



54th Battalion honour guard.



# Battle of Fromelles Remembered 100 Years On

Story and Images Marilyn Collins.

There is a beautiful memorial that stands today on the Fromelles of a soldier carrying a wounded comrade on his back:  
“Don’t forget me cobber”

**T**uesday 19th July 2016 commemorated the 100th anniversary of one of the bloodiest battles our country has ever experienced. The devastating death of 2,000 young men and over 5,533 injured at Fromelles, France goes down as one of the country’s darkest days – never to be forgotten as the greatest Australian loss of life in one night.

Many families back here in Australia could describe the loss of a son or husband with one word; they simply said ‘Poizieres’, the ‘Somme’ or ‘Passchendaele’.

The Cressy family, originally from Boolaroo, a Lake Macquarie suburb, lost a son and brother in a battle that was rarely mentioned - the Battle of Fromelles - now commemorated as the worst ever in our country’s history.

There were more battles to come, but none with the loss of

life as great as the battle that took place in 24 hours outside a small village in Northern France. This was the time an Australian division was to make an attack in France – the eastern Front.

Geoffrey Blainey, a prominent Australian historian, wrote that the worst effect of the war on Australia was the loss of ‘all those talented people who would have become prime ministers and premiers, judges, divines, engineers, teachers, doctors, poets, inventors and farmers, the mayors of towns, and leaders of trade unions, and the fathers of another generation of Australians’.

One of the Hunter commemorations of the 100th anniversary was held at Sandgate Cemetery to honour Private Henry (Harry) Alfred Cressy, a well-educated loco driver from Boolaroo, who died on 19th July 1916. >



Descendants of World War I Private Edward Cressy - many travelled from overseas to commemorate his brother, Private Harry Cressy at Sandgate Cemetery. AJM Photography.

The commemorative ceremony was held by the unmarked gravesite of Harry's parents, Brougham and Ann Cressy.

The ceremony was well attended by descendants of Henry's brother, Edward Cressy, many travelling from New Zealand to attend wearing the colour patch of purple and green representing the 54th Battalion, along with relatives, friends and members of the Friends of Sandgate Cemetery and the public.

Harry's older brother, Edward Brougham Cressy, suffered a gunshot wound at Fromelles and was injured twice more during his service, but survived the war and returned home in January 1919. Forty-two years later he was laid to rest at Sandgate, aged 69.

Catherine Murray, Harry Cressy's grandniece, compiled and read the following story of his life.

Henry Alfred Cressy, or Harry as he was known to his family, was my grandmother's brother. My grandmother, Ella Elizabeth or Lily as she was known, was 16 when her elder brothers, Edward Brougham (Bro) and Harry, enlisted in 1915.

Australia was a different place in 1915. England was regarded as the mother country and when war broke out in 1914 there was no question that Australia would be there. We will never know why the two Cressy boys enlisted but enlist they did, Bro at the age of 24 and Harry 22 years of age.

On the 10 August 1915, Edward Brougham Cressy (Harry's elder brother) enlisted and perhaps this was the impetus for Harry to enlist some six days later on the 16 August 1915.

Both were destined to become part of the 54th Battalion. The brothers trained at Liverpool and left Australia from Woolloomooloo on the same ship, the Aeneas, on the 21 December 1915. They were farewelled by their Aunt Emily, Bro's wife Kit and their sister Emily. The last Kit and Emily saw of Harry and Bro was from a launch that cruised beside the ship for some time as it left the harbour.

Harry's personality comes through in his well-written diaries on how he passed the time en route to Egypt watching boxing bouts, playing cards and attending church services quite regularly.

Harry and Bro arrived in Egypt on the 18 January 1916. Harry found the heat and talks about the effect of long marches where many suffered from the heat as 'worse than being in the line', (the words of an innocent young man not to know what was to come). He and Bro trained preparing for the battles to come. He was a young man often describing things that were new and exciting as 'bosker'. Today, young men his age would say 'awesome!' He also managed to send gifts home to his family.

Harry and his brother left Egypt aboard the Caledonia on the 19 June, bound for Marseille in France. They travelled north to the bay of France. When travelling north, Harry would notice many things about the country he was to see for. The many women who were in mourning, the old men guarding the railway and the many locomotives that they passed on their journey north that impressed him as locomotive driver. He wrote that 'it was a country worth seeing' as he travelled through the French countryside.



Nieces of Harry Cressy - Evelyn Kibble and Maisie Gibson. AJM Photography.

They arrived at the front on around 4 July and were on the front line by the 16 July. During this time, preparations were in place to create a diversionary attack to take away the German focus on the battle of the Somme. The plan was to attack the 'Sugarloaf', a high ground near the village of Fromelles that the Germans had held for at least 18 months. This would mean that the Germans would not be able to send extra troops to the Somme. Some of our force were seasoned Gallipoli veterans; others, like Harry and Bro, were to have a different role.

The Germans were well prepared, with comfortable, reinforced dugouts, secure communication lines and reinforced concrete bunkers. Among the ranks of German soldiers was a young Adolf Hitler. If only the battle had a different outcome, it may have changed the whole course of history.

The battle began at about 11am on 19 July with a bombardment, which was to take out the German trenches, but it had little effect on the well-reinforced German lines. At about 2pm that day the Germans began their own bombardment, which severely damaged the allied lines.

Sometime after this, the battle plan for our troops began. The 14th brigade, which Harry belonged to, had to cross about 400 yards to get to the German trenches. This began at about 6pm, which in Northern France at that high point of summer is broad daylight. So 400 yards, open ground to well-reinforced German bunk

The continuous, accurate fire of German machine guns, which had survived the allied bombardment earlier in the day, killed many.

We do know that Harry made it to the German trenches and we know that sometime after that a sniper bullet killed him. We know that Bro was wounded earlier in the battle. This probably saved his life. Colonel Cass, who commanded the 54th, wrote that he lost all his company commanders

The fate of those like Harry who fell behind German lines was not known for another 95 years. There is a poignant record of this time. Harry's parents, Brougham and Ann, wrote to the Australian Imperial Force from October 1916 right up to 1922. They requested information about where Harry was.

The letters go backwards and forwards asking for Harry's personal effects, which they knew must be somewhere, as they had had a letter from Private Wilson who had been present at Harry's death. His mother Ann writes that she knows you can have an inscription placed on the headstone, not knowing that Harry's resting place would be unknown for another 95 years.

They received a memorial plaque for Harry, and his personal effects were eventually found; a money belt, wallet, Bible, cards, photos, letters and diaries. They were never to know where Harry lay, in an unmarked grave near a little village in Northern France. >



This is a treasured family photo taken outside the Cressy house on Creek Road, Boolaroo, after August 1915 when both boys enlisted. It depicts a loving family including Brougham and Ann Cressy, the boys' parents, Catherine, Kit (Edward's wife) and other family members surrounding the two boys standing proudly in uniform.

For 95 years, Harry and his comrades lay unnoticed in that in France until a Melbourne schoolteacher, Lambis Englezos, focused his attention on the lost diggers of Fromelles, and through his tenacious attention to detail the remains of the diggers were found in Pheasant Wood, Fromelles, in 2008. Today, the recovery work still continues.

My sister and I visited that in 2009. It is a quiet, peaceful corner of the village and I will be forever grateful to the French people who honour our dead and carefully maintain their resting places throughout the of France.

Late in January 2010, burial parties comprising soldiers from Britain and Australia reburied with full military honours the remains of soldiers killed during the battle. I remember watching those sombre scenes on television and I knew that wanted to be there for the dedication of the cemetery in July 2010. Harry's remains were iden through DNA from a female in the family line in March that year and I travelled with two of my sisters and other Cressy descendants.

There were many tears but also a great sense of pride and gratitude that those young sons, brothers and husbands that lost their lives 100 years ago today, far away from the blue skies and great land of ours, have a resting place and will be forever honoured because they now have a headstone. I know that Brougham and Ann Cressy would be happy that their son, Harry, now had a resting place, although many miles away. Lest we forget." 📌



Henry Alfred Cressy's grave in the little village of Fromelles, in northern France, the Pheasant Wood 1st World War Cemetery. The inscription reads: "Henry Alfred Cressy's Born 5 December, 1893, Died 19th July, 1916. In your family's hearts and minds forever. We won't forget."