

Trains, Toxic Agents & Toadstools

The secret story of Glenbrook Tunnel and the Mustard Gas Men.

By Geoff Plunkett

Thousands pass over it daily on their way from Sydney up the Great Western Highway, yet only locals are aware of its existence – for 65 years just a handful knew that Glenbrook tunnel once held enough chemical weapons to wipe-out the entire population of Australia.

But the place wasn't always secret. To reach the coal and iron ore deposits of the Lithgow Valley, a railway was forged across the Blue Mountains with a zig-zag bypassing the steep gradient just below Glenbrook. Early in 1891 it was decided to bypass the zig-zag with a 660 metre tunnel. But in 1911 yet another bypass was initiated. The old tunnel was last used on September 25th 1913 and lay abandoned until an enterprising couple decided it was perfect for another use.

Fanny and Herbert Rowe wanted to grow mushrooms. Requiring high humidity and temperature as well as darkness, the Glenbrook tunnel was ideal. In June 1934 they obtained a 12 month lease at £13 per annum, although it wasn't until 1939 that the underground farm showed any return. Just as the farm was coming into profit the Rowe's world was rudely interrupted. Around April 1941 Air Force officers from Richmond made an initial inspection of the tunnel - they were searching for an area to store conventional explosives.

By January 1942 the Royal Australian Air Force occupied the tunnel under national security regulations, and the Rowes were employed by the RAAF to compensate for the loss of their livelihood.

But the game plan changed after the fall of Singapore in February the same year. As they swept down to Papua New Guinea, the Japanese brought chemical weapons with them, and a willingness to use them. Australia decided on a retaliatory stock, and the Glenbrook tunnel was chosen as an ideal storage site.

The problem with storing mustard gas drums was the pressure build-up. The daily job of the Mustard Gas Men was to drag the containers from the tunnel and release the dangerous pressure. But these brave soldiers paid a price - mustard gas vapour penetrates the skin with lightning speed. Sixty five years later, they still suffer rashes, coughs and other ailments with the 'gas' now officially listed as a carcinogen.

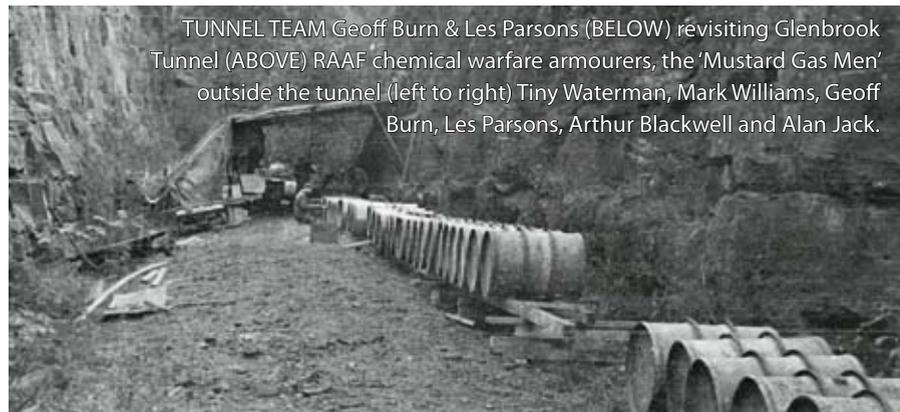
Immediately after the war the drums were taken to the Newnes State forest where 20,000 containers and 2,000 tons of mustard gas were burnt in a huge conflagration.

Again, the tunnel was abandoned, and it reverted to its pre-war use as a mushroom farm. Initially classic button mushrooms were grown. A refrigeration unit was installed, but with such a long tunnel the power costs were prohibitive, and by 1994 Asian mushrooms were started. Requiring less labour, they've been grown in Glenbrook ever since.

Beautifully built (after almost 120 years there is not a stone out of place), the Glenbrook tunnel and those who have worked in it are now getting the attention they deserve, featuring in a History Channel segment for 'Cities of the Underworld' and remembered on plaque laid at the Glenbrook memorial. The rats and bats are gone but not the memories - many of the surviving Mustard Gas Men have returned to the place where they spent time as chemical warfare armourers at the edge of the Blue Mountains. ❖



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TUNNEL TEAM Geoff Burn & Les Parsons (BELOW) revisiting Glenbrook Tunnel (ABOVE) RAAF chemical warfare armourers, the 'Mustard Gas Men' outside the tunnel (left to right) Tiny Waterman, Mark Williams, Geoff Burn, Les Parsons, Arthur Blackwell and Alan Jack.