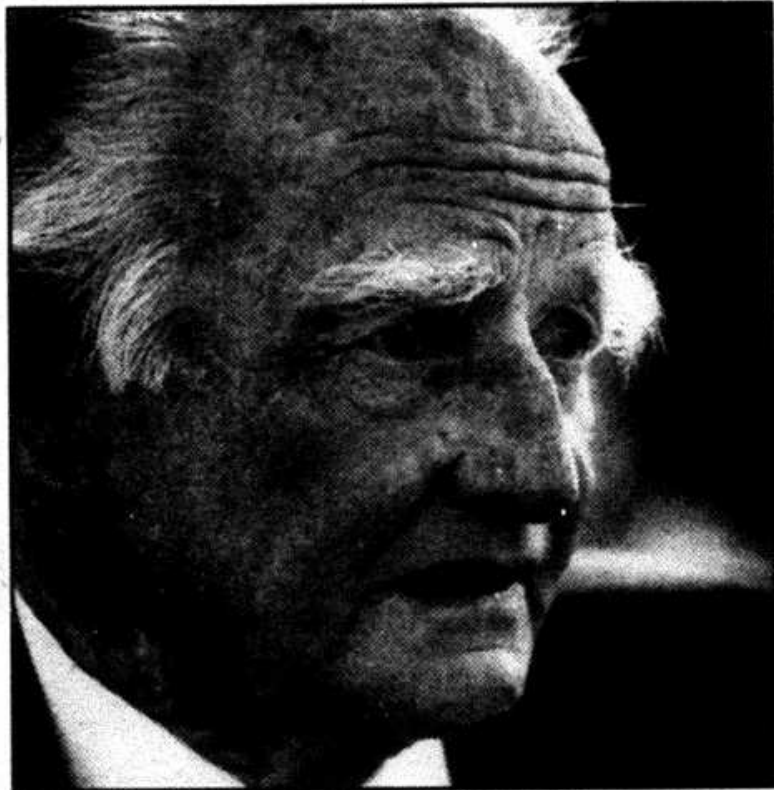


# Digger remembers his fallen comrades



Frank Simm recalls the tragedy of losing 26 comrades in a Kapooka training accident in 1945.

As the strains of the Last Post drifted across a dusty Wagga paddock yesterday, Frank Simm remembered the horrific training accident at the same spot nearly 47 years ago that claimed the lives of 26 comrades.

Mr Simm, 74, was a sergeant instructor with the famous 9th Division on May 21, 1945, when a training exercise near where he was working with conscripts at Kapooka went terribly wrong — somebody had accidentally mixed detonators with charges and somehow during the exercise they had combined to create a huge explosion.

Yesterday, Kapooka officially paid tribute to the 26 dead men with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque placed on the remains of a concrete shelter near the blast site.

Mr Simm, aged 26 at the time of the tragedy, said yesterday he felt a "bit emotional" during the cere-

mony, even though the event it commemorated took place nearly 50 years ago.

"It's the sort of thing nobody should forget," Mr Simm said.

In 1945, with the end of World War II less than four months away, Sergeant Simm had been brought to Kapooka to train conscripts.

He had been a Rat of Tobruk, serving with the 9th Division Engineers, and had also seen service in Pacific.

It was there that he caught dengue fever and the illness resulted in him being given a training position at Kapooka.

"I had only been at Kapooka a couple of weeks when it happened," he recalled yesterday.

"I had a group of 24 18-year-olds.

"I was instructing them on mines and boobytraps at the time, there were no charges involved," he said.

While working with his group he heard a huge explosion 100 metres away.

"The whole dugout went up," he said, referring to explosion point.

"There should not have been detonators there.

"They were preparing charges for night exercises, bundling up the charges.

"Certainly none of the instructors would have taken the detonators into the dugout; they were all veterans from the Middle East," Mr Simm said.

He believes one of the young conscripts must have accidentally mixed up the detonators and the charges.

Mr Simm said the explosion scattered bodies everywhere.

"I rang the alarm, assembled my group and marched them away; I had seen a lot of death and destruction and knew what effect it had — that's why I did not take my class to it," Mr Simm said.

Mr Simm remembered the instructor who survived the blast — one of only two men to survive.

"He was on the ramp going down (to the dugout) and got blown out again," Mr Simm said.

Mr Simm had a good look around the area again yesterday, now a dusty farm paddock with one large tree, two concrete blocks and a large metal shed.

He sat silently as the Last Post was played, the Australian flag was lowered to half mast and then the Rouse was sounded.

And he remembered his fallen comrades.

In his speech before unveiling the plaque, the Chief of Defence Force, General Peter Gration, described the 1945 tragedy as probably the worst training accident the Australian Defence Force had had up until that time.

He said it was important to have a permanent reminder of the tragic event.

The marble plaque contains the names of all 26 men who died — 24 trainees and two instructors.