

Australian Light Horse Memorial, TONGALA.

Written by Michael Thompson

In 2002, a small group in Tongala was established to look at the possibility of an Australian Light Horse memorial on the Shire lawns. Michael Thompson, a local resident, chaired this small group in obtaining permission and funding to the erection of this memorial. John Jones was Michael's so-called right-hand man with looking after all the funding costs and donations. Many local residents also contributed to the project with George Edwards and Darren Woods with the concreting, Murray McGill with the excavation and delivery of the granite rock for the statue. The Shire of Campaspe allowed use of the land, the maintenance of gardens and engineer's guidance etc. Cr. Neil Repacholi participated in the project with a large input to see this memorial come to place, as did many more other residents of Tongala.

In 2003 the Australian Light Horse memorial was unveiled by Tongala's last Militia Light Horsemen, Mr Maurice Watson. There were over 600 people in attendance for the day.

After the Light Horse memorial was completed, Michael Thompson commenced to build another memorial to the Armoured Corps servicemen who lost their lives in the Vietnam war in 2003. This is the Avenue of Honour which is located next to the railway lines. People that assisted with the establishment of this memorial are John Madill, with the lasering and groundwork for the Avenue, John Jones in charge of the budget, Mayor Neil Repacholi again assisting with funding and all requirements needed from the Shire of Campaspe. George Edwards and Darren Woods again carried out the concreting.

John Whitehorn, ex 1st Armoured Regiment (Vietnam) came very close to Michael through the stages of the Avenue being constructed. John's vision was to see a Centurion tank located in the Avenue between to two 1st Armoured Corps plaques. Unfortunately, John didn't see his vision come to fruition, and passed away in 2005. Michael later purchased the Centurion in 2005 when one became available, and it is now located in the Avenue of Honour, with the full support of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment (Vietnam) Association, and the Tongala Community Bank providing the funding required to get it there and be refurbished.

In 2004 the Armoured Corps (Vietnam War) Avenue of Honour was unveiled by the Governor General, Major General the Honourable Michael Jeffery, AC, AO (Mil), CVO, MC. In attendance as well was the Chief of the Australian Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy AC, along with other distinguished dignitaries and over 1000 people.

In 2010, the 3rd Cavalry Regiment (Vietnam) Association, assisted by Michael Thompson, sought permission from the Campaspe Shire Council, to erect a War Memorial to honour the men of the Cavalry that served in Vietnam during the years 1965 to 1972. This was granted, and the Memorial was constructed and opened on the 31st October, 2011, by Major General David McLachlan AO, with a large crowd of former Cavalry members and their families present. Later, as the vehicle used by Cavalry, the M113A1 became available for purchase, one was placed at the Memorial in 2015, and restored to the appearance that it would have been whilst on Active Service. The vehicle was extensively worked upon by Simon Baxter, Kyabram Fabrication, and painted by Greg Lyle, also of Kyabram, in the true military grade paint, both supplying their labours and time free as a gesture to the overall project. The supporting concrete plinths were paid for by the Tongala community as a gesture of goodwill. The members of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment provided the entire funding for the Memorial, and the purchase of the M113A1.

The Cavalry in Vietnam, were the only Unit to be awarded all five of the Battle Honours awarded during the war. Additionally, they were also awarded the American Meritorious Unit Commendation whilst working with the American Forces in Bien Hoa Province, and the Australian Unit Commendation for Gallantry, for their actions at the Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral in 1968 in Phouc Tuy Province.

In 2016, the Shire Council was requested to lay a pathway from the Light Horse Memorial, to link with the War Memorial for Cavalry (Vietnam). This pathway was spray painted a sand colour, and the foot prints of a Light Horseman painted on it, to symbolise the journey over the years, from the former Light Horse, leaving the deserts of north Africa and the Middle East, to arrive at the modern-day era: mechanised Cavalry.

Each October, a Commemoration Service is held at the War Memorial for Cavalry (Vietnam), where the two schools in Tongala, gather together and conduct the Service. Many veterans attend on this day also, to remember and commemorate the lives of their Fallen.

In 2020, plans were drawn up to re furbish the nearby Avenue of Honour. Work commenced when a grant was made available by the Tongala Community Bank. This allowed for the installation of the Centurion tank, realising John Whiteman's vision. The project continued over the ensuing two years as the additional gardens, cenotaph and walkway were completed from various grants and donors.

It is hoped that visitors to this site, can gain an opportunity to visualise the transition from the former Light Horse Units who fought bravely throughout the First World War, and the journey from their military demise in the period of 1918 onwards, until the arrival of the more modern era of mechanised Cavalry in the 1960's.