



# LITHGOW MERCURY

130  
Years of Publication

Servicing the  
Community

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2008

Phone 6352 2700

[lithgow.yourguide.com.au](http://lithgow.yourguide.com.au)

Issue No 562

\$1.40

## Hoodlums run riot in Lithgow-Portland PAGE TWO

Keeping informed

RESIDENTS of Marrangaroo, as well as emergency services, are being kept fully informed of procedures being undertaken to decontaminate the Marrangaroo military depot after decades of activity that included top secret chemical warfare operations. Residents are pictured during an on site briefing at the depot at the weekend.



PUBLIC SAFETY PRIORITY WHERE ...

# Chemical warfare left its legacy

**Story and photos: LEN ASHWORTH**

More than 60 years after the last shots were fired in anger in the Pacific War Australian authorities admit that wartime clandestine activities at the Marrangaroo defence establishment on the outskirts of Lithgow were so secret that they are still not 100 per cent certain of what went on there or what sinister mysteries were left behind.

Now the Federal Government is moving to finally lift the decades-old veil of secrecy and to remove any lingering concerns about Marrangaroo's World War II legacy.

The military base just over the hill from Lithgow city was a major munitions depot for Australia's armed forces from World War II right through the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

These days it is a training facility, but still with the focus on explosives training.

For years after World War II there were

whispers about the activities at Marrangaroo during the dark days when Japanese invasion was feared.

People who did know about the depot's chemical warfare role largely feared retribution under the Official Secrets Act if they said too much and many went to their grave without even discussing it with their families.

But the passing of time has opened sealed lips and it's now known that Marrangaroo was a centre for the handling of mustard gas and phosgene bombs — hideous materials officially banned under the rules of warfare but acquired from the USA and Britain anyway for tit for tat deployment against Japanese forces who had no respect for such niceties of all out combat.

Recently the Mercury revealed that defence authorities were moving to finally determine what was left behind at

Marrangaroo and to decontaminate the site.

At the weekend the Army and its civilian agents moved a step further in this process with briefing sessions at the base for the emergency services and for Marrangaroo residents who could potentially be affected should there be any 'live' ordnance.

On Friday the authorities met with NSW Fire Brigade personnel from Lithgow and Sydney, Rural Fire Service, police (including anti terrorism officers), ambulance, Lithgow Hospital, Council and the Sydney West Area Health Service Counter Disaster Unit.

On Saturday there was another session for Marrangaroo residents.

They were addressed by the Army's top explosives disposal expert, Major Kevin Cuthbertson; Professor Garry Smith, from the University of NSW School of Risk and Safety Sciences (in his role as principal of

risk assessment consultants ENSR Australia); Ms Georgia Derham, Assistant Director of the Defence Department's Estate Policy and Environment Division; and former Royal Navy clearance diver Dave Humphreys, from the specialist firm Milsearch who have the contract to carry out the site exploration and decontamination.

The target groups were told that the impending work at Marrangaroo was part of an Australian Government commitment to clean up defence sites around Australia.

This was against the background of an admission that past disposal procedures were sometimes not at a level that would be acceptable today.

They said that there was little likelihood of anything hazardous being found at Marrangaroo but no chances would be taken.

▷ Continued Page 2

# Giving up its secrets

▷ From Page 1

The process will involve electronic scanning to identify where materials had been buried then excavate the site by hand beneath the cover of a large specially designed yellow tent to prevent the escape of any materials into the atmosphere.

Already a number of phosgene bombs have been unearthed during test digs and these were all found to be empty and totally safe.

The contractors will also be commissioned to clear the site of surface material including ammunition contributing to heavy metal contamination.

The meetings were told that tests already carried out have revealed no unacceptable levels of run off into waterways in the area.

When the work gets fully under way in January the contractors will concentrate on a 10 hectare site

on the south western side of the base where 39 burial pits have been identified.

The meetings were told that the recent surveys had been hampered by the fact that the wartime operations at Marrangaroo were so top secret that no records were kept.

The costly clean up could mean a bonus for Lithgow where the Council has long considered unused sections of the sprawling military base as having considerable attraction for civilian development.

Ms Derram said Marrangaroo was not part of any 'divestment plan' by the government.

But she said that remediation of the site 'increases the options for its use'.

"We are cleaning up the area so that we can better use it," she said.

