

Richard William Curtis, CS Navy

BY ROBERT TAYLOR QSM



Here is a man who stood above others of his time and yet succumbed to circumstances to become an ordinary citizen in his chosen homeland, Queensland, Australia.

Yet this humble servant of the Confederacy carried with him the dedication to duty, honesty and integrity that was to stand him well in both the Confederacy and in Brisbane's society where he rose to become a leading light in numerous government departments. Throughout his life Richard Curtis adhered to a deep respect for honesty and loyalty and proved this with his remarkable record.

I was deeply privileged to be requested to perform the eulogy for Richard William Curtis at a rededication of his formerly unmarked grave at Toowong on November 7th 2010. It was a date chosen to coincide with Remembrance Day, Grandparent's Day and the day he was buried in 1905. I include the eulogy and have updated it since as information comes to hand with further ongoing research. I have included relevant illustrations as they apply to the story.

It was a hot, humid day and for those who stood in the sun, it was at times uncomfortable. Jack found it played havoc with his joints on the sloping ground and I had trouble standing for such a long period with my 'dicky' hip but we all endured our individual pain for the precious moment. It was well worth the effort to ensure that a war veteran is no longer forgotten and is given a service befitting his life and experiences. He may have been reluctant to talk about it in his Brisbane days, for it would have served him no purpose as he moved in government circles where such an allegiance may have been frowned upon. Nowhere in the many local reports of his life, is there mention of his role as a Paymaster in the Confederate Navy.

Remarkably I was reading from speech notes without my glasses, something seemed to deem them unnecessary and an ever painful hip vanished to allow me to relax and deliver a eulogy revealing his many exploits.



Firing guard assembled, James Gray and Robert Taylor

When the salute was fired by replica muskets of the period, it was to the left of the grave away from the assembled crowd and towards Hamilton on the Brisbane River where Richard Curtis fell and drowned. Perhaps the echo of the volley was heard there.



THE CURTIS EULOGY

Distinguished guests, descendants of Richard William Curtis, Friends of Toowong Cemetery, ladies and gentlemen, welcome. I would first like to acknowledge the Indigenous people and custodians of this sacred land at Toowong Cemetery, where so many interesting people now rest in peace and the idyllic surroundings.

Our history is here in this cemetery more than any other; we are surrounded by the people who made Brisbane and indeed Queensland what it is today, we owe them all a great debt. When I acknowledge the Indigenous Custodians, I mean this with sincerity as a New Zealander, where respect for the Maori people is gaining prominence in our unique culture and enriches every day life. Like Australia, many of our famous landmarks and mountains have reverted to original Indigenous names and we can learn much from our Indigenous peoples.

The people buried here at Toowong not only gave us Brisbane but also its roads, schools, hospitals and commerce, an entire city infrastructure. Just as we hand on the development of our time to future generations; the people who rest here at Toowong gave us the ability to live and build our own lives and continue the process for future generations.

We who are not yet old but grow older (*as the saying goes*) are content to pass on our efforts to the next generation. It is a generation that needs to stop and take stock. We older members are not mere encumbrances. Today is the first day of **Grandparent's Day**, one that will in future always be held on the first Sunday of every November. So we have a Mother's day, a Father's day and at long last we have a Grandparent's day.

There comes a time when we should all take stock of our past, this is one such time; in this case it is a grave that was unmarked, unrecognised, covered in weeds and forgotten for too long. The grave of a scribe, an accountant, a man who had an incredible experience in life, an Englishman who fought under the Confederate naval ensign during the *American Civil War*.

For we members of the American Civil War Round Table Queensland and the local chapter of Sons of Confederate Veterans Incorporated, Richard Curtis represents our first Confederate in Queensland but there are more, perhaps even in this cemetery. Terry Foenandar is a researcher in Victoria who's helped greatly with research and provided the only image we have of Curtis and is currently working on the grave of another veteran buried here.



James Gray, of Sons of Confederate Veterans, is sitting here with me today and has given tremendous support and because of his efforts, this event is able to be held today. James Gray arranged delivery of the Confederate Cross and the clearing of the site for this ceremony and the gathering of Curtis descendants. James also located the gravesite of another veteran who rests nearby, Union navy man William Waters and helped prepare Waters' grave that was, like this one, gnarled with roots and weeds.

Jack Ford, of the **ACWRTQ** is also deserving of recognition for his tireless efforts in stitching together events of today, including the various permissions required to actually fire over the grave. Jack is ably assisted by **ACWRTQ** President John Duncan whose family were pioneers and his great Grandfather discovered the Gold Coast's Surfers paradise area. John is holding the loud speaker system today.

Incidentally, this is only the second time that a salute will be fired over a grave since World War Two, thanks to the understanding and flexibility of our **Queensland Police Service**. The previous occasion was for William Waters, buried nearby. Both events were ably supported by The Friends of Toowong Cemetery. While the veteran we've come to honour was a mere accountant; in his own way he contributed valiantly to the fortunes of Britain, America and Australia. He was part of history's most stirring and achieving moments. He is one of our unsung heroes, who actually took up a sword to wield with his pen.



Richard William Curtis, CSN
Courtesy: T. Foenandar

Often, when we undertake research, it's very difficult to bring together the loose threads of history but in this case there are many positive leads to the Richard William Curtis legend, thanks to the newspaper **Brisbane Courier**. There are numerous accounts of Curtis in the **Brisbane Courier** where we see the births of his children and his rise through various companies he worked for. We even uncover a classified advertisement attempting to sell a bone-mill in 1875 and letters he wrote to the editor explaining his role in importing **Kanaka** labour in the 1870's.

Richard William Curtis was the son of an English brewer, born in Lincolnshire on January 2nd 1840. He didn't follow in father's footsteps but first worked in a shipping office in London, before joining the famous new giant paddle steamer **The Great Eastern** as Clerk and later Ship's Purser. At the time the vessel, built by **Isombard Brunel**, was said to be the largest ship of its kind ever constructed and required a crew of about four hundred. As Paymaster, Curtis had his work cut out for him.

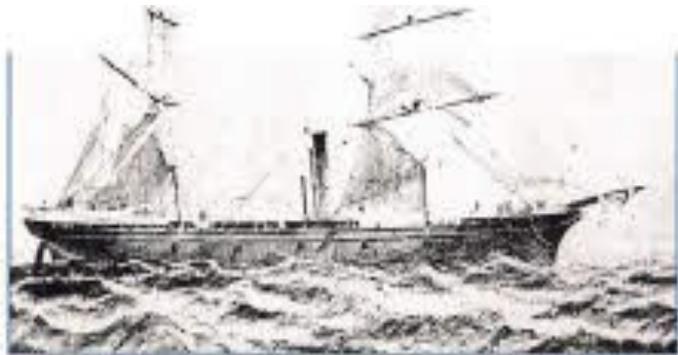
Serving as Purser for two years, from early 1860 to mid-1861, he visited New York aboard **The Great Eastern**, and was there just after the bombardment of Fort Sumter, resulting in the start of the War.



Isombard's 'Leviathan' The Great Eastern five funnels and two side-paddle wheels plus sails.

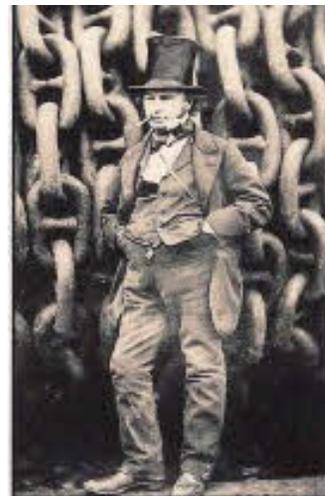
At the time of *The Great Eastern's* first arrival in New York, crowds gathered along the shore to wave and view this 'leviathan' and she was truly gigantic and originally 'Leviathan' is what they wanted to call her but politics and economic backers demanded otherwise. Amongst the New York crowd was a regiment of volunteers who stood to attention and saluted the ship's passengers and crew almost as if homecoming heroes. The ship didn't receive such a warm welcome on her next visit, there were far more serious things to occupy the minds of Americans; there was the War Between the States, often referred to as *The Civil War*.

There's some confusion about when Curtis joined the South but In March of 1863 he was Assistant Paymaster in the Confederate States Navy, serving aboard the cruiser, *CSS Georgia*,



One of only three known images of *CSS Georgia*

a screw steamer built in the United Kingdom in 1862. Hand-written records kept at the time are fairly unreliable and dotted with errors. Records for Curtis reveal mistakes concerning where and when he joined the Confederate States Navy.



The Great Eastern's Isambard Brunel with Eastern's massive launch chains

Isombard Brunei was a man of great influence in Liverpool at the time and it's likely that his recommendation may have smoothed the waters for Curtis. It would have required a big figure like Brunei to sway Confederate navy recruiter, Commander James Dunwoody Bulloch C.S.N. who was stationed in the 'Dixie' port of Liverpool. There was such a web of intrigue at this time in Liverpool that the truth of events are so heavily veiled as to confuse historians and perhaps we'll never know; although Terry Foenander is currently working on this aspect.

Any researcher getting some account of this history wrong could be forgiven. Surely if we had the writings of Curtis himself, upon which to base our research, there would be fewer errors, as he proved himself very capable in this respect.

The whole naval saga connected with Britain during the war smacked of melodrama and a touch of Sherlock Holmes, indeed at times humorous if it were not connected to such deadly circumstances as war. Prior to going aboard *CSS Georgia*, Curtis and his fellow officers were involved in bizarre activities, even to the extent of using false names in an effort to counter United States Consular spies plaguing the waterfront.



Commander J. O. Bulloch



Georgia's Commander, W. L. Maury

One Confederate officer, in his account of these activities, mentions how they had to meet up in a secret rendezvous before heading off to board a ship taking them to their Confederate cruiser. In his book 'Recollections of a Rebel Reefer,' Midshipman James Morris Morgan states, "Returning to Little St. James's Street, I passed Midshipman Walker who then joined the party and about half-past nine that evening, we all proceeded to a railway station where we took a train for Whitehaven, a little seaport about an hour's ride from London. There we went to a small Inn, where we met Commander Maury, Dr. Wheeden, and Paymaster Curtis and were soon joined by others - all strangers. We waited at the Inn for about a couple of hours.... If Mr. Adams, the United States Minister, was going to get in his fine work and balk us, now was his last opportunity"

The *CCS Georgia's* armaments consisted of five Whitworth guns, two 100 pounders, two 24 pounders and one 32 pounder. The guns, ordnance and stores are secretly conveyed by the steamer *Alar* to *CSS Georgia* laying off the French coast at Ushant.



Also on board the *Alar* are officers and men Morgan mentioned as hiding in the Inn, Commander W. L. Maury, Paymaster Curtis, 1st Lt. Chapman, 2nd Lt. Evans, (*who later was to take over command of the ship*) 3^d Lt Smith, 4th Lt. Ingraham, Chief Engineer Pearce and Surgeon Wheedon.

Curtis remains aboard **CSS Georgia** for her entire cruise and handles accounts and musters of seamen who enlist from several vessels actually captured during the cruise. An example is shown in the Official Records of the Navies, a list of men from the captured prize vessel '*Dictator*,' dated April 27th 1863 and signed by Curtis. It provides the names and ratings of fourteen men who had shipped aboard **CSS Georgia** from the *Dictator*. After the end of the cruise, Curtis is given responsibility for making payments to families of deceased seamen from **CSS Alabama**; this was after the famed battle off Cherbourg, in June 1864



Rifled 32 pounder recovered from wreck of a river iron-clad **C.S.S. Georgia**



A newspaper advertisement, in the *Liverpool Courier* of July 13th 1864, advises families of deceased Alabama Confederate sailors, to contact ... "Paymaster Curtis." A dispatch was sent by H. S. Wilding, Vice Consul in Great Britain, to the United States Secretary of State, William H. Seward, "Within the last few days, circumstances have transpired to create distrust. On the 13th of July, and subsequently, an advertisement ... appeared in the *Liverpool Courier*, intimating that communications respecting claims for pay, due to deceased seamen of the *Alabama*, were to be addressed to a Mr. R. W. Curtis. This Curtis as far as I can learn, is a Confederate agent ..."

By the 6th of January 1865, he was appointed Paymaster to serve aboard the mighty and much feared ironclad, **CSS Stonewall**. Both the *Georgia* and *Stonewall* recruited personnel from Britain and other European countries. This could account for confusion over enlistments as such activities were closely guarded secrets, shrouded with clandestine intrigue.

During 1864-65 Curtis was overseeing the pay of sailors of many other Confederate cruisers visiting London. Information gathered by the United States Consul and other agents during that period mentions that, "Orders given to the men for 10 pounds each were drawn by Richard W. Curtis, understood to be a person in the 'rebel' naval service." An original payment slip, made out to William Young, a Confederate sailor serving as fireman aboard the cruiser **CSS Florida**, was included as evidence in naming Curtis an officer of the Confederate Navy ... the United States authorities were after him.



CSS Rappahannock trapped in Calais

A uniformed photograph of Curtis, taken about this time, reveals him with magnificent side boards, as was fashionable in the navy and a moustache, looking proud and determined (*see picture page 2.*) He is depicted with a Paymaster's stripe on his jacket



sleeve and Lieutenant's badge on a kepi hat with a wreath, anchor and single star denoting First Lieutenant. Perhaps the hat is not his. It may be that another person is sitting at the same table but has been clipped from the picture. Obviously intelligent and well respected in his profession, Curtis was trusted enough to be in charge of the finances of one of Britain's most famous ships, as well as the accounts and pay of men he served with in the war Between the States.

He stepped straight into the role of Paymaster of the CS navy, indicating enormous faith and trust in his ability to perform the duties required of him.

In mid January 1864, after the end of the **CSS Georgia** cruise, Paymaster Curtis writes to fellow Paymaster aboard **CSS Rappahannock**, Douglas French Forrest, they had often corresponded and were obviously well acquainted.

By June, Curtis was in Calais in France, on his way to Paris and arranged to meet up with Forrest on June 23rd aboard **CSS Rappahannock** to look over the ship that had been stranded in the port by French authorities.

Forrest, in describing Curtis, states: "A very pleasant fellow! I showed him the objects of interest here, gave him a lunch at the buffet and a good dinner in the cabin. In the evening, fellow officers Domin, Herty, Miller, Curtis and I, had an invigorating game of quoits."

No doubt a welcome respite, Curtis then went on to Paris to await further orders. Previously on October 28th, Commander Maury took the **Georgia** into Cherbourg and followed the same route to Paris as Curtis to report the ships condition and finances to Flag Officer Commander Samuel Barron. While there, due to ill health, Maury requested that he be stood down and Lt. Evans took command of **Georgia**.

By December 22, 1864 Curtis receives orders from Commander Samuel Barron to await orders from Commander James D. Bulloch, in Britain. This was obviously in preparation for taking up the Paymaster's job on the ironclad **CSS Stonewall**. In January 1865,



Curtis was instructed by Commander Bulloch to compile a list of men and form a crew for the ironclad and forward the list to him at his office in Liverpool, an extraordinary request of a Paymaster. Bulloch entrusted Curtis with a large sum of money (most likely gold sovereigns) and instructed him to report to Thomas Jefferson Page, who was to command the huge Confederate iron clad warship. That trust was well placed and Thomas Page displays an interesting and characteristic look of naval commanders of the times.

At the end of the *American Civil War* a few months later, Curtis is still aboard **CSS Stonewall** on her way to the Confederacy but on learning of war's end, the vessel is surrendered to Spanish officials in Havana, Cuba. Confederate navy personnel were afraid of being hanged as pirates by the Union and generally chose neutral ports at which to surrender their ships. They weren't pirates but there was little appreciation of this in the punitive North of the time, one bent on avenging the death of Abraham Lincoln.

Curtis makes his way back to his home port in England aboard a former blockade runner, the **Ptarmigan**, and a few months later, November 1865, sails from London where things are getting a little too hot politically. He arrives [in Australia] at Moreton Bay aboard the **Legion of Honour** February 27th 1866.



Commander T.J. Paige



Little more than slaves, one child is clearly undernourished

Originally Curtis owns a farm at Pimpama he calls '**Encliffe Vale Plantation**,' and lives coincidentally near another veteran now buried in the Pimpama cemetery, a Union militiaman James Latimer, who I researched in some detail. They had to know each other but were on opposite sides in the war.

Unlike Latimer, Curtis obviously isn't cut out for the rigours of plantation life and gives it up. It may be that the local Indigenous people and Kanakas working for him cause too much strife. In November 1868 there is some trouble on his plantation involving local tribes of Aborigines, including the murder of an aboriginal by other members of his tribe.

Strangely, Curtis shortly finds himself in service as the first Government Agent appointed to accompany vessels to the South Sea Islands; his appointment, dating from January 21st 1871.

Richard Curtis' responsibilities are to see that Pacific Islanders are recruited in an appropriate and humane manner.

The type of vessel Curtis is to oversee was engaged in carrying island labourers we now know as Kanakas from places like Vanuatu to Queensland, under the Polynesian Labourers Act of 1868. This is a dark, regretful and shameful side of Queensland's history and the Kanaka people are little more than slaves; there is evidence to prove they were treated as badly, if not worse than some slaves in America and like them, many are brought unwillingly to Australia. Curtis is appointed to see that justice is done, that people are lawfully recruited for work, not abducted.



The port of Brisbane in 1870 looking from Kangaroo Point across to Eagle Street

On the appointment of Curtis we gain another insight into the man from a published description of him in the Brisbane Courier ...

"Government agent, Mr. Curtis is a gentleman of experience in the management of Polynesians, having been, for a considerable time, in charge of large numbers of them on a plantation near Brisbane. He is no 'new chum,' and we are informed that he got his appointment because he's believed capable of performing its duties with credit to himself and satisfaction to the Government. Curtis is under strict instructions, and, although his power is discretionary in certain cases, he will be held personally responsible for recruiting being conducted in a strictly just and humane manner. His expenses will be paid by a fee of 10 shillings per head, exacted by the Government in advance from the owners of the vessel for each islander imported."

Richard Curtis is aboard the ship, "*Mystery*," when it sails from Rockhampton in January of 1871 to the New Hebrides, and while aboard this vessel an altercation with island people results in the death of a fellow passenger. An account of the tragic incident is provided by the *Brisbane Courier* and I have abbreviated it slightly.

"... Government Agent Curtis had considerable difficulty persuading islanders, who had not been here before, to venture on the voyage; owing to the ill impression produced by those who've abused the Act. Mr. Curtis, the Government Agent was, we learn, indefatigable in his exertions to procure a good class of immigrants, having taken every precaution to acquaint the people, through their chiefs



Ships similar to the *Mystery* about the same business

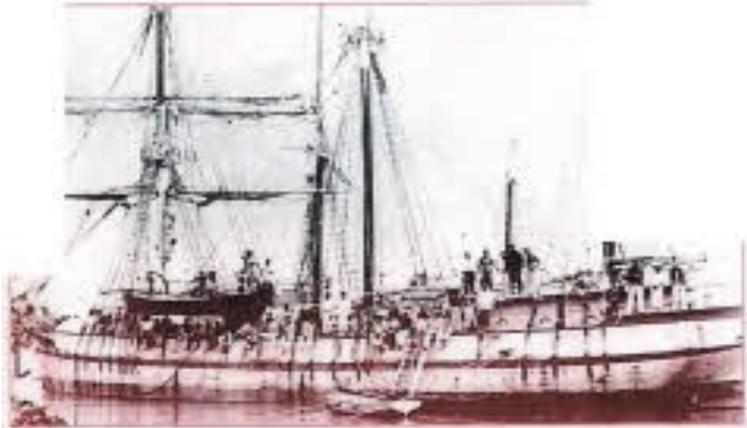
and interpreters, with the exact nature of the contract, the description of the place they were coming to, the labour they would have to perform, and the rate of pay they would receive."

The paper continues, *"During one of these trips, Curtis was accompanied by Captain Irving and a passenger, Mr. Majendie, who took the trip for the purpose of benefitting his health. The party was lured to shore by islanders but when the boat arrived within thirty yards of land, they were welcomed by a shower of arrows, which were said to 'Come as thick as rain.' Curtis had a very narrow escape, one of the arrows glanced along his chest, pierced his shirt beneath his left arm, and broke off short leaving the point embedded. We need hardly add he keeps it as a souvenir of his 'pleasant' trip. Poor Mr. Majendie was not so fortunate. An arrow struck him on the shin, midway between the knee and the foot.*

The interpreter informed them that it was a poisoned arrow and instant action was taken by Mr. Curtis, who cut the wound and endeavoured to suck out poison and did everything in his power to arrest its fatal progress.

Captain Irving at once returned—not however, before Mr. Curtis had emptied the barrels of his revolver at the savages. Mr. Majaende was put back on aboard the *Mystery* but grew worse day by day, his sufferings being terrible. On the sixth day he expired, his body committed to the deep, the funeral service being most expressively read by Mr. Curtis.”

In October 1872, Richard marries Coroline Amelia Bolden at Lutwyche Church, Kedron Brook, and over the years four children are born.



A ship loaded with Kanaka labour for Queensland

After return to the Port of Brisbane and late in 1873, Richard Curtis is appointed, 'Port Guager.' The position is as bonded warehouseman, similar to custom officers today and holds the job for about ten years. He is stationed at Petrie Bight until 1883 in the same



Customs Building on Eagle Street pier

year that the Queensland government decides to build a grand Customs House edifice with Corinthian columns. Work commences in 1886 and after 3 years and 38,346 pounds the city was graced with the fine building seen to the left.

Curtis' claim to have experience in dealing with Islanders of the Pacific region is confirmed by a letter he writes to the editor of *The Brisbane Courier*, dated Tuesday, November 28th, 1876. In the letter he gives some detail of how trade and exchanges with Polynesians and other Islanders were conducted. Curtis states that recruits for the Queensland fields were 'often' volunteers. Items of trade were exchanged for these recruits, with the items always handed directly to individuals and to chiefs on each island.

By the time of writing the letter, Curtis has already taken another occupation in Brisbane. He is later appointed secretary of the Queensland Fire Insurance Company and after three years appointed Resident Secretary of the Mutual Assurance

After a short period he is accountant to the Curator of Intestate Estates, and also holds the position of acting Deputy Curator. In February, 1888, thanks to his obvious abilities in these positions, the Queensland government appoints Curtis a Railway Arbitrator and he holds this position for many years, effectively resolving railway disputes. During this time he becomes involved with the Queensland Acclimatisation Society and Railway Club and is involved in a number of functions, befitting his status, even including jury duty at the Supreme Court in Brisbane. On one occasion, in 1894, he is stated to have attended a Railway Club and Library Concert, at which he performs "*When Night is Darkest*." (Possibly a monologue.)

Then some terrible mishap befalls Curtis. At 4.30pm November 10, 1905, the body of Richard William Curtis, aged 65, is found floating in the Brisbane River, near the 'Training Wall' at Hamilton and close to the Hamilton Swimming Baths. At the time of his death, Curtis is said to be an accountant and resident of Brisbane's Clayfield suburb and probably the night before, may have tripped, or, in the poor lighting at the time, fallen into the river, hitting his head and subsequently drowning; a cut is found on his head. Some possessions, including an umbrella and basket are found further along the wall. He's taken to a morgue where a post mortem is performed and as was the custom, buried on the same day; fittingly it was November 11th. We now mark this as Remembrance Day to honour the fallen of World War I.



Ladies in mourning. ACWRTQ re-enactors.

I could find no reference to the original ceremony, or who officiated but it is fitting that we have this ceremony for him today, as close to that date as possible. A subsequent magisterial inquiry, held at Brisbane on December 14th 1905, with results of his post mortem to hand, concludes his death is caused by oxygen deprivation, commonly termed asphyxia from drowning.



James Levi, a descendant of a Civil War veteran, plays Taps



Lt. Trace Scaff ordered his men to fire the three volley salute over the grave. The last salute from ACWRTQ re-enactors. Firing left oblique towards Hamilton

Earlier this year, Terry Foenander arranged for a Veterans' Administration grave marker to be installed on the previously unmarked grave. Today, we mark the death and memory of a hero, a legend and an ordinary man, an accountant thrust into extra-ordinary circumstances. The war was truly multicultural and drew in large numbers of Irish, German, Scottish, English, Chinese, French and Italians. New Zealand Maori were in the navy crews and Australians filled Confederate ships at Melbourne. Some left Australia to fight for the North or South and some came here to escape the awful memories of war.

Richard William Curtis was just one of the people who decided to cast their lot with the South in its war for Independence and proved the pen mightier than the sword. The South may have lost the war but the spirit of those warriors lives on to inspire new generations of Americans and indeed we Australians. Today is important because of the coincidence of Remembrance Day, the day Curtis was buried but also reveals yet another unsung hero, another 'Forgotten Veteran' and a Grandfather. We should not discriminate; we should not forget any of our history's proud players. But honour them for what they did and what they thought was right at the time.

Lest We Forget Richard William Curtis, a true son of Queensland and a loyal son of the Confederacy.

Editor: And so ended an historic moment at Toowong Cemetery. The Friends of Toowong Cemetery, guardians of the land, invited guests to take refreshments in a nearby area and the day was rounded off with many questions and discussions. This story is still being researched and there will be updates of discoveries as they come to hand in The Bugle.

ABC Television attended the ceremony and put together an excellent package for screening that night. Richard William Curtis has reached down the years to extend a helping hand in making people aware of our organisation and the work we do with researchers in ensuring veterans of The War Between the States have an appropriate marker or headstone. The navy brought the war to our Australian shores and ships like CSS Shenandoah found recruits in Melbourne eager and willing to join as crew.

Australia has won a right to stand with the ancestors of veterans. From Irishmen, who escaped from Tasmania and joined the Irish Brigade, to sailors or individuals who sailed to America and those many veterans who came here after the war looking for peace and a chance for a new life. Richard William Curtis is just one of many.

