



Medals of
Ray Bishop

94 years on a proud family can finally mourn a Moruya son in a far off foreign field.

by Michael Gold



Ray Bishop

This article is a description of a visit made by me to the village of Fromelles in northern France to fulfil a long harboured wish to visit the Great War battlefields and cemeteries of France and Belgium, and also to be present at a very special event that was going to take place there.

There is a field in France that will forever be a part of Australia. It lies to the north of the village of Fromelles near Lille and to this day holds many secrets of the young men who fought and died there so long ago in 1916: sacrificed on the altar of ego, indecision and wanton incompetence. I visited this now beautiful farmland in July 2010, and walked through the pristine wheat fields, still dotted with concrete pillboxes from that terrible far off conflict, on a personal pilgrimage of discovery and tribute to so many young men who would never return to their homelands. For this was the exact location, now trodden by many historians such as I, of what in July 1916 was called the diversionary attack at Fleurbaix, but, much later, became styled as the battle of Fromelles. Too late for the frantic mothers, wives and sweethearts throughout country Victoria, and throughout Australia to discover what had happened to their men, many of whom simply disappeared. The courage and mateship displayed that day, 19th July 1916 by the 5th Division AIF, so very recently arrived in France from Egypt, was in every way, equal to any in the whole of WWI, and set the scene for all the AIF gallantry which was to follow. The casualty total over a period of twenty four hours was to prove the worst in Australia's military history and was due in the main to the total incompetence and lack of preparation of British General Sir Richard Haking, and to a lesser extent the 5th Division commander, the detested General James McKay.

Such is history. The Bishop family's part in the action is well explained in the following article by Douglas Parbery. Personally I have for some twenty years studied the events of this particular battle in an effort to get at the truth of what has for many years been an event clouded in mystery and



Michael at the
grave of Ray
Bishop

denial. This interest, apart from a general interest in military history, was born after reading a book written in 1920 by W. H. Downing of the 57th Battalion describing the action and prompting me to take a lifelong interest in his 15th Brigade and its enigmatic and much loved commander Brigadier General Harold Pompey Elliott. Downing's description of the "air being thick with bullets, swishing in a flat lattice of death with hundreds mown down in the flicker of an eyelid, like great rows of teeth knocked from a comb, but still the line went on, thinning and stretching" will always stay with me. My long held desire was to visit the scene of this action and see it for myself. The events of the past few years with the discovery of the burial pits at Pheasant Wood gave me the impetus I needed. I was indeed privileged to make contact with several members of the Bishop family and, also the family of David George Irvin of Bemboka, another identified digger from the Pheasant Wood pits, prior to my departure from Australia. I was invited to join both families at the dedication of the graves of **Raymond Bishop** and **David Irvin** after the main ceremony on 19th July (the 94th Anniversary of the battle). The new Fromelles, Pheasant Wood, cemetery is the first to be constructed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for over 50 years.

During the two days prior to the official ceremony I spent time exploring the battlefield and visiting the existing monuments such as the moving VC Corner Cemetery which contains the remains of 410 unidentified soldiers discovered at the war's end. They are included in the roll of names of 1299 soldiers listed as missing, and recorded at the cemetery. VC Corner stands starkly alone in an area that was then 'no man's land', and over which some of the fiercest fighting took place. The remains of some of the latter names are now, of course identified and it gave me a sense of profound satisfaction and thanks to be able to rub my fingers along the names of Raymond Bishop and David Irvin shortly to be reunited with their families. I also fulfilled an



Cobbers VC Corner

ambition to locate the name of Major Arthur Hutchison of 58th Battalion whose particular gallant act in the battle has always inspired me. He was described by official war historian C.E.W. Bean as a fine example of the best of his generation this country produced. I also was able to visit Le Trou Aid Post Cemetery nearby, with its willow trees by the river rustling in the breeze, guarding the gravestones in peaceful silence. Here are the graves of many Scots of famous name regiments who fell trying to take the same fields a year before in May 1915. This is a truly beautiful



Menin Gate

place and made a deep and residing impression upon me. I was fortunate to meet up with several knowledgeable and likeminded people with whom I could swap information, including one,

Andrew Duncan from Melbourne, whose uncle George was thought to be buried at Pheasant Wood but has, as yet, not been identified. We made plans to visit Ypres, now known as Ieper, the next day and experience the Menin Gate nightly ceremony. This we did and were charmed by the ancient city and marvelled how it had been restored so meticulously from the total devastation of 1914-1918. Our travels that day took us around the lovely Belgian countryside on visits to Tyne Cot, Sanctuary Wood, Vimy Ridge, Polygon Wood, memorials and cemeteries.



Tyne Cot Cemetery

We also visited the pretty village of Paschendaele, trying all the while to assimilate the enormity of what had happened here now almost a hundred years ago. An impossible task.



Monday the 19th July dawned fine and sunny and we embarked early on one of a legion of coaches laid on to ferry relatives, spectators and serving personnel from Lille to Fromelles for the ceremony and dedication of the new cemetery and final resting place of soldiers believed missing for 94 years. Later in the day I was to gaze into the faces of

some of the close relatives of those now buried here and observe the emotion generated by an event they had never thought possible. This will be my most abiding memory. The welcome given to the visitors, particularly those of us from Australia, by the flag waving local population all out in their streets, was heart warming. In all there would be a crowd close to six thousand people by the time the ceremony commenced. The horse drawn gun carriage bearing the coffin of the last soldier to a lonely drumbeat, arrived just before noon, preceded by a marching prince of Wales, Governor General and other dignitaries. They took their seats around the Cross of Sacrifice and the moving burial service, conducted by chaplains from Britain, Australia and Ireland, got under way, commencing with an emotional singing of the hymn "Abide With Me" and ending with a rifle volley salute and the Last Post, played on a recently exhumed WWI bugle. The laying of wreaths, speeches, and singing of the three anthems followed in the bright sunshine of a beautiful day and momentous occasion. It was a thrill to be just a tiny part of it.



Fromelles Ceremony

Following the main ceremony the relatives, kin and invitees gathered inside the cemetery and were addressed by the Governor General, Ms Quentin Bryce, AC, before moving off to locate individual graves. I met up with members of the Bishop family at Raymond's gravestone and with his photograph and medal replicas placed upon it, held a short service of dedication and remembrance in the presence of a British Army chaplain. A moment in time that will always be with me. Later I was to gather with the Irvin family at David's gravestone in a different part of the cemetery.

My thoughts in conclusion of this article are that I had done something really worthwhile, formed a bond with some lovely people, and completed a mission I had wanted to accomplish. To those kind enough to read this to the end I urge you to visit this part of France and maybe place a poppy on the graves of Raymond and David.

