

Memories of mustard gas

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STROLLING through the streets of Innisfail brings back mixed emotions for one airforce veteran, who has made only his second trip north since his days as a chemical warfare armourer during World War II.

Aged 19, a young Arthur Lewis, who hailed from Penrith, west of Sydney, travelled to Innisfail with the rest of his company to undertake experiments on the effect of mustard gas. Driving along Corinda Street in East Innisfail, Mr Lewis, now 83, can still point to the spot where an old Queenslander sat – converted into an experiment station – as well as the humble shack the group called home in 1944.

“It is definitely a different place now,” Mr Lewis said.

“Back when we were here the buildings we used were pretty much the only ones in the area and the few roads here were all dirt.

“I came back 15 years ago with my wife and the house we all lived in was still standing and I’m glad to see it’s still there now because it holds a lot of memories for me.”

Mr Lewis clearly remembers the street, with the former research station sitting on the back of the block where earthmoving company IMEC now stands, and the slab for the recreation hall used by the young officers is still visible on the grounds of the BMX track.

“(Wright) park and all the houses alongside it used to be the show-grounds from what I remember, and there was a small house which was probably owned by the caretaker where the toilet block is,” Mr Lewis said. “There was also an endurance course in the park that army volunteers would use.”

According to Mr Lewis, volunteers



SECRET HISTORY: WWII veteran Arthur Lewis says he bunked in this East Innisfail home during trials of mustard gas in 1944.

WHAT IS MUSTARD GAS?

The sulfur mustards, of which mustard gas is a member, are a class of related cytotoxic, vesicant chemical warfare agents with the ability to form large blisters on exposed skin.

In their pure form most sulfur mustards are colourless, odourless, viscous liquids at room temperature. When used as warfare agents they are usually yellow-brown in colour and have an odour resembling mustard plants, garlic or horseradish, hence the trivial name.

from Atherton travelled to Innisfail to be a part of the tests, using the endurance course to work up a sweat before going to the lab and exposing themselves to mustard gas in order to test the chemical’s effectiveness.

“It sounds horrible but we were trying to mimic the conditions of Papua New Guinea and learn how we could make the gas work the best and

we had reason to believe the gas was the most effective when you were perspiring,” he said.

“The volunteers were paid one shilling a day extra on top of their six shillings to be ‘guinea pigs.’”

Local author and historian Ray Ovendon, who is also compiling a book on the war period in Innisfail, said he was 16 when the chemical warfare armourers came to town.

“I remember seeing them marching along the river and they were usually covered in bandages,” he said.

“We all knew they were there but didn’t know why.

“There were even intelligence officers in town who would make sure no-one was talking about it.”

Mr Lewis said he also remembered the secrecy, saying the only civilian

they were allowed to mix with was an old Italian woman living in the area who did their washing.

“She would clean all of our clothes, which were pretty sweaty because we did all of our work between December and March and because it was so wet she would dry our clothes in front of an old wooden stove.”

Though his time in Innisfail was not always pleasant, Mr Lewis said the town would always hold a special place in his heart.

“I’m just amazed at how much the place has changed,” he said.

“We had a real hard time here just dealing with the heat and climate but I’ll never forget this place.”

The Federal Department of Defence was asked to verify the details of this story, but was unable to respond by the time of publication.