

□ EXPOSING A MURKY PAST:

# Clean up for our wartime secrets

**Story and photo: LEN ASHWORTH**

The role of Marrangaroo Army Depot in a top secret chemical warfare operation during World War II was revealed in somewhat sensational disclosures late last year.

At that time it was disclosed that no one was really sure what remnants from those dark days of 1940-45 remained buried beneath the pad-docks at Marrangaroo.

But six decades after the guns fell silent the Defence Department made it clear that it was anxious to make amends for the sloppy military

housekeeping of that era.

Now what is expected to be the final act in that saga is about to get under way.

When investigations began last year it was publicly confirmed for the first time what had been whispered about since the end of the war.

Marrangaroo had been central to the 'tit for tat' preparedness by the Australian Armed Forces to fight a chemical war if the feared Japanese invasion occurred.

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**JUST IN CASE:** Marrangaroo residents inspect a personal decontamination cocoon to be used as a safety precaution during the chemical warfare clearance at Marrangaroo Army Depot.

# Our dark wartime secret

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This area became the central storage facility for mustard gas and phosgene bombs, utilising the disused railway tunnel adjacent to the Great Western Highway.

The top secret, and technically illegal, chemical stores were guarded by dogs so savage that they even had the resident military personnel seriously frightened.

There were similar storage facilities in old tunnels at Clarence (now part of the Zig Zag railway) and at Blaxland in the lower Blue Mountains.

But Marrangaroo was central to the operation, with the chemical warfare teams sharing the disguised military depot with the RAAF and Army using the base for distribution of more conventional ammunition.

Last year the Defence Department announced a thorough investigation into claims that chemical warfare ordnance had been buried on the depot property, an area still used today by the various services for explosive training.

They appointed one of the department's top explosive clearance experts, Major Kevin Cuthbertson, to supervise the operation.

The investigation identified several sites around the south western corner of the base where ammunition, including the chemical warfare items, had been buried. Trial excavations uncovered a number of mustard gas shells and phosgene cylinders.

All were so far found to have been emptied.

The digs also revealed some live rounds of conventional ammunition as well as many thousands of other rounds scattered about the surface and contributing to a heavy metal contamination problem.

This investigation led to public information days where Marrangaroo residents were advised of decontamination programs to be undertaken.

Now the department has announced that the full scale excavation is beginning with intensive safety and security precautions in place.

The precautions include the erection of sophisticated containment tents over each dig site to prevent the escape of any toxic vapours that may be unearthed.

Personal decontamination facilities are also being installed.

A specialist company, Milsearch, has been contracted to carry out the operation.

Special Projects Manager, Dave Humphreys, said it had unfortunately been necessary to remove a number of trees to make room for the protection measures.

Training for all staff involved in the challenging project will continue until February 6 when there will be an on site familiarisation for all local emergency organisations, including medical resources.

Full scale excavations begin on February 9 and Mr Humphreys said that if all goes according to schedule the project should be completed some time in May.