

Book details gas warfare

SYDNEY MAN'S STRANGE DEATH EXPLAINED

James Beech

A BOOK exposing the deadly effect of poisonous mustard gas on unsuspecting Australians in wartime Sydney has revealed the true cause of a wharfie's mysterious death.

Narwee resident Beryl Miller, 76, cannot remember her paternal grandfather, wharfie Andrew Williams, as she was only five when he died unexpectedly.

Mrs Miller said she could remember the entire family gathering around the dining room table in the Williams' home on High St, Millers Point, the day he died.

She can still see the widow Mrs Williams crying over and over "My Bill", the name the family knew Mr Williams best.

"It was extremely traumatic and something you can never forget," Mrs Miller said.

Chemical weapons historian Geoff Plunkett interviewed Mrs Miller when writing his new book, *Death By Mustard Gas*, published by Blue Sky Publishing.

The otherwise healthy 63-year-old family man was



Andrew Williams.

reported at the time in 1943 to have suffered hallucinations and climbed from his room at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, losing his grip on a downpipe and falling 15m to his death.

But the cause of his behaviour was covered up.

The author reveals 72 years later Mr Williams had a "catastrophic brain failu-

re" after having been severely poisoned by mustard gas.

A top secret consignment of chemical weapons arrived in Sydney by ship.

Tragically the barrels were leaking, but in his book Plunkett claims the military sacrificed unwitting and unprotected wharfies, including Mr Williams, in the interests of secrecy.

Plunkett claims Royal Australian Air Force officers visited Mr Williams on his deathbed and warned him never to disclose the truth of his gassing.

"Everyone knew what it was but were told not to talk about it," Mrs Miller recalled. "I learned more about it in my thirties when my father (John William Williams) was dying."

John was the wharfie's eldest son and confided the true cause of his father's death for the whole family to finally come to terms with.

"We still thought how awful," Mrs Miller said.

"Being it was over 30 years ago it happened, we couldn't do anything else about it.

"They weren't given the gas masks they should have used."