

Marianne Van Velzen, *Missing in Action: Australia's World War I Graves Services, an astonishing story of misconduct, fraud and hoaxing* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin 2018). Pp. xx, 267. Paperback, Illus., Select Bibliography. ISBN: 9781760632809. RRP: AUD \$29.99.

In 2014 Peter Barton published his masterly account of the disastrous July 1916 battle of Fromelles, during which the inexperienced 5th Division of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the British 61st Division suffered seven thousand casualties for no military advantage.¹ A significant part of his narrative deals with the re-emergence of a mass grave of British and Australian dead that had been inexplicably missed when the battlefields of the Western Front were cleared of human remains and permanent cemeteries organised in the immediate aftermath of the war. There is an exceptionally good account of the bureaucratic processes developed during the war for recording and reporting casualties by all belligerent nations, which brings to light the dubious activities of the Australian Graves Services (AGS) on the old Western Front in the years immediately after the war.²

It was not part of Barton's brief to delve into the troubled history of the AGS in any great detail. Now, Marianne Van Velzen has attempted to do so. Amid the padding and the repetitions that mar the book, which is aimed at a popular audience, she draws out the internal squabbling, the evidence of theft and fraud and the deliberate covers-up of the false information given to bereaved members of the public by weak second-rate Australian officers, both in London and in France. In her own words:

Poor leadership, mismanagement and financial abuse marked those first years in which the AGS was shaped. It was by no means a happy ship. With their headquarters across the Channel in London, the men, most of them coarsened and scarred by the war, were left behind in France and Belgium without proper guidance. Quarrels, insinuations, distrust and suspiciousness among the men led to an inquiry in France; after a grave turned up empty, accusations of hoaxing led to another inquiry in London (p.xx).

The picture that emerges is of a severely dysfunctional organisation unable or unwilling to get a grip on what, at the sharp end, was a disgusting and soul-destroying job, viz. trying to identify, on a large scale and over a very wide area of France and Flanders, the remains of human beings in various stages of decomposition (pp.106-107). A certain emotional temperament was needed for the job, together with an empathetic understanding of its importance for the many families whose relatives were still missing. But if Van Velzen is correct, in the Executive part of the organisation little compassion was felt for these families, or much understanding of their need for closure.

Much of Van Velzen's book is taken up with describing the various disputes that occurred between the officers in charge of the three main sections of the ASG on the continent, which were based at Villers-Bretonneux, Poperinghe and Amiens.³ The arguments and accusations were trivial, merely demonstrating the pettiness, petulance, ambition and small-mindedness of the individuals involved. But this focus on in-fighting within the AGS perhaps helps to

¹ Peter Barton, *The Lost Legions of Fromelles. The Mysteries Behind One of the Most Devastating Battles of the Great War* (London 2014), p.270.

² Ibid, Chap. 17. Until October 1919 the AGS had been known as the Australian Graves Detachment.

³ There was also a unit at Maricourt, known as the Monumental Section.

explain why discipline was so slack in the organisation. With supervision lacking (p.81), it is not surprising that army stores were systematically stolen (sometimes cars and even an ambulance, taken from the docks in Calais and subsequently found burnt out with its supplies missing). Soldiers in uniform either part-owned or worked behind the bars of estaminets and the primitive barracks were shared with prostitutes—when a fire broke out in the lodgings of Australians in Villers-Bretonneux, local inhabitants saw half a dozen naked women escape the flames (pp.49, 113-118,125). Sgt. Bilko would have been in his element. Van Velzen makes allowances for these activities by reference to the hideousness of the job (p.107) yet fails to explain why the majority of the Labour Corps was not so undisciplined.

It is unlikely that the rank and file had much respect for their superiors, who lamentably failed to set an example. Lt William Lee, OC at Amiens, although married lived with a French woman; Capt. Charles Kingston, OC at Villers-Bretonneux, went drinking with his men and was known to them as ‘Charlie the Boozer’ or ‘Bastard’ (pp.28, 27). He made little effort to keep his men in check. Lee and Kingston despised each other and were repeatedly ‘dobbing’ the other in to Colonel Quentin Spedding, who from London had command of the AGS until January 1920.⁴ On one thing, however, they agreed: Major Alfred Allen, OC at Poperinghe with overall supervisory control of all AGS sections in France and Flanders, was unfit for his role. Allen’s background was with the Red Cross and his rank was honorary. This made him unacceptable to officers who had served in the army during the war. He was not a real ‘Digger’.

It was less the internal wrangling than complaints from French citizens that led to an inquiry into the working of the AGS, which was held over a period of ten days in March and April 1920. Under orders from Andrew Fisher, former Labor Prime Minister and in 1920 Australian High Commissioner in London, a secret court of inquiry was ordered. It comprised three men connected to the AIF, chosen by Major George Phillips, the new head of the AGS in London. He was a disabled veteran who moved to London from Lewes in Sussex, where he had been Governor of the AIF Detention Barracks (p.72).⁵ The inquiry was to be held in Villers-Bretonneux, away from prying eyes, although it adjourned to London after a few days following widespread rumours that one of the court members was angling for a job with the AGS in France.⁶ Inexplicably, Van Velzen does not give the results of the inquiry in detail. Barton, fortunately, does. The court made thirty-five findings, based on evidence of frequent drunkenness, ‘staff routinely sharing their quarters with “women of ill-repute”, drunken discharge of weapons to the imminent danger of others, improper use of military vehicles, a comprehensive lack of record-keeping, carelessness resulting in fire, idleness, attempted sale of an ambulance, and sundry misdemeanours involving tyres, fuel, military equipment, etc’. In its general remarks, the court stated that ‘unless immediate, and drastic, action is taken for proper control, this effort to honour the dead shall only be a means of bringing shame and disgrace upon the good name, fame and reputation of Australia’.⁷ In keeping with the need for secrecy, Lee, Kingston and the Other Ranks involved in the various scams were posted back to Australia, where they were demobbed in the usual way. No-one was charged with an offence. It was all quietly swept under the carpet.

⁴ He left under a cloud, suspected of accepting a bribe to allow a French family to remove and re-bury a relative.

⁵ For the Australian military prison in Lewes, see Paul Cobb, “Diggers in Strife”: The Australian Military Prison, Lewes, Sussex 1917-19’, *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association*, no. 40 (1994), pp.9-10.

⁶ The court member, Major Alan MacLean, was removed and sent back to Australia.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp.366-67.

The one officer retained in France was Alfred Allen. Aided by friends' support in Australian newspapers, he was developing a fine reputation for his uncanny ability to discover the remains of soldiers whose relatives had made personal representations to the AGS in London. Using his 'divining rod' (a steel probe) and working on his own, Allen purportedly found between seventy and one hundred bodies a week, even in areas already 'cleared' (p.155). This was almost certainly hyperbole, but it helped to sustain the reputation of the AGS.

Whether or not Allen was deceiving some of these bereaved families by falsely claiming newly discovered remains to be their relatives will probably never be known. What is known, as Van Velzen relates, is that he attempted to persuade the prominent family of Lt Robert Burns, 5th Australian Machine Gun Company—reported missing at Fromelles on 20 July 1916—that he had found Burns' remains in a cemetery at Fournes. When a family member, Cecil Smith, persisted in a request to be present during the exhumation, Allen began to backtrack. Despite considerable efforts by the AGS, including Phillips, to keep the affair under wraps, Smith was present when the grave was opened. It was empty.

Under pressure from Senator George Pearce, who had been receiving a series of complaints from Lt Lee in Australia, another official but secret inquiry was held in London in December 1920. Smith was not called to give evidence and the main prosecution witness was discredited, even though the information he supplied clearly showed that there had been an attempted cover-up between Allen and Phillips in the Burns case. The result was the same as before. It appeared not be in the interests of the army or the Australian government for this dirty linen to be aired. Within a year the AGS was disbanded and the Imperial War Graves Commission took over responsibility for the remaining missing Australians.

Despite the disorganised nature of Van Velzen's book, her subject is worth bringing to public attention and not just because it might explain why the mass grave at Fromelles was not discovered at the time. It also highlights the lengths to which the Australian authorities were prepared to go in order to cover up the lack of discipline that had always dogged the AIF.⁸ In addition, it also subtly undermines the Anzac Legend, which still inspires grossly exaggerated comments on the AIF's role in the war.⁹ Finally, the various forms of malpractice rumoured to be occurring, such as dividing bodies into two and filling a sack with straw and passing it off as human remains, remind us that the beautifully awful, regular lines of gravestones in the CWGC cemeteries are a sanitized version of the reality of death and its aftermath during the Great War. Knowing now how the AGS operated, can we really be sure that the names on some Australian gravestones are accurate?

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⁸ For the Australian government's policy of playing down AIF indiscipline, see E.J. (Jack) Garstang, 'Crime and Punishment on the Western Front: the Australian Imperial Force and British Army Discipline', PhD thesis, Murdoch University 2009; Peter Stanley, *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force* (Millers Point, NSW, 2010).

⁹ For the latest assertion that the AIF won the war, see the article by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott in *The Spectator Australia*, 5 May 2018, p.v.

