

# Kapooka ceremony to mark tragic day in military history

Researched by MICHAEL McCORMACK

One of the saddest days in Australia's military history will be remembered today at 1RTB Kapooka.

Chief of the Defence Force, General Peter Gration, at 2pm will unveil a plaque at an historical marker on the site where 26 soldiers lost their lives during a training accident on Monday, May 21, 1945.

Of the 25 trainees and three instructors, only one trainee and one instructor survived the explosion.

The marker is made of marble and is inscribed with the names of the 26 soldiers killed that fateful day.

The blast occurred in a dugout while the men were receiving instruction in demolition work.

The huge bang drew the attention of other instructors at a nearby range.

They rushed straight to the scene where they saw the instructor who miraculously escaped lying 15 metres from the enclosed dugout.

The alarm was raised and all available medical help — doctors, ambulances and medical orderlies — were soon on hand.

The victims were mainly Victorians. Others who died came from NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

Most were reinforcement troops, many with service in the Middle East and New Guinea.

Others were from units which had been broken up as a result of Army changes. The men had done a little more than a fifth of their sapper's training.

All forms of high explosive tuition was given to sappers in training in the demolition range, where the accident occurred.

An ambulance arrived within five minutes of the accident and a ghastly sight awaited the two doctors first at the scene.

One of the survivors was an instructor who had left the dugout 20 minutes before the explosion. He was laying charges for night exercises which were to have taken place that night.

The Army dugouts were fairly roomy to allow work to proceed both on the range and in the classroom with the minimum of delay. Blackboard instruction was given five metres below ground level.

There was a rounded earthen mound at the top and the dugouts were properly ventilated and lighted. Gelignite and detonators were stored in the dugout prior to use in practical work.

Kapooka camp commandant, Colonel W. D. McDonald, was very distressed at the tragedy which cast a pall of gloom not only over the camp but over the entire Wagga district.

Military authorities at first withheld the names of victims and more than 200 telegrams flooded into Wagga from anxious parents and wives from throughout Australia.

Among the dead was Sgt Instructor Herbert John Pomeroy of Victoria who was killed on his 31st birthday. He resided temporarily at Beckwith Street with his wife and four children. They were three boys and a girl, aged 6½ years, 4, 2 and 10 months respectively.

Also killed were: Spr Colin Francis Boyd (NSW), Spr Joseph James Collins (NSW), Spr Joseph William Faull (NSW), Spr Alan Flood (NSW), Spr Denby Eric Grasby (SA), Spr Kevin Alexander Hurst (NSW), Spr Colin Leslie Hurley (NSW), Spr Ronald Irwin Linthorne (WA), Spr Terence Ronald Moore (NSW), Spr Stanley Robert Morphy (Qld), Spr Leslie John Mather (NSW), Spr Jack Clinton Nixon (NSW), Spr Geoffrey Wilton Partridge (NSW), Spr Ernest Frederick Poschalk (Qld), Spr Frank Wilfred Platt (Qld), Spr Kevin Francis Pierce (Vic.), Spr Stanley Ernest Ross (NSW), Spr William Reid (SA), Spr Edward Charles Robson (NSW), Spr Thomas Woods (NSW), Spr Alfred Edward Woods (WA), Spr Alfred George Widd (WA), Spr Ivan Walter Thomas Merritt (SA), Spr Norman Rourke John Dilley (NSW), Cpl William Barclay Cousins (NSW).

Three days later more than half the population of Wagga, some 7000 people, stood silently in the streets watching the largest military funeral to take place in Australia.

The military funeral procession left Kapooka shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon and entered Wagga by the Sturt Highway with a large tender leading, decked out with beautiful blooms.

The approach of the procession was signalled by motor cyclists, and as it came into view at the western end of Edward Street the waiting crowds formed in lines on each side of the highway to pay their respects.

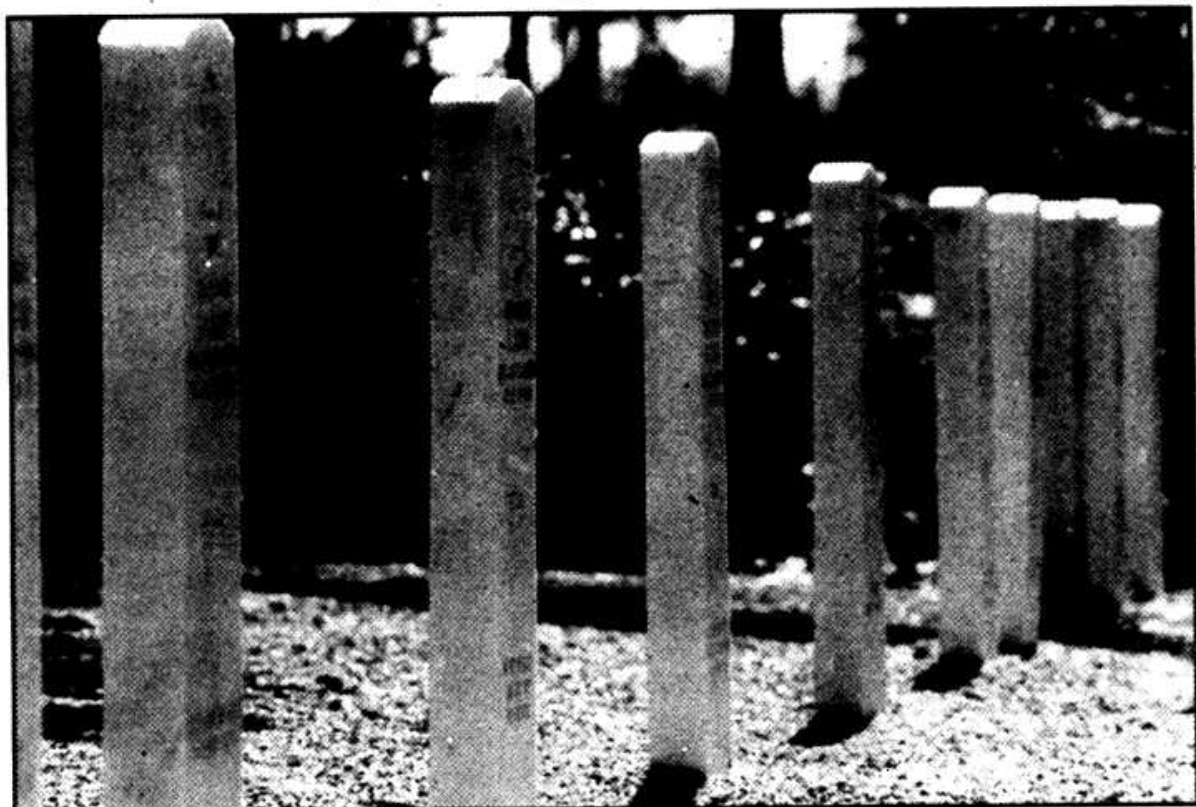
The portion first set apart for military graves at the Wagga cemetery was filled and a new section opened on the southern side of the Wagga cemetery. Row upon row of simple white crosses told the sad story. These have since been replaced by marble headstones.

Several hundred soldiers stood as a guard of honour.

As each coffin was lifted from the tender on to the shoulders of six bearers the sergeant in charge took his place at the head of the coffin which was followed by a wreath bearer. Then came the bereaved ones. Many travelled long distances from other states to attend the funeral of loved ones. Some of the dead had no relatives present to shed a tear. The whole proceedings were carried out with military precision, but with dignity and grace.

Today's unveiling ceremony is part of Kapooka's 50th anniversary.

Among those in attendance today will be Frank Simms of Sydney, an instructor at the demolition range when the accident occurred.



The graves in the war section of the old Wagga cemetery bear a grim reminder of the tragedy which claimed the lives of 26 soldiers in 1945.

Let's  
RIV

“Hey! No more bad times  
So let's get going just like  
'Cause working hard's the  
And, we can get things mo  
The Riverina's home to us  
And getting it going is qui  
Team effort....that's what  
It'll help us get things mov

Join 2WG and local bus  
in helping to get our local ecc

2WG