At the Archives

BY WAYNE DOUBLEDAY

HISTORICAL IMAGES supplied by R Brown and K Moran, show just some of the $100,000 damage that was caused and just how close the fire got to brave Mrs Budd’s home.

DISASTER STRIKES ARMY

IN THE last “At the Archives, we told the story of a disastrous fire at the Militia Drill Hall on the corner of Curwood and Beckwith streets in 1908, the cause of which was never entirely found out. Forty-one years after that mysterious blaze, another fire occurred at the Citizen Military Force (CMF) Drill Hall site on Dock Street.

The 1949 Fire

ON THE afternoon of Tuesday December 27, 1949, a huge fire occurred which was headlined by *The Daily Advertiser* the next day as “$100,000 Blazes at Wagga Army Headquarters”.

The claim was made that it was the largest fire in Wagga since the Commercial Hotel (Roman’s) fire in 1944, during its short stint as accommodation for RAAF personnel.

The entire shed, which was built about 1914, was originally used to house the guns and horses of the 2nd Battery, Australian Field Artillery but when the CMF was formed in 1948 it was used as a storage shed for the armoured and other vehicles used by the unit.

It was a hot day (102 degrees Fahrenheit) with a strong breeze blowing, when the 120-foot long shed apparently ignited at the northern end and the wind fanned the flames through the total length of the shed. The wooden building became a blazing inferno in a matter of minutes with smoke belching 300 feet into the air.

Due to low water pressure, the firemen were unable to get close enough to the fire. To fix this problem, the Dock Street main had to be cut off and pumps brought in to boost the hose pressure. Mrs E Budd, who lived next door to the hall at 161 Dock Street, bravely attempted to fight the fire using a garden hose. Later, Mrs Budd and her neighbours handed out refreshments to the firemen working to quell the blaze.

Flames shot from the walls as Colonel Cornell, the commanding officer of the 7th/11th Australian Horse Regiment, and a civilian, Mr Gibbs, rolled a 44-gallon drum of petrol from the fuel storage shed (the POL). Other civilians moved hazardously to a safe area. There was also petrol in some of the vehicles inside the burning shed and explosions were feared.

About 900 people turned out to watch the fire, which had started about 4.30pm and was still burning strongly at 7pm. Iron and glass were twisted into fantastic shapes by the terrific heat.

Firemen almost had the fire under control about 6.30pm, but a strong westerly wind stirred the flames and thick smoke continued to pour into the air. Later in the night, the fire was still smouldering and firemen were required to stand guard.

At one stage the fire had threatened a shed on Mrs Budd’s property and had burned fences and trees and had dangerously heated a fuel storage building about 30 feet away.

The fire brigade had been hampered not only by initial poor water pressure, but was depleted due to some volunteers being on holidays at the time. Additionally, a fire in Kincardie Street had called away some of the firemen who had been attending the CMF fire. To make up this reduction in manpower, some civilians were called on to assist the brigade in fighting the fire.

After the fire police and army officials were at a loss as to how the fire had started. Sabotage, a possible cause, was later ruled out of contention. They reported that Sergeant Jack Gowland of the army permanent staff had inspected the building about 11am that day and had checked all power points and battery chargers as he had done daily during the Christmas holidays.

Apart from the loss of the building, everything inside was destroyed or damaged beyond repair. There were major losses of equipment, including band instruments, clothing and personal effects of regular army personnel who lived in the building.

Two Staghound armoured cars worth about $40,000, along with a jeep, a truck, two white four-ton armoured personnel carriers and an armoured scout car were also destroyed in the blaze.

The main brick building about 90 feet away was not damaged and legend has it that two bottles of beer survived the fire unscathed.

Although it was expected that a coronial enquiry and an army investigation would be held to look into the cause of the fire, we found no report of either of those in the local media or in our coroner’s files collection.

In January 1951, the RAAF sent a giant mobile crane and Diamond T semi-trailer to Wagga.

They loaded and transported the damaged vehicles to the railway station; they were then railled to Williamstown, near Newcastle, for use by the RAAF for target practice.

Compiled by John Bowman


EXTRA HOURS: The CSU Regional Archives is extending its opening hours to include the first Saturday of every month. This initiative has been put in place to cater for those researchers who are unable to visit the archives on weekdays during normal business hours. The next Saturday opening is June 7, from 10am to 3pm.