

***A CENTURY OF SERVICE:  
100 YEARS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY***

***'QUITE PATHETIC TO SEE'  
THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY'S PERMANENT RECORDING NOTICES  
IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA***

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The commemoration of war is something about which Australians have a nice conceit about themselves. We have done, and are doing it, rather well. Perhaps, even, we are doing, and have always done this labour of remembrance rather better than anyone else. Or so Pambo Morrison, a driver for the 6th Division's Photo Unit thought as he contemplated an Italian memorial near Sidi Barrani, north Africa, on 13 December 1940. Pambo had his photograph taken beside that statue by none other than Frank Hurley. The photograph's caption in the Australian War Memorial's collection reads:

Pambo Morrison ... fails to raise any enthusiasm over the Italian memorial that commemorates their liberation of Libya from Egyptian tyranny. Pambo has seen better statues in Swan Hill.<sup>1</sup>

The 2nd AIF had not yet been in battle but Pambo was surely confident that their forthcoming exploits would be appropriately memorialised. Was this to be the case? Did the Australian Army, during World War II, leave behind adequate and appropriate memorials to its struggles on the battlefields of three continents and the islands of the Pacific? Indeed, just what did the Army do to carry out this task of remembrance and commemoration? How did what was done compare with the efforts of the 1st AIF after World War I?

Many Australians have visited Gallipoli and the battlefield sites of the old Western Front in France and Belgium. Fewer, probably comparatively very few, have been to the main battlefield sites in Papua and New Guinea. For those who visit Lae War Cemetery—one of the three consolidation war cemeteries in PNG (the others are Bomana at Port Moresby and Bita Paka at Rabaul)—there is a reminder, if they even notice it, of the Australian Army's wartime commemorative effort in Papua New Guinea. This is the so-called AIF Memorial in the driveway leading up to the cemetery entrance.

The memorial consists of a raised platform on which are arranged, in a circle and embedded in concrete, ten bronze plaques. Each of the plaques has at its head the Rising Sun badge and beneath a text outlining the significance of an Australian wartime site and usually the achievements of particular units—divisions, brigades and even battalions—that fought there. A similar arrangement can be found at the Popondetta Memorial, where there are seven plaques.

Another nine plaques can be seen at various locations throughout PNG—at Kokoda, Milne Bay, Wau, and Madang. In total there are 26 plaques. These are indeed the 26 notices or, to use the descriptions of the time, 'Historical Recording Notices' or 'Permanent Recording Notices' authorised for erection in PNG by the commander-in-chief of the Army in February 1946.

These plaques represent one of the Australian Army's central commemorative efforts in PNG. Before looking at how these plaques came into existence—indeed how they have even managed to survive—we need to go back to the AIF's commemorative efforts in World War I, primarily because it provides an interesting contrast to what happened later in PNG.



This photograph shows Pambo Morrison, a driver with the Photographic Unit, 6th Division, 2nd AIF, outside Sidi Barrani, North Africa, in December, 1940. Pambo is contemplating an Italian monument commemorating the supposed liberation of Libya by the Italians from Egyptian tyranny. The original caption states: Pambo has seen better statues in Swan Hill.  
[AWM 004421]

All who travel round the battlefields of the old Western Front become familiar with the cemeteries and monuments maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. These are not national monuments per se but represent the collective effort to bury and commemorate the war dead of all Britain's Empire and Dominion armies. Aside from the cemeteries, there are the national battle monuments—the Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge, the South African Memorial at Delville Wood, the Newfoundland Memorial at Beaumont Hamel and the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.

These monuments were erected and paid for some time—in Australia's case a long time—after the armistice of 1918. However, among the first purely Australian monuments to appear on the Western Front were the five memorials dedicated to the battle exploits of the five divisions of the AIF. The initiative for the siting and building of these monuments came from the AIF itself and from the beginning they were considered to be Australian, not Commonwealth or Empire, memorials. What are the main characteristics of these monuments?

First, apart from one notable exception, they are uniform in shape, size and the nature of the information provided on each. This uniformity can be traced back to an AIF commanders' conference held at Ham-sur-Heure, France, on 14 March 1919 to consider a 'Battle Memorial Scheme'. Each division was represented at this conference and recommendations were to be made to an Imperial 'Battle Exploits Memorials' Committee in London. The GOC, Major General Talbot Hobbs, suggested that each memorial should be a 'plain granite obelisk, perhaps standing 50 feet high, mounted on a plain pedestal; the obelisk being quite plain, except perhaps for the 'Rising Sun', in copper or gilt one third of the way up'. Hobbs felt that what they were trying to achieve in France was not 'for today, or next year, but for all time'.

Consequently, the combined divisional memorial effort should be towards simplicity of design and a design that any Australian visiting the area would at once recognise. 'Dignity en masse' was Hobbs' watchword rather than 'beauty in detail'. He rejected the idea of a 'digger' figure not only because of cost but because 'a monument erected in Western Australia, depicting an Australian soldier, went to pieces in 3 years'. Moreover, Hobbs thought the 'digger' figures would cost a lot more money and would be less impressive than stone obelisks. Apart from the 2nd Division's memorial at Mont St Quentin, Hobbs' views prevailed.<sup>2</sup>



Secondly, these memorials were not specifically erected for the dead. They were, as the inscriptions on them indicate, dedicated to the officers and men of the division who had fought in France and Belgium between 1916 and 1918. To emphasise this point, each memorial carried a plaque listing the division's battle honours without reference to casualties. At the Ham-sur-Heure conference these memorials were referred to as 'Australian Battle Memorials' whose purpose was to 'commemorate the actions'. Again, with one exception, that of the 2nd Division memorial, they stand today devoid of any other information apart from the 'Rising Sun' badge.

Thirdly, the site of each memorial was to be chosen by the division concerned. It should, Hobbs' said, 'mark the spot where it made itself most famous'. This was a subject that probably led to much debate within each division and it is possible that research into personal records could reveal the course of such discussions. What is readily available at the Australian War Memorial is a set of files about each division's memorials. Each file opens with a statement giving the reasons for the final choice of site by the division. That for the 1st Division, whose monument is at the western end of Pozieres village, is typical:

As the scene of the first operation on a large scale undertaken by the 1st Australian Division in France, because of its strategical importance in the Battle of the Somme, 1916, and on account of the intensity of the fighting and gallantry shown by both sides in its capture and retention, Pozieres so impressed itself on the minds of the members of the 1st Australian Division that its selection as the site for the Memorial to be erected to the fallen of the Division was unanimously endorsed.<sup>3</sup>

The description goes on, as do the descriptions for the other divisions, with supporting comments from senior commanders, lists of VCs gained by the division in that area, and casualties and diagrams indicating the formations and units of the division.

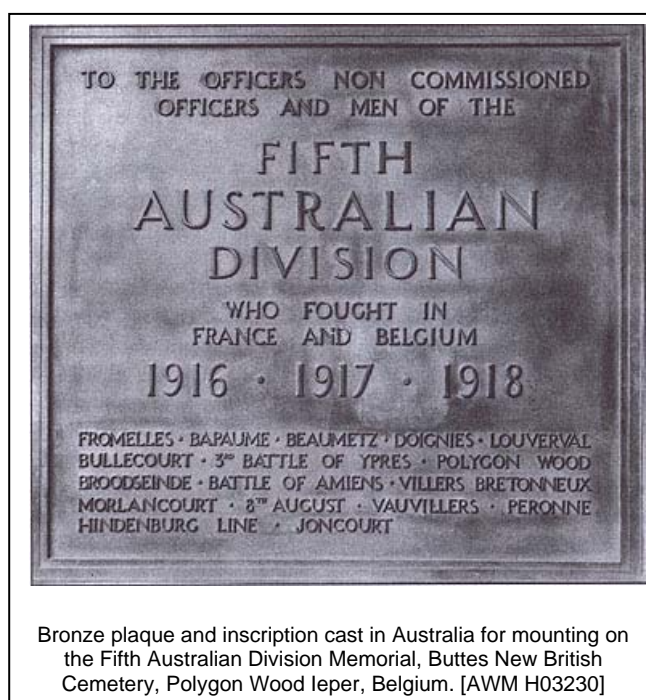
Interestingly, the 1st Division had, by 1918, already erected and dedicated a wooden divisional memorial at Pozieres. The standard AIF obelisk replaced this memorial and the wooden cross was shipped back to Australia. It is also interesting to note that the division itself saw this monument as having been 'erected to the fallen' and not simply as a battle exploit memorial.<sup>4</sup>

The only AWM divisional file that reveals contention and discussion within the division concerning site selection is that for the 4th Division.<sup>5</sup> There is reference to a letter from Major General Sinclair MacLagan to Hobbs in which MacLagan mentions two 'long and wordy meetings' on the topic within the unit.<sup>6</sup> It should be mentioned that one site that was explicitly excluded from all divisional choice was Villers-Bretonneux. So incensed was the CO of the 45th Battalion, 12th Brigade, 4th Division, at this exclusion that he threatened the following action:

I desire to protest most emphatically upon the arbitrary action of allocating Villers-Bretonneux to any Division to the prejudice of the 4th. I feel so strongly upon this point that I desire that this protest be sent through the proper channels to the Right Hon. The Prime Minister of Australia, with the request that he may be good enough to have this matter enquired into. I have reason to believe that it is intended to allocate Villers-Bretonneux to a Division to which, either on the ground of its special action in that area or its general work in the war, it is so entitled.<sup>7</sup>

The writer, unfortunately, did not say which division he was referring to!

A final point to note about these AIF divisional memorials is that they were built by the men of the division. Circulars were sent around units asking for names and numbers of stonemasons, monumental masons and concrete casters willing to work on the proposed division memorial. These men were to be assured that this work would not interfere with their repatriation. In the 5th Division's AWM memorial file there is a page of detailed instructions for the erection of the division's memorial at Polygon Wood, near Ieper, Belgium. Apart from the skilled Australian personnel, the monument builders were allocated 100 German POWs for the heavy digging work. To entertain the Australian workers, arrangements were to be made on Sundays for them 'to visit places of interest such as Lille and parts of the old Battlefields'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the first Australian battlefield tourists in Belgium were the soldiers themselves.



In David Horner's biography of Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey is this sentence relating to Blamey's visit to Washington D C in early June 1944:

With business over, Blamey visited the Shenandoah Valley, and Major McCleery (recently promoted and reassigned as ADC) organised a number of social activities.<sup>9</sup>

Leaving aside the social activities—a topic on which Horner has a bit to say in his biography—something which caught Blamey's attention on his journey he later described in a letter to the head of Australia's Military Mission in Washington, Lieutenant General Sir John Lavarack:

I noticed along the road from Washington to the Shanandoah Valley, what appeared to be small metal constructions, on which were recorded in relief, the various actions that had taken place. This method of recording the site of actions etc struck me as being very simple and very suitable. I would be glad if you could have two or three of these plates photographed and measurements taken, together with details of the method by which they are constructed. I have particularly in mind the tablets on the roadside recording the Manassas battles.<sup>10</sup>



One of the many battle signs erected by the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade in the Sattelberg-Finschhafen area of New Guinea in early 1944. This sign describes the action for which Sergeant T.C. Derrick, 2/48th Battalion, was awarded the Victoria Cross. [AWM 0712213]

Here, in these plaques about an American Civil War battle, is the genesis of the style adopted by the Australian Army in its effort to mark the key World War II battle sites in Papua New Guinea—those 26 so-called 'Permanent Recording Notices' which have already been briefly described. When he wrote to Lavarack about the Shenandoah notices in October 1944, however, Blamey had already seen in New Guinea a series of historical signs erected on the battle sites of the Huon Peninsula in the Finschhafen area. There were 150 of these 'Recording Notices' or 'Battle Signs', 34 of which had been placed along a jeep route around the sites of the Sattelberg action by the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade.

Their purpose was, in the words of Lieutenant General Berryman, 'to commemorate the actions of our troops on the actual battlefields and the secondary object was to assist in guiding visiting officers and other ranks around the battlefields'.<sup>11</sup> Berryman also made the following point to Blamey as to the national usefulness of these signs:

Finschhafen is fast becoming a big American Army Base and our notices describing the operations will be a reminder to them that our troops captured the area.<sup>12</sup>

In his reply to Berryman, Blamey wrote:

I also agree with you that the marking should be given some more permanent form, and hope you will determine upon a means of doing so before you leave the area.<sup>13</sup>

By late 1944, therefore, Blamey had the essence of what he wanted in New Guinea as a permanent record on the ground of the Australian Army's battle exploits in those momentous campaigns. This was to be Shenandoah style notices with brief historical information outlining the basic achievement of this or that Australian unit at a particular place. Blamey set up a committee that by March 1945 had produced a report on 'the scheme for installing recording notices in New Guinea'.<sup>14</sup>

There is no space here to detail the workings of this committee. Suffice it to say that it took recommendations from commanders and former commanders who had fought in New Guinea on the possible location of sites for plaques and draft text. From this consultation they recommended 132 notices and that an initial scheme should see 60 plaques erected. In its report the committee made much reference to its consultation with Lieutenant General Sir Edmund Herring and they took his suggestions to heart. For example, Herring felt that the withdrawal over the Owen Stanleys 'is overstressed' and suggested fewer notices. Herring also suggested, with less success, that more attention be paid to commemorating the actions of the 32nd US Division in the early actions in the Buna area.<sup>15</sup> Herring's recommendation ultimately translated into a commemorative sign at Cape Endaiadere, Papua, with this text:

#### 18th Australia Infantry Brigade

In this area, the 18th Brigade, with other Australian and United States troops under its command, engaged in heavy continuous fighting with Japanese between 18th December and 3rd January 1943.

In the vicinity of this notice, the 2/9th Battalion penetrated the enemy defences on 18th December 1942, and after heavy fighting, captured Cape Endaiadere.

The text for all the notices followed similar lines.

The committee's final recommendations envisaged the construction of 'permanent' notices plus a guide book. They would be rectangular in shape, carry the 'Rising Sun' badge, and be 'supported in a metal structure at approximate eye level above the ground'.<sup>16</sup> On 25 July 1945, Blamey, with modifications, accepted the committee's report. The recommended 60 plaques were reduced to 47.<sup>17</sup> These matters rested until 15 February 1946. Blamey had gone—just—and the commemorative plaques scheme was revised; the guide book disappeared, 22 notices were cancelled as being in inaccessible locations and instructions given for the final construction and erection of 26 notices.<sup>18</sup> These were put in place and promptly forgotten.

The plaques, or at least the problem that they posed, surfaced in the early 1960s in the files of the Office of Australian War Graves. On 30 January 1960, J E Norton, an Assistant District Officer for the Northern District of Papua, wrote to the District Officer at Popondetta:

There are a number of wartime memorial plaques sited along the Buna coast which commemorate famous battles and defeats of the Japanese army by Australian troops ... The condition of these memorials was quite pathetic to see. Their steel supports had weathered and rusted to such an extent that two had fallen over.<sup>19</sup>



An example of one of the Australian Army's 'permanent notices' erected at 26 battlefield sites through Papua New Guinea in 1946. This 'notice' was on the south west end of the Salamaua Isthmus. The inscription reads: '3rd and 5th Australian Divisions – Australian and American soldiers under the command of the 5th Australian Division captured Salamaua on 1943-10-11, after many months of strenuous fighting over the mountains from Wau by the 3rd Australian Division.' [AWM 069813]

Such proved to be the condition of many of the plaques. Eventually, after lengthy consultations, discussions and much other to-ing and fro-ing, most of the plaques were brought in under War Graves supervision to Popondetta and Lae. There, gathered together on elevated concrete platforms, their status has been raised over time from that of 'Permanent Recording Notices' to that of 'Battle Exploit Memorial'. Indeed, a quick scan of the files reveals that by the early 1980s, and probably even earlier, the collection at Lae and Popondetta were being called AIF Memorials.<sup>20</sup> Who should now care for these structures, and the plaques that had been left *in situ*, was not quickly determined. In the mid-1980s one clearly frustrated Director of the Office of War Graves wrote in a letter to an Australian veteran who was seeking advice about erecting a monument to the 32nd US Division:

My office charter does not include the erection of monuments but we are being called upon frequently these days to restore and maintain hastily erected relics of the war years. In most cases this is beyond our budget capacity.<sup>21</sup>

The fate of the Army's Papua New Guinea 'Historical Recording Notices' or 'Permanent Recording Notices' is a metaphor surely for the relative lack of national focus and imagination on commemoration after World War II. Canberra poet Geoff Page caught that essential difference in approach between the two wars in his well-known lines from the poem 'Smalltown Memorials':

The next bequeathed us  
Parks and swimming pools  
**But something in that first**  
Demanded stone.<sup>22</sup>

The men of the 1st AIF left behind them in France and Belgium monuments that they hoped would transmit down the years the significance of what had happened to them there, and to their country. The names they inscribed on those monuments such as Flers, Malt Trench, Langicourt, Broodeseinde, or Biache, may now carry little if any meaning in the Australian community. However, viewing those monuments *in situ* visitors are left in no doubt as to the importance which such place names must have carried for the men of the five divisions of the 1st AIF.

By comparison, with the singular exception of Kokoda, the places and battle information recorded on the 'Permanent Recording Notices' in Papua and New Guinea fail to evoke the same resonances and potential layers of meaning as do those five great Australian edifices along the Western Front. And yet, we are now all clearly aware of the singular importance of that struggle against an Asian enemy during 1942 and 1943 in what was then Australian territory. One conclusion which one might reach here flies in the face of the assumptions of our so-called 'information age'. At the end of the day it is perhaps stark, spare stone that best carries the message of human suffering and endeavour in battle from one generation to the next. In that respect, at least, the Army in World War I knew what to do to ensure that those who came after recognised what the 1st AIF had achieved in France and Belgium. Perhaps we should give the final word on those 'Permanent Recording Notices', significant and important though they undoubtedly are, to a paraphrase of Driver Pambo Morrison's thoughts:

Pambo Morrison ... fails to raise any enthusiasm over the Army 'Permanent Recording Notices' that commemorate the campaign in Papua New Guinea. Pambo has seen better efforts in Swan Hill.

## Endnotes

1. Part of original caption to AWM negative 004421.
2. For a full description of the Ham-sur-Heure conference and Hobbs' remarks see 'Memorials—Aust Corps & Misc', 623/3, AWM 27.
3. 'Memorials—1st Division', 623/4, AWM 27.
4. Two interesting files concerning the shipment of battlefield crosses back to Australia are 'Relics, Crosses and Memorials of the AIF in France', 7/1/62 Part 1(b), and '27th Battalion, Keswick, SA Crosses of AIF Units', 7/1/62/2, AWM 93.
5. 'Memorials—4th Division', 623/8-623/12, AWM 27.
6. 'Extract from letter dated 28/3/19 from Major General Sinclair MacLagan to Sir Talbot Hobbs', 623/8-623/12, AWM 27.
7. Letter, Major D Hannay [?], 45th Battalion, to Commanding Officer, 45th Battalion, Thy-le-Chateau, Belgium, 13.3.19, 623/8-623/12, AWM 27.
8. 'Memorials—5th Division', memo, HQ, 5th Australian Pioneer Battalion, 5 April 1919, 623/8, AWM 27.
9. David Horner, *Blamey: The Commander-in-Chief* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998), 459.
10. Copy letter, General, Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces, to Lieutenant General Sir John Lavarack, Australian Military Mission Washington, 26 October 1944, 'Recording Notices', item 2/67.1, 419/10/2, Blamey Papers, AWM 3 D R L 6643.
11. Extract from letter of 2 February 1944, GOC 2 Australian Corps, to Commander-in-Chief, 'File dealing with Battle Signs in Finschhafen Battle Areas—Commemorative Tablets on Sites of Battlefields, Nov 44', 485/2/7, AWM 54.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Extract from letter of 25 February 1944, Commander-in-Chief to GOC 2 Australian Corps, 'File dealing with Battle Signs in Finschhafen Battle Areas—Commemorative Tablets on Sites of Battlefields, Nov 44', 485/2/7, AWM 54.
14. Committee Report on the Scheme for installing Recording Notices in New Guinea—Records of Campaign in Middle East—Separate Suggestion, 14 March 1945, item 2/67.1, 419/10/2, Blamey Papers.
15. 'Notes on interview with General Herring, Commemorative tablets. Commanders' Original Suggestions', Appendix D, Part 4 of 5 Parts, 485/2/3, Part 4, AWM 54.
16. Committee Report on the Scheme for installing Recording Notices in New Guinea Records of Campaign in Middle East—Separate Suggestion, 14 March 1945, item 2/67.1, 419/10/2, Blamey Papers.
17. Notes on the C-in-C's decisions on the Committee Report—25 July 45, item 2/67.1, 419/10/2, Blamey Papers.
18. 'Permanent Recording Notices in New Guinea', GSL 1946/90, Historical and Permanent Notices in New Guinea and Borneo—including Committee Reports, 1946, 485/2/4, AWM 54.
19. J. E. Morton, Assistant District Officer, to District Officer, Northern District, Popondetta, Papua, 30 January 1960, AIF Memorials in New Guinea, B68/1/Part 1, Office of Australian War Graves.
20. The following files in the Office of Australian War Graves deal with the issues surrounding the upkeep of the AIF Recording Notices in Papua New Guinea: B68/1/1 parts 1 and 2, 77/0223, 93/348C.
21. Alf Clarke, Director, Office of Australian War Graves, to Stanley Bell, St Leonards, New South Wales, 17 December 1985, B68/1/Part I, Office of Australian War Graves.
22. Geoff Page, 'Smalltown Memorials', in Geoff Page (ed.), *Shadows From Wire, Poems and Photographs of Australians in the Great War* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1983), 70-1.