

Glenbrook's secret past

Suspected Nazi spies, men scarred by mustard gas and fatally wounded chickens — life in Glenbrook during World War II was made all the more absorbing by the presence of a secret air force tunnel stocked full of chemical weapons.

Seventy-six-year-old Ron Hughes was only 11 when his family took over the lease of Kelgoola Guest House in Glenbrook. He vividly recalls the day he discovered the quiet village was home to a supposedly top secret air force project that was stockpiling mustard gas in a disused railway tunnel.

“As a kid I discovered it contained mustard gas. I clearly remember the day. One of the air force men came in to see his wife — as they often did — and I could see his arm was covered in huge blisters which I was told were caused by mustard gas. It was all hush hush and my parents told me to be quiet about it and I did so. I was only 11 or 12 at the time.”

Later, a mysterious guest saw a veil of suspicion descend on the village.

“Another incident I remember concerned a chap in his 50s who looked for all the world like the film actor Monty Wooley,” said Mr Hughes. “He stayed at the guest house on three occasions — on the first occasion he wore a full beard, on the second he wore a moustache and on the third occasion he was clean shaven. He was apparently asking too many questions about operations at the camp

so the air force guys had him followed as they were concerned he may have been a Nazi spy.

“From memory, I do not think it amounted to anything. He was just interested but it showed how paranoid people were at the time.”

Glenbrook Historical Society president Tim Miers was another primary school student during World War II. He remembers how the Glenbrook townsfolk tacitly agreed to keep the mustard gas stockpile a secret.

“One afternoon at about 4.30pm a RAAF trucker was transporting drums of mustard gas from the Glenbrook railway siding to the tunnel . . . (when) just behind the butcher’s shop . . . two of the drums fell off and busted open. Next we had a high ranking air force officer visiting all the nearby homes advising mothers to ‘shut all the doors and windows and keep your children inside until we are able to clean up the mess’. There was a strange smell around which I recall was like a rotting egg smell. Two guys in full anti-gas gear then turned up and rolled the drums into a gully where they dealt with them.

“Although the mustard gas that was stored in the commandeered mushroom tunnel was



The view from the east end cutting of the Glenbrook chemical weapons storage tunnel where the maintenance of stocks was undertaken. Storage drums filled with mustard gas are stacked outside the tunnel to the right. A guard dog is seen near the tunnel entrance. Photo: National Archives of Australia.

supposed to be a secret all the locals knew it existed. My late mother told us as children — as did all the other mothers — not to talk about the mustard gas as it would sabotage the war effort. It was a matter of ‘we knew, but pretended not to’. The fact is today the real story is not known to many residents as they moved to Glenbrook in later years and simply weren’t around at the time.”

Sometimes the clandestine nature of the project led to less serious incidents.

“That the operation was top secret was obvious because the RAAF trucks used to leave the Glenbrook railway yards on their way to the tunnel by four different roads and never used the same road twice in a row,” said Mr Miers.

“I well remember one truck driver running over one of Miss Bysouth’s chooks which used

to wander across Cowdery Street to a paddock opposite. The driver stopped and apologised to Miss Bysouth over the incident to which she replied, ‘Don’t worry driver, as I will pluck it and have it for dinner tonight’. That’s the way old Glenbrook residents thought.”

Mr Miers will publish more of his wartime anecdotes in a new edition of the book ‘Glenbrook of Yesteryear’ later this year. For more information contact the Glenbrook Historical Society on 4739-2384.

A full history of Australia’s secret chemical warfare history — including details on the Glenbrook tunnel — has just been published. For details about ‘Chemical Warfare in Australia’ by Geoff Plunkett visit www.warbooks.com.au or phone 9542-6771.

Geoff Plunkett can also be contacted by email at geoff.plunkett@gmail.com.