

Sydney Barrister's Remains Identified after 94 years.

It was announced in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Thursday 8 July that the remains of Sydney barrister and soldier, Lieutenant Colonel Ignatius Bertram (Bert) Norris, had been one of those identified in the recently discovered war graves at Pheasants' Wood in Northern France. The identification brings some closure to a tragic story of heroic idealism and sacrifice, almost impossible to comprehend today, but which was common amongst lawyers in the First World War.

'Bert' Norris, of Darling Point, had grown up in Hunters Hill, a near neighbour of the Windeyer family. He was one of the many Catholic boys who rowed or ferried across the Lane Cove River to climb the stone steps up to St Ignatius College, Riverview, where he was a high profile student. After graduating from Sydney University he had practiced out of University Chambers in Phillip Street, Sydney. Norris had gone overseas on board *Ceramic* in June 1915 with three other barristers who had all gone to Riverview: Francis (Frank) Coen, Charles Gavan Duffy and Jack d'Apice. In the absence of a Catholic Chaplain they had led those of similar faith to theirs in prayer. They said the Rosary every night, sung hymns and had special prayers on Sunday. The Jesuit priests at Riverview would have been very proud of the way their 'boys' led others in prayer and where possible attended Mass before battle. Coen, Gavan Duffy and Norris were all killed in action. Their sacrifice is still remembered at that school with the publication of a memorial history of those who fell in World War One published in 2009.

Norris had been in Egypt for six months by the beginning of 1916. The thirty-six-year-old Sydney barrister was serving as Judge Advocate on courts martial. At that time there was no army legal division so any suitable officers were selected for court martial duty and often those with legal backgrounds found themselves back in court. He did not want to be there, rather he was keen for action, despite the fact that his pregnant wife, Jane, had sailed to Egypt to be with him. She gave birth to their son, John, in Egypt in February 1916. But Norris was keen to get to the Western Front and fight. He insisted on going into the front line and was put into the New South Wales unit, the 53rd Battalion and travelled with those men to France in early 1916.

The 53rd Battalion went into action 20 July 1916 at Fromelles led by Norris was leading. It was their first major battle. He received his last orders from Captain Geoffrey Street, who he probably knew as the nephew of Justice Street and cousin of fellow lawyers, Kenneth and Laurence Street. Laurence Street had already been killed at Gallipoli. The 53rd Battalion advanced in one of the most ill-conceived and pointless attacks involving Austrians in the war. There were over 5,000 casualties in that single night. Bert Norris was killed within the initial 20 minutes, according to the Official History of the war. In the heat of battle it was impossible to properly care for the bodies so there was an extensive investigation, led by the Sydney barrister, Langer Owen KC at the Red Cross Missing and Wounded Bureau into the possibility that Norris was a prisoner. His death was confirmed later but his remains were never identified until advanced DNA testing and a meeting by the joint identification Board in London on Monday, 5 July 2010, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

There were many Australian soldiers, including a number of lawyers, still listed as Missing Presumed Killed in The First World War. The actions of Lieutenant Colonel Ignatius Bertram (Bert) Norris provided a good example of how keen some lawyers were to fight in the First World War and how that conflict can still reach out of the past to affect people going about their lives today.

Tony Cunneen. This article uses information from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday 8 July 2010, p6, as well as material from *The Law at War (1916)* written by the author and available on the website of the Francis Forbes Society for Australian Legal History. Interested people can contact Tony on acunneen@bigpond.net.au