

# COLUMBOOLA: A Short Historical Overview

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## World War II Ordnance Support

In August 1942, Brisbane was designated the main base of supply for US operations in the Pacific when General MacArthur moved his operations from Melbourne to Brisbane. At the time, an ammunition depot was in operation at Darra (near Brisbane). Elsewhere, ammunition supply sites were meagre in north-eastern Australia - a logical support area.

The 37th Ordnance Medium Maintenance Company soon set up operations in the open air from shop trucks at the edge of Doomben Race Track. A detachment of the 84th Ordnance Depot Company also set up a small general supply depot in a converted orphanage building in Clayfield.

In July 1942, the USAFIA Ordnance Office secured land at Coopers Plains south of Brisbane. They built a large ordnance service centre to house a maintenance shop and a general supply depot, which was completed by September 1942.

In the same year at Rockhampton, a maintenance shop and a small general supply depot were also established. In addition, new ammunition depots were established at Wallaroo, west of Rockhampton, and Columboola, west of Brisbane. Darra was enlarged.<sup>1</sup> Note: The term 'dump' is often used in reference to these depots. This term can be misleading. It was used during World War II to refer to ammunition storage facilities.

## Establishment of Columboola

Between July and November 1942, the Queensland Main Roads Commission built an ammunition storage facility at Columboola with a camp (south of the facility and adjacent to the railway line) for 50 men. A total of 55 men were employed to construct roads for the site at a total cost of £13,441.<sup>2</sup> The United States' 636th Ordnance Ammunition Company sent an advanced detachment of personnel to assist in the construction of the camp site in September 1942.



Unit service jeep parked outside the Officers quarters.

The site was utilised during 1942 - 1945 as a US Forces depot with large ammunition storage and a demolition range. It is noted in some documentation as a United States Air Force depot.<sup>3</sup>

Reports from the time show that enlisted US personnel working at the site maintained a high work ethic. However, this reputation was marred by the murder of T/4th Eddie Garfield, shot by Private Arthur N. Jones, on the 10 April 1943, who was tried by Court Martial for the offence. Private Jones was imprisoned for life at McNeil Island Penitentiary, Washington in the US.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding this incident, a number of the US soldiers married local girls, and one company commander elected to remain in the region - and still does!

A Watch Tower, constructed completely of wood, was erected at the ammunition depot for security purposes. During World War II the Watch Tower was manned 24 hours a day to guard against fire, theft or sabotage.

The first ammunition shipment was received on 5 October 1942.<sup>5</sup> Records show the heavy shipments were received in March and May 1943. These ammunition shipments would have been conventional munitions.

## Conversion to a Gas Depot

The facility at Columboola was converted to gas depot in June 1943. It is recorded that chemical munitions were stored at the site in 1943 and 1944. These included large quantities of 75 mm, 105 mm and 155 mm artillery rounds filled with the sulphur mustard vesicant (mustard) plus over 26,000 mustard filled 100lb aircraft bombs.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that, under arrangements with the Australian Government at the time, the US forces based in Australia imported their own chemical weapons to Australia and stored them under their own supervision.

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During 1943 and 1944, a range of US Army Chemical Processing Companies were posted in and out of Columboola, to provide storage and perform surveillance for the chemical munitions stored there. Various reports from this period provide insight into their munitions work which included repackaging ammunition for operational use and forwarding on demand on a regular basis; as well as interesting insights into their postings at Columboola:

The history of the 28th Chemical Decontamination Company notes that in June 1943 Lieutenant Apt and eight enlisted men were placed on temporary duty at Columboola for the purpose of overhauling and repairing damaged mustard bombs.<sup>7</sup>

The 105th Chemical Processing Company notes in its monthly historical summary for November 1943 that 1st Lieutenant Albert J. Low, Jr and 20 men attended Columboola for the purpose of building vertical racks, racking and testing for leaks, 29,000 100 pound mustard gas bombs ..... Leaky bombs had to be emptied, decontaminated and buried.

Construction work concluded in February 1944 with a BBQ held on the 11 February 1944. Unfortunately, during the celebrations T/5 Gilbert E. Henry drowned.



Loading the munitions' onto the train for shipment to the pacific theatre. Note: the wooden packaging was ironbark for transport to the tropics as the US packaging as it arrived in Australia was cardboard tubes.

In June 1944, the 105th Chemical Processing Company noted that a three month old kangaroo had become the Company's mascot.

September and October 1944 historical summaries for the 62nd Chemical Depot Military Histories note that 12 and 16 enlisted men were placed on temporary duty to Columboola for the purpose of servicing toxic gas bombs and performing decontamination respectively.

In March 1945, the 105th Chemical Processing Company noted that an average of six men were kept at Columboola for the purpose of decontaminating Mustard gas, first aid for gas casualties...

## Columboola Since World War II

The Australian Army has made several visits to Columboola since 1976 when one 105 mm High Explosive artillery round, without fuse, was located and destroyed on a neighbouring property.

In addition, a number of unarmed 12 inch Seacoast Mortar projectiles have been located. Three of these have been donated to the Australian War Memorial and two were donated to the local Historical Society.



**US troops hunted kangaroos for R&R. They were also known to have had a joey as a mascot.**

After World War II, the wooden Watch Tower was severely damaged by white ants. Ultimately, the property owner bulldozed it in the 1990's due to safety concerns. Specifically, a tradition had developed among the local children – competing to see who was the bravest to climb it.

The property was subsequently sold to a mining company which had discovered an enormous vane of coal on the site. Having acknowledged that the property was listed as having previously been a Defence site with an attendant unexploded ordnance risk, late in 2009 the company had it independently surveyed.

This survey resulted in a finding that the large majority of refuse on site today is safe and comprises mainly ammunition packaging, casings and some shell fragments from previous demolitions. A good deal of this material has recently been removed and recycled during investigations.



**Munitions as they were removed from the burial site in 2009.**

However, three underground anomalies were located, and these proved to be burial pits holding 144 rounds of WWII artillery munitions.

In 2010, Defence initiated Assessment, Remediation and Destruction activities so as to meet Australia's obligations as a signatory to the Chemical Weapons Convention. The multiple stakeholders included members from the Army's Incident Response Regiment, Defence Environmental Impact Management Directorate, Defence Science and Technology Organisation, United States Army and the Australian Army History Unit. With Capt Scott Heiman (AAHU) being the military liaison officer for the task.

Efforts by members of the Australian Army History Unit have assisted the project by scouring war diaries and official histories of both Australian and American origin. Substantial inroads have been made, examining previously unreleased documenta-

tion and private records, including unveiling 'lost' units previously forgotten and unrecorded as having served on Australian soil during WW2. These sources have assisted to identify the Standard Operating Procedures of the six United States Army units now known to have operated in Columboola, QLD. This in turn has assisted refining search patterns and appreciating the site, and is hoped to refine future works.

- 1 The Ordnance Department: on beachhead and battlefield, 1991, (Washington: Centre for Military History.) Ch 4. p. 60.
- 2 The History of the Queensland Main Roads Commission during World War II, 1939 - 1945
- 3 Closed UXO Defence File
- 4 636th Ordnance Ammunition Company History files
- 5 636th Ordnance Ammunition Company History files
- 6 G. Plunkett, *Chemical Warfare in Australia*, (Sydney: Australian Military History Publications, 2007.) p. 582.
- 7 History of the 28<sup>th</sup> Chemical Decontamination Company, 25 AUG 44, p. 6



**IRR, USA and Queensland Fire Rescue Service personnel undergoing decontamination after assisting UN inspectors.**