

The Wagaitear

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Beach gas scare

Army chemical and bomb disposal experts were called to Wagait Beach late last month after erosion along the beachfront exposed a suspected 200 litre drum of mustard gas.

The area at the end of Wagait Tower Road was an Army gun battery during World War II and there were rumours of mustard gas being deployed along the coast as a last resort defence in the event of a Japanese invasion.

Council chief executive Geoff Handicott, whose father was a wartime Z-force commando, said while other drums found were badly rusted, this one was in good condition.

He said the heavy duty drum matched his father's description of those used for mustard gas.

"What I thought I was looking at was a drum of mustard gas," he told last month's Wagait Shire meeting.

"We got the people at the Army bomb disposal and chemical warfare to look at them.

"They couldn't tell us what was in it, they didn't open it but importantly they said there was nothing dangerous so it couldn't go bang.

"They searched about 30 m² (of the surrounding dunes and beach)."

Geoff said the Army personnel then left, leaving Northern Territory Government officials with the problem of what to do next.

"At this point they're not sure what action to take," he added. "They did say they'd put a fence up."

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Photos: Joy & Geoff Handicott



An Army chemical weapons expert checks the drum with a gas detector. Nothing was detected and the drum was pronounced safe – although it was not opened. Note the heavy duty rims similar to those in the World War II photograph of mustard gas drums.

Beach gas drum saga – part 2



They are going to fence this?

The 200 litre drum at the centre of a mustard gas scare in June has been moved to the Wagait Shire workshop.

Army weapons disposal experts and environment officers were called when the drum was identified as similar to those used to store the deadly wartime gas.

The army report said the drum had “unidentified contents with the bung intact”, but council workers found the pressure relief bung was missing.

Council chief executive Geoff Handicott said the Environment Department asked if it was possible for the council to move the drum.

“They wanted us to look and see what we thought,” he said.

“We went down there and tried to stand it up, that’s when we saw the bung was missing.

“It was full of sand so there’s nothing in the drum except sand.

“We organised to have it lifted from the hole and taken back to the workshop.

“They still want to put a fence around it (the area where other rusty drums have been found).

“It will be a low one, not a security fence, but they’re saying they can’t keep people out.

“It will have a sign with a warning on it.”