Memories rise to surface

Innisfail in war time a closely guarded secret

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SECRECY, chemical testing and human guinea pigs.

It sounds like the plot for a James Bond film but for the few remaining chemical warfare testers it is these things that most remind them of their time in Innisfail.

Former laboratory assistant and secretary Sylvia Stoltz, who took part in comprehensive field studies in the rainforest surrounding Innisfail during the early 40s, has memories ranging from lively dances at the Shire Hall to visiting men in the Innisfail hospital blistered and burnt after being exposed to mustard gas.

"I am anxious for Innisfail to have the true story because not many of us really spoke much about what happened," she said.

"Not even my mum and sister knew about what I was doing in Innisfail and even up to 30 years after the war ended most of us didn't even know what roles people in other units played.

"The story of the RAAFs has been covered quite extensively but I put together a book and talk about my experiences so people realise the role women played."

Ms Stoltz, from Wantirna South in Victoria, contacted the Innisfail Advocate recently following a report about another serviceman who spent time in Innisfail during WWII as part of Mustard Gas

Ms Stoltz was a part of the Australian Chemical Warfare Research and Experimental Section, a unit made of Victorians who stayed in the region between November 1943 until the end of May in 1944, returning again in November and then leaving Innisfail for Proserpine in January of 1945.

"I was working in a normal office job and going home every



UNDER ASSAULT: Soldiers using the physical assessment course built on sports ground where the BMX track now stands. The course was used to assess a soldiers fitness after being exposed to mustard gas.

something more; to feel I was Innisfail enjoying dances at the doing my bit," she said.

"I was told there would be more more mosquitoes than people but was told nothing about working with gas.

"For most of us girls it was like a big adventure; we were never scared of anything we had to do or what we would be exposed to.

"I was expecting to end up somewhere in the middle of nowhere and then we arrived in this beautiful little town and were able to stay in houses rather than tents."

Though the unit was constantly lectured on the importance of remaining tight lipped, even amongst each other, the group often wandered freely around

Shire Hall, attending church and shopping.

"It was my understanding that Col. Fred Gorrill impressed upon the local media how essential it was that the utmost secrecy of the unit's work should be observed." she said.

"It never ceased to amaze me that the work of the unit was able to remain secret when the unit operated so openly, entering sites in the rainforest close to Innisfail and Mourilyan."

Being a member of the meteorological team, Ms Stoltz regularly suited up in heavy protective clothing including a respirator, thick knitted gloves worn under rubber gloves, hoods,

boots and gaiters before heading into the "jungle" to collect readings and data over a four day period, recording the effects of gas bombs dropped in the area.

"We were always told if we behaved ourselves we wouldn't get hurt," she laughed.

"If anyone was exposed to mustard gas it was our own fault.

"There were strict rules about wearing the gloves and clothing at all times which is something I always adhered to.

"I don't believe I have suffered any ill effects as a result of the tests but later in life I did suffer from a kidney disease and I can never be sure if my time in Innisfail had anything to do with

However, it was a different story for the "volunteers" who acted as human guinea pigs, being exposed to mustard gas in the "gas chamber" to test the effects

of the gas in humid conditions.

"A unit did take over an entire wing at the Innisfail hospital," she said.

"Sometimes would go and visit them in the hospital and they



Protective clothing

would be covered in massive blisters like a big sunburn right across their chest.

"I believe some of them even contracted cancer and later died from the exposure."

Ms Stoltz has used her extensive collection of photographs, diaries and letters she sent home to accurately make a record of the role women such as herself played during the war to pass onto the next generation.

"I'm 88 now and I can't take all of this stuff with me," she said.

"I think it is important people know what was happening and what role we played in it."



night and I decided I wanted UNIT: The tropical trials group pictured in Innisfail during WWII.