

Trawlers dredge up weapons

A TRAWLING company has accidentally retrieved about 30 tonnes of chemical weapons and unexploded mines dumped by the Australian Defence Force off the Victorian coast.

The Australian and US defence forces dumped 1606 tonnes of chemical weapons, mainly mustard gas shells and containers, in an area west of King Island after World War II.

The Australian Defence Department and federal fishing authorities were unaware the material was dumped in an area that would later be trawled by fishermen at depths of more than 1000m.

There have been several deaths and dozens of injuries off European and Japanese coasts after unwarly fishermen trawled up chemical and explosive weapons.

Lakes Entrance-based professional trawler David

Mark Dunn

Guillot said his crews had picked up between 20 and 30 tonnes of dumped ordnance, ranging from mines to huge shells and one-tonne containers, off the ocean floor.

But he said he was unaware that any of the material could have contained mustard gas.

He said his company trawled the area for years, regularly picking up the bombs before, about 12 months ago, they were able to accurately map the extent of the dumping ground and avoid it.

"We've picked up some big bombs. We just don't fish there any more, it's too dangerous," Mr Guillot said.

"One trip we had something that looked like a mine. It landed on the back of the boat and that was pretty scary."

Mr Guillot said the trawling process meant you could not see what was collected until it was

dumped in the hold at the rear of the vessel.

He said his company, Guillot Enterprises, does some of the deepest trawling in the world, to depths of 1700m.

He said he tried contacting the defence department years ago when he began finding material at another military sea dump off Sydney harbour but his calls were not returned.

The Australian Defence Force has urged anyone who comes across any of the material to contact local police.

The ADF said mariners, including fishermen, were notified in January 2000 about the chemical weapons dump off King Island through Australian Hydrographic service website notices.

He said there was no need to clean up the site because the chemical weapons provided no assessed threat to the environment because of the material solidifying through hydrolysis as containers corroded.