

THE DAY CHEMICAL WARFARE CAME TO LITHGOW:

Mustard gas scare

Story: LYNN PINKERTON,
CAROLYN PIGGOTT
and LEN ASHWORTH

Hundreds of residents were evacuated from their homes on Thursday afternoon in a dramatic sequel to the decontamination of Marrangaroo Army Base.

For several months contractors have been excavating World War II chemical warfare residue from the army depot.

Hundreds of shells were unearthed and were judged to be empty.

But this assessment came unstuck mid afternoon on Thursday when it was believed there had been a mustard gas spill at Denis Cooke's Salvage Yard in Inch Street where the corroded shells were being cut up for scrap.

NSW Fire Brigade personnel responded to an emergency call just before 3 pm after a forklift pierced the World War II ordnance which subsequently started leaking a 'jelly-like substance'.

NSW Fire Brigade superintendent Ian Krimmer said the crew's initial concerns were that the substance would pose a risk for the community.

An exclusion zone of 250 metres was established around the site and crews evacuated homes in the zone, including residents in Inch, Macaulay, Atkinson, Guy, Laidley and Donald Streets in Morts Estate.

"Two hundred and ten people were evacuated from housing and businesses around the area and moved to the Lithgow Workmens Club.

"During the night crews relayed information to the evacuated people keeping them up to date with what was happening," Superintendent Krimmer said.

A Jones Brothers bus was engaged to pick up residents who had no transport.

Two workers at the site who were first exposed to the substance were treated by paramedics at the scene.

A Lithgow Ambulance spokesperson said they received a call at 2.55 pm.

"One of the workers (a 48 year

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taking all precautions: Alf Baldock, his son Mark and wife Patricia register with DOCS at the Lithgow Workmens Club

Evacuees had a long wait for all clear

Story: CAROLYN PIGGOTT
and KIRSTEN HOLMES

When residents from the vicinity of Cooke's scrap metal yard were approached by police on Thursday and asked to vacate their premises as a safety precaution, they had no idea that the evacuation would carry on into the night, let alone what the precaution was about.

After gathering at the immediate evacuation points it was decided to make the Workmens Club a final evacuation point and an action plan was put into place.

On arrival the evacuees were ushered into the 'Baldy Mountain Room' where the Department of Community Services took names for the Local Emergency Plan program and then onto the bistro where a meal and drinks were served by the staff.

A spokesperson from management at the club said "we didn't know they were coming so we had to work pretty fast to get organised as about 150 people entered the premises in quick progression.

"Paul Deveigne from DOCS told me what he needed and we

pulled it all together, from urns to soft drinks, meals and so on.

"At one stage the ambulance was called as an elderly lady collapsed from an existing medical condition.

"All in all it was pretty hectic up until the evacuees were briefed at around 8 pm, with the last lot of people being allowed to go home at about 10 pm."

On Friday some of the residents of Inch Street were asked how they fared the night before and what their opinion was on the evacuation plan that was put into place.

"Blocka" (aka Craig Pearce) from George Pearce and Co said "there's not much you can do about it.

"It could have turned out worse."

Proprietor of Style Smash Repairs, Billy Coleman replied "bit of overkill but better to be safe than sorry."

Veronika Bell was out on a walk when she and her sister were told they had to vacate the area immediately.

On hearing this all she could

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Morts Estate gas drama

Scare brought out the best

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old male) was transported to hospital in a stable condition with suspected contamination, but he was later released after the substance had been cleared."

The spokesperson said a second 66 year old male worker was assessed at the scene but did not require transport to hospital.

Police Media reported those who came into contact with the substance suffered a burning sensation in their throat.

Eighteen people who were in close proximity to the substance were also assessed and cleared at the scene.

The spokesperson said paramedics undertook medical assessment for fire brigade, Hazmat crews and scientists who came into contact with the substance during the process.

They also transported 10 residents to Lithgow Hospital who had to evacuate suddenly without their belongings and important medications.

Superintendent Krimmer said a mobile scientific laboratory was transported to the site from Sydney and a fire brigade scientific officer was flown in by helicopter.

"Crews in full protective clothing collected samples at the site and those samples were analysed in a laboratory.

"Unfortunately fore the residents

the sampling procedure took some time," Superintendent Krimmer said.

Concerns the substance was mustard gas were proven negative at 9 pm and further sampling was undertaken to ensure there were no other risks, before the substance was cleared at 9.30 pm.

Superintendent Krimmer said crews were still unsure what the substance was.

"It is a bit of a mystery but we have declared that it poses no risk to the community or the environment and no further testing is being conducted.

The substance was cleared to be handled back to the recycling plant for further treatment.

Superintendent Krimmer said 100 emergency workers attended the scene and the local emergency plan was enacted.

A team of Red Cross personnel and other disaster relief agencies were at the club to assist residents and a local emergency plan to provide accommodation for those evacuated was prepared by not required.

Superintendent Krimmer said it was a good exercise for the town as emergency agencies worked together to dispel the situation.

It was Lithgow's biggest evacuee challenge since 1965 when large numbers were stranded by record snowfalls.

Evacuees' long night

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think of was her 85 year old mother back at the house, that is just around the bend from Cooke's, and how she could get her out of there.

A bit of quick thinking from the girls and they managed to duck up the back lane to the house and grab their mum and the car to go to the Workies.

By this time Veronika was still in the dark as to what was going on so she contacted her son who watched the news and reported back to her.

"The Workies were brilliant," Veronika said.

"On the whole the services did the right thing, you have to act as if it's the worse case scenario.

"It was a friendly atmosphere up at the Workies with a real community spirit and I even got to meet some of my neighbours."

Cooke's Office Manager Lila Rowlandson was in the scrap yard office at the time of the delivery while owner Denis Cooke was out away from the site at the time.

He had no idea what had happened until after the event.

He arrived back to the scrap metal yard only to be told that he couldn't go in.

"Dave Humphries from the Army camp at Marrangaroo brought in the four shells and the incident happened pretty much straight away. I was in the office," Lila said.

"The fire department initially told us to go and get bleach from the supermarket for the spill.

"We didn't want to any cause panic.

"Really we were just as in the dark as our neighbours as to what was going," Lila said.