Thomas’s case continues

By Marie Low

TENTERFIELD lawyer James Francis (J.F.) Thomas’s life-long belief that Harry “Breaker” Morant and Peter Handcock should not have been executed is being passionately pursued by military lawyer Commander James Unkles.

This Sunday is the 109th anniversary of the execution of Morant and Handcock, but Cdr Unkles said the case remains far from forgotten.

Cdr Unkles is leading a push for a pardon for Morant and Handcock, and has sent a petition to the Queen.

While Cdr Unkles had said his petition had so far been rejected by the British Government, the fight was not over, with new evidence uncovered late last year.

Lieutenants Morant and Handcock were executed on February 27, 1902 after being convicted of the murder of 12 Boer prisoners. A third man, Lieutenant George Witton, had his sentence commuted.

Cdr Unkles said he wanted to carry on J.F. Thomas’s fight to have the case reviewed.

“What is certain is that a country solicitor from outback Australia (J.F. Thomas) who served his community with distinction as a community leader, newspaper proprietor and solicitor from outback Australia (J.F. Thomas) who served his community with distinction as a community leader, newspaper proprietor and solicitor assisted his clients to professional standards that reflected his experience and training,” Cdr Unkles argues on his website.

“In the circumstances, justice demands a review of the trials, the convictions and the sentences imposed on Morant, Hancock and Witton. Until this occurs, Major Thomas work as an advocate will remain incomplete.”

Cdr Unkles told The Tenterfield Star last week he believed new evidence that there were British orders for soldiers in the Boer War to shoot prisoners had “rattled the British.” He has sought the assistance of Australia’s Attorney-General Robert McLelland in issuing an Australian pardon for the soldiers, but said an official pardon could only be granted by the British Government.

“I am continuing to push for a judicial enquiry,” he said.

“I have been around for a long time and I know how to play the game. I am playing the game at the moment, but if push comes to shove, I will be pursuing the case.

“I am happy to do that for the descendants. We have a fighting fund and a very strong case.”

Cdr Unkles’s website www.breakermorant.com includes his research into J.F. Thomas. He said after watching the movie Breaker Morant, he became concerned J.F. Thomas was “an elusive man in the military who probably hadn’t been recognised.”

J.F. Thomas, who also owned The Tenterfield Star for a time, returned to Tenterfield, but remained convinced justice had not been served.

Those are just a few of the memorable residents of the shire. To celebrate our role in history, The Tenterfield Star will next week begin a special series that will run throughout the year called “Our amazing history”, starting with J.F. Thomas, we will feature some of the biggest names of our past, with a feature article on each.

Watch next week for the first of our two-part series on J.F. Thomas.

A broken man: J.F. Thomas by the graveside of “Breaker” Morant.

Lost with the Star at the beach

THE beach might be great fun, but there’s still time to catch up with your reading.

Peter and Zac Thompson are pictured at Macmasters Beach on the central coast of NSW, each with a copy of The Tenterfield Star.

Kim Thompson, who submitted the photograph, is now in the running to win a $500 camera package in the Wandering Star competition sponsored by Rhombus Contracting and The Tenterfield Star.

If you would like to enter, send your jpeg image to editor.tentstar@rural-press.com, or drop it in to The Tenterfield Star office at 225 Rose Street.

Please include your name and details of where the photograph was taken. The winner will be announced in November 2011.
THE Fighter

Last week marked the 109th anniversary of the execution of Harry “Breaker” Harford Morant and Peter Handcock. The two were defended by Tenterfield lawyer J.F. Thomas. In this, the first of a two-part series on Thomas, we look at Thomas’s life up until the day of the execution.

MARIE LOW reports.

H e was a poet, newspaper proprietor and editor, legal practitioner, gallant soldier and forthright community leader - and the man credited with first bringing to Australia from South Africa the gerbera flower.

That is the introduction to James Francis (J. F.) Thomas given by the Australian Light Horse Association Ltd, who pay tribute to the famous Tenterfield resident on their website.

To many other people, he is simply the man who defended Harry “Breaker” Harford Morant, whose story - given the Hollywood treatment - became familiar to millions through the 1980 film, Breaker Morant.

J. F. Thomas has again recently come to international prominence through the efforts of lawyer-com- mander James Unkles, who petitioned Queen Elizabeth II for a pardon for Morant and Handcock. While the appeal has been rejected, Cdr Unkles is continuing the fight he says will complete the work of J. F. Thomas.

Thomas’s renown in Tenterfield dated back to before the Morant and Handcock case.

He was born on August 25, 1861 in the NSW Legislative Assembly and was elected to represent Tenterfield in 1899.

He pushed for Federation and was reportedly one of a group of townspeople who lobbied Henry Parkes to give his historic Federation speech in Tenterfield on October 24, 1890.

Thomas had risen in law from Sydney University before establishing a law firm in Tenterfield and making a name for himself as a community leader.

“From the moment of Thomas’ argument that Morant and Handcock had followed official orders to shoot prisoners without being unchallenged, his insistence that the volunteers be identified as Australians, was refused by the British,” Cdr Unkles said.

“The moment of Thomas’ case returns to Tenterfield, but continues his fight.

The war continues they are willing to enlist again.”

“Personally, I have no special inducements for another period of hard service, but I like the men and I think they like me, and I am willing to go with them.”

Cdr Unkles reports in August 1901, Thomas returned to South Africa, having recruited 200 volunteers to fight the Boers.

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