

The Kapooka Tragedy 1945: history or heritage?

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Abstract

The paper is a further contribution to the author's (and a range of collaborative partners) long-term project of mapping, analysing and critiquing the construction of Australian adult and Vocational Education and Training (VET) history. The paper narrates the story of the accidental deaths of twenty-six army engineers, or 'Sappers', in an explosion during a training exercise at the Royal Australian Engineers Training Centre, Kapooka Camp, near Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, on 21 May 1945. Though of interest in itself as a contribution to military and vocational training history, the event suggests questions relating to its institutionalised 'forgetting' by historians and the wider population. Given its status as the site of the most deaths suffered in a training accident in Australian Army history, why then is it not recorded in the literature and popular memory? This collective amnesia suggests questions related to how we write, record and value history. The paper flags these themes through a brief discussion focused on the ideas of 'history', or the systematic and critical investigation of the past, and 'heritage', or the popular and often distorted selection of past events for legitimising contemporary institutional behaviours. The paper concludes with a suggestion that the Kapooka Tragedy may serve as an allegory for New Millennium VET training and research: what pasts are we 'forgetting' and leaving for resurrection by future historians; and what pasts are we holding on to, distorted or otherwise, as 'heritage'? And, why do we choose one path or the other?

Introduction

The story of the Kapooka Tragedy forms another panel in the author's growing mural of adult and VET history. While the 'big' picture will take several lifetimes to complete (and who knows what it will show!) the gathering of its parts will nevertheless reveal tantalising pictorial insights. Over the past decade many historical 'panels' have been completed and have revealed a range of 'pictures'. Each picture, in turn, was crafted (sometimes with a partner or partners) with an illustrative idea, though some ideas were set aside for more abstract treatment. Broad montages have been given of a range of job roles, from the evolution of the operative worker (Brown and Rushbrook 1995) and the technician (Rushbrook 2003, forthcoming), to the construction of the modern apprentice (Rushbrook 2001). A long term plan to sketch the biographies of major sectoral identities has so far revealed Myer Kangan, author and mentor of the report that launched 'TAFE' (Rushbrook and Mackinnon 1998), Colin Badger, founder of Victoria's Council of Adult Education (Rushbrook 2001a), and John 'Jack' Kepert, Victorian Technical Schools Division Director and progenitor of the modern TAFE institute (Spaull and Rushbrook 2000). Quick brush strokes have been given to accounts of Victorian adult education (Rushbrook 2003a) and the William Angliss Food Trades College (Rushbrook 2003b), while fine detail has been applied to the development of the Victorian TAFE system (Rushbrook 1995). As the mural has taken shape, there has been time for occasional reflection on more abstract material. A consideration of the role of tradition in creating, protecting and preserving

institutional boundaries (Rushbrook 1997, 1997a) was followed by later musing on the role of history in forming the VET sector's self-image (Rushbrook and Brown 2001). At the heart of the VET sector is also the enduring theme of 'the construction the 'good worker', an image without which the sector could have hardly drawn breath (Boughton, Brown, Merlyn and Rushbrook 2002; Rushbrook 1995: 93-94). The importance of this particular image will remain for some time the focus of future historical work (for example, Boughton, Brown, Merlyn and Rushbrook 2003).

The image of the Kapooka Tragedy may be located in a distant corner of the vast adult education and VET mural, but, like all carefully crafted works, is worthy of fine treatment. In many ways it symbolises the countless similar stories of education and training that inform and underpin contemporary vocational education practice. But unlike most New Millennium vocational education research, which tends to be located in some kind of abstracted statistical playground, the Kapooka Tragedy is grounded, to paraphrase Manning Clark, in a people, a time and a place (Clark 1975:433). It is therefore unique and not intended to be replicated, collated or averaged for a higher pragmatic purpose. It should be enjoyed as a story of value in itself, yet illustrative of the potential of the science and craft of history and what it can offer to a discipline grounded, it appears sadly, in the continuous present.

The remainder of the paper narrates the Kapooka Tragedy and its aftermath. The evidence consulted represents the first stage of a detailed investigation of the incident. The narrative is followed by a discussion of the role of 'history' and 'heritage' in understanding the event's place in Australian popular memory. By way of analogy, the implications of this discussion have applicability to the history of vocational education practice and its long-term rescue from, in a twist of E. P. Thompson's words, 'the enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson 1984: 12).

The Kapooka Tragedy

Morning

Sergeant Herbert 'Jack' Pomeroy woke early on the morning of Monday 21 May 1945. He needed to. His temporary home with local police-officer Constable Harry Hickson was in Wagga Wagga's Beckwith Street, about five miles from work with the army's First Battalion at the Royal Australian Engineers Training Centre (RAETC), Kapooka Camp. Reveille was at 0630, the beginning of the army day. A miner and munitions factory worker in civilian life, and a Sixth Division veteran who had seen service in the Middle-East and New Guinea, he was well equipped to instruct new recruits in the deadly art of destruction through explosion. Although 'being very bored with the inactivity of an instructor' and wanting to return to New Guinea to fight with his mates in what were known to be the final months of war (Victory in Europe was declared earlier in the month), he was nevertheless in high spirits. He had just enjoyed a relaxing weekend with his family, who had travelled with him to Wagga from Melbourne six months before. His wife Dorothy and four children under five were justifiably proud of him. Apart from being a devoted, non-drinking family man and distinguished soldier who had 'made good' after emigrating from Reading, England, he was also widely-known and admired as a leading Victorian amateur cyclist. No doubt Dorothy and the children wished him well for the day before leaving, as it was his thirty-first birthday. None knew it was their last goodbye. (Visit to Wagga Wagga

Commonwealth War Cemetery; *Daily Advertiser* 24 May 1945; *Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour*: VX 57880; AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Minute AG12a (2) 16 June 1945; Bolton 1990: 19.)

At Kapooka Camp 8 000 or so residents similarly stirred to greet the crisp but clear autumn dawn. In 1945 the camp presented a dishevelled appearance. Nestled in the forested southern slopes of the Pomingalana Range overlooking rich Riverina farmland, it consisted of a series of dirt tracks, low wooden buildings, temporary huts and countless rows of tightly packed tents. Wagga, however, was proud of 'its' camp. Local aldermen had fought from 1939 for its location in the district after the local showground was found inadequate as a regional recruiting depot. They did not need to fight hard, though, as Wagga's position equidistant between Sydney and Melbourne on a loop of the main railway line made it a prime location. At the same time a rationalisation of engineer or 'Sapper' training from six to two sites (Western Australia's isolation meant it was left alone) secured its purpose. The camp's closeness to several airfields added to its strategic value as a training centre. Local talk that 'Kapooka' a Wiradjuri word thought to mean 'place of wind', was selected by local lad and supreme military commander General Thomas Blamey, was most likely apocryphal. (*The Leader* 9 January 1980; *The Daily Advertiser* 15 December 1990; Hyder Consulting 1998: 18-20; Sharp 1990; Morris 1999: 197-198.)

Crammed six to a tent, the camp's trainees dressed quickly but carefully, tidied their stretchers, blankets and straw mattresses and placed personal possessions in modest storage facilities. They wore standard army issue outer wear: khaki pants, shirts and jackets marked with rank and unit, an instantly identifiable slouch hat, but folded down, deeply shined black boots, seemingly defying the all-present dust and mud, and black webbing with attached bayonet and water canteen. Away from the gaze of sergeants and corporals who punitively enforced the army's unwavering dress code, recruits favoured wearing civilian underwear, carefully labelled by loved ones; army issue underwear scratched and irritated, adding discomfort to an already tough training regime. A final adornment was a scrupulously maintained rifle, most likely a Lee-Enfield .303.

Upon leaving their tents, the recruits lined up for first roll call. Many answered for mates clandestinely making their way back from Wagga following a night spent with a loved one, or from the nearby Uranquinty pub after a heavy drinking session. Breakfast in one of the makeshift huts was a hearty affair. Globes of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and black tea were slopped into the Sappers' standard issue 'dixies' and pannikins. Stories were exchanged in the self-deprecating banter typical to the almost exclusively young, white and Anglo-working class male throng. But beneath the bravado was a palpable nervousness engendered by the inherent risks of Sapper training.

The RAETC program was considered radical for its day, most likely for its participants' weekly progression through the hands of area specialists rather than single 'all-purpose' instructors. Participants were divided in four battalions, each of 960 men, and a branch instructional wing. The training period was set for sixteen weeks for new recruits and seventeen weeks for soldiers converting roles or members of already formed units. Fifteen weeks were devoted to the actual program; the remaining period was used for interspersed camp roles; for example, guard and mess

duties. Based on British military engineering texts, with Australian modifications, the program demanded a recruit pass each section of training before proceeding to the next. At completion a recruit was regarded as 'draft priority one' and ready for despatch to one of a number of Pacific theatres, most probably the Borneo campaign where engineers featured prominently. Topics covered included regimental and weapons training, minefield, field defences and machines, camouflage, roads, airfields, and bridging. Week Four was devoted to demolitions. (Sharp 1990: 42; AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit C; Coates 2001: 280-284)

At 0825 the troops assembled for Monday Parade. This was a time for mapping the day's activities and reminding rank and file their responsibilities in what were potentially hazardous situations. Three squads, led by demolition area specialists Sergeant Pomeroy, Sergeant Tafe and Corporal Conwell, greeted their new charges for Day One of Week Four training. Warrant Officer II (WOII) Dodds, the acting Key Instructor, read all assembled the 'Standing Orders Demolition Area'. The orders required personnel to carry their rifles to and from the area, instructors to make clear safety precautions before beginning training, instructors to have absolute control over personnel, and instructors to manage carefully all explosives in their care, including their guarding in the absence of the squad from the training area. WOII Dodds then read the releases for the day: nine Sappers from Sergeant Tafe's squad and two from Corporal Conwell's were assigned other duties. The three squads of trainees and area specialists and their assistants then marched the mile or so to the Demolition Area, first with rifles 'at the slope', and after leaving the camp area less formally at 'trail'. (Sharp 1990: 43; AAV MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit B, and witness statement NX. 191935 WOII Dodds)

The Demolition Area is now a sheep paddock not far from Kapooka's main gate, but outside the camp's present boundary. It is still recognisable from old photos, particularly the gnarled and beautiful, but lonely, yellow-box eucalypt at its centre. Missing are the four dug-outs scattered across the paddock that served variously as shelters, training rooms and storage facilities. The dug-out Sergeant Pomeroy and his squad headed toward on that cold day measured about twenty-one feet long and nineteen feet wide. No more than seven feet high at its centre and tapering down at each end, it was more than half-buried in the local red clay. Supporting wall and ceiling timbers were made of rough sawn bush timber. A nine-inch opening around the structure at ground height allowed both light and air into the space. The roof of cement-coated hessian on arc-steel mesh was covered with a thick layer of dirt. Instructors and trainees entered the dug-out using steps at its northern end, not far from the yellow box. On the right was a large blackboard used by the instructor or his assistant. Sawdust covered the floor and trainees sat around the edges on old ammunition boxes. The area could accommodate up to thirty-five personnel. (author's site visit; AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit D.)

Sergeant Pomeroy and his assistant, the unusually tall Corporal Bill Cousins, began their work with their trainees at about 0900. Because of the cold weather they chose to conduct all training and introductory explosives handling in the dug-out, its construction providing a naturally stable environment. At 0915 Pomeroy would have heard the familiar sound of a large Ford truck lumbering its way into the area. It was driven by a member of the Australian Womens Army Service. Travelling in the truck was Sapper Musto, a storeman. It was his job to deliver to each dug-out one hundred

pounds of Monobel quarry explosive, ten pounds of gelignite, a range of electric and safety detonators and about thirty-five feet of fuse. Pomeroy used his permitted discretion and placed the explosives, packed in several wooden boxes, in the dug-out not far from his right as he faced his students, rather than leave them outside guarded by two trainees, depriving them of valuable training time. (AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit D, witness statement NX. 89519 Sapper Musto.)

At 1100 Sergeant Kendall released most of his squad for guard duty and kept three back to prepare detonators for the scheduled Day One night exercise. As Sergeant Tafe similarly had only three of his original twelve trainees a suggestion was made that Kendall's and Tafe's men be sent to Pomeroy's dug-out, with one man staying with Kendall to help lay down wires for the night exercise. Kendall's two men would remain under his and Pomeroy's supervision and prepare the fuses in Pomeroy's dug-out. WOII Dodds agreed to the suggestion. (AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statement NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall, witness statement NX. 191935 WOII Dodds.)

Afternoon

At 1230 the Demolition Area trainees stopped for a hot and nutritious lunch delivered by a purpose built truck equipped with a wood-fired boiler that water-heated field kitchen food containers. Trainees sat around, talked and smoked or played football. After lunch there was another Parade followed by physical training exercises. During this period six more men arrived to be assigned for training. Dodds sent three to Corporal Conwell and yet another three to Sergeant Pomeroy. This meant twenty-six recruits were now under Jack Pomeroy's care. (AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statement NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall, witness statement NX. 191935 WOII Dodds.)

At approximately 1330 Kendall transferred Tafe's issued explosives close to the entrance of Pomeroy's dug-out. He then led his men into the dug-out, to the immediate left of the blackboard, and set them to work preparing the fuses. They used the explosives issued to Pomeroy. (AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statement NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall.)

Pomeroy's men arrived at about 1430. According to Kendall's account, Pomeroy first said, 'We will now get on with the preparation of hand charges' and commenced the training session. In keeping with the suggested protocol Pomeroy would have demonstrated cutting and crimping safety fuse wire, attaching it to a detonator and then placing the detonator into a tennis ball-size plug of monobel. Only one trainee at a time would be permitted to repeat the demonstration under the strict supervision of either Pomeroy or Cousins. Sapper Allan Bartlett of South Australia, sitting in the far right corner of the dug-out, waited his turn. He noticed Corporal Cousins move to his right and pick up the fuses already completed by Kendall's men. Kendall had just left the dug-out to check the night exercise wiring work. Bartlett then turned to talk to one of his mates. (AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statement NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall, witness statement VX. 106418 Corporal Holdsworth, inquiry questions directed to Sapper Bartlett; *Daily Advertiser* 22 May 1995.)

Kendall checked the electrical firing cable and found it to be sound. He then moved back to the dug-out, but decided not to enter immediately. He reached a point about

seven yards from the entrance and suddenly felt enormous heat, heard a deafening sound and was propelled violently backwards the unmistakable force of a catastrophic explosion. He fell to the ground and noticed part of a body close to his left side. He also noted through the dusty haze that the roof of the bunker had collapsed. Sergeant Tafe, about 150 yards away, exclaimed surprisingly, 'sounds like a crater charge'. Sergeant McNabb, working with him, yelled, 'The dugout's gone.' Captain Merry, Officer in Charge of G Company and Captain-Instructor of the Fourth Week, on his way to the Demolition Area and about 800 yards away, heard the explosion and saw an unusual column of smoke and dust, but initially thought it was the result of some experimental work currently underway. However, on seeing Sergeant McNabb run towards him in an obviously distressed state, said to his driver, 'Hurry up, it looks as if something's wrong.'

In the following ordered mayhem twenty-seven personnel were removed from the destroyed dugout, plus the seriously injured Sergeant Kendall. Sapper Bartlett, burned and profoundly deaf, but alive, was embedded in the hard clay of the far wall, most probably surviving because of the shielding effect of his mates beside him. He was carefully excavated from the wall by Sergeant Tafe. Two of Bartlett's companions survived with him, but died later of their terrible injuries. The camp's three ambulances worked laboriously to ferry the dead and injured to the camp morgue and hospital. At 1600 Sergeant Sherwood of the Wagga police arrived, but soon left as under the National Security Regulations a civilian inquest was not required for an incident involving army personnel. Later, at 2000, death certificates were issued for twenty-six fatalities. Nineteen were identified by identity discs; the remaining seven, being unrecognisable, were identified through personal possessions, including wedding rings, dental records, and labelled clothing, including braces and civilian underwear. Pomeroy, one of the seven, was identified by his engraved watch; Cousins, another, by the size of his torso and bone structure. (AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statements, particularly NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall, NX. 12713 Captain Merry, NX. 124393 Sergeant Tafe, VX. 81510 Captain Smith.)

Aftermath

Two final stages closed the Kapooka Tragedy to national memory. On 24 May a mass funeral was held in Wagga Wagga that attracted national attention, partly because of the magnitude of the event and partly because of the publicised insensitivity of army censors to release the victims names until the evening of 23 May. Wagga's *Daily Advertiser* reported 'Men have been forbidden to mention the explosion. Many were very upset they could not let their relatives know they were safe.' A lorry of wreaths and four flag-draped semi-trailers carrying the coffins drove sombrely past half of Wagga's assembled 14 000 population. After separate denominational funerals, the coffins were lowered simultaneously into the prepared graves. The emotion of the event continues to reverberate in local folk memory, nearly sixty years later. (*The Daily Advertiser* 24 May 1945; Morris 1999, p. 209).

From 23 May – 1 June 1945 a military Court of Inquiry presided over by Brigadier A. M. Forbes met to unravel the causes of the explosion and apportion blame, if any. The exhaustive process involved the preparation of statements and witness cross-examination (Bartlett was spared most of this because of his injuries). Two of the remaining dugouts were blown up to test separately the effects of monobel and

gelignite, concluding that either explosive alone was more than enough to kill those present. At the end of the inquiry the Court 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. It was against all regulations to store charges next to opened or unopened ordnance. It was also found unusual that Pomeroy elected to store the explosives in the dug-out. The day was cold but not wet, the usual circumstance for storing explosives underground. In a post-inquiry Department of the Army minute, Brigadier A. G. Torr, on behalf of the Major General Engineer in Chief, ordered that in any dugout or confined space only one type of explosive work should be conducted at a time, and that in a dugout or confined space containing more than three men and a quantity of explosives exceeding one pound, there should not be any stored detonators. He emphasised, however, that though these precautions were covered in the extant proceedings, they should nevertheless be brought to the attention of the RAETC. It appears, then, that an accident waiting to happen, whether or not because of loose training protocols (for example, Pomeroy's discretionary power) became just that, a blameless accident. Perhaps an earlier minute would have prompted RAETC educators to sharpen their protocols, preventing the tragedy? (AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Minute DE 26 June 1945, Minute AG12A(2) 18 July 1945.)

History or heritage?

As far as the author is able to ascertain, there has been no previously published detailed account of the Kapooka Tragedy. The official history of World War II (Long 1973) makes no mention of it, nor does the recently published *Australian Centenary History of Defence* (Dennis and Coates 2000). And, though the incident lives on in local folk memory and in the minds of the victims' families (*Daily Advertiser* 22 May 1995), it has disappeared altogether from national memory. The only monuments to it are a mouldering plaque at the site, now privately owned and locked to the public, and a modest memorial at Wagga Wagga's war cemetery. The Kapooka Tragedy, it appears, is not mentioned in the same breath as Ken Inglis's tribute to war memorials as 'sacred places', grand and eloquent tributes to those who paid the ultimate price for the preservation of nationhood (Inglis 1998). Rather, the Kapooka Tragedy seems to occupy a space in what may be called Australia's hidden history of shame. Accidents, then, ought not to be remembered as they fail to add value to the national heritage.

In many ways, though, it is the Kapooka Tragedy's consignment to quiet oblivion that is its legacy to understanding the unfolding of historical memory. The process of popular and institutional 'forgetting' suggests conversely that 'remembering' must be actively constructed through time. Often distorted for particular contemporary institutional purposes, preserved 'remembering' often assumes the mantle of 'heritage'. There must, therefore, be 'value' in 'dragging up the past'. This contrasts with 'history', or the critical understanding of the past through rigorous interrogation of extant sources, whether preserved in documents or living memory. The heritage-history tension is nicely captured by Graeme Davison (2000), and David Lowenthal (1996) who writes:

[Heritage] is a jumbled, malleable amalgam ever reshaped by this or that partisan interest. Flying in the face of known fact, it is opaque or perverse to

those who do not share its faith. Those who do share it, though, find heritage far more serviceable than the stubborn and unpredictable past revealed by history. Such an unrevised past is too remote to comprehend, too strange to be exemplary, too regrettable to admire, or too dreadful to recall. It may also be too dead to care much about (p. 147).

From another angle the work of Luisa Passerini (1992) further captures the manipulation of memory over time. In her work on 'totalitarian' memory she argues that all subjective memory is exposed to the contemporary 'cult of consensus and authority' that filters and obscures that which is not deemed wholesome for the polity, mainly 'through unperceived structural violence that shapes ideologies, values and dependencies (p. 8).' Memories, then, without continual personal and institutional validation, soon slip and are 'consigned to the past'.

In 2003 the Kapooka Tragedy does indeed appear to be a matter of history rather than heritage. This is a shame, as the Kapooka victims ought to occupy a worthy place in popular memory, and their fate ought to remain a lasting lesson in the vicissitudes of war. But, given *its* popular 'forgetting', what other events have we consigned to historical oblivion? This remains the task of the vigilant historian.

Conclusion

So, are these thoughts relevant to the place of history in adult and vocational education and training research? The Kapooka Tragedy, as demonstrated, has value in itself as an example of heritage-in-action, but undistorted except through the subjective lens of its narrator. Similar stories, maybe less dramatic, must lay undetected in archives and living memory.

Perversely, then, the author is arguing for the legitimization of a meeting point between history and heritage. Through historical research and active intervention in contemporary adult and vocational education and training debates, the historian ought be able to remind those locked in the present that the discipline does indeed have a past that informs practice. Perhaps this can be best represented as 'historical memory' rather than the tainted concept of heritage. Further, the historian's task remains to interrogate vigorously and bring to historical memory those traditions and heritages quite unconsciously informing practice. But that is the subject of a further paper.

References

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