

HISTORY SLEUTH by MAJ Tony Park

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Hours of studying 90-year-old maps, war diaries and records in the Australian War Memorial may pay off for historian Ric Pelvin in his quest to identify the remains of five diggers uncovered in Belgium last year.

The remains were discovered during pipeline excavation works, near the hamlet of Westhoek.

They were found in an area which was a temporary burial ground for Australian soldiers killed in a series of battles in 1917, known collectively as the Third Battle of Ypres.

The Army History Unit (AHU) was tasked with identifying the remains and much of the work fell to Mr Pelvin, who is a consultant historian to the unit.

"It was never going to be an easy task, not least of all because dog tags in the First World War were made of cardboard, so they rarely survive," Mr Pelvin said.

Some of the men's uniforms and badges, however, were reasonably well preserved, including a circular colour patch, indicating that at least one of the men was a member of the 12th or 13th Brigade, which had eight battalions between them.



Mystery revealed: Ric Pelvin has been busy searching through old maps and war diaries in an attempt to identify the remains of six WWI diggers.

Through studying records of actions fought in the area and the Australian War Memorial's burial records - sometimes pencilled entries in notebooks - Mr Pelvin was able to come up with a list of men who may have been buried near Westhoek, but whose remains had not been moved to a permanent cemetery after the war.

"After the war, the Belgians needed to rebuild their infrastructure as a priority, and it seems the course of a road through the temporary cemetery was altered, and covered the remains of the men who were rediscovered last year," he said.

His research has identified a list of seven possible matches for the five sets of remains.

AHU is now awaiting the results of a scientific investigation by the Belgian authorities, to see if further insights can be gained into physical characteristics, such as the men's height, and evidence of wounds and other injuries.