The Kapooka Tragedy

Lest not Forget

By Major Kieran Jackel

`On the 21st of May 1945, in a single blinding flash of gelignite 26 young lives were snuffed out in an underground bunker. When they buried the victims three days later, half of the population of Wagga Wagga - 7000 men women and children - lined the streets to bow their heads at the passing of the coffins. It remains to this day the Nation's largest military funeral. But then something strange happened. Australia forgot.'

In an unassuming paddock on the outskirts of Wagga Wagga five Bailey panels rest in place, encircled by 26 saplings for company. Unless you had taken a wrong turn on route to Kapooka, The Home of the Soldier, you would most likely be unaware of this site. Yet the fact remains that on this site a humble memorial exists in memoriam of the Australian Army's worst accident that claimed the lives of 26 soldiers, including two who died of wounds in hospital. All of those lost had a common hat badge and at some stage would have responded to 'Sapper'. Like many of the Sappers currently serving at the 1st Recruit Training Battalion I felt a wave of guilt to my ignorance of this event as the memorial service came and went this year.

The incident, or the 'Kapooka Tragedy' as it is referred, was in essence a training incident occurring during a demolitions practice. However it occurred during a time when the country was at war on the 21st of May 1945. The gravity of the loss likely compounded by the fact that World War II was drawing to a close, the Germans had surrendered and momentum was with the Allies in the Pacific.

'It was the Australian Army's worst accident a tragedy so grim and gruesome it tore the heart out of a country town'

The Wagga Wagga Township has for over 70 years had a close relationship with the Australian Army, with the majority of soldier ab initio training being conducted at Kapooka, the Home of the Soldier since 1951. What is not widely known is the Corps association with the region, perhaps fitting in 2014-15 as the School of Military Engineering once again looks towards a new home.

In 1942 Sappers conducted their Field engineer training at what was then termed the Royal Australian Engineer Training Centre (RAETC). Wagga was chosen as the site to centralise six of the seven engineer training depots due to its proximity to both Sydney and Melbourne. By July 1942 headquarters and accommodation had been established to provide for four engineer training battalions and also to accommodate for reinforcement training to Australian and United States Engineer units.

The method of training conducted at the RAETC at the time was viewed as radical, today it is the norm. The training continuum had evolved to a stage were it was believed trainees would retain more knowledge if training on a given subject area was concentrated over a number of weeks. As such, training focused on demolitions, minefields, field defences and machines, camouflage, roads, airfields, sawmilling, cement construction and bridging. In order to progress in training each Sapper had to be deemed satisfactory in each area.

The parallels for the IBT of today are obvious. This concentration of training concept also extended to instructors with subject matter experts being utilised based on module. A number of these instructors now have a plaque beneath one of the 26 trees on site.

The day of the tragedy was like any other, week 4 of training, 0630 reveille, 0730 Breakfast in the mess, 0825 Morning Parade, 0840 Training begins.

At 1415 Lance Sergeant Kendal and three trainees entered the dugout (Bunker as known today) to prepare fuses for the night practices. This included affixing matches to lengths of fuse cord, attaching electric leads and binding with detonator cord.

At 1430 Sergeant Pomeroy, Corporal Cousins and twenty-two trainees entered the dugout for an explanation on the night practice and how to develop hand charges. In addition to the complement of trainees and staff, detonator cord, fuse wire and ignition sources; the dugout also contained over 50 Kilograms of High Explosive including Gelignite and monobel.

At approximately 1445 as members were counting detonators with safety fuses it is believed the explosion occurred. The dug out collapsed and smoke and debris filled the air. As Sappers, it is clear that this description is benign, and the scene confronting first responders would have been horrific.

In the chaos that followed both the military and community responded as best they could to the incident site, triaging survi-
The ceremony and funeral service were then dispatched to the members Next of Kin.

The funeral service conducted on the 24th of May saw four flat bed trucks carry the 26 flag draped coffins to the Wagga Wagga war cemetery. As much as half the town turned out and lined the main streets in respect, with 200 returned servicemen forming a guard of honour.

The service had a profound and lasting impact on the region and emotion overcame a number of people during the service as the coffins were simultaneously lowered to the sound of a squad of buglers playing the last post.

As the Second World War ended, the Royal Australian Engineer Training Centre closed and all functions were absorbed into the School of Military Engineering that had been established at Casula in Sydney since 1939.

Annually, and only since 1995, the Army Recruiting Training Centre conducts the Kapooka Tragedy Memorial on the 21st of May. Although a small and intimate service it provides a forum for those that still reside within the local community an opportunity to silently reflect on the tragedy and costs of service. At the time of the incident a prevailing social strategy existed of not talking about the difficult issues, rather focusing on moving on after the war. Consequently the memories of these fallen had long only been held by families and friends, many who are clearly carrying the burden of age.

As I reflected on a simple handshake with a member who was, as fate would have it, attending an appointment at the time of the blast, I found myself compelled to strike this article driven by the sense that it needed increased awareness as an integral aspect of Corp history. I was shocked that as a member of the Corp for a decade and as a past Adjutant of the School of Military Engineering I was unaware of the magnitude of such an event.

As age will continue to claim those that remember that day I believe it is fitting the Sappers that continue to serve make effort to remember those that have given their lives, not simply in conflict, but also through training for it.

As an Army we continue to learn how to manage those that suffer following a traumatic event and perhaps the lessons associated with the past at times have not been fully learnt, as I am sure mates and commanders of those Sappers lost in recent operations can relate to the comments below:

‘Fellow instructors and sappers were devastated by the explosion particularly those who had to pack up the belongings of their mates. Paddy Cranswick was particularly distressed he was left alone in the six-man tent he had shared with sappers killed in the explosion for several days. Paddy still has nightmares which, he says, are like repeatedly watching the accident unfold ‘as if watching it on TV’.

Perhaps we as a Corp owe elements of our Demolition Range Safety practices to these members and that the tragic loss has in some way contributed to the safety of all Sappers hence forth, and for that, lest we forget.

The Kapooka Tragedy Memorial and the Wagga Wagga War Cemetery are open to the public and recommended as a worthy Visit. The Author would like to thank and acknowledge the efforts of local historian Sherry Morris in researching and helping to revive this part of Corp History.