

Open letter

Subject: Zonnebeke 5 - identification human remains of Australian soldiers in Zonnebeke.

With this letter I wish to report a few things that have more than 2 years in the stomach, and a number of questions to which I, so far still, never received a clear answer. With this letter I also like to clear out a number of things for everyone that has been involved or is interested in this topic.

Knowing that this topic touch me very close to my heart, and after all kinds of foolish messages in the media, I feel myself compelled to distribute this single statement.

In July 2006 a contractor was engaged in drawing lines for the gas supply in the Frezenbergstraat in Zonnebeke, Belgium. I contacted the contractor and clarified with him the importance of the disclosure or reporting of certain discoveries (human remains). You must know that the works were closely followed by as well local collectors as by professionals. I asked the chief of plant of contractor Vandenberghe to contact me when potential discoveries would be done.

The day after I was contacted by a local residents, with the message that during the works in the Frezenbergstraat human remains were found. When I came on the spot, I could only conclude that the contractor himself already had searched the matter. I have also uncovered those remains and found two legs with shoes, a jaw and a bottom and top - dental prostheses. The rest of the body was removed by an earlier pipeline draw. I spoke with the contractor to examine this in the sequel to faster reporting.

Middle September 2006, I suddenly get a phone from Tom Heyman, the team leader of the contractor in the Frezenbergstraat. Those were his words: Johan? Johan the excavator?..... Yes,... You must come immediately, we have found two skulls. It is serious.

I went to the site and committed consultation with the team on how to proceed with the works and on the same time make it possible to excavate the bodies on an archaeological responsible way. Subsequently, Mr. D. Demey of Areo7 (Responsible archaeologist for the Ypres area) was informed of the discovery and Mr. Smessaert of the police. Meanwhile, I was already started with the widening of the working pit to allow the necessary space for an archaeological excavation. Later that day I found traces of a 3rd body.

The next morning at 7:30 am I contacted Mayor Cardoen of Zonnebeke and asked them to come to the spot. The mayor asked me "Johan, what do you want?". I replied ".. that you not try to get me out of that pit. And if you would try to do so, I will lay myself in that pit, next to those boys. ". Some time later, the curator of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele arrived on the spot. This was informed by a local collector. I reported it clear "I will finish the work that I started". He sent me a few more people to assist in the excavation (Mr. K. Blieck, assistant MMP and Mr. B. Heyvaert, temporary employee MMP). The commander of "Belgian War Graves" coordinated and led to the actual excavation site. He gave me the necessary workspace and instructed the staff of the MMP to assist me.

The excavation of these 5 mortal remains for 5 full days of intense work was an very special experience for me, which has a close association to these casualties. This emotional involvement is surely one of the reasons that I now (after years) publish my story.

In the aftermath of excavation of the 5 Australians and tell today; there happened several things where the reasons are unknown for me, and where I can't find a reasonable explanation for. It was agreed by all concerned that there would be a meeting with all involved peoples to lay our information. Everyone would be kept informed of further investigation. I was never contacted by the MMP and served through the media or other channels the results of the investigation to ascertain.

Why?

When the 5 soldiers were reburied in October 2007, received neither I nor Tom Heyman, who is actually the key figure in this whole story, any invitation from the MMP. There were however plenty of people invited by the council who have little or nothing to do with the matter had. Exactly the same happened some years ago on 21st October 2004 when a soldier, John Robertson Thomson, was buried. Stefaan Vermeulen, which found the body in his garden then also were not invited.

Why?

In all publications and press who were dispersed by the MMP, it stated that the 5 bodies were salvaged by a team of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele. I've never on the payroll of the MMP before, neither I have worked for the museum. The name of Tom Heyman or myself have been blocked from any text. Tom had the correct attitude and above all the courage, when they find the mortal remains, to stop the works and to for fill the reporting requirements, what was contrary to the instructions of his employer. Without Tom the 5 Australians would be disappeared in the shovel of the digger. The ignoring of the instructions of his boss to mention human remains, has cost him his job later. **Why no mention of this in the official press texts of the MMP? Why no sign of gratitude?**

Last year the mayor of Zonnebeke, Mr. Cardoen, was along with its councillor in Australia. On Wednesday, August 15th, 2007 the mayor did "the story" of the Zonnebeke 5 on the radio,.... or better a version of the story. So I could hear that it was not me who called them to inform him about the discovery (and invited him), but his conservator did it (so he said in the broadcasting). No word about Tom Heyman Johan Vandewalle. When I confronted the mayor with that interview, I received this answer ".. oh those peoples over there don't know that. "

Why proclaiming falsehoods?

The full interview with Mayor Cardoen in Australia you can listen to on this site:

<http://www.wikiupload.com/comment.php?id=57221>

On September 9th 2007, historic monument day in Flanders, the site "Cryer Farm" Zonnebeke opened to the public and guided tours are being cared for by a delegate of the MMP. He tells the visitors that the Australian soldiers of the 4th ID, the same as the 5 excavated Australian soldiers, resident at Cryer Farm and explain the link to the funeral ceremony on October 4, 2007. These cases are historically incorrect and vexatious. **Why using (abusing) World War One casualties and entrapment them in a story which has to serve as publicity for an event? Why telling lies to the people?**

The explanation of the guide can be found here: <http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=-okhXYyglgc>

On Thursday, October 4th, 2007 was the funeral of the 5 Australian soldiers held in Polygonwood to Zonnebeke, immediately followed by a weekend full of theme-related celebrations organised by the municipality. Personally, I think a funeral is not an occasion for festivities and receptions to launch. After the funeral the conservator of the local museum proclaimed " We have scored well at the media." Fortunately the organisation of the funeral himself lay in the hands of the Australian authorities. **Why using a funeral to get in the media?**

In August 2008 came the Australian announced that a third body of the 5 casualties was identified by professional DNA research. His name was Private Richard George Storey. Also now came a press circulated by the Memorial Museum Passchendaele, in which we can read the following cases: (Source: <http://www.wo1.be/ned/mainnav.html>)

"The Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 led all in a good way and started the historical research."

The excavation of the bodies was led by D. Demey of Areo7 (Responsible archaeologist for the Ypres area) together with the service Belgian War Graves. The historical research was led by Mr. Roger Lee of the Army History Unit in Australia. This is in contrast to the contents of the press text.

"The name was not released earlier by the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 out of respect for the family and to leave the honour of the release to the Australian authorities who had done all what was possible in cooperation and support for the detection of the family members."

Again, it appears that nothing is less true. On 09/11/2006 in the Canberra Times published an article by Paul Maley with the title "Badge key to identity of soldiers". In this article we read this: *"The report, which was prepared by the Memorial Museum Passchendaele, said all five men probably belonged to the 50th battalion and died between September 25-28. The report listed the names of 25 soldiers from the 50th battalion and one soldier from the 51st battalion that British trench maps from the time show were buried in the area. .. "*

In this article stuck a list of 25 names which, according to the MMP would have been eligible. I have that article with list in my possession, if anyone would be interested in it. The names of Sergeant George Calder and Private John Hunter ,by mid 2007 identified on the list of Mr. Roger Lee, are not on the list in the article.

How can a local museum speak about a perfectly organised cooperation with the Australian authorities if one, without knowledge of the other, sends matter to the press with the with the intention to receive all the honour? Can you imagine what a drama it must be for the 25 families in Australia which hopes full expectation on an identification of their dear, after reading its name in the newspaper? Can you imagine how those 25 families will have felt themselves after they received a call or a mail with the message" Sorry had but your family member does not qualify for identification"? **Why are here again untruths preached? Why are these things again sent the media?**

Soon the name of Private George Richard Storey will be placed on his tombstone placed and perhaps even fourth identification will come truth. Let us hope. I really hold my breath for what will thrown in the media now.

With this open letter, after all this time, I still try to find an answer on all my to all my "whys" you can find in my letter.

The only thing I ask is that all this stops. **Stop all that PLEASE.** Please Stop with the use of people, both dead and alive, for their own or other commitment and respect everyone in the acknowledgement that he belongs, even if they live on the other side of the world.

This open letter contains the facts and nothing but the facts. All cases are substantiated and justified. Who keeps the opinion is that there are falsehoods in it may sue me.

Kind regards,
Johan Vandewalle
Polygonwood Zonnebeke.