Flashback to 1944 when our troops faced chemical warfare threat

By Eve Reitmaier

"A HIGHLY secretive war effort came to Bowen early in 1944, when quietly a RAAF unit was established at the civil airstrip and a campsite at Mount Gordon."

So recalls former airman Ron Barker, who was stationed in Bowen from August, 1944. He had just returned from a full tour of operations in the New Guinea area, flying as a pilot in the RAAF No. 214 Diverbomber Squadron as a navigator/wireless operator.

When he was assigned to the unit that would operate out of Bowen, he was required to give a written undertaking to observe strict secrecy, with any breach a court-martial offence.

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The RAAF unit was the flying arm of considerable chemical warfare experiments serving the Allied efforts to counter the use of war gases by the Japanese," he said.

"It was known that the enemy had supplies of gas and equipment at its bases in New Guinea and it was necessary to establish the measures to be taken to protect our troops."

The Chemical Research Unit, as it was later known, received considerable supplies of mustard gas, a highly dangerous material, as a weapon from its use in the Great War in Europe.

"But its effectiveness was unknown under tropical conditions," Mr Barker said.

Furthermore, mustard gas was not working as the mustard corroded the brake linings, which resulted in the gas being expelled into the aircraft cabin.

Mr Barker said that at first Beaufort Vengeance dive bombers were sprayed with mustard gas, simulating an enemy attack on the aircraft, "he said.

"For this purpose one of the Beaufort bombers was sprayed with mustard gas, simulating an enemy attack on the aircraft," he said.

"It was flown by two of the aircrew, Warrant Officer Bill Wells, pilot, and myself, Flight Lieutenant Ron Barker, as wireless operator, and had on board two scientists."

"The flight was carried out off the Bowen coast for two hours before returning for appraisal.""During the flight both the crew were affected by the gas, with Warrant Officer Wells being hospitalised in Townsville."

"I was treated locally, but later suffered from cancer and visual and internal problems," Mr Barker said.

"On the declaration of peace in the Pacific, the operations at Bowen were terminated and the unit disbanded," Mr Barker said.

"Large stocks of the gas remaining were taken out to sea and dumped off the Bowen coast."

Mr Barker recalled dumping the canisters just off Kings Beach, putting a hole in each as it was dumped over the side of a boat, to ensure it sank.

Now, more than 60 years after he left, Mr Barker looks back favourably at his time in Bowen.

"Bowen in those days was a home away from home for many a lonely airman from home for many a lonely airman and during the 15 months that the unit operated, RAAF members enjoyed the hospitality of the Bowen Women's Institute."

"Some contact is still maintained and a happy group of former members still gather at the W.I. Hall on the Bowen coast."

Mr Barker said the force of the slipstream into the aircraft cabin had carried mustard gas through the fuselage into the cabin.

It was also discovered that the brakes were not working as the mustard corroded the brake linings, which resulted in a rather spectacular landing.

"On the declaration of peace in the Pacific, the operations at Bowen were terminated and the unit disbanded," Mr Barker said.

"Large stocks of the gas remaining were taken out to sea and dumped off the Bowen coast."

"But at no time were the civil population in danger, so stringent was its control."

Mr Barker said when the experimental program was in full swing there was considerable flying, and work at the base at Bowen became quite hectic with ground crews working day and night preparing for them.

"They suffered health consequences and, because they only served in Australia, were uncomfortable attending returned service marches."

"They were not eligible for a Gold Card under the overseas service provisions."

"As they didn't go to war overseas they are regarded as bludgers."

"Their military records don't record any of their chemical warfare activities and when they are denied they were exposed to it."

Mr Plunkett said the details of Australia's chemical weapons were denied by the government until the 1990s.


Bowen’s role in gas trials

A bomber is sprayed with mustard gas in an experiment to determine the effect of the gas on Flight, Top, decontamination is carried out fore crew and scientists after the flight. The new book, published by the Department of Defence’s Army History Unit and the Department of Defence’s Army History Unit and Army History Unit, reveals the story of the men whose job it was to handle and store a million chemical weapons, which were covertly imported into Australia to counter a possible Japanese invasion.

Author Geoff Plunkett said although the weapons were meant for retaliatory use only, and were never employed, Australian servicemen risked their lives handling the deadly munitions.

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