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News from the 'Bombing Paddock'

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This is an update of two previous reports in this Newsletter (1/2015 and 2/2015) on the Duntroon Trench Warfare and Bombing School of 1916–17 (associated with the Officer Training School) and the 'Bombing Paddock', containing the trench system that was constructed for the School just across the Molonglo River from the RMC. This site is now in the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve, managed by the ACT Parks and Conservation Service in partnership with the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust.

The last report on the trench system was about archaeological excavations in mid-2015—since that time a great deal has happened on the site and in researching and promoting its history.

Aided by a 2016 Heritage Grant, we developed a self-guiding 'Trench Trail' leaflet and installed trench layout markers (steel posts with labels colour-coded to the plan in the leaflet), interpretive signs, and initial sections of what will become a loop trail. The trail sections are laid out as the trenches were, with zig-zags and a forward traverse, and with observation platforms that take the size and hexagonal shape of island traverses. The initial sections are protected from the cattle that are still needed to graze the site while it is too rough for mowing; over time, we hope the whole site will be open and accessible without internal fences and gates. The trail work has been undertaken with assistance from the Green Army and from cadets of the Australian Defence Force Academy. A further Heritage Grant will enable more of the loop to be built during 2018.

Those developments got us started on providing access and information, but we still wanted to convey some of the trench experience. The high groundwater table precludes any notion of leaving open an excavated trench on the site. But if you can't dig down, you can build up instead. So we have constructed a section of mock trench to give visitors a sense of the deep, narrow and convoluted layout of what lies below the surface. It was built with the assistance of the Green Army and the ACT Parks and Conservation Service. The timber structure simulates a fire trench at full scale, with an island traverse, zig-zags, a fire step, some duckboards, and a length of sap heading downwards, as if on its way under 'no man's land' to the enemy trenches.

Even in its unfinished state, the mock trench has been very popular with visitors, and those on guided tours can work with periscopes and other props to enrich their experience. If you can't get out on-site, the mock trench and the initial sections of trail are visible on Google Earth, starting from the image dated 13 October 2017.



An incomplete mock trench in August 2017, with the first trial sections of fire step and duckboards, and the island traverse at its heart (Photo: Michael Maconachie).

Public trench tours have been very popular, and we have been pleased to welcome some Duntroon graduates on those tours. The next round of public tours will be during the Canberra and Region Heritage Festival in April 2018. Once finalised, bookings will be through the [Woodlands and Wetlands Trust](#). Tailored group tours can be arranged at other times.

During 2017 the historical importance of the site received some measure of recognition in a request for soil from the trench system to be incorporated into the Flanders Fields Memorial garden which was opened at the Australian War Memorial in that year. This blended soil taken from iconic Western Front battlefield sites with soil from Australian sites notable for troop training, embarkation and return.

A 2018 Heritage Grant will now enable further track work, interpretation of the mock trench, augmented reality sites (where video and audio can be delivered to hand-held devices), sandbagging of structures, a simulated forward machine gun emplacement, a mural facing the cycleway, and purchase of additional props to aid trench tours and educational activities.

A book detailing the background to, and history of, the trench system was released for Remembrance Day 2017, although it has not yet had a 'hard' launch. We have been very grateful for the assistance of WO2 Steve Medforth in accessing the archives of the Army Museum Duntroon—a very significant, but (as yet) poorly appreciated, resource.

All proceeds from the sale of the trench book go to support the work of the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust. At present it can only be ordered [online](#).

Research for the book uncovered additional, more detailed, stories that are waiting to be told, and more information keeps on coming. Hopefully, some of these stories and new information will find their way into this Newsletter or other journals.

We are also hoping to stage an 'open day' event in Spring 2018, marking completion of the mock trench, the mural, and the expanded facilities enabled by this year's Heritage Grant, and perhaps coinciding with some more archaeological excavations. This event would celebrate the rediscovery, investigation, and subsequent presentation, of this nationally important heritage place as we mark the approaching centenary of the Armistice.



A guided tour for the Heritage Festival April 2017, showing a hexagonal observation platform and one of the interpretive signs (Photo: Michael Maconachie).



ANU archaeologist Dr Tim Denham collects soil from the trench system for use in the Flanders Fields memorial garden at the Australian War Memorial, March 2017 (Photo: Michael Maconachie).

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