MAJOR JOHNSTON APPEARS FOR THE DEFENCE

On 5th March Blacktown Council organised a ceremonial dedication of a memorial marking the site of the "Battle of Vinegar Hill", in which the convict revolt of 1804 was crushed. Many of those present must have been surprised by the appearance of a scarlet-coated officer in very regimental but very antiquated uniform and equipment; and still more surprised when this visitor from the past saluted the Mayor, announced himself, and addressed the company thus:

"Mr Mayor, I am Major George Johnston, at your service sir, and I thank you for bringing me here today.

Fellow Australians, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen and those of my descendants here present. History describes me as a good looking lieutenant of marines aged twenty three when I arrived in Sydney Cove with the First Fleet in 1788. I am gratified to note that all of my family have inherited those good looks.

And it pleases me to learn that at long last you have seen fit to commemorate the affray which has been given the name of the Battle of Vinegar Hill, for what reason I wot not.

Three very different parties were involved in this. Firstly the settlers and small farmers whose homes were attacked and plundered of guns and implements by the large band of convicts which had mutinied and broken out of the stockade at Castle Hill.

Secondly were the mutineers themselves who planned to march to Sydney Town as an armed force and from there to escape in several captured vessels.

And the military force under my command which here on this hillock - I fail to recognise it - and greatly outnumbered faced and defeated those rascals.

It is about those soldiers that I address you now. The marines of the First Fleet thought that their duties on arrival here would be that of garrison troops dealing with the King's enemies, keeping the peace, drills and parades and sentry assignments. Instead they were amazed and disgruntled to find themselves employed as jailers and supervisors of convict working parties.

When I was awakened this afternoon in the Johnston vault in the Waverley cemetery it reminded me of that midnight hour 184 years ago when I was aroused in my Annandale home with word from Governor King of the outbreak in the Hills district and an order that I should lead a half company of soldiers, already on the way to my gates, to Parramatta with the object of quelling the mutiny.

We set off, I on horseback in the lead, through the trees and scrub along those ten dusty miles to Parramatta.

And what a change had come over those fifty two soldiers; knowing that for once they were being used as troops on active service and with the prospect of duties for which they had been trained they marched smartly and cheerfully without pause to reach Parramatta at daybreak for a scanty meal before setting out in pursuit.

May I add that on my journey here today I travelled in a strange kind of horseless carriage and I failed to recognise any part of that Parramatta Track.

At the Battle of Waterloo the Duke of Wellington gave an order "Up Guards and at 'em" which has been remembered and quoted ever since.

In similar fashion when about to set out in pursuit of the rebels I asked in which direction they had gone. A hundred voices shouted "Up the Windsor road". This phrase has been repeated and can be heard often even now around the streets and hills of Parramatta.

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Suffice to say I divided my forces and with twenty six soldiers and a small following of armed civilians followed and overtook the mutineers, over two hundred strong, facing us here on this hillside. After some fruitless parley I arrested their leader Cunningham at pistol point and ordered the troops to open fire. In the resultant volley of musketry fifteen of the convicts were killed.

Then with empty muskets, which took some time to reload, and outnumbered ten to one we could well have been over run and slaughtered but here military training and discipline showed up.

Steady as rocks my men stood with fixed bayonets and then charged; the convicts broke and ran defeated. Later that day I had no compunction in stringing up Cunningham and leaving him to dance on air.

I have made my point in regard to the military side of events and the rest is history.

Now it is growing dark, I am very old and very tired and must go. You have two songs which appeal to me and which we have heard through the walls of our tomb at times; “Old soldiers never die they only fade away” and the other, sung by a person named Vera Lynn, says “We’ll meet again”. I trust that this is so.

Would the best looking of my descendants come forward and help me leave.

“Major Johnston” is, in another incarnation, known to many of us — one of our own members. A letter from him to the editor explains all:

“Harbour Lights”
403/102 Alfred St.
MILSONS POINT NSW 2061
8-3-88

Dear Bill

The enclosed is largely self explanatory and relates to the ceremony held for the past six years on the presumed site of the battle of Vinegar Hill.

As you see I was asked to contribute a speech which I did in the guise of Major George Johnston. I donned period uniform and intimated that I had been brought there from the Johnston family vault in Waverley cemetery.

The speech was a smash hit and I received a standing ovation which repaid me for the effort I put into producing it.

About three hundred people were present including four members of Parliament, six local mayors, members of many historical societies and the notables listed in the Order of Proceedings.

With my best wishes
Sincerely
Bert Weston

[A further link between Major (afterwards Lieut. Colonel) Johnston and Illawarra is that he, and his son David, were among the early grantees in the Macquarie Rivulet and Marshall Mount areas.]