

# They were only 19: armourer recounts doing dangerous duty in Innisfail

ARTHUR Lewis recalls without hesitation exactly how many days — 182 — he spent as a chemical armourer based at Innisfail in 1944 and 1945.

Mr Lewis, now 83 and living at Gerringong on the New South Wales south coast, visited his old living quarters while on a holiday to the North in June. He said the town bore little resemblance to the dirt-tracked village where he served as a 19-year-old, although the humble shack where he lived with his fellow airforce armourers still stands on Corinda St.

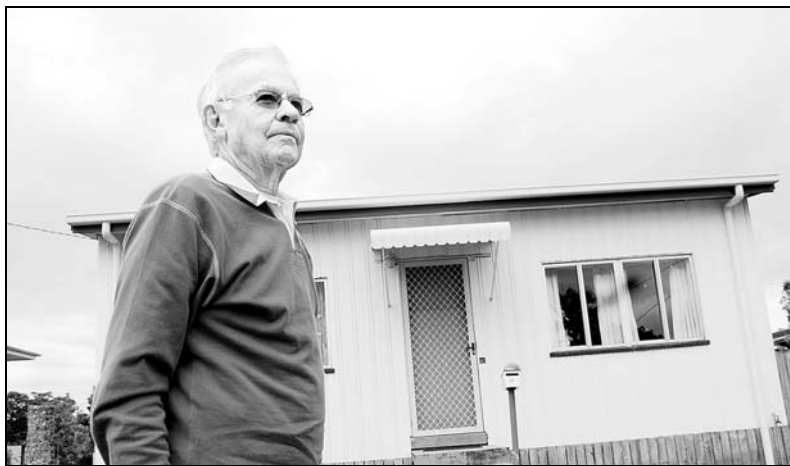
Mr Lewis said volunteers would be dressed in protective gear and made to complete a rigorous obstacle course near the town's old showgrounds in order to replicate the sweaty conditions of Papua New Guinea.

"From there they went to a stainless steel gas chamber," Mr Lewis said.

"They used to take off a sleeve, or other parts of the clothing, and put (the volunteers) in there.

"I saw them with blisters as big as tennis balls hanging off their elbows."

The veteran was one of six armourers rushed to the Cairns RAAF Base for a massive cleanup operation after a drum filled with mustard gas fell out of a plane and burst on the runway. Wearing heavy protective gear in the stifling January



**Arthur Lewis, above, visited the former quarters that housed them, right** *Photos: ALITA PASHLEY and RAAF Chemical Warfare Armourers*

heat, the men had to manually remove about 225kg of the sticky spilled liquid.

"We all had to get into our gas masks and clothing and scrape and scratch the mustard gas off the runway," Mr Lewis said.

"It was the middle of summer and we were all 19-year-olds. We had shovels and it took hours —

then we loaded it into a flat-bottomed boat and loaded it into the ocean."

Mr Lewis described his recent return to Innisfail as 'strange', but not distressing.

"It's been 63 years since we were there in the air force," he said. "There's been too much water under the bridge."

