

Families remember

By KEN GRIMSON

MAUREEN Raunic was just 10 months old when her father was killed in Australia's worst military training accident.

It was on May 21, 1945, and her father, Sergeant Herbert Pomeroy, was to have celebrated his 31st birthday that day.

Herbert Pomeroy was the father Mrs Raunic never knew and yesterday's memorial service for him and 25 other men who died when explosives detonated during a training exercise at Kapooka was like a funeral service for her.

"I have never been able to have that mourning process, but this service is something where I have been able to express my grief publicly.

"It (the service) has been difficult, but it's one of the most important things I have done," said Mrs Raunic, of Ballarat.

"It's been a healing thing for me."

Mrs Raunic was joined at yesterday's service by family members of several other men who died in the explosion.

Over lunch they shared stories and swapped photos, addresses and newspaper clippings of the disaster.

Jessie Morley, of Wellington, lost her only brother, Corporal Bill Cousins, in the accident.

She said her family had thought that after he had spent two years fighting the Japanese in New Guinea he was safe with an Australian posting.

"He was just 24," Mrs Morley said.

"He was lovely. He used to take me to all the dances before I met my husband. We went everywhere together, that is why I missed him so much."

Mrs Morley said she could not describe how she felt about yesterday's service and meeting up with the families of other blast victims and the Titus family with whom Bill shared Sunday nights while in Wagga.

"I'm just overwhelmed by it all. I just feel I'm back to when he was a little boy," she said.

Mrs Morley, wearing her brother's medals yesterday, said she was in hospital when he died and could not travel to the funeral in Wagga.

"That was the hardest thing. At the hospital they turned the radio down so I could not hear much about it; they did not want to upset me," she said.

Shirley Booth, sister of Sapper Geoff Partridge, travelled from Bourke for yesterday's service and lunch.

"It was a very moving experience and I would not have missed it for the world," she said.

"I'm only sorry my mother, who died in January, could not make it. She was 90."

Mrs Booth said Smithtown, on the New South Wales north coast, was naming streets after those from the area who died during World War II and there was now a Geoffrey Partridge Place.

Like Mrs Morley, Mrs Booth could not attend the funeral of her brother on May 24, 1945.

"I was 12 at the time and Mum had had a serious operation and could not travel to the funeral," Mrs Morley said.

"Because of the operation, we could have had him home, but my parents didn't do that because they thought he was safe in Australia."

"We came down in the August. They took dad around and showed him everything," she said.

"It was devastating for Mum and Dad," Mrs Booth said.

"I don't think they ever got over it."

Adelong woman, Betty Murphy, lost her brother Sapper Thomas Woods in the shocking explosion.

She said her family was absolutely devastated by their loss.

"My parents had very high hopes nothing would happen to him," she said.

Mrs Murphy said she felt no anger at the Army over the explosion, nor was she looking for an answers to what caused the blast and who was to blame.

"My mother could never come to terms with it, but over the years I have."

She said the service and the lunch was "lovely" because it brought together people who had suffered similarly.

"They know just how I feel; they share the same thoughts," she said.



LOST BROTHERS: Betty Murphy (left) and Jessie Morley look up to a plaque containing the names of the 26 men, including their brothers, who died in the Kapooka training tragedy on May 21, 1945. The plaque was unveiled in 1992 on a concrete structure just metres away from the accident scene.

Soldier's miracle escape

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why didn't I become conscious on the flat (of the ground)?" Mr Bartlett said.

"I was on an incline and aware of rubble running down.

"I wasn't in any pain, I was just numb and I realised I could not breathe.

"I tried to clear my nose and my mouth, they were full of mucus, and I looked up and I could see the silhouette of a person.

"Then someone picked me up.

"They did not carry me far; they pushed me down and a woman's voice said: 'Let him sit up if he wants to.'

"I felt a prick in my arm; they lifted me up and we were walking to what I thought was a black square, but it was the back of an old Army Blitz (truck).

"I was conscious as the stretcher was pushed in; I heard the truck being put into gear and then I blacked out.

"My brother could tell you more than I can after that".

Mr Bartlett's elder brother, Alf, drove with Allan and Allan's son,

Bruce, from Semaphore in South Australia to Wagga for yesterday's memorial service.

"I was at Bonegilla, near Albury, attached to transport when I got a telegram from mum saying there had been an accident and Allan had been hurt badly," said Alf Bartlett, recalling the days after the accident.

"Because it was so serious I just asked my Regimental Sergeant Major for leave, but he refused.

"So I asked a mate of mine — Jimmy Foster — to run me into Albury and I jumped a train to Wagga.

"I think they (the Army) knew I went AWOL (Absent Without Leave) because when I got to Wagga two Army police grabbed me.

"At the railway station was a padre and when these guys grabbed me he asked me my name. He said: 'Hang on a minute, I think it's your brother who is still alive'.

"He went into the station, took railway telegram paper and wrote out a leave pass and told the police guys to take me out to Kapooka.

"When I got out there they put me in a bed next

to my brother where I stayed four or five days to see what was happening.

"He was badly injured.

"His chest was badly bruised and his clothes had been blown off.

"He must have been burned bad because I remember the nurses bathing him in oil and peeling his skin off."

Alf Bartlett, 71, says his brother does not talk about the explosion much simply because he remembered so little about it.

Allan yesterday said that while in hospital at Kapooka recovering from his injuries he was visited by "a lot of top brass" who quizzed him, trying to find a cause of the blast.

"But as I said to them, I saw nothing and I heard nothing".

When well enough, Mr Bartlett was moved to Wayville in South Australia. He was discharged from the Army on August 31, 1945, with a letter that said he could not work for 12 months.

After a time, he became a qualified carpenter, married and had two sons and a daughter.

The explosion left him with no serious long-term

health problems and he was self employed for 42 years.

In 1980, Mr Bartlett visited the Wagga War Cemetery where the 26 soldiers are buried. He was amazed at how well it had been maintained.

"The last time I had seen the cemetery there were just 26 white cross and sunken holes, so you can imagine my shock in 1980 to see how beautifully it had been kept," Mr Bartlett said.

"It moved me to see how much people still care".

Before yesterday's service he went back to the cemetery to honour the fallen 26 again.

Yesterday's service raised many questions about the incident, including just how many men died.

Although the official records state 26 died, Mr Bartlett said he believed another man died in hospital at Concord in Sydney six days after the explosion.

Newspaper reports immediately after the accident also talk of two injured survivors — Mr Bartlett and an un-named instructor.