

Victory Memorial Gardens

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1. Symbol of Grief, Loss and Mourning

War memorials are very visible civic structures which dot the communal landscapes of Australia. They are the products of the collective grief and mourning by communities in response to the separation from, and loss of loved ones during wartime.

Most Australian families experienced the loss of fathers, sons, brothers, daughters and sisters during the Great War of 1914-1918. In Australia, the number of the fallen was proportionately very high (one in five), and this, plus the fact that remains were not repatriated for burial, sharpened the sense of loss and grief. For this reason, the erection of war memorials by Australian communities was a much more imperative and symbolic gesture than that of any other nation involved in the War.

Wagga Wagga's Memorial Arch was the community's way of expressing its collective mourning and remembrance of loved ones who did not return. The Arch stands prominently within the Civic Precinct, flanked by peaceful, beautifully tended lawns and gardens, solid, sombre and reassuring. Who would have imagined it to have been the subject of a long and bitter campaign marked by acrimonious debate and controversy?

2. Proposals for a Memorial Arch

Wagga Wagga Victory Memorial Gardens

The erection of a fitting memorial was mooted as far back as 1916, and the idea gained momentum with the return of servicemen after the War. Popular opinion was captured by the words of former Mayoress, Mrs Hannah Oates, who said that "some lasting monument of the deeds of our dear men who went out to fight for us" would be most appropriate. Several were suggested, generating much public debate, and finally a plan to erect a monumental archway entrance to a memorial gardens was advocated by D.T. Byrnes was agreed upon in 1925.

3. Deadlock: The Matter in Dispute

A fundraising campaign was launched to add to the £800 already raised by 1919, and a competition was conducted in 1920 to create a design for the memorial. From this point on, the history of the Archway was to be dominated by dispute. Stormy early days saw disagreement about the utility value and location of the Memorial. Both personal and political elements became embroiled in the controversy: at the local level, three different committees as well as the Municipal Council had vested interests which seldom converged, and the established community leaders frequently clashed. The site of the Archway in particular was the subject of controversy among rival factions who each had opposing ideas, while fundraising was also a major issue.

Work on the present site had already been commenced by the Council in 1926 without referring to the War Memorial Arch Committee, resulting in a legal battle between the Byrnes and Collins factions. A suit of Equity was put before the N.S.W. Attorney General, and eventually the matter was settled out of court and the site remained where it was. The construction was behind schedule, and there were concerns that it may not be completed on time for the official opening.

4. Resolution: Completion and Official Unveiling

Wagga Wagga War Memorial Arch when first completed

The Arch was finally completed at a cost of £1700. It consists of sandstone on a trachyte base with polished trachyte panels on which are inscribed the names of the men and women of Wagga Wagga and district who served during World War I. It was officially unveiled amid great fanfare on Anzac Day 1927 by Major-General C.F. Cox and dedicated by the Reverend John Wheen, President-General of the Methodist Church of Australia. A message from the King was read, while a guard of honour, bands, public addresses and a procession including returned servicemen added to an atmosphere of solemn dignity of the occasion.

5. Aftermath

Wagga Wagga War Memorial Arch as it stands Today

The Archway has undergone numerous changes over the years. In 1990, the 1939-45 World War II Memorial incorporating the eternal flame was officially handed over in a ceremony on 24th May. This addition stands adjacent to the Archway and was designed to complement the the structure and design of the Archway entrance and park, with its circular paving and antiquated appearance. It features brass plaques bearing the names of more than 2000 men and women who saw active service. Gas projects a large flame by day, dimming to a glow at night. The realisation of the new memorial was made possible by the Wagga Wagga Sub-branch of the R.S.L. with the support of the City Council, citizens, clubs and businesses who donated the necessary funds. More recently, names have been added to the Roll of Honour of those who served in Korea, Malaysia, Borneo and Vietnam.

6. Percival George Collins

Percival George Collins was born at South Yarra on 24 March 1892. He was the third child of Edward Easter Collins and Emma Collins (nee Clayton). He was an excellent boy tenor and attended St. Paul's Choir School in Melbourne where he excelled in mathematics, taking out the prize for the subject in each year of his attendance at school. After leaving school he studied wool classing and joined his father's wool buying and exporting businesses. He was a very keen sportsman, and excelled at cricket and golf. He was also a very good rifle shot, winning the King's Medal on two occasions. At the outbreak of World War I he was working in his father's wool store at Murrumburrah and he enlisted from there a few days after the outbreak of the war, on 19 August 1914, as Percival George Collins, number 1920 in the 3rd Battalion AIF. He sailed for the Middle East on the "Euripides." Apart from the appallingly cramped conditions on board, the most memorable event on the voyage was witnessing the sinking of the battle ship "Emden" by their escort HMS "Sydney." The flagpole from HMS "Sydney" was procured by Edward E. Collins, who was then Mayor of Wagga Wagga, to become the centerpiece in the planning of the Memorial Gardens where it still stands to this day. While serving in the Middle East on Gallipoli, Percival contracted pneumonia and pleurisy and was shipped back to Australia medically unfit on 2 May 1915. Percival then returned to working in his father's businesses. When the wharf labourer's went on strike, holding up essential supplies to Australian troops, volunteers were called for, and he joined the volunteers from the Riverina area and wharves until the dispute was settled. He then returned to work in his father's wool store in Wagga Wagga, but it was not long before the famous Cooee recruiting drive occurred, and once again, Percival enlisted - this time as George Percival Collins, number 3721 in the 18th Battalion. After a further 257 days service, mainly in Egypt, he was once again discharged medically unfit on 2 September 1916. After the war, all volunteers were issued with an illuminated address by the Council of the area in which they resided at the time of their enlistment, in appreciation of their war service. Percival had the rare distinction of having two of these. Percival is also listed twice on the Memorial Arch in the Victory Memorial Gardens - as PG Collins and GP Collins.

Written By Margaret Edwards - Museum of the Riverina Volunteer

7. Links

WORLD WAR I

Australian War Memorial

www.awm.gov.au/

Gallipoli Campaign, Department of Veterans' Affairs

www.dva.gov.au/