cited in Lord 2006) paid tribute to both Fromelles and Long Tan, commenting:

that although 50 years and thousands of miles apart, [both] had helped shape Australia and define the common characteristics of Australians—courage, initiative, individual fortitude and mateship.

Howard drew both battles into the national narrative, successfully linking ‘Anzac past with Anzac present’ (McKenna and Ward, cited in Scates 2010, 219). That same year at the Fromelles Memorial Park, the then Minister for Veterans’ Affairs Bruce Billson (cited in Scates 2010, 219) spoke of ‘service and sacrifice’ and ‘courage of the highest order—the mateship that stands at the heart of the Anzac Legend’. Similarly when the Victorian Premier John Brumby officiated at the unveiling of a second Cobbers statue in Melbourne in 2008 he was quick to salute the Anzac commonalities, citing those well-worn qualities of courage, sacrifice and mateship, stating that Cobbers (Fromelles) ‘embodi[d] the Anzac spirit’. Official endorsement of Fromelles meant that the battle was now positioned firmly within the national remembrance. However it was the persistent efforts of Lambis Englezos to find the missing soldiers that would cement Fromelles’s place within the Anzac narrative, officially and informally, and forge a much closer connection to Anzac.

An unflinching media campaign waged by Englezos and his supporters to locate the missing dead propelled Fromelles even further into the mainstream. What had previously been the domain of familial remembrance and military history enthusiasts now caught the attention of both the public and greater historical appraisal. New books were published and newspapers ran interviews with Fromelles descendants. A 60 Minutes (2006) segment consolidated public interest and elicited an emotional response. It presented Fromelles in all its battlefield horror and was indignant at the battle’s anonymity. ‘[I] would hate to see our missing war dead as an inconvenience’,

Englezos lamented for the programme. Public interest was reaching critical mass, and as Joan Beaumont (2015) has acknowledged, Australia’s popular media played a critical role in constructing a contemporary memory of Fromelles.

Attitudes towards the discovery at Fromelles were heavily coloured by its renewed association with the Anzac legend. Broader public opinion eulogised the Fromelles soldiers as national heroes. ‘Ian’ from Sydney went so far as to call Lambis Englezos and Robin Corfield modern heroes for bringing Fromelles to the national attention. A Channel Nine News opinion poll gave a voice to the Australian public. Many were angered by the perceived idea of a government ‘cover up’ that continued to linger almost a century later; one respondent called it a ‘bureaucratic scandal’. Others, like ‘Matt’, emphasised the necessity of teaching the importance of other battles like Fromelles, which shaped Australian history, in addition to Gallipoli. In many instances public opinion mirrored that of Fromelles advocates in 1919. 31 It was through this lens that the public justified their demands for exhumation and identification. Amidst the consenting majority though there were occasionally isolated voices of dissent. ‘Andy’ questioned the Fromelles project, arguing that it ‘smacks of morbid curiosity and a publicity stunt. Mark these mens [sic] graves, but then let them lie in peace. You dishonour them.’32

On the 92nd anniversary of Fromelles, six years after Englezos began his public campaign to find the missing soldiers of Fromelles, a replica of Corlett’s *Cobber* statue was unveiled at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. The statue was clear acknowledgment of public interest, given the Victorian government’s willingness to contribute financial support, (matched
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by Tattersall’s George Adams Foundation). Bruce Scates (2010, 229) noted that the statue represented a homecoming of sorts:

[I]n the midst of the Fromelles controversy, it suggested that these men, once honoured only by the surrogate graves of memorials, were soon to be recovered, re-membered, re-embodied again.

The groundswell of interest that surrounded Fromelles in Australia was unique. British responses to ‘their’ Fromelles missing were somewhat mute by comparison, but no less heartfelt (Totaro 2010). Bruce Scates (cited in Totaro 2010) has suggested that Fromelles resonated with Australians by feeding the needs of a public ‘greedy for war stories’. In part this may be true, but the politics of commemoration are undoubtedly complex. The tension between the broader public, who regard Fromelles as part of the Anzac tradition, and those who see the exploitation of the dead for political purposes is ongoing.

For the descendants of the Fromelles soldiers, remembering has always been the impetus, and an act that traversed generations. When Private Harry Willis’ body was identified, his 93-year-old niece Marjorie Whitford was ‘extremely happy’. She would finally be able to inscribe the epitaph written by her mother: ‘Beloved son of John and Janet Willis of Alberton, Victoria’ (cited in Totaro 2010). Margaret L. was a DNA match with her grandmother’s cousin Private George Lucre. The process of undertaking the family history had given her a sense of ‘knowing’ her grandmother’s cousin: ‘distant to me but a relative none the less’. The identification process had offered her family a sense of reconciliation with the past (Margaret L., personal communication, 23 September 2010).

A public memory of Fromelles has gathered in strength, to the extent that the authenticity of private and individual memories had in part been consumed and reimagined by a broader social narrative, dictated by familial inheritance, and consumed by what Jay Winter (1995) describes as collective remembrance. As Fromelles cemented its place in the public consciousness, it was no longer defined by bureaucratic negotiation or the demands of descendants. These men, if we engage with the majority public consensus,

33 ‘Unveiling of Cobbers’.
had become the heart of the Australian nation as men whose sacrifice embodied the expression of national character.

**Fromelles in the Anzac rhetoric: 2010 onwards**

Fromelles has now assumed a prominent position in the Australian commemorative landscape, firmly articulated in Anzac rhetoric. Ensuring it is not forgotten by future generations, Fromelles now sits comfortably in school curricula between Gallipoli and the Somme as students commemorate the centenary of the First World War. Historical accounts of the battle have been reframed for teenage reading, such as Carole Wilkinson’s *Fromelles: Australia’s Bloodiest Day at War* (2012), complete with companion teaching notes. At the newly renovated First World War galleries at the Australian War Memorial Fromelles features prominently as a significant moment on the Western Front. Since the dedication ceremony of the new cemetery in 2010, Fromelles has continued to inspire interest internationally. London’s Imperial War Museum opened its *Remembering Fromelles* exhibition to coincide with the cemetery’s dedication and welcomed thousands of visitors eager to understand the fascinating and complex story of recovery.

The cemetery at Fromelles and the Australian Memorial at V.C. Corner have become significant sites of pilgrimage and battlefield tourism on the Western Front. Australians predominantly write the entries in the visitors’ book. Messages of gratitude and respect rest alongside promises to ‘never forget’ as they contain their sentiments to a few words. French and English citizens paying their respect echo similar sentiments. The global reach of Fromelles is such that visitors identified themselves from America, Japan, Canada and New Zealand. Regional War Graves Commission Director, Piet Declercq (cited in Miranda 2014) expects Fromelles to be one of the most visited of the 300 cemeteries in the area, particularly since the new Fromelles museum has opened.

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Officially opened 18 July 2014, the Fromelles Museum is located 120 metres from the cemetery, having moved from its original location in the Town Hall. The new museum houses thousands of artefacts that were found in the discovery and are used to tell the story of Fromelles. But it is the personal stories of the soldiers who fell at Fromelles that are most poignant. Declaring its official stake in the museum, the Australian government contributed AU$1 million to its construction. French partners have contributed over €1.8 million to this project.36 Michael Ronaldson, Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, declared the museum would ensure that the ‘story of Australian service and sacrifice in this bloody battle’ was never forgotten.37

More recently Fromelles was the subject of a musical entitled The Front that opened as part of the Adelaide Cabaret Festival in June 2015.38 Billed as a musical about the bloodiest battle in ANZAC history, the production set out to depict the ‘brutality of war and commemorate the love, loss and legacy of our WWI veterans’, complete with ‘soaring romantic melodies and infused with a uniquely Australian spirit’.39 For so long Fromelles was the private realm of those intimately connected. The latest addition to the canon of literature on Fromelles comes from popular author and social commentator Peter FitzSimons; evidence itself of the battle’s acceptance in popular culture. The timely publication of Fromelles & Pozières: In the Trenches of Hell (2015) eulogises the events of 19 and 20 July 1916 and elevates Fromelles’s mythical status, the pagination of the book ironically skewed in Fromelles’s favour. Supported by onerous footnoting, FitzSimons’ self admission (xvii) of fudging quotes and infusing emotion to accommodate the storyline is perhaps the price paid for engaging the reader keen to understand the experience


of Fromelles. The broad appeal and commercialisation of Fromelles, like that in *The Front*, raises concerns that the public’s appetite, to reiterate Scates, ‘greedy for war stories’, feeds an Anzac industry that can at times breed cynicism, particularly regarding how Australians commemorate and remember their war dead.

As the Centenary of Anzac shifts focus to the Western Front in 1916, Fromelles will be remembered as a key part of the commemorative programme. As one of the twelve major sites along the new Australian Remembrance Trail that traverses France and Belgium, it will remind visitors of the events of Australia’s bloodiest twenty-four hours and the nation’s first engagement on the Western Front. This will further establish Fromelles within the physical commemorative landscape. Tour operators are already promoting Fromelles centenary battlefield tours as ‘once in a lifetime’ events, where travellers can participate in anniversary commemorations and picnic lunches. The Friends of the 15th Brigade are also arranging their own commemorative tour with Lambis Englezos and Mike O’Brien as joint Tour Leaders and Battlefield Guides.

Such events come with an element of caution though. Joan J., who was unsuccessful in identifying her uncle Private John Patrick Larkin through DNA testing, would hate to see Fromelles reach similar proportions to that of the Anzac Cove ceremony. Instead she prefers the comparative anonymity of the local ceremony as an ‘honourable and fitting’ memory of the men, rather than grandiose commemorations (Joan J., personal communication, 30 September 2010). Her response is suggestive of the shift from private remembering to public collective commemoration that exposes what David W. Lloyd (1998, 43) has suggested as the ‘dichotomy between tourist and pilgrim’. As long as such ‘sacred places’ are revered as keystone sites of national commemoration, cultural sightseers will always be drawn to locations defined by Australianness.


42 Mike O’Brien was in charge of the identification and burial process of the Fromelles soldiers; *Friends of the 15th Brigade*, newsletter, 28 August 2015.
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Conclusion

For a century Fromelles has been framed by an anxious tension between forgetting and remembering. Closer analysis of the commemorative patterns surrounding the battle reveals that a long history of remembering had existed since 1916. The transition from intimate private memory, expressed by Fromelles veterans and their families, to today’s expansive commemoration on a national level, was a result of both sustained familial remembrance and a growing reconnection with Anzac that was occurring more broadly with the passing of First World War veterans. Within this context the individual agency of Lambis Englezos, coupled with a commitment by the state to commemorate Australia’s experience on the Western Front, helped to construct a public memory of Fromelles that was closely associated with national identity and Anzac. Now well established in the official state rhetoric, Fromelles is a unique case study through which to observe the shifting patterns of Australian war memory and the inherent politics of commemoration and commodification associated with honouring Australia’s war dead.

Monash University

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