

The Kapooka Tragedy - 21st May 1945.

On 21st May, 1945, just months from the end of World War II, a tragic accident occurred at the Engineers Training Base, Kapooka. While being shown demolition and explosive procedure, an enormous explosion occurred in a dugout, killing 26 personnel. Kapooka Camp had been established by the Australian Government as the main Royal Australian Engineers training facility in Eastern Australia, in 1942.

On that day, two instructors were taking 26 young conscript sappers through training in the use of explosives. They were located in a dugout, where men usually waited while an explosion occurred above ground level. This and two other underground rooms were located a large distance away from the Kapooka buildings (towards today's San Isidore). An enormous explosion occurred in the dugout at about 2:45 pm . 24 sappers died plus the two instructors. Two men who were just outside survived. The sound of the explosion could be heard in Wagga, more than 10 kms away.

Surprisingly by today's standards, death certificates were issued for the dead men later on the night of the accident. From the 23rd May until the 1st June a military inquiry was held on site. The few witnesses were interviewed. However, outside of the army, censorship occurred. In the Daily Advertiser of 22nd May a small front page story said "Shocking Tragedy". No names were released. There was an enlarged story on 23rd May, but no names again. Some names were printed on 24th, the day of the funeral. Even allowing for the limited information that had been released, the turn-out for the funeral was amazing. It is said that 7000 people lined the route. That would have been half the city's population. The coffins were carried on the back of four army trucks. Another truck was reserved for wreaths and tributes.

The funeral was said to have been the biggest military funeral in Australia up until that time, and may still hold that honour. The accident is, according to current army officials, still the largest training accident that the army has suffered.

After the war ended, nothing was publicly said about the tragedy for decades. No doubt the families never forgot, but at other WWII ceremonies in Wagga nothing was publicly remembered, probably until 1992. In that year, the 50th anniversary of the opening of Kapooka was being celebrated and many officials were coming to town. The army arranged for a plaque to be placed on a concrete block, in private property near the explosion site. There were some family members of the deceased at the ceremony and more than one newspaper articles. Later, in 1995, another ceremony was held marking the 50th anniversary of the accident. A local committee called, Australia Remembers was involved, together with Historic Society members, attended a moving ceremony at Kapooka. Many family members plus at least one survivor gave their thoughts on the tragedy for the press. Then in 2000 an information board on the accident was unveiled at the War Cemetery.

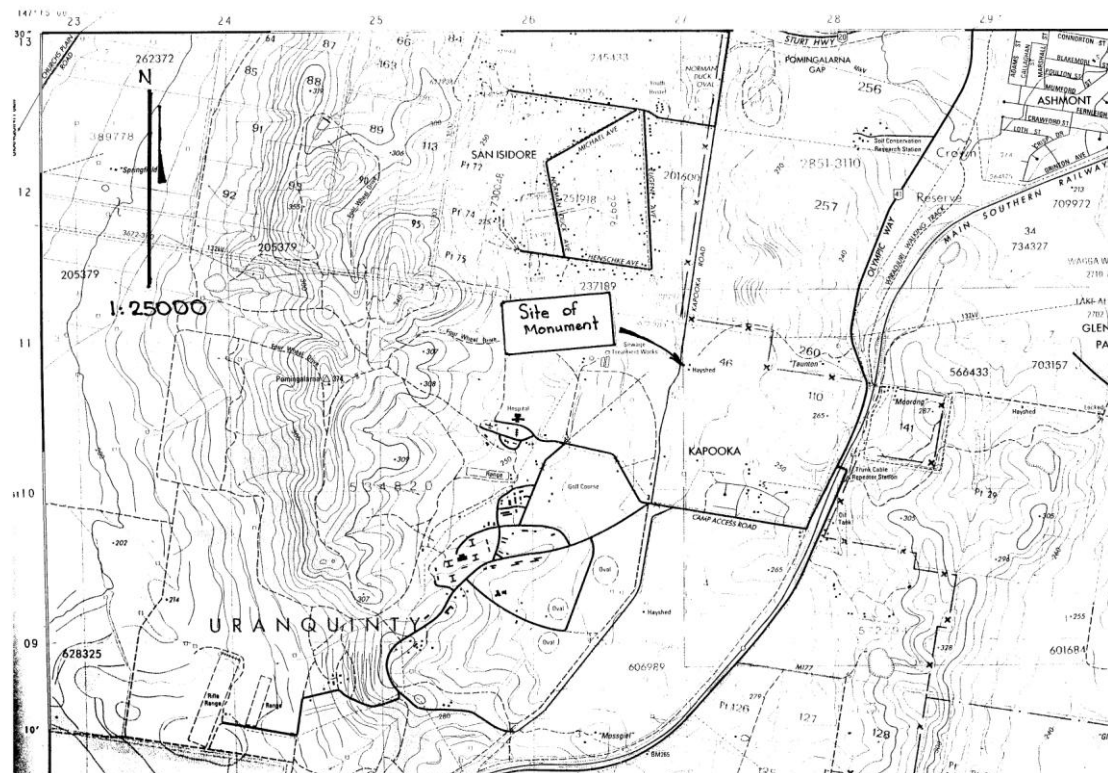
More recently, the plaque which had been located on the concrete slab in the farm paddock, was relocated across the road to a spot where the public could view it without entering the private land. In 2012, the army has built a commemorative enclosure across the road from the actual site, allowing for car parking and with interpretive boards to be erected. A tree has been planted for each soldier killed, and there is a name plaque in front of each tree.

The army has plans for a walking trail from the base to the site, which is about 400 metres. Another action required is for the City's tourist brochures to mention the event and the memorials.

Gary Croker
June 2012.

References.

Various editions of the Wagga Daily Advertiser 1945 – 2012.
Peter Rushbrook The Kapooka Tragedy 1945: History or Heritage 2003
Sherry Morris Wagga Wagga A History 1999.



KAPOOKA MILITARY AREA

Historical Marker

NEAR THIS SITE ON 21st MAY 1945 THE TWENTY SIX
ENGINEERS WHOSE NAMES ARE LISTED BELOW WERE
KILLED IN A TRAINING ACCIDENT.

WX25792
VX57880
NX347275
WX27966
NX20447
NX215915
NX45836
NX285563
NX205966

Sgt RO Linthorpe
Sgt HA Pomeroy
Cpl WE Cousins
Cpl AE Woods
Spr CF Boyd
Spr JJ Collins
Spr NR Dilley
Spr JW Fauli
Spr A Flood

SX34059
NX480546
NX205951
NX180209
SX34058
NX205952
Q270563
MX206033

Spr DE Grasby
Spr CL Hurley
Spr KA Hurst
Spr LA Mather
Spr IWT Merritt
Spr TR Moore
Spr SR Morphy
Spr JC Nixon

NX380218
VX96197
QX63509
Q273551
S115574
NX285938
MX81964
WX23184
N460870

Spr GW Partridge
Spr KF Pierce
Spr FW Platt
Spr EF Poschalk
Spr W Reid
Spr EG Robson
Spr SE Ross
Spr AG Witt
Spr T Woods

LEST WE FORGET

Unveiled by

General PC Gratton AO OBE
Chief of Defence Force

Alderman P Brassil
Mayor Wagga Wagga

Colonel G W Hurford
Commander
Kapooka Military Area

On 6th April 1992

INSCRIPTION