At the Archives

BY WAYNE DOUBLEDAY

Fire remains a mystery 100 years on

IN THE first half of last century, two military buildings in central Wagga were destroyed by fire. In 1908, a very suspicious fire destroyed the Militia Drill Hall, situated at the corner of Gurwood and Beckwith streets.

Forty-one years later, another fire destroyed the gun park and stables of the Citizen Military Forces onGP. This second fire will form the basis of our next story in a fortnight’s time.

The 1908 Fire

A MILITIA Drill Hall had been built in 1899 by Charles Hardy on the corner of Gurwood and Beckwith streets on NSW Crown Land. It consisted of one wooden building, which was small and little more than a shell. Inside there were two offices, a storeroom and a main hall.

It was used by half a battery (No.3) of the Australian Field Artillery and the senior cadets. The hall was also used by the NSW Education Department as a class

room for teaching woodworking.

The fire started about 10pm on October 22, 1908, a Thursday. Less than an hour later, all that remained of the building was a few charred sticks.

The newspapers reported that about 1000 people gathered to watch the fire, despite warnings from the police that black powder and ammunition could explode.

Fortunately, the guns that were usually stored on site were in Sydney for an overhaul and new uniforms, which had been ordered had not yet arrived. However, in the hall were 30 365 Lee Enfield rifles, 100 rounds of ammunition, multiple sets of harness and traps, and a host of military books and equipment. All the woodworking equipment was also destroyed. The total loss was estimated to be in excess of £200.

The fire brigade was summoned once the fire had been noticed, but they could do little to save the building or its contents. The brigade tried to reach the scene as quickly as possible but due to an accident with the reel which, when drawn behind a horse-drawn cab, parted from the poll, bringing down on top of each other a fireman and a policeman who were pushing the reel at the rear.

The explosion of cartridges from inside the drill hall reportedly created a curious effect somewhat akin to a battle being fought and the members of the fire brigade put themselves at considerable risk.

One member of the militia, Lieutenant Heath, assisted the firemen and courageously grabbed an axe and cut a hole in the wall of a room where blank artillery shells were stored.

The origin of the fire was a complete mystery. No one was known to have been at the hall that evening, there being no meetings or classes held there on Thursday nights.

The Magisterial Inquiry

While the Army conducted its own inquiry into the fire, the civilian authorities held a Magisterial Inquiry before Mr Stevenson, police magistrate, which was reported in the local papers.

On Monday, October 26, 1908, the inquiry began with the commander of the district military forces, Major Warren, giving evidence.

He stated he was at the Riverine Club in Tarcutta Street on Thursday night and, on hearing the fire bell being rung, proceeded to the scene of the fire and saw that the building was well alight. The fire brigade was there but unable to do anything. He stayed at the scene until the fire was completely out.

He had no knowledge of the origin of the fire. He also stated that the artillery had 21 charges of black powder in the building. Also, there were small arms ammunition and lubricating oils.

Captain Penrose, who had taken command of the cadets when Lieutenant Jackson went on leave, stated he was to receive from Jackson an inventory of the cadets’ equipment, all the unpunct money and his receipts for money expended.

This was to have been done by the day before the fire but Jackson had failed to do so. He wrote to Jackson and received a reply that the books and money would be handed over on the following Saturday.

Jackson gave his account of his movements on the night of the fire. He had started down Gurwood Street with the intention of going to the drill hall and had changed his mind and turned back to go to the billiard room at the Criterion Hotel in Fitzmaurice Street. He said he had met a Mrs Forrest and her daughter, Ethel, and had walked part of the way with them. He said he believed he told them he was going to the drill hall to do some work.

He claimed he was at home in Newtown (South Wagga) when he heard the fire bell ringing and went to the fire but the whole building was alight.

Mrs Forrest gave evidence that she and Ethel had met Jackson and walked with him. She said Jackson had told them he was going to the drill hall to do some work.

The magistrate said in summation that it was a peculiar case and a difficult one. He was sorry to find a young man like Jackson whose memory should be so blank in regard to the amount of money received...

Nothing further is known of Jackson following the Inquiry.

Compiled by John Bowman

References:

- The Daily Advertiser - 24 Oct 1908, 27 Oct 1908, 3 Nov 1908; The Wagga Wagga District Historical Society Collection, RW6545

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.