

MISSING WWI SOLDIERS IDENTIFIED

(Press Release: 4 September 2007)

The remains of two missing Australian WWI soldiers have been positively identified following extensive research collaboration between Australian and Belgium authorities.

The Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, Mr Bruce Billson, said the investigation started last year when five sets of unidentified remains, believed to be Australian missing war dead, were discovered near the small Belgian town of Westhoek.

“Based on historical research a list of possible candidates was drafted and released to the public in March this year, and three families subsequently came forward and offered DNA samples,” Mr Billson said.

“The positive identification of two of the soldiers is good news, and I congratulate the Army on their approach to the research process. By engaging the scientists, we were able to establish a physical link between the list of names and the remains.”



Local Belgian archeological group removing topsoil from the grave site.

The two identified soldiers are Sergeant George Calder of Gladstone, Victoria, and Private John Hunter of Nanango, Queensland. Both soldiers lost their lives in the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26 September 1917, and were buried in a temporary cemetery near the battlefield. Their remains were not uncovered during the post-war battlefield clearance operations which relocated remains to permanent war cemeteries throughout France and Belgium.



Portions of the recovered uniforms showing the colour patch which is currently being examined by the AFP forensics division.

Minister Billson expressed his condolences to the family of a third soldier, Lieutenant Corrigan of the 22nd Battalion, as DNA results have established he is not linked to the remains.

“I am very grateful to all the families who provided DNA samples and I appreciate how this involvement may have increased the anticipation of finding their lost relative,” Mr Billson said.

“I empathise with the sense of loss and disappointment the family of LT Corrigan may now be experiencing.”

The Army will continue attempting to identify the remains of the other three soldiers using DNA samples which have been preserved, but it is unlikely that any further identifications will be made before the soldiers are laid to rest later this year.

The five sets of remains are due to be reinterred in The Buttes Military Cemetery, Zonnebeke, on the 4th of October 2007 at 3.00 p.m. The Governor-General of Australia, the Vice Chief of the Australian Defence Force, the Prime Minister of New Zealand and the Chief of Belgian Defence will all be present at the ceremony. The Army will fly two representatives of each of the families of the two identified soldiers to Belgium to participate in the ceremony.



A map of the Westhoek district where the remains were discovered. The red sections indicate arcs of fire. In the lower left section, the 2 dots to the right of the crook in the road (right of "52nd") mark where the remains were found.