

Toxic gas dumps litter coastline

Natalie O'Brien

REVELATIONS that Australia's eastern coastline is littered with thousands of tonnes of chemical weapons, including the killer agent mustard gas, have been made in a new report that warns there could be many more unidentified toxic dumping grounds around the country.

The disclosure is the latest in a long and vexed history of mustard gas use in Australia including its testing on unsuspecting servicemen in Queensland in the 1940s and its burial beneath what are now Brisbane suburbs.

A veil of secrecy has surrounded Australia's involvement with chemical weapons, notably the stockpiles and disposal of the tens of thousands of tonnes stored around the country during World War II.

It was revealed in the early 1990s that 63 dump sites of chemical weapons exist off the NSW coast.

But now the *The Weekend Australian* reveals that the extent of the dumping offshore is much greater than previously disclosed.

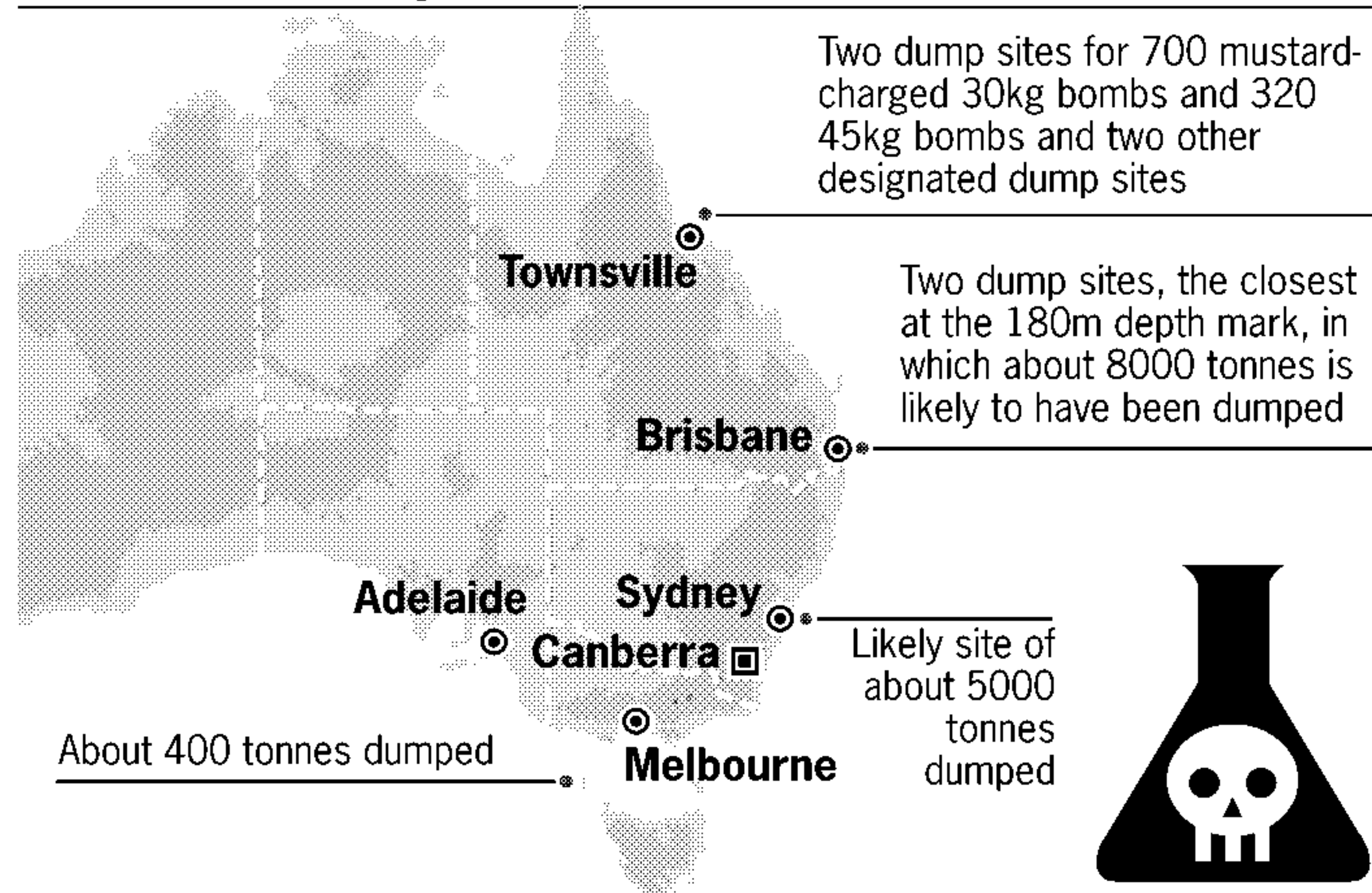
Environment Australia's former chief executive officer Barry Carbon said yesterday it was time the dumping of the chemicals was brought out in the open.

"We went through the era of keeping everything behind closed doors. Most of this stuff is not a risk any more. The important thing is that the community knows it's there.

"It's an illustration of the period we went through — an era of not knowing what to do with nasty things. Out of sight was out of mind."

The report, *Chemical Warfare Agent Sea Dumping off Australia*, by Australian Defence Force staffer Geoff Plunkett, divulges that more than 14,000 tonnes has been ditched in the ocean from Queensland to King Island in Bass Strait and it is sus-

Where the dump sites are



'It's possible Australia still has unknown (chemical weapon) sites'

Bonn International Centre for Conversion

pected others, including one off the Northern Territory, have not been officially identified.

An Australian Defence Force statement said yesterday there had not been any dumping for decades and the ADH no longer held stocks of gas.

The statement also says that mustard gas will dissolve and break down close to the dump site without a significant effect on the marine environment.

Research into sea dumping of chemical weapons began under the auspices of the Federal Environment Department (now Environment Australia) and its then CEO, Mr Carbon.

Environment Australia has declined to comment on the issue of sea dumping.

Mr Carbon said yesterday a priority list of contaminated sites to be cleaned up was needed. Greenpeace Pacific toxic campaigner Matt Ruchel said a concerted effort to find out what went on was needed.

"There should be a detailed inventory of what you can trace on paper as well as an inspection of the sites," Mr Ruchel said.

The Bonn International Centre for Conversion claims that "it is possible that Australia has additional old CW (chemical weapon) sites still unknown on its territory".

The Plunkett report reveals that poor and fragmented record-keeping has hindered investigations into the whereabouts of many chemical weapons and their disposal.

While it reports that public risk of coming into contact with a bomb from the sea dumps is virtually nil, it does warn of the possible dangers of human contact with the gas and says "the danger will become more acute as the state of the containers deteriorate ..."