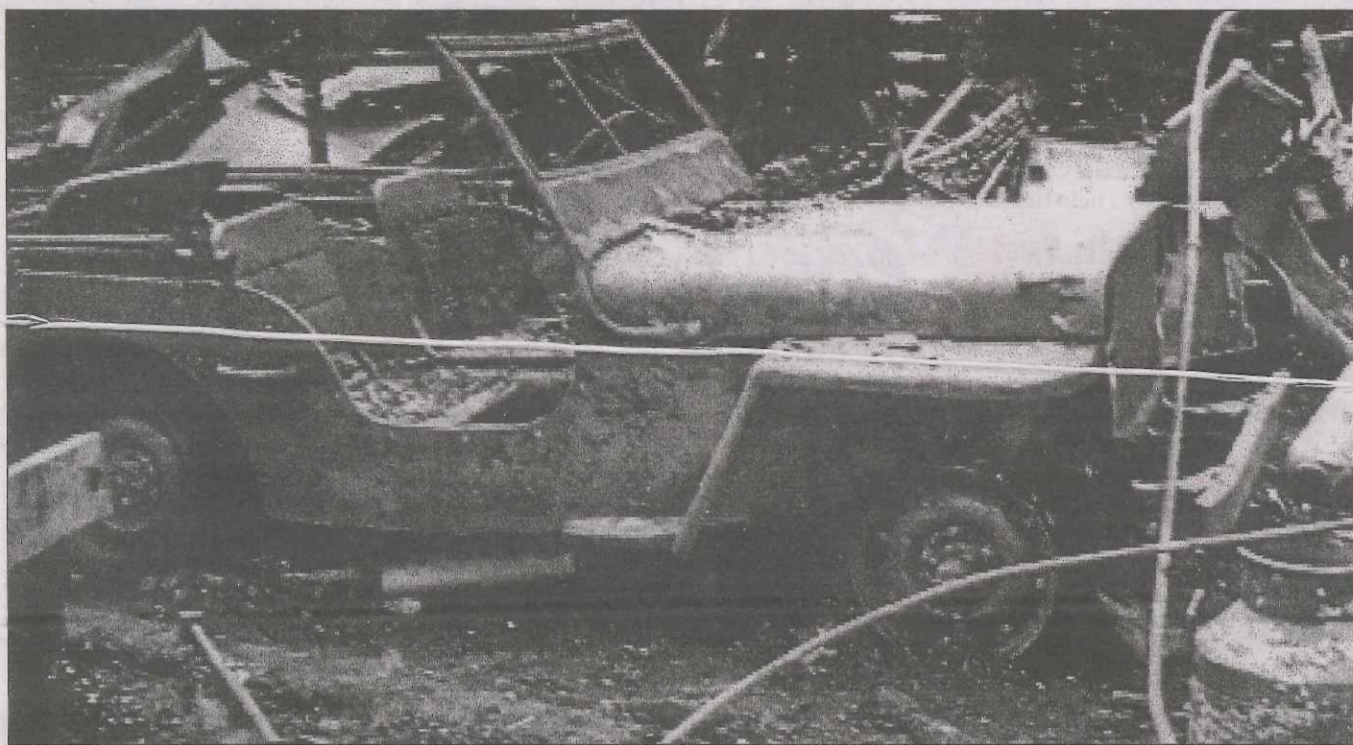


At the Archives



BY WAYNE DOUBLEDAY



HISTORICAL: These photographs, kindly 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.

INFO

■ The CSU Regional Archives are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Located in the Blakemore Building on South Campus of the university, access can be gained via College Avenue or Hely Avenue. Members of the public are welcome to visit the search room, where professional archival staff can assist with inquiries. For those people unable to visit the archives in person, staff can provide a research service for straight-forward inquiries for a fee of \$55 per hour including copying and postage. For further information, phone 6925 3666, email archive@csu.edu.au, or visit our website at www.csu.edu.au/research/archives for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.

DISASTER STRIKES ARMY

IN THE last "At the Archives, we told the story of a disastrous fire at the Milita Drill Hall on the corner of Gurwood 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 Docker Street.

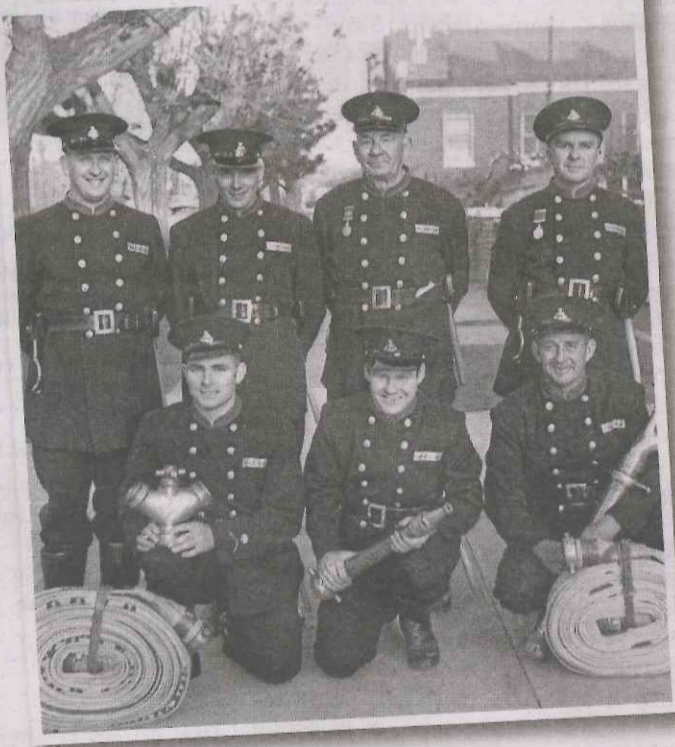
The 1949 Fire

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 Blaze at Wagga Army Headquarters".

The claim was made that it was the largest fire in Wagga since the Commercial Hotel (Romano'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 16th 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 200 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 Docker 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 Docker Street, bravely attempted to fight the fire using a garden hose. Later, Mrs Budd and her neighbours handed out refreshments to the firemen work-

ing to quell the blaze.

Flames shot from the walls as Colonel Cormack, the commanding officer of the 7th/21th Australian Horse Regiment, and a civilian, Mr Giles, rolled a 44 gallon drum of petrol from the fuel storage shed (the POL). Other civilians moved highly inflammable oils away to a safe area. There was also petrol in some of the vehicles inside the burning shed and explosions were feared.

About 800 people turned out to watch the fire, which had started about 4.35pm 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 10 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 Kincaid Street had called away some of the firemen who had been attending the CMF fire. To make up this reduction in man-power, 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 these 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 railed to Williamstown, near Newcastle, for use by the RAAF for target practice.

● Compiled by John Bowman

References: *The Daily Advertiser*, 28 Dec 1949, 29 Dec 1949, 18 Jan 1951; Wagga Wagga City Council Valuation Books, CSURA RW1429/127.