

## BOOK REVIEW

Geoff Plunkett, *Chemical Warfare in Australia: Australia's Involvement in Chemical Warfare 1914-1945*, Australian Military History Publications, Canberra, 2007, 734pp.

Reviewed by John Donovan

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Somewhere in these 734 pages there is an interesting book (about 300 pages long) struggling to be found. Unfortunately, it is so buried by repetition and lack of focus that only the most determined are likely to plough their way through to the end.

The principal cause of the lack of focus seems to be that the author attempted to fulfil the spirit of his title, when his real interest seems actually to be the experiences of the RAAF chemical warfare armourers during the Second World War. However, even within that narrower focus, there is too much repetition. For example, similar descriptions of the daily work of those armourers were often provided by several of them.

Such limited reference as there is to the First World War is largely contained in the first chapter, which includes the reminiscences of some armourers about gassed First World War soldiers they knew while they were growing up, and an appendix (the last of 18) that briefly covers some incidents during the war, the post-war effects on three individuals, the effects on animals, and some chemical warfare proposals submitted by the public during the war.

The focus on the RAAF experience is demonstrated by the different treatment of the trials conducted in Australia. The experimental stations and the Brook Island trials of air delivery in Queensland, where there was significant RAAF involvement, are covered in the main text. However, most of the 25-pounder trials, which principally involved Army personnel, are covered in an appendix.

Once Plunkett gets to his main interest, however, the story is comprehensive. There is much that will (or certainly should) cause eyebrows to rise. The idea of walking into a mustard gas store and detecting the presence of leaking containers by sniffing for a garlic smell, or entering a phosgene store with a hand pumped spray

full of ammonia solution looking for a reaction on the sprayed ammonia to detect leakers there, is the stuff of nightmares.

So, too, are the many photos of casually dressed armourers sitting on containers of mustard, or (with the addition of gas masks) venting unwanted phosgene after the war by shooting holes in the containers. Burning large stocks of mustard in open areas after the war might have been effective, but even in the rush to demobilise there must surely have been some senior personnel who questioned such an approach. At least with sea dumping there was reasonable prospect that leakages would react with seawater to produce safer by-products.

Disposal was not comprehensive, as some areas later had to be decontaminated, and at least one individual died around 1960, when he found a drum of mustard in the Adelaide Rover area and rubbed onto his skin, having mistaken it for liniment.

What is clear in this book is that preparations were made, starting between the wars, for Australia to use chemical warfare. However, this use would only have been in response to enemy (principally Japanese, as far as Australia was concerned) first use. Plunkett suggests that Macarthur, who had experienced gas during the First World War, might even then have refused to authorise its use. However, the preparations were comprehensive, training was conducted, and the stocks of chemical weapons held were significant.

The book sheds some light on little known incidents during the war. The reluctance of some wharf labourers to handle ammunition ships, for example, might have been increased by the fear of mixed loads, when at least one wharfie died after mustard contamination. The bureaucratic use of euphemisms is also prominent. 'Smoke Curtain Installations' (for aircraft) sound so much less threatening than mustard gas spray tanks! Perhaps this title even deluded enemy intelligence.

The casual attitude of many of the RAAF armourers (who were not specifically volunteers for chemical warfare duties, but 'detailed' to that speciality) to the material they handled has already been mentioned. The limited supervision provided of their work is rather surprising. For example, junior non-commissioned officers supervised long distance movements, while a leading aircraftman organised the clean up after a fully loaded Smoke Curtain Installation dropped off an aircraft taking off at Cairns, spreading mustard along the edge of the runway. Their authority on these occasions seemed to come more from the fear induced by them telling higher authority exactly what they were handling than their actual rank.

The extremely basic facilities provided for maintenance of chemical filled weapons are described fully. While ventilation was obviously important, the open sheds provided often gave limited protection from the elements, leaving work that surely demanded some care to be conducted in less than ideal conditions. For the gourmets among readers, the thought that the disused railway tunnel at Glenbrook reverted after the war to its previous use as a mushroom farm might put a sharp taste on the tongue!

On the (darkly) humorous side, some Queensland farmers had to be warned not to steal drums of mustard, which they apparently hoped would contain something useful as tractor fuel. Also, a stationmaster who declined to provide an engine for a trainload of chemicals stuck in the middle of Rockhampton had to be 'encouraged' by the police to provide one. Another trainload of chemicals was delayed at the main platform at Townsville, until the corporal in charge gave the stationmaster a letter informing him of the contents of the load. This letter rapidly increased the priority for movement of that particular train!

Despite its deficiencies, this book tells an important story, to those with the perseverance to find it.