

LEST WE FORGET: THE KAPOOKA TRAGEDY 1945

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*They shall not grow old as we grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.
[Lest we forget]*

— from Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), 'For the Fallen', *The winnowing fan; poems of the Great War*, London, 1914.

Introduction

A curious article appeared in Melbourne's *Herald Sun* on Saturday 23 August 2003. Titled 'New suburb seeks old war memorial', it reported on an idea from a suburban Returned Servicemen's League (RSL) president that 'near-forgotten' war memorials, mostly located in remote rural areas, should be shifted to and 'adopted' by newly established city communities. Their function would be to 'help educate migrants' and others, and in particular 'to instil traditions of sacrifice and service.' The rationale for the strategy was expressed as a belief that there 'is an intrinsic value in having older objects in new communities, to give a sense of wider community and place – otherwise it's just a lot of houses on a hill'.¹

The story represents a widespread relationship Australians have with their war dead. Built on the solemn celebration of the 'digger' spirit, this particular form of national social memory is reinforced annually in cities and towns through ritualised Anzac ceremonies observed beneath shadows of ubiquitous war memorials. It is an ongoing public education campaign that carefully packages sacrifice and heroism as an intrinsic component of national heritage and identity.²

But observance of the war dead has a subtext: social memory and heritage favours those who die valiantly. What of those who died with heartfelt ideas of service and sacrifice, but in arenas far from any front, or in circumstances unbecoming the code of the warrior?³ There appears to be a public awkwardness, even shame, when lives are taken without honour. The national machine that creates and reinforces heritage, in these cases, remains silent. Should there be a moment of national publicity, awareness often fades.⁴

This article explores an incident that raises questions relating to the making and unmaking of history, heritage and social memory. It also points to the role of the historian in unravelling forgotten pasts. On 21 May 1945, at the Royal Australian Engineers Training Camp (RAETC) Kapooka near

1 *Herald Sun*, 23 August 2003.

2 For the role of war memorials in Australian society, see K.S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: war memorials in the Australian landscape*, Melbourne, The Miegunyah Press, 1998; and, A. Hamilton, 'Monuments and memory', *Continuum: the Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1990; for the digger spirit, P. Lindsay, *The Spirit of the Digger: then and now*, Sydney, Macmillan, 2003.

3 L. James, *Warrior Race*, London, Abacus, 2002.

4 For social memory, see J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Blackwell, UK, Oxford, 1992, and L. Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992; for social heritage, D. Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: the heritage crusade and the spoils of history*, London, The Free Press, 1996, and G. Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2000.

the provincial New South Wales city of Wagga Wagga, twenty-four 'sappers' or engineers, and their two 'other ranks' trainers, were killed in a demolitions training exercise gone terribly wrong. The accident remains the largest in Australian army history. However, following a brief flurry of national grief public memory of the tragedy soon slipped into historical obscurity. The article narrates the Kapooka story and then reflects on its role as an exemplar of how a society makes, unmakes or forgets its past.

The Kapooka tragedy

Morning

Sergeant Herbert 'Jack' Pomeroy woke early on 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.⁵

At Kapooka Camp eight thousand 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 drought stricken 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.⁶

5 For Pomeroy, visit by the author to Wagga Wagga Commonwealth War Cemetery, Koorngal Road, Wagga Wagga; *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga) 24 May 1945; *Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour*: VX 57880, Australian War Memorial, Canberra; AAMT885/1:51/1/209, Minute AG12a (2) 16 June 1945, Australian Archives, Melbourne; for a 1945 social context, G. Bolton, *The Middle Way*, The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 5, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 19.

6 Temperatures ranged from 34.5 F (1.0 C) to 66.0F (19 C) with the day described as fine and mild with scattered cloud and scattered frost, with no recorded rain, *Daily Advertiser*, 22 May 1945, p. 2. On 17 May 1945 the *Daily Advertiser* described the continuing drought, with the country coloured a 'sombre brown' (p. 2) For the camp, *The Leader*, 9 January 1980; *The Daily Advertiser*, 15 December 1990; Hyder Consulting, *Kapooka Military Area Resource Assessment*, n.p. (Kapooka Army Recruit Training Centre Library), 1998, pp. 197-198; L. Sharp, 'Kapooka: an engineer beginning', *Sapper*, vol. 3, no. 7, 1990; S. Morris, *Wagga Wagga: a history*, Bobby Wagga Wagga NSW, Graham Publishers, 1999, pp. 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 Lee-Enfield .303 rifle.

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-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 because of its participants' weekly progression through the hands of area specialists rather than single 'all-purpose' instructors. Participants were divided into 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.⁷

At 0825 the troops assembled for Monday parade. This was a time for mapping the day's activities and reminding rank and file of 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'.⁸

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

7 For the assembly details, Sharp 1990, p. 42; AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit C; For the Borneo campaign, *Daily Advertiser*, 16 May 1945, 21 May 1945, and Coates, 2001, pp. 280-284.

8 Sharp, 1990, p. 43; AAV MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit B, and witness statement NX. 191935 WOII Dodds.

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.⁹

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 Women's 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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-four recruits were now under Jack Pomeroy's and Bill Cousins' care.¹²

Of the twenty-four, eleven were 18 years old, four were 20, five were between 21 and 25, and five were between 26 and 36. Eight sappers lived with parents before enlisting, and five others were married. Fifteen were from New South Wales, the remainder divided more or less evenly between, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria. All were previously employed in a range of unskilled or trades-based occupations, both rural and urban. Unskilled and semi-skilled

9 Author's site visits, Kapooka Army Camp, Wagga Wagga 2002-2004; AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit D.

10 AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Exhibit D, witness statement NX. 89519, Sapper Musto.

11 AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statement NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall, witness statement NX. 191935 WOII Dodds.

12 AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statement NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall, witness statement NX. 191935 WOII Dodds.

jobs included timber-cutting, farm hand, miner, milk factory employee, tractor driver, fruit mart assistant and casual labourer. Skilled and trades-based jobs included motor mechanic, junior motor mechanic, solderer/assembler, tool setter, apprenticed engineer, carpenter, plastic moulder and hairdresser. Declarations of a classless Australia, it appears, had no place in the Royal Australian Engineers.¹³

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.¹⁴

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 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 was 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.¹⁵

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 with surprise, '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.'¹⁶

In the following hours twenty-seven personnel were removed from the destroyed dugout, plus the seriously injured Sergeant Kendall. One member of the recovery squad observed seven complete bodies sitting against the wall with their arms folded: 'They all looked like men of eighty, their faces ash grey.' Another victim, about to be recovered, terrified a squad member who remarked, 'The bastard moved.' 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 injuries. Once the survivors and intact bodies were removed the recovery squad assembled as best they could matching body parts, though

13 For details of the sappers, AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Appendix B; *Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour*: NX. 204475, NX. 205981, WX. 5559, N. 481536, NX. 05863, NX. 205969, SX. 34059, NX. 180545, NX. 205951, WX. 25792, NX. 180219, SX. 34069, NX. 205652, Q. 273563, NX. 205833, NX. 180218, VX. 96197, VX. 57880, Q. 273551, QX. 63309, S. 115574, NX. 205938, NX. 81964, WX. 23101, WX. 27166, N. 480870,

14 AA MT885/1:51/1/209, witness statement NX. 143571 Sergeant Kendall.

15 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.

16 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.

not all were found. The camp's three ambulances, driven by women, worked laboriously to ferry the dead and injured to the camp morgue and hospital. A nurse at the hospital remarked that, 'I always felt for the ambulance drivers – they were all women – because not all the bodies were on a stretcher, some were in plastic bags.' 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.¹⁷

Aftermath

Two final events closed the Kapooka Tragedy to national memory. On 24 May 1945 from 2.00 pm 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 not to release the victims' names until the evening of 23 May. *Sydney's Daily Telegraph* reported 'Men have been forbidden to mention the explosion. Many were very upset they could not let their relatives know they were safe.' A motor cycle led lorry of wreaths and four flag-draped semi-trailers carrying the coffins crept sombrely past half of Wagga's 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.¹⁸

Politicians and newspapers were quick to appreciate public perceptions of military death through battle and military death through misadventure. The mayor of Wagga Wagga, Alderman J. V. Doyle, believed it a 'fitting and nice tribute if the townspeople line Edward Street in thousands to pay respect to 26 young men who have truly given their lives for their country just the same as if they had been killed in action.' Minister for Agriculture E. H. Graham forwarded a message that the sappers 'have given their lives in the cause of freedom just as assuredly as they had fallen on the battlefield. We will remember them with gratitude and by honouring them, honour ourselves.' And Wagga Wagga's *Daily Advertiser* opined that 'Once in uniform a person is a soldier of the King and should death come swiftly in peaceful surroundings far removed from the battlefield, a life has been given for the King as surely as if the soldier had died in combat.'¹⁹

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

17 For the details of the recovery squad, letter in the author's possession, 9 November 2005; for details of the role of women ambulance drivers and nurses, *Daily Advertiser*, 16-17 July 2005.

18 *Daily Telegraph*, 24 May 1945; for a description of the funeral, *Daily Advertiser*, 24 May 1945; Morris, *Wagga Wagga*, p. 209.

19 For Doyle, *Daily Advertiser*, 23 May 1945; for Graham and the newspaper, *Daily Advertiser*, 24 May 1945.

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?²⁰

Reflection

As far I am able to ascertain, there has been no previously detailed published account of the Kapooka tragedy. The official history of World War II²¹ makes no mention of it, nor does the recently published *Australian Centenary History of Defence*.²² And, though the incident lives on in local folk memory and in the minds of the victims' families,²³ it has disappeared altogether from national memory. The only monuments to the event 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.²⁴ Accidents, then, ought not to be remembered as they fail to add value to the national heritage, in spite of the pleas of those who bear witness.

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,²⁵ and David Lowenthal, 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 too recall. It may also be too dead to care much about.²⁶

From another angle the work of Luisa Passerini further captures the manipulation of memory over time. In her work on 'totalitarian' memory she argues that all subjective memory is exposed to the

20 AA MT885/1:51/1/209, Minute DE 26 June 1945, Minute AG12A(2) 18 July 1945.

21 G. Long (ed.), *Australian in the War of 1939-1945* (22 volumes), Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1973.

22 P. Dennis and J. Coates (eds), *The Australian Centenary History of Defence* (five separately published, titled and authored volumes), Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2000.

23 For example, *Daily Advertiser*, 22 May 1995; also see Morris, *Wagga Wagga*, pp. 197-198.

24 Inglis, *Sacred Places*, pp. 1-11.

25 Davison, *Use and Abuse*, pp. 263-274.

26 Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, p.147.

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'.²⁷ Memories, then, without continual personal and institutional validation, soon slip and are 'consigned to the past'.²⁸

In 2008 the Kapooka Tragedy does indeed appear to be a matter of history rather than heritage, of forgetting rather than remembering. The incident re-emerged briefly to local memory following the unveiling of a memorial plaque on 6 April 1992, and three years later in a poignant fiftieth anniversary ceremony attended by relatives of the deceased and a sixty eight year-old Allan Bartlett. Its national forgetting, though, 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. One wonders if the citizens of suburban Melbourne and their gatekeepers would today assume responsibility for the Kapooka monument?²⁹

Conclusion

I am a historian of Australian adult and vocational education and training who works within the broader 'non-historical' adult and vocational education and training research field. So, what place does the Kapooka tragedy, and similar stories, have within this area? The Kapooka tragedy, one hopes, has value in itself as an example of heritage-in-action. Similar stories, maybe less dramatic, must lay undetected in archives and in 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 further research.

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27 Passerini, *Memory*, p. 8.

28 See also Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*.

29 *Daily Advertiser*, 7 April 1992; *Daily Advertiser*, 22 May 1995.