

Sydney – A Chemical Weapons Depot and Dumping Ground

Chemical weapons. One immediately thinks of Iran, Iraq and World War I but not Sydney, Australia. But it was in the Olympic city that enough chemical weapons were stored from 1942 to 1945 to wipe out the whole population of Australia. It was so secret that only a handful of survivors, Australia's mustard gas men, knew it ever occurred. And it was so secret that a Commanding Officer from one of the chemical warfare storage depots was referred to a psychiatrist when he thought it reasonable to get some medical assistance for the health consequences of his military service. "Sorry, you've got the wrong war mate, that stuff happened on the Somme but we never had any here"¹.

It wasn't a secret to a sharp eyed Tim Miers who was just a young boy. He has lived overlooking the Glenbrook railway siding for the last 66 years. Now president of the Glenbrook Historical Society he watched as thousands of drums arrived by rail and were put onto semi trailers. What caught his eye was the secrecy surrounding them. If they were simply petrol drums why was each load taken by a different road route to the nearby abandoned tunnel? There were four roads from the siding and each was used in turn. And then one day two drums fell off a truck and there was a great hullabaloo. Personnel in gas masks appeared from nowhere and rolled the drums into a gully. Senior air force officers knocked on all the neighbouring doors. "Get everyone inside as we've got a toxic spill to deal with". Tim was always too scared to explore the gully - a wise decision as the Chinese whispers were correct. Mustard gas was being stored at the picturesque village on the western outskirts of Sydney in the Blue Mountains.²

They had seen the MovieTone films on Air Raid Precautions and heard of the possibility of gas attacks. But it was a shock to know they lived only hundreds of metres from this deadly arsenal. How could this be? But the weapons weren't only there, they were also cached in the nearby abandoned Clarence railway tunnel as well as one at Lithgow and another south of Sydney at Picton. The abandoned tunnels were perfect warehouses for the toxic mix. Out of view of Japanese planes, easily guarded and crucially cool they were a logical choice. The mustard had an innocent appearance of dark oil but this belied its mean character. It released a constant dangerous vapour and the hotter the drum, the more pressure. Although the tunnels alleviated the pressure issue they didn't stop it.³

And that was the daily task of the mustard gas men. Drag the drums and bombs out of the tunnels, undo



View of maintenance line just outside Marrangaroo tunnel with a temporary shelter at the rear. Mustard filled 250-lb light case bombs await venting on both sides of the road. The bombs were mid grey and stencilled with yellow paint for bomb identification. Brown detector paint was applied to detect gas leaks. The chemical warfare armourer pictured is Geoff Burn. Mid-1943.

the bungs to release the pressure, apply a leakage detector paint around the seams and put them back. They were told never to talk about it as it was 'against the Geneva Convention'. Some vaguely understood it had something to do with the Japanese - others were completely in the dark.

Only a handful really knew the dark secret the Japanese brought with them as they swept down South East Asia. They carried a range of chemical weapons and a willingness to use them. Samples were brought back to Australia for analysis and intelligence reports confirmed the 'yellow peril' had used them in Manchuria on an unsuspecting Chinese population. When Singapore fell Australia deemed it urgent to have a retaliatory stock and a logical source was the home country, the United Kingdom. It is an irony the Wing Commander in charge of Australia's chemical warfare arm was unaware it was legal to store chemical weapons for a retaliation but was illegal as a first strike option. The Geneva Protocol of 1925 had legalised an 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth'⁴.

There was only one way the 1,000,000 weapons could be landed in Australia - by ship. And their destination was Walsh Bay - right under the Harbour Bridge. The ship *Idomeneus* docked on a balmy summer's afternoon in 1943, only hundreds of metres from the central business district. No office workers had an inkling of the unfolding catastrophe. A leaking drum gassed dozens of wharfies, blinding them for weeks and impairing their health forever. One, Andrew Williams, distressed by the blindness and blisters that developed



East cutting to chemical warfare storage tunnel at Glenbrook where the maintenance of the bulk storage containers was undertaken. To the right mustard gas drums are seen in bond (a settling period after venting) and other drums are being cleaned and repainted by a chemical warfare armourer under a tarpaulin which spans the cutting. Mid-1943.

around his genitals and chest – climbed out of the third-floor window at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and fell to his death. The coroner ruled accidental death. The family were told not to talk about it and the promise was kept. Andrew's granddaughter, Beryl, only found out the truth 30 years later.

The stevedores shut up shop and the cargo was blacklisted. The Royal Australian Air Force were forced to move the ship to their own wharf at Glebe, now a sought-after inner-city suburb. But the troubles continued. At least 80 pounds of mustard had penetrated the pitch in the hold and over 70 air force personnel suffered mild to severe mustard gas burns in the cleanup operation. It was a hot summer and Geoff Burn recalls the decontamination was like a rugby scrum "you were dressed in these ridiculous thick pink anti-gas bloomers under the outer protective gear - they sent you down for 20 minutes, dragged you back up, revived you and sent you back down." On the wharf they'd tear off their anti-gas capes and pour the perspiration out of their boots. Curious locals watched through the fence as the pink-bloomered recruits did their rounds. One wouldn't hazard a guess of their conclusions⁵.

Although most of the weapons went by rail through the heart of Sydney from the wharves some went by semitrailer directly to the tunnel and that job fell to Harry Evans. As he lumbered through the streets of Sydney he couldn't wear a mask as it would "look a bit queer wouldn't it" and on one rainy night it was lucky a full load didn't contaminate Penrith. A drunk, losing control of his car, slammed under the semi and ended in a heap on the side of the road. The police came and then revisited Harry at the depot. He never revealed the load he had, "It is just military equipment" he assured with a straight face⁶.

The rail transport wasn't immune from leaks. On another occasion as one train drew near to Picton

Station a strong smell of mustard gas was apparent and liquid was streaming from two trucks. The contaminated ground was later dug in and bleached and decontamination of five of the rail trucks was undertaken at the Penrith siding using steam and hot water from an engine.

It wasn't just the Australian forces but also the Americans who used Sydney as a chemical reservoir. The United States forces maintained their own chemical depot next to Penrith. Now known as Defence Establishment Orchard Hills it stored mustard gas howitzer shells⁷.

And then the war was no more and it was a question of what to do with this lethal brew. There were two possibilities, burning and dumping at sea and both were undertaken on Sydney's doorstep. At Newnes State Forest 2,000 tons consisting of some 20,000 items were destroyed in a huge conflagration in early 1946. The destruction was incomplete and 2,500 kg of mainly soil residue was removed and decontaminated in 1980⁸. Two shiploads of gas were scuttled 18 miles from Sydney heads, the remainder simply pushed off the deck of a ship as loose items. Unrecoverable, the material in the sea remains there to this day although it should only be a hazard to local biota⁹.

There are few remains of Sydney's chemical warfare history. The tunnels are still there. Clarence is now part of the Zig-Zag steam train attraction. Glenbrook houses mushrooms as it did before the war and Picton is a ghost busters delight. Rated one of the spookiest sites in Australia, ghost tours are a staple. One of the armourers carved his name outside the Glenbrook tunnel and the concrete foundations to the phosgene sheds are still outside the Lithgow tunnel, now overgrown with blackberry and gum trees.

But not all the legacy is visible, some of it is buried, literally. Geoff Burn, one of the original mustard gas men, recalled he had buried filled phosgene bombs at the Marrangaroo Army Base and was unaware of their fate¹⁰. As Australia's storage headquarters for phosgene, thousands of bombs passed through the base on the way to the nearby tunnel. And many of the phosgene bombs were leaking. A quick fix was burial.



Truck tipping stocks of chemical weapons (in the form of Chemical Special No. 6 drums in crates) in preparation for the burn disposal at Newnes State Forest in February & March, 1946. Bulk drums are seen to the left centre.



Stocks of mustard gas burn fiercely at Newnes State Forest in February/March 1946. Drums of mustard gas lie to the left. Chemical special No. 6 canisters, filled mustard gas lie to the right. Incendiaries were added to the conflagration to increase the fire's intensity.

Dave Humphreys, a Project Manager for Milsearch made his way to Geoff's home in Penrith to investigate the claim. He placed an old World War II aerial map in front Geoff who promptly planted a finger on the spot. Scans revealed the bombs were still there, 65 years later and now only hundreds of metres from residential housing. Phosgene, the most deadly of chemical weapons required special handling and briefing sessions for the residents. It is a lethal choking gas with victims drowning in their own fluids as their lung lining disintegrates. During 2008 and 2009, 267 bombs were extracted, luckily all empty¹¹.

The bombs were extracted under the auspice of the Chemical Weapons Convention¹², a treaty that Australia pushed hard for. All the 1,000,000 weapons are gone and because of the treaty will thankfully never return.

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- 1 Filmed interview with chemical warfare armourers, 2005.
- 2 Interview with Tim Miers, 2008.
- 3 *Chemical Warfare in Australia*, Geoff Plunkett, 2007, Australian Military History Publications.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *Death By Mustard Gas*, Geoff Plunkett, in prep.
- 6 Filmed interview with Harry Evans, 2005
- 7 *Chemical Warfare in Australia*, Geoff Plunkett, 2007, Australian Military History Publications.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 *Chemical Warfare Agent Sea Dumping Off Australia*, 2003, 3rd edition - revised and updated. Department of Defence [Canberra].
- 10 Filmed interview with Geoff Burn, 2005
- 11 Milsearch, pers comm.
- 12 <http://www.opcw.org/>