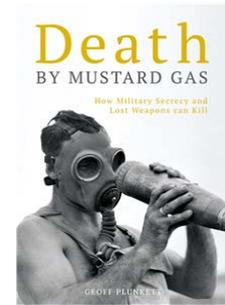


Death by Mustard Gas: how military secrecy and lost weapons can kill

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Reviewed by Lex McAulay

Of all the weapons of war, mustard gas must be one of the most horrific in its effects on the human body. When people are exposed to it, but its presence is denied because of secrecy, the results can be even more tragic. This happened in Australia in 1943 when waterside workers and RAAF trainees and ground staff were exposed to the gas over a period of time because of the handling procedures in place.

The captain of the ship in which a consignment of mustard gas and phosgene was delivered from the UK was an experienced seaman. However, he had no information on the exact nature of the cargo, other than that it was 'chemical explosive' and that a small team of RAF technicians would be aboard. Phosgene containers were loaded into No. 4 Hold and mustard gas into No. 1 Hold. Being a wartime voyage, other cargo included munitions and aircraft.

The trouble began at loading. No. 4 Hold was not suitable for the quantity of drums involved, and during the voyage one fractured, with much of its content leaking and soaking into the bituminous lining of the hold. As a safety measure, the hold containing the mustard gas drums had been double-sealed with tarpaulins before sailing, so nothing was known of the leak until these were removed.

The responsible Air Force officer in Australia was Wing Commander R. Le Fevre, RAF, a former lecturer in organic chemistry and, since 1940, an adviser on chemical armaments. He arrived in Australia after escaping the debacle in Malaya and was appointed chemical warfare adviser at RAAF Headquarters, Melbourne.

Some of the cargo was to be unloaded in Melbourne and the rest in Sydney. Problems began in Melbourne when the unloading crews became aware of the effects, although Le Fevre refused to admit the presence of chemical weapons. This continued in Sydney and, despite whole unloading gangs being seriously affected, Le Fevre blamed 'dust' from other cargo for the problems. Reasonably enough, the waterside workers refused to continue and RAAF trainees and ground staff were brought in, at first with no warning apart from the advice that gas masks were available but would not be needed.

As the men were not wearing protective dress and were working in hot conditions, the potential for the gas to have its designed effect was almost perfect. As it was most effective on the human body where sweat is generated, the armpits and groin area were attacked, as well as the eyes and mouth.

The tragic results continued, though at least the RAAF conducted an investigation, at which Le Fevre still refused to admit presence of the gas. There is evidence that despite the official posture, local people at several storage locations became aware of the presence of the gas as soon as it arrived. (This is similar to the official secrecy in World War 2 on the presence of Spitfires in Australia, and substitution of 'Capstan' as the term to be used; when the fighter was the most famous aircraft in the Allied world, no-one was deceived.)

Many of the men involved in unloading the gas drums from the ship, both civilian and RAAF, had health problems for the rest of their life. One waterside worker died, and there was a post-war death. A recluse in the Northern Territory found a small mustard gas bomb, opened it, and decided to put the contents on himself as a cure for arthritis and as a fly repellent, with lethal results.

Post-war, at court cases, Le Fevre did admit the cause of the damage to the waterside workers and RAAF men was mustard gas but claimed that he was bound by wartime secrecy. As this officer knew the capabilities of the gas, and that it was four times more powerful in warm climates than in cool, and that he

witnessed the distress inflicted on the unloading crews, his continued denials of its presence could be seen to be criminal. Given the nature of these weapons, there was a casual disregard for the destruction of stocks at the end of the war. As recently as 2009, containers of wartime origin were still being destroyed.

Readers might smile to read of wharf labourers described as 'workers doing their best to support the war effort', when other writings on the attitudes and work practices of those people during the war present a very different picture. But this incident did nothing to build trust in the authorities by the waterside unions.

While the book indicates the extensive research by the author, and there are photos of many of those mentioned in the text, with the proceedings and results of post-war court cases, and lists of men affected, there is one important group not mentioned or identified. The prime minister of the day is seemingly anonymous and no-one is identified who was involved in the political decision-making to request the chemical weapons, or the delivery and storage for them, nor anyone responsible for adequate post-war disposal. It was the Curtin Australian Labor Party government, of which the War Cabinet comprised Messrs F. Forde (Army), A.F. Drakeford (Air), N.J.O. Makin (Navy and Munitions), J.A. Beasley (Supply & Development), with Ben Chifley as Treasurer and Dr. H.V. Evatt as Attorney-General.

This book is obvious reading matter for those whose responsibilities include occupational health and safety, regardless of the field; a classic example of refusal to admit the obvious because of a regulation.