

Marangaroo - what can go wrong

If you go out in the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise...

Michael Keats,
The Bush Club

This story is not about the Teddy Bear's Picnic but something rather more sobering. This is a true story of how two bushwalkers became embroiled in a saga involving Australia's Chemical Warfare history of WWII. It is a story of duck shoving and detective work ...

While crafting walks for the Bush Club 2008 Autumn program, I pulled out a copy of the latest (2006) 1:25,000 topographic map of Lithgow. Amongst other iconic localities it includes a reference to the "Lost City" – top pagoda country. Whilst most bushwalkers are content with a single visit to this site, what fascinated me was the knotted complexity of contours in several discrete groups that lay to the west. I had already ventured into the country to the east of the Lost City and I had a gut feel that these as yet unexplored contoured pagoda groups would be a challenge.

Exploratory walking took on a whole new meaning as a result of our trip into the complex ravine and canyon system north of Marrangaroo Creek, flanking the ridge extension track off the Becroft Fire Trail after it crosses the 66 kV power line at GR 357 005. We parked the vehicle at GR 357 005. It was a bracing 9 C – ideal walking conditions. There was an old track on the eastern side at GR 358 005 that seemed promising. We clambered down to about GR 358 007. The pagodas were fantastic and the creek was accessible. It was however so scrubby that we turned to each other and said 'no way' and hauled ourselves back up the side of the canyon and headed a bit further south.

Again the pagodas were fantastic, and we found a fine ramp alongside the base of a line of them, which went down and down, somewhere around GR 360 004. The last bit of the ramp seemed to end in a 4 m drop, but after some scouting among the greenery a way down was found that did not even require a tape assist. It was perfect.



The river-level cave

Once down a whole new world was revealed - a huge, magic, dry cave with a soft sandy floor - one of the largest I have seen. The ceiling was a good 3 m above the floor. Both were flat and gave the cave the appearance of a real room. A wall of tree ferns some 30m in length curtained the opening. Not in your dreams would you imagine a cave like this one. Lots of pictures and then it was time to move outside into a world of pagodas.

Then it was down into the creek with some scrub bashing on the way. Generally, walking/wading in the creek was the easiest option. Most of the time the water was only ankle deep and after about ten minutes you did not feel the cold water – you did not feel anything!

We had morning tea at GR 360 998 on a rock next to a notched stump where in times past timber getters had cut magnificent specimens of red stringy bark. The notches, stark testimony to the loggers who stood on boards precariously as they wielded axes or two-handed saws - we observed both styles. The average felled tree had a girth in excess of 1m at head height. What disappointed us most was the number of huge trees that had been felled and then left to rot because they were hollow inside.

At 11:43 we crossed the Marrangaroo Creek at GR 358 991 and then picked up an old road that on the map winds its way up Marangaroo Creek for over 5 km. After observing the high cliffs to the north we started walking down the road. Imagine our surprise when we came across a collection of rusting steel boxes. These were not just any old boxes. These were ammunition boxes, some 1000 x 500 x 250 mm. A panel inside had 6 regular 100 mm diameter holes. Each hole could have supported one 25 pound artillery shell. The closure for each container had a rubber seal and two large locking screws. Two rectangular handles allowed for ease of carrying between two troops. Each box was dated 1943.

It was then we saw the sign. It said clearly for anyone approaching up the valley – "Contamination Area – Keep Out." It was quite clear that the authorities never envisaged anyone entering the valley the way we had come. We took lots of photos and had a good look around. Even though the area looked untouched, it had been cleared (or fired?) a long time ago. Without further thought we kept heading down the road. I wanted to follow the map and cross the Marrangaroo Creek and explore another fascinating ravine on the western side of where the vehicle was parked. At 12:05 we came across a major road junction, GR 353 992. There was evidence of recent heavy machinery use. We crossed the Marrangaroo Creek here - it was dirty with what appeared to be a red brown algae.

The road continued and showed evidence of recent earthworks. After about 400 m it was deliberately blocked to vehicles by a large felled tree. We clambered over it and kept on the road. I picked up an odd piece of threaded plastic with a stainless steel swivel with a sign on it "do not fill." I decided to do the right thing and remove it from the bush: it did not belong here, it was litter. Then I picked up a piece of iron. It also had thread work and was horribly distorted. It was a bomb fragment. Further on I picked up a piece of what I thought was a firing pin. We photographed these pieces and left them.

Finally we came around a bend to be confronted by padlocked gates, barbed wire and many signs – all blank facing our side. We crossed over the gate and then all was revealed. The main sign said, "Danger Military Range Boundary - Live



Ammunition cases from 1943

Firing Do Not Enter", "Laser Hazard" and "Live Bombs." The most frequent sign proclaimed, "Australian Government Land -Trespassing on this land is prohibited, Commonwealth Crimes Act, 1914 –1973, Section 89." The ultimate message was a crisp, new red flag flying on a pole. There was absolutely no indication coming from the east side that we were infringing the law. There is no indication on the topographic map that this range exists. All that the map advises is that the area is part of the Newnes State Forest. We were flabbergasted, so much so that we forgot to get a GPS reading. After finding more spent ordnance up the road we went back and took a reading at the gate, GR 349 000. What an adventure!

We pushed on to the point where the road crossed a tributary of the Marrangaroo Creek. More surprises ensued. Here we found a lot of khaki-painted metal cylinders that could have easily held Howitzer shells (105 mm?). The cylinders were 110 mm or so in diameter and about 1000 mm long. They were stuck in the creek at odd angles. We also spied pieces of pressed metal used for forming air-strips or roads over sandy ground, rusting food containers and much more. We returned to the track that now showed signs of being used by motorbikes. All along the way we picked up, noted and replaced pieces of spent ordnance, even though we were way outside the designated firing range boundary.



The boundary gates - facing the wrong way for Michael

The track was a good one, and wound its way up a truly spectacular valley with great pagodas and increasing cliffs. At GR 350 007 pulled off the track onto a pagoda to have lunch. The views are special and once the edge was off our hunger we started looking for ways up, and ways down – pagodas get to you like that. What we did find was by now no surprise - a part of an exploded shell about 2 m away on a pagoda. It was part of a shell casing, twisted and deformed by the force of the explosion. We were by now over 2 km from the firing range gate. Either someone is very incompetent with a 25 pounder gun or the fallout area is a lot bigger than the authorities realise, or...

As I predicted to Steve, the bike track joined up with the road we had driven out on at GR 352 010. We were back at the vehicle at 1405.

Back at home I just had to pursue the mysteries arising from the walk. Where had we been? Why were the topographic maps, even back to 1936 (the club library has a full set) not showing any land reserved for defence purposes? Did Forests NSW know that their workers or contractors could disturb and explode old ordnance? How extensive is the area where unexploded ordnance could still be about? These and dozens more questions needed answers.

My first enquiry was to LPI. How come the latest 2006, 1:25,000 topographic map of Lithgow could fail to show such a significant site as a live bombing range? It appears that the Crown (Department of Defence in this case) has no obligation to disclose land it has appropriated for any purpose to the State or any other authorities. Transparency in



Pagoda country - the original goal

Government? Stephen Peacock, HR/Business Services Manager, Land & Joint Systems, Thales Australia (formerly known as the Lithgow Small Arms Factory) confirmed I had stumbled across a Defence Facility and referred me to M.St.C. Mark Walton, Non-Defence Training Area Manager, Joint Operations Support Staff, NSW. We had an interesting discussion about how vandals knocked off fencing and signage and he indicated the possibility of providing a map showing the approximate boundaries of the Bombing Range...

Brian Fox sent me an extract of part of the Lithgow Sheet as a cadastral plan showing Lot 10/DP87273 - apparently reserved to the Commonwealth. When plotted out onto the topographic sheet the northern boundary is about 2 km south of where the range is. More questions! An unlikely break though came from another member of the Bush Club, Tony Mitchell, who has a friend interested in old trains. The May 2008 issue of Australian Railway History has an article on the old tunnels at Glenbrook and at Marrangaroo, west of Lithgow. Surprise! Both localities were used to store mustard gas and other chemical weapons that the RAAF had imported from England in the form of bombs in the early part of World War II.

When the Japanese midjet submarines attacked Sydney Harbour the attack caused a panic at the Marrangaroo depot which housed a lot of munitions, not just mustard gas. Apparently they received instructions 'to evacuate all the munitions from the depot and hide them in the rough country behind'. And that is very rough country indeed. Such was the rush to clear everything out of the depot that no one kept accurate records of where various loads of munitions were dumped and when it came time to recover the hidden bombs etc not everything could be found. Quite a few of the chemical warfare weapons were never recovered because no one could remember where they had been hidden.

So some bombs and chemical weapons may still be out there, and the area where the munitions depot once stood has become much more populated than it once was. Secrecy all around! Now I want to know where the tunnels are! But there is more. Cameron Dobson, Acting

Regional Manager, Forests NSW provided a map and asked me to identify the area of interest. My questions to him are when did this section of Crown Land become State Forest? Is he aware of the Bombing Range? Are his workers and contractors safe?

Even more fortuitous is the release of a book by Geoff Plunkett entitled 'Chemical Warfare in Australia'. It raises rafts of questions. Frustratingly, but not unexpectedly it does not include any useful maps. It does have great pictures, particularly of the hoax town that was built near Marrangaroo to try and disguise activities. The book includes hair-raising accounts of handling chemical weapons and disturbing

graphic pictures of the damage that mustard gas does to the human body.

On 19th June Kevin Cuthbertson, E.O.D. Department of Defence, contacted me. He was very helpful and suggested I make direct contact with the caretaker of the Defence facility at Marrangaroo, Neil Hutchinson. If a visit did not resolve my questions, I was to call him back and arrange a walk through the facility with him, retracing the walk that Steve and I did along the old road. I raised with Cuthbertson the issue of trail bike riders creating tracks in an area that is liberally scattered with spent ordnance and possibly ageing unexploded ordnance as well, outside the apparent hazard zone. His response was almost one of despair implying that dealing with trail bike riders was beyond his capacity. I wonder what happens when someone is seriously injured or worse ... who will be running for cover?

I met with Neil on site near the famous 'hoax town' 'Ryans Hotel'. True to their word the Army released to me a map overlaid on the current Lithgow topographic sheet showing the boundaries of what must be regarded as sensitive no-go walking area. But you would never know from the LPI topo map.

The following article comes from the Daily Telegraph later in the year, after Michael started digging.

Chemical bombs sit metres from Lithgow families for 60 years

A HORDE of deadly chemical weapons untouched for 60 years has been uncovered just 100 m from unsuspecting residents. Imported during World War II as part of a top-secret program, dozens of 250-pound (113 kg) bombs containing deadly phosgene were buried less than 100 m from private properties at Marrangaroo, near Lithgow. The bombs were only re-discovered after 84-year-old retired chemical weapons armourer Geoff Burn blew the whistle, identifying the site on an aerial map.

'We dug this big trench to hold about 32 bombs, so it was pretty extensive, and just buried them in there' Mr Burn said. 'They didn't tell us why they were being buried, but I am certain they were still full of phosgene gas.'

The Department of Defence confirmed the claim, recovering several empty bombs before engaging specialist contractors capable of safely removing the remaining weapons.

Nearby residents were shocked when Defence officials told them the deadly chemicals had been stored on the site for over 60 years. Marnell Banning, a mother of four who has lived near the site for eight years, said the find was a real concern. "I am glad they are finally doing something about it but we would like them to fully investigate the site to make sure there are no more bombs there," she said.