Missing Diggers mystery solved

A Melbourne man’s obsession with the fate of hundreds of Diggers missing since 1916 may lead to the largest military mass grave discovered in Western Europe in decades. NEIL WILSON reports

A BOUT 100 descendants of Diggers gathered inside the Shrine yesterday to recall the bloodiest night in the nation’s history, the tragic yet little known battle of Fromelles.

As usual, Richmond school teacher Lambis Eizenges observed and led the annual service for the 500 casualties — more than 1900 killed — on the night of July 19, 1916.

There was an announcement of a new plaque for St Kilda Rd, a replica of Peter Corlett’s Cobbers on the Fromelles battlefield.

The Australians’ debut on the Western Front was a fiasco, a chance at glory overgrown by ground doomed to failure.

Now, 91 years later, that tragic site is back in the spotlight.

Starting evidence has emerged to back claims that at least 102 missing Diggers from the Fromelles battle were buried by German troops in unmarked mass graves.

A scientific survey in May at a field at Pheasant Wood, a few kilometres behind the old German frontline, concluded that site had been disturbed since 1916. British aerial photos taken days after the battle showed eight large pits.

Researchers believe that as many as 300 of their missing compatriots may also be at Pheasant Wood, unmarked since 1916, causing a sensation among historians.

Australian Defence Minster Peter Dutton said Mr Eizenges has given a fantastic result in the push towards a scientific approach which has been so long overdue.

He has decided to conduct an exploratory dig on the site, which could prove crucial for historians.

Australian army historians believe this may be the site of the military mass grave found in Western Europe since the last war.

And if so, it comes down to the efforts over five years of one indistinguishable Melburnian.

Lambis Eizenges arrived in Australia as a tot with his Greek family in 1954.

He has an obsession with Fromelles, born out of the respect he developed for the survivors, some of whom he met in the 1990s.

His home in Northcote is covered in books, papers, letters and charts on the Fromelles battle.

"Fromelles was a national disaster which should never be forgotten and we should do everything we can to recover from the thousands of anonymous pits," he says.

Since 2013, Mr Eizenges, with a few supporters, has gathered evidence to back his seemingly fanciful claim that aerial photos sourced from the Imperial War Museum showed graves behind German lines in 1916.

"In this case I have to admit to Lambis being right and I was wrong," says Army History Unit head Roger Lee.

"It wasn’t so much doubt they were graves, but the fact I could not believe we would recover such evidence, possibly have missed such graves before.

The British army’s Graves Registration Unit was busy in the area in some post-World War 1 of recovering 1000s of bodies or in some cases, bones and remains.

About 200,000 men were buried and reburied in new war cemeteries.

In 1921 the French, with agreement of all Allied powers, sent an expeditionary force to the area.

Since then, occasional resurection of search terms or in road works are re-interred at a number of cemeteries.

After his second visit to Fromelles in May, Lambis Eizenges started looking into rumours that there were graves behind Pheasant Wood.

First he got the 1916 British aerial photos. He learned the Demasiut family, who own the site, had never been able to grow a decent crop there.

Nearby VC Corner Cemetery is the 1916 dead and missing Australians from the Fromelles battle, but the bodies of 171 men on that honour roll were never found.

Mr Eizenges uncovered two more contemporaneous accounts of mass graves in the area.

A Red Cross photo taken in 1919 told the parents of one of the missing men their son may have been buried in one of "five large British collective graves at Pheasant Wood."

"Fromelles was a national disaster which should never be forgotten and we should do everything we can to recover our Diggers from anonymous pits," Mr Eizenges also found an account from Australian Field Marshall Sir John chem, in the 1930s, that he saw the bodies of Diggers being dumped into five mass graves in a paddock behind German lines.

"I know about 20 families, relatives of these men, across Australia crying out for resolution," Mr Eizenges said.

By May 2005, Mr Eizenges and history enthusiasts John Fielding and Ward Selby, whose father fought at Fromelles, had enough evidence to convince the Australian Army History Unit to convene an expert panel. They got their hearing.

Then former Office of War Graves chief Air Vice Marshal Gary Gask produced analyses that 165 Diggers were missing from Fromelles.

The expert group spent a year trying to prove the bodies buried at a later date were recovered from that site, but no record could be found, Mr Eizenges said.

In 2006, as the potential enormity of a find dawned on history enthusiasts, a private group emerged out of Sydney led by lawyer Chris Riedy. "I didn’t think the army would ever get to the point where they would get the job done. It needs a dig," Mr Riedy said.

So he recruited his own experts, led by Sydney University’s Emeritus Professor Richard Wright, who led the UN team that exhumed mass graves from the 1990s Bosnian conflict, and asked the French Archeological Service for permission to dig a test pit.

The move outraged the army’s Mr Lee, who responded to a French query about Mr Riedy by telling him he had no official status.

Veterans’ Affairs Minister Bruce Billson was insisting with all his powers to involve digging so there was no chance of disturbing any remains.

The expert panel finally reconvened in December 2006, and approved a survey of the site by Bastille specialist Dr Tony Pollard, who Dr Pollard’s team began work at Pheasant Wood in late May. Mr Eizenges was there, having paid his own fare. Dr Pollard’s team of six conducted a range of sophisticated tests, which tended to support the grave pits theory.

Most exciting was a standard metal-detector scan, which unearthed two Australi-­an medals just beneath the grass.

"They were located very close to one of the pit sites, so it looks like they fell from bodies as they were being prepared for burial," Dr Pollard said.

No Australians fought at the site, so historians believe they must have come from either French — or bodies.

"The next phase will have to be a full-scale dig to dig some trial trenches to establish beyond all doubt whether the bodies still remain there and how many," Dr Pollard said.

This move is likely be a British, Australian and French joint project.

Dr Pollard’s technical report is with minister Billson. He is likely to reconvene the expert historians’ panel before making a final call.

Mr Eizenges hopes a DNA data base could be built up in the slim chance of matching remains with living Australians in the long term.

"German offered the Aus-­tralian commandancy the chance of a collector to collect all of our dead — he refused," Mr Eizenges said.

"More than 50 years on, we may set right what should have happened then day in July, 1916."

Determined: Lambis Eizenges dug deep into history. Picture: ANDREW TAUBER

Helping: Lambis (left) helps survey the field.

LAMBIS EIZENGEDES