

Service honours men killed in Kapooka training accident

By KEN GRIMSON

SURVIVING families of 26 soldiers killed at Kapooka 50 years ago yesterday were told in a memorial service not to let the facts of the mysterious tragedy stop them accepting their loss and learning from it.

On May 21, 1945, an estimated 50 kilograms of explosives accidentally detonated in an earthen dug-out during a training exercise.

The blast caused the deaths of at least 24 trainees and two instructors and their burial in Wagga on May 24 was the largest military funeral ever held in Australia.

The cause of the blast, and even the exact number of people who died as a result, remains a mystery to this day.

Only one man — South Australian Allan Bartlett — still lives and newspaper reports at the time of the accident indicate another instructor was not killed outright, although he is believed to have died six days after the accident.

He is not listed among the 26 who were honoured yesterday at the memorial service hosted by the 1st Recruit Training Battalion and attended by more than 150 people, including children and wives of the blast victims and Kapooka staff from 1945.

Mr Bartlett travelled



EMOTION: Yesterday's memorial service brought to the service emotions that have their roots 50 years deep in history.

from Adelaide for the service, which was held yesterday just metres away from the blast site in what is now a farm paddock on the outskirts of the Kapooka Military Area.

In his requiem, Padre

Gary Kenney, of Kapooka, outlined what was known of the circumstances surrounding the accident and said they were a part of the history of the Australian Army in Wagga and throughout the nation.

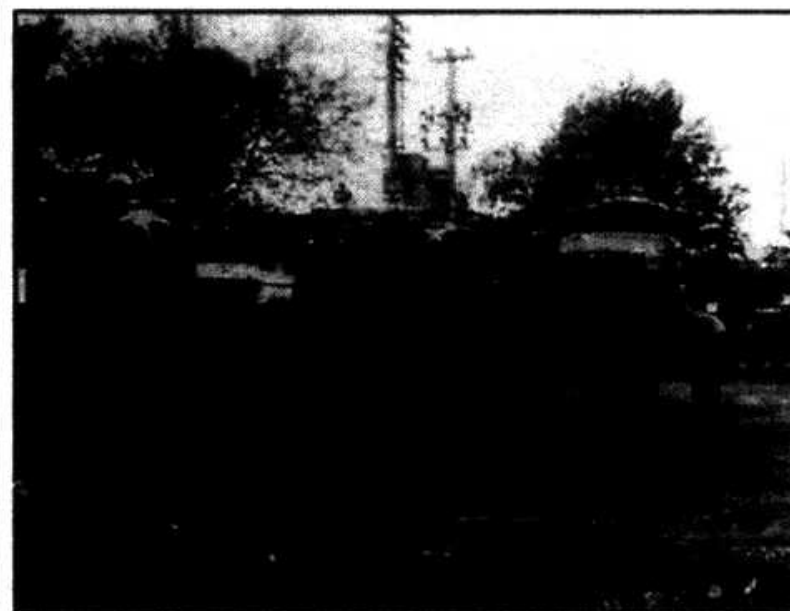
He said the incident would have generated doubt about the Army and doubt about God in the minds of the victims' families.

"Tragedy always remains

tragedy if we who are near it do not grow and learn from the experience," Padre Kenney said.

"We can't change the facts, but we can change the way we think about the facts," he said.

Padre Kenney said the aim of Australia Remembers in 1995 was not simply to remember the past or to glorify the war, but was to reflect on how Australia has grown and learned from the past.



FUNERAL: This historic photo shows one of the four trucks that were used to carry 26 coffins from Kapooka to the Wagga War Cemetery for a mass funeral on May 24, 1945.

Wagga's 'saddest day'

MAY 24, 1945, has been described as the saddest day in Wagga's history.

It's the day when 26 soldiers, some of whom had survived battle in the Middle East and the Pacific and some of whom were teenagers early into their military training, were laid to rest in the city's war cemetery.

The men were killed when an estimated 50 kilograms of explosives detonated in an earthen dug-out during a training exercise three days earlier.

The tragedy shocked the nation, coming as it did after the end of hostilities in Europe and with the end of the Pacific war in sight.

And no-one expected such shocking loss of life in a non-combat area.

The cause of the disaster is still not known today. The only survivor, Allan Bartlett, recalls nothing of the blast itself and the area was so devastated it left no clues for the inquiry that followed.

Wagga came to a halt for the mass funeral at the Wagga War Cemetery, within the monumental cemetery along Koorringal Road.

Council offices and business houses closed, an estimated 7000 people lined Edward Street while the cortege passed by, four semi-trailers carried the 26 coffins, other trucks carried the countless flower arrangements and scores of citizens loaned their cars for the transport of grieving families.

The funeral was also attended by some of the leading military figures of the time, including the General Officer Commanding the Second Australian Army, Major-General AW Lloyd.

The blast victims buried in Wagga are:

Sergeants Ronald Linthorpe and Herbert Pomeroy; Corporal William Cousins; Sappers Alfred Woods, Colin Boyd, Joseph Collins, Norman Dilley, Joseph Faull, Alan Flood, Denby Grasby, Colin Hurley, Kevin Hurst, Leslie Mather, Ivan Merritt, Terence Moore, Stanley Morphy, Jack Nixon, Geoffrey Partridge, Kevin Pierce, Frank Platt, Ernest Poschalk, William Reid, Edward Robson, Stanley Ross, Alfred Widd and Alfred Woods.

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