

Theme: Defending Australia – Tocal's OPIT and the Largs/Paterson Artillery Range

Note: Tocal's thematic history has been prepared as part of the assessment of the site's heritage significance in the 2012 (draft) conservation management plan.

Australian heritage theme: 7. Governing – Defending Australia

NSW heritage theme: Defence

During World War II the western part of the Tocal property was used as an artillery training range, known as the 'Largs/Paterson Artillery Range'. Construction of a concrete gunnery observation post and bunker/pit (OPIT) on Tocal began in October 1940 and took four months to complete. The OPIT on Tocal played a key role in the functioning of the range, as it allowed its occupants to observe the accuracy of the shells as they landed and report back to the trainee gunners via field telephone. The range operated from early 1941 until mid 1944. It had many targets and several observation posts but only one OPIT, located in Heifer paddock on Tocal.

Large guns located at Mindaribba (south of Tocal) fired shells of various types into the head of Webbers Creek. The range appears to have fired 37mm, 75mm and 76mm high explosive and armour piercing/tracer ammunition, and 18 and 25 pounder guns firing rounds that exploded and fragmented on impact.

One to five percent of rounds failed to explode and consequently there have been several attempts to clear the site of UXOs, primarily to enable construction work to be undertaken. In 1994 a clearance operation for a proposed hardwood plantation on Tocal was abandoned when evidence of UXOs was found over the entire site and complete clearance could not be guaranteed. Over the years there have been a significant number of UXOs found on Tocal and occasional findings continue.

The Tocal OPIT and its role in the Largs/Paterson Artillery Range sits within the broader context of a high level of military training activity in the lower Hunter Valley during WWII. There were several military camps in the area during this time, including camps at Rutherford, Lochinvar, Largs and Greta. The Greta army camp, for example, was capable of holding over 6,000 men. By September 1940, a month before the construction of the OPIT at Tocal, about 15,000 men were camped in the Hunter Valley, many of them in the lower Hunter around Maitland.

Analysis of Significance:

Tocal's OPIT, widespread UXOs, a shrapnel-scarred tree and shrapnel-impregnated logs are evidence of WWII artillery training as part of Australia's 'war effort' for defence of the country.

Chronology:

- 1940 construction of the OPIT on Tocal;
- 1941 commencement of operation of the Largs/Paterson Artillery Range;
- 1944 end of operation of the artillery range;
- 1988 report on the high incidence of UXOs found on the range;
- 1989 'Operation Seebac' to clear 20ha of UXOs around the Tocal Cattle yards (Canobies paddock), hayshed and airstrip;
- 1994 a further clearance of UXOs for a proposed hardwood plantation abandoned due to widespread UXOs;
- 1995 further clearance undertaken for a dam and silage pit works.

References:

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