

PIONEER NEWS

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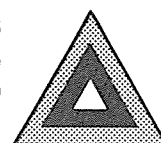
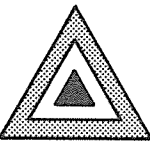
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THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER – CANBERRA

We kindly acknowledge the following address given by Warrant Officer, M. A. Caughey to the 7th Division Association Reunion at Singleton in October 1998 as printed in "Purple Diamond" 7th Division Engineers news sheet.

Thank you for this invitation to speak to you tonight on the topic of "The Unknown Soldier", who, as you know, is buried in Canberra at the Australian War Memorial. But first a little background information. In late 1993 a contingent was formed with soldiers from most Corps in the Army, both male and female soldiers were selected. The Bearer party consisted of two sailors, two soldiers and two airmen. The contingent was commanded by Major Warren Young and I was fortunate enough to be appointed as the Regimental Sergeant Major.

The task was to collect an Unknown Australian Soldier, and following ceremonial duties in France and Belgium return the remains to Australia for interment in the AWM on Remembrance Day, 1993.

From Ypres in Belgium to the Somme River in France and beyond, lies a landscape strewn with graves. Here, as all who have visited the area know, lie in cemetery after cemetery, the remains of Australia's first AIF dead from Passchendaele, Fromelles, Bullecourt, Peronne, Villers-Bretonneux and a score of other Great War battles. Of all the headstones so carefully maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, few have the power to move the Australian visitor more than those with the simple inscription: "An Australian Soldier of the Great War Known Unto God". From under such a headstone on 2 November 1993 at a small cemetery named after the city of Adelaide near Villers-Bretonneux, the remains of an Unknown Australian Soldier were exhumed and placed in a simple coffin. Even the toughest of hearts softened a little as our unknown soldier began his journey home.

The idea for the tomb was first proposed 78 years ago, in 1920. It was suggested that an unknown soldier be buried in a place of prominence in each of the world capitals. The difficulty was the AWM had not been built. As a nation, we were content to be represented by the remains of an Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey. The idea dropped away; but at regular intervals was mooted by veterans' groups.

WHAT/WHO IS IN THE COFFIN?

At this point I will answer the most commonly asked question. What/who is in the coffin? Before I answer that I must admit to being a little sceptical before the exhumation took place. It would be too easy to place some French soil and remnants of clothing in the coffin and claim to have the remains of an Unknown Australian Soldier. Fortunately, I can tell you that the remains in the coffin are definitely those of an Australian soldier. I can confirm that there are substantial skeletal remains, his uniform is in fair condition, the boots appear good enough to walk in and around his waist is a web belt with a gas mask still strapped to it. He was someone's son, perhaps a young farmer from the country, full of the spirit of adventure. Or perhaps a clerk from Sydney with two young children who felt obliged to "do his duty" for King and country.

The Unknown Soldier was officially received by the Australian Guard at the Australian National Memorial near Villers-Bretonneux, itself a significant Australian battle site. On the hill where the memorial and cemetery now stand, Australian troops were instrumental in halting the German Spring Offensive in 1918. Being a member of the guard was a double thrill for myself, my own grandfather was a member

of the Guard when the site was consecrated at the end of WWI.

The Guard also conducted other ceremonies after the handover on November 2, at sites significant to Australian involvement in WWI. These ceremonies were watched by numerous local people and tourists from many countries including Australia. The young soldiers of the Guard performed magnificently. After the Villers-Bretonneux parade, an American tourist could not be convinced that the Guard was not a Ceremonial unit. After a night ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ieper, Belgium, an elderly German asked what the parade was commemorating, when told the Unknown Soldier story, she completely broke down sobbing uncontrollably and had to be attended to by a local doctor. At the Menin Gate ceremony, four buglers from the local community's Last Post Association played the Last Post at 8pm – an act that has been performed every night since the end of WWI, except during the WWII German occupation.

It has been said that every Australian soldier who fought in Belgium in WWI marched through the Menin Gate on his way to the front, and farewelling the Unknown Soldier from there was significant. Other smaller ceremonies conducted by the Guard, such as the Dawn Service at Tyne Cot and Polygon Wood cemeteries, were particularly moving for the contingent.

A WEEKEND WITH BERNIE

When returning to Barracks at Noyon in France after the Ieper ceremony (3 1/2 hour trip), an incident occurred that made me aware that Australian soldiers still have a warped sense of humour. It was around 11pm, after a very long and eventful couple of days of ceremony after ceremony and much bus travelling with little sleep, so I was nearing the end of my tether, as RSM's are prone to do, on very rare occasions. A group of young soldiers, male and female, sitting behind me were joking, laughing and carrying on, I could not help overhear them, the butt of their joking appeared to be centred around the Unknown Soldier in the coffin that we were parading everywhere with us. I listened for a while and decided, like all good RSM's would, to put a stop to this irreverence. I jumped up and seriously reprimanded the group and left them in no doubt that I had had enough of their disrespectfulness. There was stunned silence, I'd achieved the aim! Then one bright young lad answered in a serious voice, "Sir, we aren't being disrespectful, haven't you seen the movie, "A Weekend with Bernie"? He explained – a group of old friends are having a weekend reunion when the host, a fellow named Bernie, dies. Rather than ruin the weekend, they decide to take their friend with them to all their outings and escapades. "So you see Sir," he continued, "We have decided that our Unknown Soldier is called Bernie and we are calling our activity 'A Week with Bernie!' From that moment our Unknown Soldier was named Bernie and to this day when we meet we still discuss Bernie, maybe our Unknown Soldier is not as unknown as we thought.

The Unknown Soldier spent his last night on French soil lying in State at the Villers-Bretonneux memorial, guarded by two Australian sentries. A little after 1am, shrouded by a thick fog, I marched out to check the sentries. I found two female soldiers on duty and both were obviously very jumpy and

uncomfortable with their predicament. The body of the Unknown Soldier in a coffin only one metre away and surrounded by literally thousands of graves. Assessing the situation, I endeavoured to put them at ease. I told them that over 75 years ago, Bernie most likely spent many a long night just like this, standing sentry in a freezing trench and probably dreaming about being in the company of an Australian woman, and now, 75 years later, he was spending the night in the company of not one, but two Australian ladies. This obviously worked, as both volunteered to do the last shift before dawn.

The Unknown Soldier was farewelled from the battle fields of the Western Front in a very moving ceremony at the French Air Force base at Cambrai. As a French helicopter carrying the simple coffin, and the Australian Bearer party took off from Cambrai, the rotor blades caused the mist to swirl around in a mystical fashion, creating a lasting memory for the Australian and French dignitaries and guards on parade. The Unknown Soldier was on his way home.

Flown back to Australia aboard the Qantas flight "Spirit of Remembrance", and from Sydney to Canberra by RAAF Hercules, the coffin lay in State at Old Parliament House.

On the morning of Remembrance Day 1993, the Unknown Soldier was removed from Old Parliament House, placed on a gun carriage and taken to the War Memorial where, at 11 o'clock on 11th November, the coffin was entombed in the Hall of Memory. The Governor General at the time, Bill Hayden, cast into the tomb a sprig of wattle, and the final scene was played out by WWI veteran Robert Comb, who pitched a handful of soil into the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The soil had been collected by the guard from the Pozieres battle-ground in France. As he cast the soil, Comb said, "You're home mate." We will never know who this Australian was. We do know that he is one of the 100,000 Australians who have died in wars this century.

The Unknown Soldier honours the memory of all those men and women who have laid down their lives for Australia. His tomb is a reminder of what we have lost in war. In the words of the then Prime Minister, Paul Keating, "He is all of them and he is one of us."

ANZAC ACTIVITIES 1999

WREATH LAYING – Saturday, 24th April.

The Wreath Laying Service will be held at 4 pm on Saturday, 24th April and all members are to assemble on the corner of Martin Place and Pitt Street, on the G.P.O. side at 3.50 pm and will place wreaths at the Cenotaph at 4 pm.

ANZAC DAY MARCH – Sunday 25th April

Forming up will be the same as previous years for both units – 2/1st in Phillip Street, head on to King Street and rear of 6th Division – 2/2nd in Phillip Street near Martin Place and rear of 7th Division.

Pioneer News subscriptions will be collected prior to march by Gavin Todd for the 2/2nds and by Don Crawford for the 2/1sts.

Subscriptions will also be accepted at the Occidental Hotel by Don Crawford, our new Association Treasurer.

ANZAC REUNION – Sunday, 25th April

The ANZAC Day Reunion Dinner will be held at the Occidental Hotel, 43 York Street, Sydney, so after the march board the train at Museum Station and travel to Wynyard Station. Proceed up escalator, turn right into York Street and hotel is on next corner.

Costing will be: Meal \$15; Beer – Middy \$1.70, Schooner \$2.20, Jug \$6.90.