

# Guinea pigs tell a testing tale

Australian soldiers who handled chemical weapons in World War II were largely forgotten, not attracting attention because of the secretive nature of their work. Until Geoff Plunkett of Berowra heard about them and wrote a book documenting their plight. **JULIE HUFFER** spoke to him.

THEY were guinea pigs for mustard gas and had excruciating burns – yet were ribbed for not getting their hands dirty.

They were the Australian soldiers whose job it was to test chemical weapons in World War II and they were, until recently, the forgotten men of our war history.

That is, until a Berowra resident stumbled across a document detailing the dumping of hazardous materials at sea. In 1994, while working for the Environment Protection Agency, research scientist Geoff Plunkett found a reference to mustard gas cylinders dumped off Morton Island in Queensland.

“I wrote a report which was picked up by the Defence Department and I thought, ‘how did this stuff get here and why’, and that’s what led to the book,” he said.

*Chemical Warfare in Australia*, published by the Australian Army History Collection and Australian Military History Publications, focuses on personnel involved in the maintenance and testing of chemicals imported as a retaliatory plan against Japan.

It documents the secrecy of production, storage, transportation and disposal of chemicals.

“Initially my driver was research,” Mr Plunkett said of his motivation to write the book.

“Everyone has an interest in chemical weapons. Then I saw a small piece written by a member of the Chemical Warfare Unit and he said there were ‘more of us’. I got hold of 35 veterans.”

As Mr Plunkett delved deeper, he said the book became personal.

He said many of the veterans he spoke to were angry because, 65 years on, there was still ignorance about what they did.

They were accused of being bludgers because gloves kept their hands lily white and were denied benefits because they were forced to stay at home.

Some died from the toxic chemicals and many have related illnesses today.

“Much of the equipment was designed for use in the UK . . . not for temperatures of 40C,” he said.

“They couldn’t wear full gear and were often exposed to vapours.”

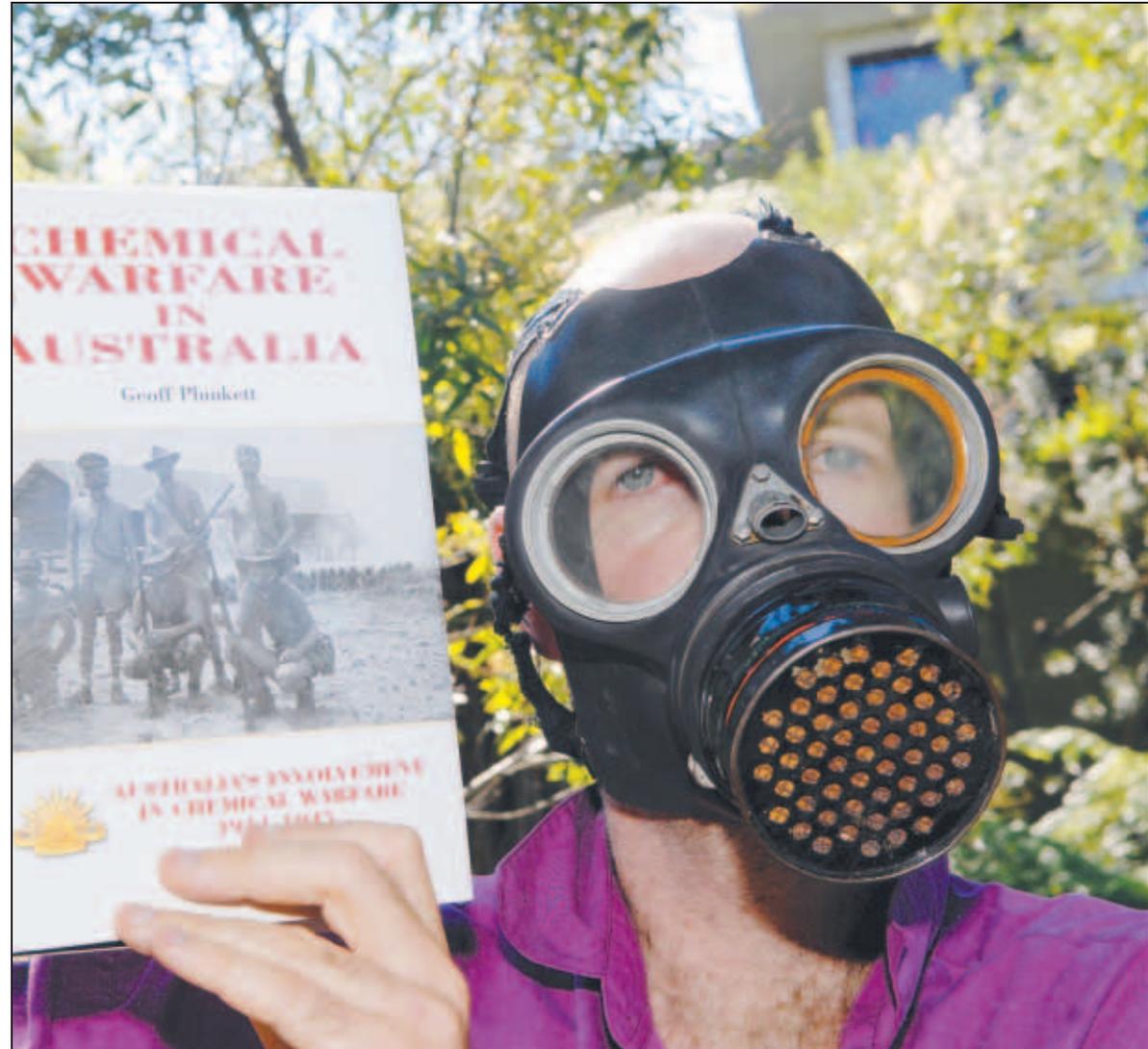
Frank Burkin, one of 19 soldiers left from a unit of 124, said Plunkett’s book was great.

“To know the story has been told provides a sense of closure. I was under a 30-year silence and if I mentioned it, people looked at me like I was telling tall tales.”

Mr Burkin is happy mustard gas was never used in battle.

“I’m grateful it proved it was not a useful weapon in World War II, because it was a hindrance and would have cost more lives,” Mr Burkin said.

● Details: [www.warbooks.com.au](http://www.warbooks.com.au)



Geoff Plunkett uncovered the untold history of soldiers exposed to chemical weapons.

Picture: PETER KELLY