

**ANZAC DAY ORATION
KING ISLAND
25th APRIL 2022**

Introduction by MC

Today's oration will be given by Gary Barker, the RSL Sub branch's Vice President. He served for 36 years in the Australian Army, starting as a soldier and retiring as a senior officer. He was a member of the Royal Australian Engineers for 34 years and served overseas including the highlands of Papua New Guinea and as the Australian Army Exchange Officer at the Royal Engineer School of Military Engineering in England. He is proud that he has never forgotten his starting point as a soldier and still remains in contact with many who served with him.

Oration

Good morning and welcome. In this year's oration, I will be talking to you about our Cenotaph. On 25 April 1916, exactly one hundred and six years ago, the first anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli was widely observed in Australia with crowds attending church services and public ceremonies. The day was also commemorated by ANZAC soldiers in Egypt and London.

Over the next two years as the stalemate on the Western Front escalated, losses increased as did community despair. But there was undoubtedly a community rallying, that when the war is over we shall not forget those who served by dedicating a memorial. These monuments were also a way for a community to recover from the horror of war and return to normality. The Cenotaph was the result of a local committee led by the the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia, known locally as the RSA.

Fund raising commenced prior to the war ending and by July 1918 nearly £7 had been raised and 'a mother' was listed as having donated £1. Perhaps she was a woman who had lost a loved one, but to put the £1 in context it was the weekly wage for a farm labourer. Fund raising continued and by 1920 included collecting items for a jumble sale that was to be held on the day before Anzac Day. The plan now included a memorial in Currie and a Memorial Hall in Yambacoon - one gauges a slight north-south rivalry on the Island!

The issues of the design and shape of the memorial, sourcing a supplier and deciding where to erect it were concurrently addressed. The location in front of the Town Hall was eventually agreed with Council and a contract was let with Messrs H.B. Corben and Sons, stonemasons located in Clifton Hill, near Melbourne. It is known as a sombre non-figurative cenotaph.

The memorial in sections, ready for erection, was expected to arrive in Currie in late March 1922. However, in what would amaze current Island shippers, it arrived on 21 March on board the SS Koomeela along with Corben's representative, a Mr Pagelson. This was in the days of telegraphic communication and the Koomeela was only a wooden cargo steamer of 191 tons.

Mr Pagelson and a local team poured concrete for the foundation, placed the base of bluestone followed by the freestone sections weighing over a tonne. When finished it was an impressive 14 foot tall on a seven foot base. The names of the deceased were cast in lead, rather than black lettering, and inserted in the freestone.

The unveiling ceremony of the King Island Soldiers' Memorial took place just after 2 pm on Tuesday 25 April 1922. The day was fine and sunny, but a strong easterly prevailed. The school children were assembled in a half circle with the adults behind them. The memorial was draped with a flag as you see it today. Richard Hooper VC directed the proceedings, Mr G. Robinson, the Municipal Warden throughout the first World War gave a brief speech, and

the oldest Island resident, Mr W. Hickmott, did the unveiling. The only downside was that an appeal was made for further donations – the fund was nearly £20 in debt.

Over the years, as the result of conflicts, more names have been added to the memorial, but sadly it is now showing its age. In 2019 the RSL Sub branch initiated discussion with Council Staff about Custodianship and rectification funding. Some progress was made, but never formalised – Covid and staff resignations are perhaps the reasons. The Sub branch hopes for further discussion with Council, because letters falling off the monument should not occur.

Your Cenotaph is a special place and I commend you all, at a time of your choosing, to spend some quiet time reading the inscriptions. Note the words on the front - Erected by the residents of King Island as a tribute to the men who enlisted, and in memory of those as engraved hereon who made the supreme sacrifice in the Great War, 1914 - 1918.

When looking at the names pause to reflect that they were people like you and had families, just like you have. If you find someone who you think you could be related to, I encourage you to find out more about them. You can also see the Honour Boards in the RSL Club Rooms and the Council Hall.

You all still have a role to play. Protect the monument, for it will only last if the community takes care of it, and remember that the community erected this monument, not those who served.

The monument is draped with the flag as it was in 1922 when the all-male group unveiled it. All veterans understand the importance of the role loved ones take in their lives – mothers, wives, sisters, partners and daughters. However, they are seldom recognised and today we do so. Our plan was to invite senior war widows to do the unveiling, but age does weary. We now invite two daughters of King Island soldier settlers to do the honour. Their maiden names are Margaret Stansfield and Yvonne Perry and when they were in their teens, both tragically lost their fathers in the 1960s who died as a result of their war service.

Before the Cenotaph is unveiled I invite those who are able, to form up in a semi-circle on the grass verge as they did 100 years ago, with our youth in the centre. I now invite Margaret and Yvonne, supported by our President, to do the unveiling.

Congratulations you are now part of the history of our Cenotaph, for viewing in 2122 at the 200th celebration. Please return to where you were so we can conclude our service.