

# XAMC: Rowsley 1999; a conference retrospective

*being an informal report on  
the Tenth Australian Mediaeval Convention*

*by  
Sgt Alan Shanks, ROTY, OB, BSB(Hons.)*

What strange spirit motivates re-enactors to travel from the far corners of this island continent to gather for a medieval conference? Further I ask how do we manage to maintain the enthusiasm to re-create the bygone times of a continent as far from our own as one may travel? Indeed it is such questions that draw me to undertake a haphazard analysis of what has gone before with the aim to discover what was in it for me?

## 1. Gumtrees and GP's

My arrival at the site drew a strange response from within (I had not been particularly enthusiastic in the run up to this conference), I saw a barren hillside scattered with gum trees and 1950's dwellings, hardly a site with atmosphere. My travelling companion (the cunning Vixen) and I had listened to a few dance tunes in the last portion of the trip to whip up some enthusiasm. Despite first impressions, we passed through an uncomplicated registration and wound our way to the routier campsite glad enough to be there at last. The trip through the camp confirmed that little had changed in the movement in the two years now gone since Sokil. Army boot'd, cigarette smoking medievalists (and I use that term loosely) wandered around awaiting the first round of biff.

Despite my initial negativity, our arrival at the campsite saw a quick change in my demeanour, upon seeing happy Routiers everywhere, many from the fledgling northern and southern files. Such is the nature of our society, whatever the location; one is greeted like an old friend returning after a lengthy absence. Certainly a good reason to attend any event the society is to be found at. Alas, little time was available for talk (lunch was soon to be served) so it was unpack, dress in some real cloths, and off to risk the fare!

## 2. Courageous comestibles

The first meal of the weekend set the pace for what was to come; a Greek feast festooned with toga-clad ancients some of whom had a remarkable resemblance to Routiers - a cunning device to lure us into other time periods (no thanks - 17th century's fine by me!) I grant you, the ghosts of the Kindilan famine are now put to rest, but I still was taken aback by the superb effort by the committee and the Lady Northcote staff to feed us throughout the weekend. Sure, some dishes may have been a little bland (I'm told in some cases they were not even supplied with recipes for some of the items!), but the diversity and daring nature of the menu was a grand example of how seriously Australian re-enactors take their food. It was interesting to see in the last few years that our own society has taken the leap from "Routier cuisine" to period recipes - a worthy and welcome effort by those involved. Another point of interest was the use of people from the various clubs present to assist with the service. The obvious advantage there was that we had someone on the inside (some of the time) who would ensure that Routier plates were always well stocked (removing the risk of unsuspecting, tender recruits being devoured by Mr Haaande). Yes, there was a substantial outbreak of fish in the Palatinate during the conference, causing some to grumble. No harm done, I say! Fish makes one's coat shiny and offsets the cerebral debilitation caused by our hop-dominated lifestyle, so it is a worthy food for Routiers.

## 3. Dancefest at the conference

It was my aim to sing and dance at every opportunity at this conference; I feel for the most part this was achieved. The terrific efforts by the Routier cultural non-faction to involve people in such enjoyable pastimes was well rewarded. Saturday night saw the largest Playford's dance gathering I have had the pleasure to attend (in the order of 20 people participating). It was good to see interest from members of other clubs - if it's just for fun, it's grand, but if it has the potential for recruitment that's huge! Thanks to Sue, Jackie, Vic, and those lithe-footed chaps - you know who you are! This was without doubt the highlight of conference for me, made it all worth while.

## 4. Sgt. Silverback creates a monster

Sunday saw the planned attack on I Condottieri's encampment (now a conference benchmark), I was informed earlier in the weekend that due to the retirement of Sgt. Blohm and the absence of his esteemed replacement, Sgt. Squid, I was the most senior Sgt. Remaining, so I had the job. Being a little shaky on the details of the rules of engagement (excepting a tussle with a bovine host at Mernda (see last issue - Ed.)), I was understandably nervous. Fortunately, Bertie took pity on this greenhorn and invested me into the Routier Hand-puppet School of Command™. With the dulcet tones of Ex-Sgt. Blohm in my ear, I led a parade with all the gusto of a US marine Drill Instructor. Thanks must go to the rank and file for doing what they should, instead of what I told them to, and special congratulations to Debbie of the Whitecoats for not collapsing under the combined scrutiny of the Sgt.'s, Captayne and sundry officers. I believe it was her first serious parade with pike (am I correct?) - huge job! Still, we marched on the wog contractors' camp in the same old fashion (ably led by the Routier Drum Corps) and they folded beneath the might of a huge Routier formation (in the same old fashion). Plenty of fake casualties, and only one real one (I attempted to assassinate the Captain of I Condottieri with a halberd) - a grand engagement.

## 5. Fellowship between the files

Another fine aspect of conference was the opportunity for two files of the society (Northern and Southern) to get together and size each other up. There conceivably could be an envious standoffish relationship between two files competing for the formation of the Third Captains' Company. But, no. I found relations to be full of the usual Routier spirit, and indeed was grateful for the opportunity to get to know our comrades in the north better. I'm sure no one could deny the success the society has had in its franchise-based expansion; the numbers present in the ranks during the conference were a testament to this arrangement. At this point I would also like to thank the members of the Southern File for their magnificent efforts this year. Our last muster of 1998 saw only 3 members in kit, now all but one of the financial members (12 in total) can parade in the hugest 17th Century fashion. In fact I'm currently negotiating with a tailor to upgrade my kit as I'm rapidly being out dressed!

## 6. Medieval conferences - the future?

Some of you have been exposed to my rants about seeing conferences getting back to basics, less facilities, less catering and more living history. I still believe there is a need to re-assess what we want out of these gatherings. If I look back over my previous discussion the following things stand out as the benefits and detriment's of such a gathering (IMHO).

### *What did the conference offer me?*

- reminded me of the huge level of fellowship in our society
- exposed me to a diversity of period foods
- allowed me to involve myself in entertaining activities - both military and cultural
- provided a venue for massed displays

### *What were the drawbacks of conference?*

- lots of people not taking their hobby seriously
- conference locations are generally uninspiring (a difficult one I know)
- activities get a bit repetitive over the years
- enormous cost of site hire - should we be working to a permanent site for this event, therefore the looking for the opportunity to establish permanent and appropriate facilities?

### *The future of conference?*

I agree with the need to broaden our focus beyond the nominated medieval theme; it has occurred naturally with the interest in renaissance and ancient times, perhaps it's time to recognise this, and, as was suggested, open the event to all re-enactors. Those of us that have attended Taminick would see that there is much to be gained from this move.

Yes, also I think we do need to revive the living history aspect of the event:

- Period encampments should be more than just a place to sleep
- should cook more meals ourselves (although I agree feasts are important)
- maybe groups of similar period should camp in close proximity

The conference by and large is a good thing in my opinion, but it could be so much more.  
Where to go from here? Alas, it will take more than my humble brain to work that one out!

**Remember it's only SIX Months to the Next One** (and it's cheaper to pay early)