

## MOLONGLO INTERNMENT CAMP = A NOTABLE WARTIME ACHIEVEMENT.

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In this Session Mr. Dunbar has generally presented to you those aspects of Canberra that are more definitely connected with its foundation, growth, and significance, or descriptive of its natural or acquired beauty. In deputising for him tonight, I propose to tell you something about a Canberra episode that had no essential connection with the building of the National Capital, but, at the time it occurred, represented an important undertaking associated with the Great War of 1914-1918, and was, also, a constructional feat probably without parallel in Australia for the speed and efficiency of its design, organization, and accomplishment.

Reference in these days to the Molonglo Settlement reminds us of an area, somewhat to the east of Canberra, in which are found the least favoured of the City's residential provisions and where accommodation is available at the lowest rentals in buildings that have already served their economic life, and are decreed by the Government to be demolished progressively as their present tenants become housed elsewhere.

At the time of which I am speaking, however, the name Molonglo Camp connoted an atmosphere of mystery and romantic enterprise, of strenuous endeavour, of willing and successful co-operation, and of wartime sacrifice.

As an old Officer of the Commonwealth Public Works Branch, I recollect clearly a certain day, early in the year 1918, upon which a secret cablegram was received from the British Government, asking whether suitable arrangements could be made to accommodate several thousand enemy nationals who were to be removed from the Far East and interned. Although it involved the execution of a scheme which, under ordinary conditions, would have been regarded as almost impossible of fulfilment in the time available, the Director-General of Works, the late Colonel Percy Owen, himself a soldier, was not the man to hesitate over a wartime request because it presented arduous difficulties, and a reply was accordingly sent that Australia would do the job. At that period there was a serious shortage of staff, of skilled labour, and of materials, but those whose services were called upon threw their energies into the work with such goodwill, skill and determination that within nine and a half weeks about 250 acres of vacant land between Canberra and Queanbeyan was converted into a township with provision for 560 families and a large number of single persons, the group houses and other buildings being properly equipped and furnished, and served with water, sewerage, and electricity. The incidental buildings and works included large stores for the baggage of the internees, bakers' and butchers' shops, fire station, public school, teacher's residence, hospital, and assembly hall, as well as many structures for the housing and general purposes of the military unit, such as look-out tower, guard house, barracks, stables, commandant's residence, and a special railway loop, with station and goods sheds.

The site selected for the camp comprised a hill about 100 feet above the Molonglo River and sloping land which admitted of placing the look-out tower upon a high position, the military buildings slightly lower, and the tenement buildings in long streets, set out in the form of a fan, for convenience and ease of supervision, with a ring of flood lightings around the whole settlement.

The residences for the internees were contained in 40 tenement blocks of uniform design, each containing two separate parallel buildings returned at each end and thus enclosing a small internal square in which bathrooms, laundries, and conveniences for the block were placed. Each block was 140 feet long and contained fourteen tenements, seven in each separate structure, but the plans were so arranged that considerable flexibility might be afforded, if necessary, to provide for families of varying sizes. These units, and, indeed, the whole building portion of the scheme, were designed by Mr. J.S. Murdoch, at that time, Chief Commonwealth Architect, and somewhat later one of the Federal Capital Commissioners.

To attain maximum speed in construction, the work of erecting the 40 tenement blocks was divided between four Sydney contractors, - Ellis Bros., Saxton and Binns, George Hudson Pty. Ltd., and the State Timber Yards. The extensive engineering works, and the military and accessory buildings were erected directly by the Department. These included a number of structures that were removed from the A.I.F. Officers' Training School that had been established at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1915. The transfer of these buildings involved

the provision of a large transport team, comprising five traction engines, 30 trailers, many horse teams, and even two bullock teams. It was an interesting sight to observe them in action, negotiating the partly formed roads with huge sections of the buildings set up on jinkers. This transport section handled 8,500 tons of material during the nine and a half weeks of concentrated activity.

The procedure for the erection of the tenement blocks was for the surveyors first to advance from the apex of the fan-shaped plan and mark on the ground the position of each building in the particular line. They were followed by labourers who dug the holes for the stumps, carpenters who nailed down the floor joists and then the floors, and, finally, by the contractors' men who erected the superstructures for which the frames and walling had been prepared in Sydney. Arriving from Melbourne, one morning, I came upon this hive of industry and it was an inspiring spectacle. I had never before seen men working so hard and so cheerfully. They felt that they were doing their bit. The noise, however, was deafening, for there was a veritable army of carpenters all hammering at once. It sounded something like machine-gun fire. In these operations they actually used over ten tons of nails and three million super feet of timber. The length of the timber required for floor stumps alone was over ten miles, and the flooring put down covered a area equal to seven acres. The tenement blocks alone absorbed 3,000,000 super feet of timber, and the aggregate length of the wooden steps to entrance doors was about a mile and a half.

The engineering services involved the extension of the Cotter River water supply, and, incidently, forced the completion of that scheme. The connection under the Murrumbidgee River had been deferred earlier, owing to the war, and this had to be completed before water could be delivered to the City area. A service reservoir was constructed for the Camp on the hill upon which the first 2CA transmitting station was afterwards placed. At Molonglo 10 miles of waterpipes were laid, over 5000 fittings being used for the purpose; seven miles of sewer mains and house connections, some in deep excavation, were put in, requiring between five and six thousand fittings; and special sewerage treatment works were established. The electric supply involved nearly 50 miles of wiring, a new sub-station, and over 50,000 fittings.

The railway siding, with points and crossings, 15 chains in length, was constructed in ten days. By a special arrangement with the New South Wales Railway Department, the Commonwealth Railways Commissioner sent to Sydney a senior officer, Mr. W.L. Artlett, who co-ordinated ordering of supplies and transport in that city, providing for 28 truckloads of materials to arrive each morning at Molonglo. These were unloaded into the transport waggons in a constant stream throughout the day.

There was ready co-operation between all official circles, and generally by trading concerns. Where difficulties arose in regard to the purchase of necessary materials the provisions of the Defence Act were available to take them, but this power was rarely used. Major A.J. Gibson, now Consulting Engineer of Sydney, was liaison officer with the Department of Defence, and, in this capacity, rendered excellent service.

The local staff for the control of the work was under the late Mr. C.H.U. Todd, as Works Director. He was a good organizer and thoroughly accustomed to executing works under pressure. The Chief Engineer was Mr. Keith Ross, borrowed from the New South Wales Works Department, and afterwards placed in local control of the construction of the Hume Dam on the Murray River. Some of the other responsible sectional heads are still in Canberra, notably Mr. Charles Francis, who organized the requisitioning of materials, arranged the local transport, and controlled the costing for the whole job; Mr. Andrew Fraser who carried out the electrical installation, and Mr. Mouatt, who conducted the surveys. The local Canberra Works staff, particularly Mr. A.L. Richmond, Supervisor, and Mr. Dunn, the Stores Officer gave invaluable help, and their large stores of plant and material were drawn upon to a great extent.

An important and difficult feature of the work was the engagement, housing, and feeding of the 1200 workmen who were employed by the Department, and large numbers sent by the contractors. The Defence authorities supplied the tents, marquees, and equipment for the workmen's camp, and a detachment of soldiers pitched it. Mr. Collett, of Queanbeyan, arranged for the feeding of the men.

No serious hitch occurred throughout the execution of the project, and there was perfect co-ordination and willing co-operation. The responsible officers met each night to discuss their problems and arrange operations for the next day to the best advantage. As an example of the spirit of service then prevailing it might be mentioned that the late Mr. John Allibone, a retired railway contractor, of Sydney, came forward and took immediate charge of all construction labour,

but would accept no remuneration for making available his wide knowledge and experience.

By a strange turn of events, the people for whom the Camp was provided under such strenuous conditions never came to Australia, some compromise being made with Germany on the question. The Camp was occupied, however, by several hundred internees from Australia and the Pacific, mostly of a superior type. They gave little trouble to the garrison, occupying themselves by cultivating gardens, establishing a theatre with very fine equipment, and also setting up a good library.

After the war they were released, the military detachment departed, and the township, for a while, became lifeless, except for a caretaker. The assets which had cost about £140,000, were vested in trustees for the British Government, and were eventually taken over by the Commonwealth in the adjustment of war expenditure.

Nearly half of the tenement blocks and a number of the large store buildings were sold to the New South Wales Government for use on construction works. The remainder of the store buildings and those used by the military unit were subsequently removed and used for various <sup>purposes</sup> in Canberra, some of them being incorporated in the Offices now occupied by the Department of the Interior at Acton.

With the resumption, in 1921, of development at Canberra, the remainder of the Camp was improved and used for workmen's accommodation, serving an immediate and economic purpose, pending the provision of houses in the future City subdivisions, a work that - alas - has, at this late stage, not yet sufficiently advanced to enable the complete demolition of the Camp. It has still a substantial population which includes many who have given good service to the building of the National Capital.

This, then, is the story of the Molonglo Camp, and my purpose in speaking of it tonight is to indicate how, in an emergency similar to that which faces us at the present time, a spirit of co-operation and personal sacrifice on the part of a body of Australians, enabled them to carry out, with success, a task which, in ordinary circumstances, could not have been executed within the time allotted.

We have similar, but larger, national tasks in front of us, at this moment, and, although they may look to be almost impossible of accomplishment, they can be attacked and duly fulfilled just the same way in a wider field, if the people will throw themselves into the work with like determination and devotion to duty.

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