

Hidden Newnes Forest storage has added to military puzzle

Story: LEN ASHWORTH

Just how much secret and sinister defence work really did occur around the Lithgow-Blue Mountains area during and after World War II?

The old melodramatic line about 'the hills holding many secrets' seems to be a truism as far as many people are concerned.

Last week the *Lithgow Mercury* published a feature based on interviews conducted by the *Illawarra Mercury* with ex servicemen now living in the Illawarra region who had worked on secret chemical warfare stockpiles at Marrangaroo and Glenbrook during World War II.

The chemicals included mustard gas imported from America and Britain in contravention of the Geneva Convention to be used in any last ditch defence effort should Australia be invaded.

It was all supposed to be top secret but as the years wore on and ex servicemen told of their experiences it became more of an open secret about the clandestine activities focused largely on storage in old railway tunnels at Marrangaroo, Clarence and Glenbrook, and in some old colliery workings elsewhere in the State.

Following this week's special report Wallerawang identity Danny Whitty came forward to tell of his experience.

In 1978 he and his brother, Jimmy ('Cricket') were trail bike riding on the Newnes Plateau in an area that at that time was just native bushland between Dingo Creek and Waratah Ridge.

Danny said that they stumbled across a huge dump of 44 gallon drums sitting on pallets in the bush.

The drums were painted in colours of light blue, yellow and red and black and all were marked with the skull and cross-bones motif and the word 'poison'.

He said that there were literally thousands of the drums stashed over a distance of more than a kilometre and largely hidden from sight by the bush canopy.

As many of the drums were leaking the two riders didn't hang around for long.

But still wondering what they had stumbled across, Danny returned to the site about two years later after a major bushfire had swept through.

"It was like a bomb site," he said.

"Drums had exploded everywhere, just torn apart."

Then the mystery deepened.

After he contacted military authorities at the nearby Marrangaroo military

ammunition depot (223 Supply Coy) he was referred to a higher authority at Penrith.

The military denied any knowledge of the bush storage but when Danny returned out of sheer curiosity a short time later the entire site had been meticulously cleared.

"There wasn't a trace left of what we had found," he said.

"Not a single drum or pallet remained."

He said it was a curious coincidence that the drums and their mysterious but obviously sinister contents had disappeared so soon after he reported his find to the Army.

"Everyone locally knew there was mustard gas stored in the old mushroom tunnels at Marrangaroo," he said.

"It was a badly kept secret."

There was no way of knowing exactly what was in the drums in the forest but it clearly wasn't someone's stash of home brew.

And if the Army knows, they won't be talking.

Danny said he probably couldn't identify the exact site today as it is now covered by State Forest pine plantations.