



Chemical warfare in Australia

Geoff Plunkett

*Australian Military
History Publications,
2007*

\$45.00

The focus of this book is almost entirely upon the stockpiling, testing, storage and disposal of chemical weapons within Australia during the Second World War. In describing developments in chemical warfare in Australia between the late 1930s and late 1940s, it offers a valuable insight into an almost unknown aspect of this country's history.

The bulk of the work is devoted to the experiences of the RAAF Chemical Warfare Armourers between 1942 and 1946. During this period, in a variety of remote locations, but primarily in the Blue Mountains area of NSW, chemical weapons were stored,

guarded and maintained in case they should be needed against the Japanese. The primary types acquired by Australia were phosgene and mustard gas (both of which had proved their effectiveness on the Western Front during the First World War) although a variety of other agents were held in smaller quantities. The account is by no means as dry as might be expected, with the personal recollections of the armourers dealing with these deadly compounds making sometimes compelling reading. Local trials – although not those undertaken in New Guinea – are also discussed, and provide an interesting insight into the ways Australia would have deployed gas if required.

This weighty tome runs to more than 700 pages, nearly half of it made up of 18 detailed appendices. These deal with such matters as enemy gas equipment and weapons, chemical warfare agents present in Australia, types of munitions procured for their delivery, plans for potential use and methods of disposal. Inevitably, there is some duplication in these appendices, but they constitute a valuable overview, and indeed form some of the most useful areas of the book.

Parts of *Chemical Warfare in Australia* make for disturbing reading, but the book is painstakingly researched, and seeks to provide long overdue recognition of those men and women who protected the secrets of Australia's war gas stores, and who ensured that the stockpiled weapons did not harm the wider community. This is an important work, the first major study of its kind undertaken in this country, and it deserves a much wider readership than it is likely to receive.

NICK FLETCHER