

Flashback to 1944 when our troops faced chemical warfare threat

By EVE REITMAJER

"A HIGHLY secretive war effort came to Bowen early in 1944, when quietly an 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 with the RAAF No 24 Divebomber 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.

"It was the beginning of an important research program of a highly-dangerous nature," Mr Barker said.

"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 was known from its use in the Great War in Europe.

"But its effectiveness was unknown under tropical conditions."

Mr Barker said Bowen residents knew almost nothing of the unit's work at the time.

However, railway goods yard workers refused to handle the gas when they learned of a shipment of it arriving from the south.

"Throughout Queensland experiments in its use were carried out with tests being made on volunteer troops, many of whom suffered horrific burns to their bodies and damage to their eyes and internal organs," Mr Barker said.

"Stores of the gas were kept at the civil 'drome' where armaments were filled with the gas for use from the air; leakage of the gas containers being of concern.

"Every effort was made to ensure that gas at no time endangered the civil population."

Mr Barker said at first Vultee Vengeance divebomber aircraft were employed in dropping and spraying gas on troops in trenches in Proserpine.

"Later Beaufort twin-engined bombers replaced the divebombers, being capable of more effective use in these operations at both inland and coastal locations," he said.

"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 the gas for use.

He said he had very little contact with the volunteer troops, which had canisters of mustard gas dropped on them, or were sprayed with the gas, to test the effectiveness of various forms of protection for them.

However there was one occasion where he became a test subject himself.



Bowen's role in gas trials



A bomber is sprayed with mustard gas in an experiment to determine the effect of the gas in flight. Top, decontamination is carried out fore crew and scientists after the flight.

"One highly dangerous experiment was carried out in Bowen when it was required to know the results of an enemy attack by gas on Allied air bases," Mr Barker 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 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 gas 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

New book reveals sad story

RON Barker's story and those of many other veterans exposed to chemical weapons are contained in a new book about Australia's chemical warfare history.

Chemical Warfare in Australia tells the story of the men whose job it was during World War 2 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.

The new book, published by the Department of Defence's Army History Unit and Australian Military History Publications, tells their story.

"The work of these young, humble blokes was still unknown 65 years on," Mr Plunkett said.

"They suffer health consequences and, because they only served in Australia are uncomfortable attending returned services marches.

"In addition they are 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 doctors denied they were exposed to it."

Mr Plunkett said the details of Australia's chemical weapons were denied by the government until the late 1980s.

Chemical Warfare in Australia is available at www.warbooks.com.au.

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 and during the 18 months that the unit operated, RAAF members enjoyed the hospitality of the local folk," he said.

"Some contact is still maintained and yet almost nothing was known of the work of the RAAF at the airstrip then and now."

Retaliatory stockpile deterrent to mustard gas attacks

BY February 1942, Japan was feared for its stockpile of chemical weapons.

With an enemy so close to its shores, the Australian Government established a retaliatory stockpile of its own to deter the Japanese from launching chemical attacks.

Mustard gas would burn and blister exposed skin, badly damage the eyes, respiratory and digestive tracts and destroy white blood cells.

Bowen's RAAF Chemical Research Unit carried out chemical warfare spraying or bombing for the chemical warfare research facility at Innisfail and the Australian Field Experimental Station (AFES) based at Proserpine.

According to research by Geoff Plunkett, contained in his book Chemical Warfare in Australia, on January 9, 1944, Arthur Trewin arrived to inspect Bowen in anticipation

of its use by the Special Duties Flight Detachment of No 1 Aircraft Performance Unit.

"The CRU had its genesis as part of this unit which had been set up at Laverton, Victoria, in late 1943, using Vultee Vengeance dive bombers," Mr Plunkett wrote.

"The unit moved to Bowen in early 1944 and shared the airstrip with No. 9 Squadron.

"In November 1944 No. 9 Squadron moved out and it

was at this time that Beaufort Bombers became available.

"The unit was formed on 15 August 1944 under the command of Headquarters RAAF North-eastern Australia and was eventually disbanded on 24 December 1945.

"It was divided into four sections: a headquarters; a flying and technical flight; a meteorological flight (based at Proserpine); and a medical research section.

"The headquarters and flying and technical flight were located at Bowen but the unit aircraft mainly operated out of Cairns."

Mr Plunkett wrote four RAAF Beaufort crews were based at Bowen to provide low-level spraying and low/high-level bombing support to Innisfail and subsequently to the AFES, Proserpine, when it was established.