

Debate over chemical weapons cache intensifies Castle Hill's bunker baffler

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HAS our precious Castle Hill been used to stash deadly chemical weapons?

The Defence Department says there is no credible evidence to support such a claim and therefore says it must not be so.

However Townsville draftsman Kevin McGrath is one of several people now beginning to ask uncomfortable questions -- questions he says people in authority do not want to answer.

"It seems strange that somebody would say there's mustard gas there but I think it should be checked out," Mr McGrath said.

"It's no good burying your head in the sand. If there is mustard gas there, it will be a time bomb."

Mr McGrath's interest was rekindled after claims were aired last month by Melbourne wartime historian Mark Rawson in the Townsville Bulletin that a series of underground caverns were dug in Castle Hill by United States forces during World War II and after the war were used as a storage site for mustard gas -- sulphur mustard blister agent (dichloroethyl sulphide).

Mr McGrath said that as a young man he had been amazed at the tunnels dug at Newcastle during the war and about 10 years ago noticed what looked like the sealed entrance to a tunnel on Castle Hill.

He said the mystery of that site had gnawed at his conscience and he had since shown it to friends who were similarly intrigued, just as the Townsville Bulletin reporter and photographer were when they were shown the site this week.

On a rockface near the summit, quite visible from the roadway, a ledge of old looking concrete about 5m wide and half a metre deep protrudes from the rock.

Below it, concrete has been sprayed into what could conceivably have been a tunnel portal.

"It didn't make sense to me for anybody to put a big slab of concrete on the hill like that," Mr McGrath said.

"I was inquisitive as to why it is there."

A bunker debate has bubbled along, mostly over internet sites, for years.

Brisbane man Peter Dunn's Australia @ War website documents war-time recollections of bunkers at Townsville and details war correspondence showing an underground cavern for an Area Combined Headquarters was considered at Castle Hill.

Townsville man Kevin Parkes has been conducting his own historic research project and has been warning the council and anybody who will listen that tunnels were dug and entrances filled in all over the city, including at Jezzine Barracks and the new housing estate of Cosgrove.

"The tunnelling capacity of (the Americans) has been greatly underestimated for many many years," he said.

"So things inside Castle Hill? Yes."

He believed the Defence Department was prepared to cover up the issue in the interests of saving money.

“Defence denied there was underground military infrastructure at Jezzine Barracks and yet they were there,” he said.

Despite widely held belief that war-time chemical weapons were destroyed or dumped at sea, official records are inconclusive.

The Department of Defence’s Chemical Warfare Agent Sea Dumping off Australia 2003 report states that it appears at least 20,030 tons of chemical warfare munitions were dumped into Australian seas at the end of World War II by the United States Army and the defence forces of Australia.

Several dumping sites are listed off Townsville and Bowen. According to the report, 320 mustard-charged 100-pound bombs and 700 mustard-charged 65-pound bombs were dumped off Bowen in 1945.

The munitions were from the RAAF No. 19 Replenishing Centre at Talmoi, between Richmond and Julia Creek, and from the Australian Field Experimental Station at Proserpine.

It says US-controlled stocks of chemical weapons were held at Charters Towers and Kangaroo, near Toomulla Beach, north of Townsville.

The report says the fate of the Chemical Weapons Agents at these and other sites is not known but that it is possible they were dumped at sea near the site of storage.

Mr Parkes believed as much as 2000 tonnes of chemical weapons were stored at Charters Towers and Kangaroo.

“There is something going on within the system,” Mr Parkes said.

“I have seen nothing but bullshit from all levels of government for quite a few years.

“Where is the community interest served in all this?”

Asked about claims of mustard gas stored at bunkers in Castle Hill, the Defence Department provided the following response.

“Defence commissioned a report by Coffey Geosciences Pty Ltd to assess claims of WWII bunkers in Queensland.

“Part of this report covered the area of Castle Hill.

“The report was presented to Defence on 23 July 2002 and it concluded that there was no evidence to support the claim of bunkers at Castle Hill.

“The Coffey report was later reviewed within Defence in April 2005. This review supported the methodology and findings of the original report.

“Based on the Coffey report and the subsequent review, Defence is of the opinion that there is no credible evidence that underground bunkers exist at Castle Hill and hence no chemical weapons would be buried there.”