



Johan at the grave site of John Hunter June 2008

Johan Vandewalle lives close to Polygon Wood and knows every metre and every battle fought in this once battle torn area. He is a passionate, sensitive man who reveres the role the Australians played in the defence of Flanders.

In September 2007 a young friend of his, Tom Heyman, was operating a mechanical digger preparing a trench for a pipeline. He stopped immediately when he saw he had started to uncover human bones.

Johan's story of the recovery of these Australians has been told only to his friends. This is his account of the recovery of those five Australians, the Zonnebeke Five.

Johan led the team of archaeologists in the recovery of the remains. He could see there were at least three more bodies, meaning the narrow asphalt road had to be removed. There were five bodies and fragments of a sixth.

Each of the first four recovered had been wrapped in a blanket and tied with signal wire top and bottom. Each was then carefully unwrapped to reveal a complete skeleton still with fragments of uniforms, rising sun badges, faded colour patches and boots.

Johan has been excavating such sites for 15 years and "I have seen many things above and below ground, but I will never forget No. 5".

The fifth soldier had been carefully wrapped in a groundsheet and it had formed a perfect death mask that looked "alive" and completely serene. His arms were folded across his chest and his uniform was intact, showing the rising sun badges on the collar.

Johan asked the soldier for forgiveness before unwrapping him.

Tears welled in Johan's eyes, and when he looked at his colleague, Kristof, he saw a tear roll down his cheek. He had never seen or heard of a body having such an impression on anyone.

Johan noted the man was very tall and had a strong chin and jaw line. He put the soldier carefully into his coffin, watching for the smallest item that could be missed. When the torso was removed Johan and Kristof decided to remove his well-preserved boots for cleaning and look for any identifying marks. Johan told the dead soldier he was going to remove his boots so they could wash them. As the first one came off so easily, he had the feeling the soldier was helping. It took all his courage to remove the second.

After extensive investigation of the find and other facts by Belgian and Australian authorities, the search for their possible identities came up with two possibilities. These were confirmed via DNA and this is the first time DNA has been used as a means to identify the remains of World War I Australian soldiers. One was a Queenslander, Private 3504 John Hunter of the 49th Battalion AIF. An additional piece of evidence confirming his identity revealed it was his younger brother who wrapped him so carefully in the groundsheet. The other soldier was a West Australian, Sergeant George Calder of the 51st Battalion AIF. The remaining three are still unidentified.

Bright sun surprisingly appeared on the afternoon of October 4 as the Zonnebeke Five were buried with full military honours at Buttes New British Cemetery. That burst of brilliant sun was a brief reminder to all of us of the Australia these soldiers had left behind to fight and die in the mud of a cold, nightmarish landscape. A detachment from the Australian North Queensland 51st Battalion was at the gravesites and fired the salute. This was the same unit to which Sergeant John Calder belonged.

