

## The Kapooka Tragedy.

On the 21st May 1945 , the Wagga Daily Advertiser reported that some 300 Super Fortresses [American bombers] , supported by Mustangs from Iwojima, dropped over two thousand tons of high explosives, on the Japanese city of Hamamatsu. A week earlier over one quarter of Nagoya had been destroyed or damaged when more than a thousand Super Fortresses dropped two million 6lb incendiaries on that city. The Chinese had captured Foochow, the Americans were pressing on at Okinawa in Japan and making significant gains in the Philippines. The Japanese were suffering defeats on numerous fronts. It was only some ten weeks away from the day when the first atomic bomb was to be dropped on Hiroshima and bring an end to Japanese resistance.

There must have been a feeling, amongst the Advertiser's readers, that perhaps finally the war was nearing the end, and yet at that very moment tragedy struck right there in Wagga Wagga. On that same day twenty six men were killed in an explosion at the Kapooka military base, when a training routine went terribly wrong. Of a group of twenty eight men in a dugout only two survived.

The funeral was held in Wagga Wagga on the afternoon of the 23rd ,and was stated to be the largest military funeral ever to take place in Australia. All twenty six bodies were buried in the military cemetery [at the Wagga Wagga Monumental Cemetery in Koorlingal road]. School children lined both sides of the funeral route in Edward street, opposite the South Wagga Wagga school, as the assembly proceeded from Kapooka to the cemetery, the caskets being carried on four semi-trailers. The following description was given by the Daily Advertiser:

*"The approach of the funeral was signalled by motorcyclists, 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 and came to respectful attention.*

*In the crowds at this point were staffs from big industrial firms such as Hardys Ltd., Minty's Garage, Barton's and other artisans. There was also a large number of officers and men of the R.A.A.F. and of the A.I.F., while a splash of colour was created by the double lines formed by the matrons, sisters, and nurses from the Wagga Base Hospital.*

*The crowd was hushed as the first tender bearing six coffins came through the line, followed by three others carrying the other twenty bodies of the dead soldiers. Following was a long line of cars, the leading ones of which contained bereaved relatives, and many of those in the streets found their eyes dimmed with tears as their sympathy went out to the distressed relatives who had so sadly and abruptly been deprived of loved ones...."*



Above: A scene at the cemetery on the day of the military funeral.  
Photo courtesy of the Wagga Daily Advertiser.



**Left:** Another scene from the funeral. Photo courtesy of the Wagga Daily Advertiser.

A military Court of Inquiry found that the explosion was an accident , and:

*“surmised that the accident most likely occurred after Bill Cousins picked up the charges being prepared by Kendall’s men and moved to place them next to the explosives on Pomeroy’s right, and tripped in the process, bringing the fuses in direct contact with the opened explosives, the only way they could be ignited.”<sup>6</sup>”*

A memorial with the names of all those who died was erected at the site, and was recently removed from what is now private property, to a location across the road, which is open to the public. The society had shown concern for this memorial and were pleased when the Army made the decision to erect a new memorial stone and to relocate the old memorial to the new site.

A Memorial Service was held on the 21st May, 2010, and members will be pleased to hear that Evelyn Patterson and Sherry Morris were in attendance.



**Left:** Evelyn alongside the new memorial

Photo courtesy Sherry Morris.

#### **References:**

1. Wagga Daily Advertiser, 21st May 1945, p1c3-7.
2. Wagga Daily Advertiser, 22nd May 1945, p1c5.
3. Wagga Daily Advertiser, 23rd May 1945, p1c8-9.
4. Wagga Daily Advertiser, 24th May 1945, p2c8-9.
5. Wagga Daily Advertiser, 25th May 1945, p3c5-9.
6. The Kapooka Tragedy 1945: History or Heritage, Peter Rushbrook, CSU.