

## Outrage will prevent a windfarm over the Bullecourt dead – but it's missing elsewhere

*Where is the anger at Indigenous remains in museums after modern infrastructure disturbed traditional burial sites?*



*'Neat cemeteries belie the savagery so the living can focus on those "at rest".'* Photograph: Philippe Huguen/AFP/Getty Images

**Paul Daley**  
10 November 2017

It is easy to find distinct order in the chiseled landscape of commemoration when you visit the world war one battlefields of the European western front.

Winding your way down bucolic country laneways or taking highways across the verdant expanses for which millions died, you'll see hundreds of cemeteries with their blonde statuary, precise lawns and tended shrubs. They bring military structure to remembering.

In warmer months especially the poppies, endless twilights, the lark song, pealing church bells and laughter from estaminets make for an incongruous tranquility given the vast horror staged there a century ago.

Those neat, peaceful cemeteries serve a purpose: their order belies the savagery and filth of battlefield death so that the living can focus on those "fallen" now at "rest".

Beyond those cemeteries, however, countless hundreds of thousands – perhaps even more – of (mostly) men are buried where they were obliterated with shrapnel or drowned in the mud. A gentle furrow here, a copse of trees there, give subtle clues to the fighting and what lies beneath.

So it is with the dead of the two battles of Bullecourt in northern France, which took place in April and May, 1917. At least 3,500 Australian soldiers, as many British and at least twice as many Germans, died in the battles. According to some estimates about 4,000 bodies were never recovered.

The earth swallowed them just as it did the dead from so many other battles of that war. There are many memorials dedicated specifically to the missing (of Australia's 35,000 western front dead, 11,000 were never found, 4,000 unidentifiable at death) from the British imperial forces.

But just as the Enlightenment gave rise to the mechanised weapons of war that killed so many millions during the "great war" (an oxymoron if ever there was), progress now threatens the unmarked graves of the dead of Bullecourt.

French authorities want to erect a windfarm nearby. There is no doubt the bodies of many imperial troops – including Australians – and Germans would be unearthed. But reaction from Australian officials, including the war memorial director Brendan Nelson (once a defence minister, now effectively Australia's commemorator in chief) has been swift and predictable.

Here's another prediction: the windfarm will never go ahead as proposed. The French government will at some level see to that. Such is the emotional potency of commemoration as it translates politically and diplomatically, not least in France and Turkey, parts of which Australia – due to its khaki blood spilt there – sees almost as its sacred own.

I saw the same thing happen with a proposed airport in the Somme in 2002, which would have been laid over the places where Australian (and let's not forget many more soldiers from other countries) were buried. It was duly abandoned.

Of course, if disturbing that Bullecourt battlefield (progress can usually find another route where there's a will) can be avoided, it should be.

The reality is that right across France and Belgium, farmers, builders and ditch diggers uncover the lost dead of the first world war as routinely as the earth gives up its iron harvest – the metal ordinance of war – that was buried along with the bodies.

A few years ago I had the surreal experience of helping to recover the body of an Australian serviceman from a freshly dug drainage ditch on Mouquet Farm, near Pozierres. The body would've been reburied had we not helped a local guide remove it. The soldier was subsequently identified and reburied. This seemed to me a good outcome.

Not so according to a barrage of (mostly) anonymous abuse and outrage that followed from the trolls of the WWI armchair major general-sphere, who reckoned we

should've a: left the "spirit digger" to his "eternal slumber" in the ditch, or b: been charged with "interfering with a war grave" (go figure), or even sedition.

It was a reminder of the sanctity Australia attaches to its war dead and the ecclesiastic language grown around commemoration.

As historian Ken Inglis pointed out in his book about Australian commemoration, *Sacred Places – War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*: "... soldiers of the Queen did not stagger or sink or topple or have bits blown off, but fell, to become not quite simply the dead but the fallen, who cleanly, heroically, sacrificially gave their lives in war. People raised on such high diction were not prepared for squalid actualities."

Few Australians would realise a good proportion of the thousands of unidentified Indigenous human remains held in cardboard boxes in Australian institutions (close to 5,000 at the South Australian Museum alone!) are there because modern infrastructure disturbed traditional burial sites. Where is the anger or the government protest at the plight of these bones?

Mining companies, meanwhile, under cover of law routinely upset sacred sites, including burial grounds.

The disquiet greeting the prospective disturbance of a healed-over battlefield under which so many are buried is understandable.

But I'd still like to see outrage applied equally where the dignity of the dead is concerned.