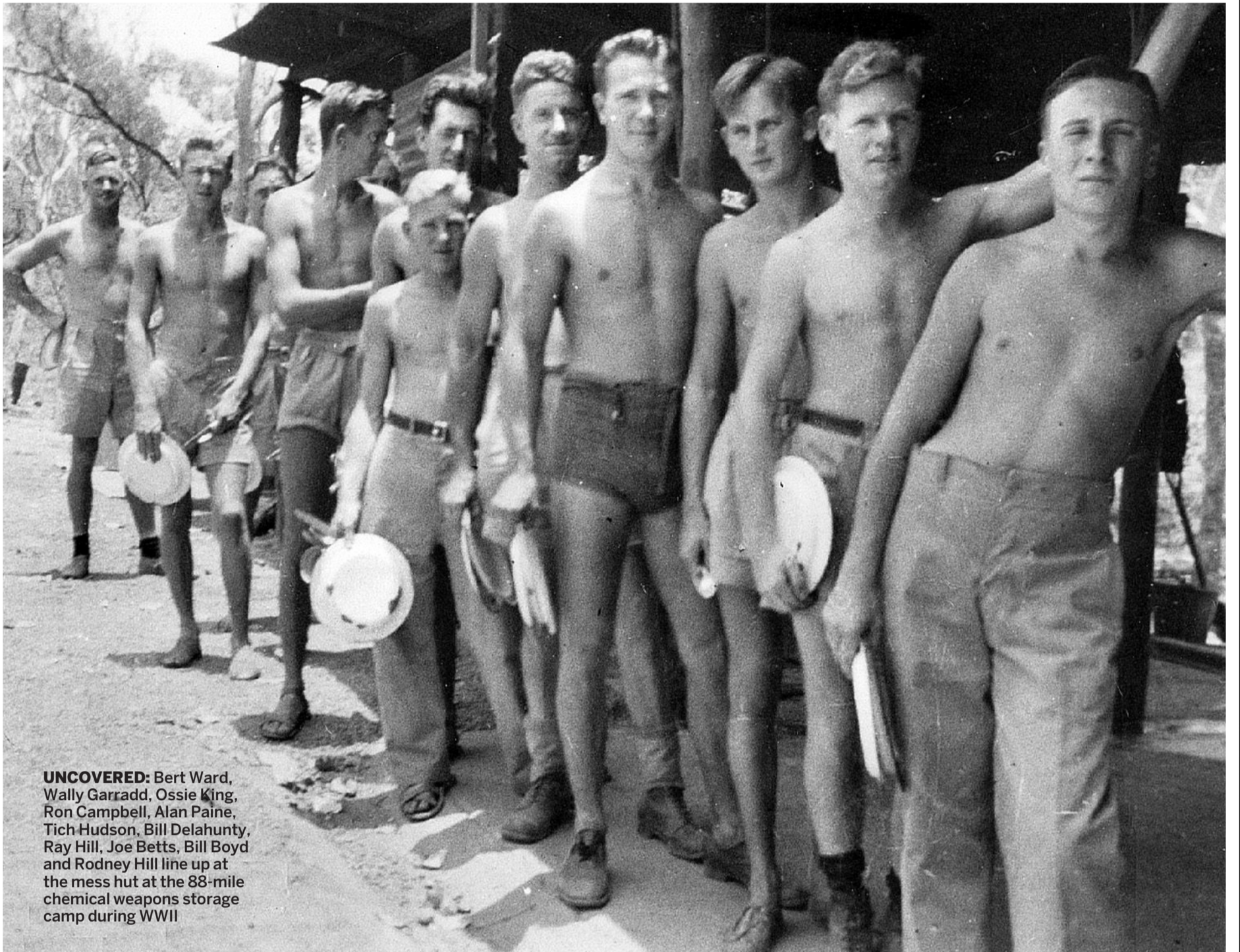


SATURDAY NEWS *Extra*



UNCOVERED: Bert Ward, Wally Garradd, Ossie King, Ron Campbell, Alan Paine, Tich Hudson, Bill Delahunty, Ray Hill, Joe Betts, Bill Boyd and Rodney Hill line up at the mess hut at the 88-mile chemical weapons storage camp during WWII

OUR TOXIC SECRET

Chemical weapons and a mysterious death uncovered in the Territory

By **MATT CUNNINGHAM**

A LITTLE-known secret of the Northern Territory's past and a mysterious death have been uncovered by an author researching Australia's chemical warfare history.

Geoff Plunkett, in his book *Chemical Warfare*

in Australia, has done in-depth research on the storage of chemical weapons in Australia during and after World War II.

Plunkett's research led him to the 88-mile camp, south of Darwin, where chemical weapons were stockpiled during World War II.

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NT had toxic arms

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He has interviewed soldiers who were sent to work at the camp.

The soldiers have told how they toiled in oppressive heat, wearing wetsuit-like outfits for protection.

Plunkett said the soldiers often ripped off their suits to escape the stifling heat and humidity, exposing themselves to the deadly chemicals.

One of the soldiers, Bill Lewis, remarked: "I would have died of heat exhaustion before mustard gas poisoning."

Les Johnson recalled his experience working at the camp.

"The gas was not taken for trials at 88-mile, it was stagnant, it stayed there, never moved and, actually, I don't think too many people knew where it was," he said.

"It was just in the scrub there, and there was always one of us on guard, at the entrance."

The Territory's history with chemical weapons did not end with the end of World War II.

Lethal WWII secret

During his research Plunkett came across the mysterious death of a European immigrant, killed after he stumbled across a discarded mustard gas bomb at Mount Bunday, near Adelaide River, in 1964.

A chapter in Plunkett's book was devoted to the man's death, but further research has shed more light on the matter.

According to reports in the *Northern Territory News* at the time, 35-year-old Nandor Somogyi died a slow and painful death after he rubbed the mustard gas over his body, thinking it was liniment.

Since the publication of his book, Plunkett has interviewed retired Captain David Luke, an ammunition technician who was working in the Territory at the time of the death.

"The gentleman involved was

taken to Darwin Hospital," Mr Luke said.

"I met him there to get as much information as possible about his bad burns and what might have caused them.

"I could see he was badly blistered on the hands, arms and lips.

"Although his English was rough I could understand him.

"He said he had found a canister, and curious, he had punctured a hole in it with a .22 rifle.

"The smell reminded him of a medicinal liniment for rheumatism from which he suffered. He took a swig of the potion and also rubbed some over his aches and pains."

Mr Luke told Plunkett a message was soon sent that the matter was not to be discussed.

In later reports the Army denied knowing how the canister came to

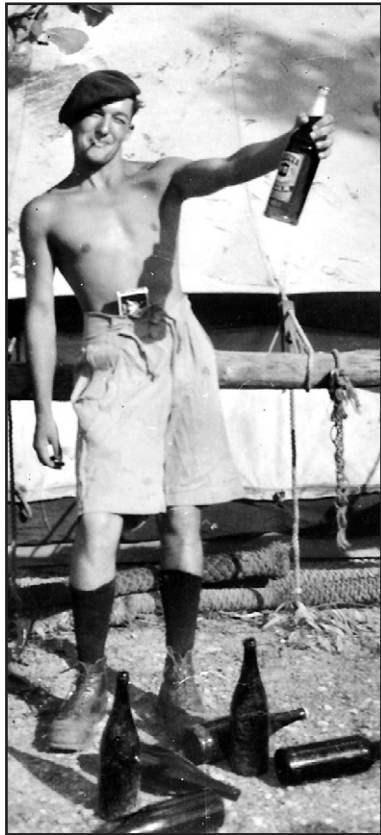


UNINFORMED: Bill Lewis in a suit worn to protect soldiers from chemicals at the 88-mile chemical weapons storage camp

be found on a lonely track in such a remote area.

They even launched a ground search for further mustard gas bombs, which proved fruitless.

Plunkett's book has been published by Australian Military History Publications and was released last month.



DEADLY STORE: Frank Sutton at the 88-mile chemical weapons storage facility during WWII



KILLER PAYLOAD: The 88-mile chemical weapons storage facility in the NT during World War II