

weekender



The big

SECRET

Australia's mustard gas
men break their silence

ALSO WILL AGE WEARY
QUEENS OF POP?



INSIDE 80 PAGES OF
PROPERTY



A cloud of secrecy and shame still hangs over the men who maintained Australia's illegal chemical weapons in World War II, writes WILLIAM VERITY.

Turn down an unmarked track off the highway at Glenbrook in the lower Blue Mountains and you'll find yourself on a disused railway line.

It's part of a 19th century single track linking the Central West and the Lithgow coalmines to Sydney, made obsolete by the current twin-track line built in the early 20th century.

Since 1933, the 600m tunnel carved through the rock and under the Great Western Hwy has grown mushrooms, so if you took a detour you wouldn't see much besides farm equipment.

The makeshift sheds and

rusting machinery clutter the tunnel entrance, and compete with overgrown weeds and young trees.

Even the mouth of the tunnel is sealed with sheets of corrugated iron, a buzzing electric fan providing the only window to the dank growing area behind.

But if you look carefully through the piles of rusting metal piled at the entrance, to the sandstone rock behind, you'll see a clue to a forgotten piece of history and one of Australia's darkest wartime secrets.

Carved on the slimy green wall and looking remarkably

fresh, are the letters: 8/43 RAB.

The rough graffiti carved in August, 1943, by Leading Aircraftman Ross Bryant is all that remains of a top-secret operation that stored 44-gallon drums of mustard gas in the tunnel, ready to use against the Japanese if they resorted to chemical warfare.

Even today, no-one knows precisely how many men knew about the secret store, kept in contravention of the Geneva Convention, which banned mustard gas and other chemical weapons after the horrors of World War I.

"I don't know how many in total, hundreds would be the maximum, but they were isolated in cells," said author Geoff Plunkett, who this month publishes the first definitive guide on the subject, *Chemical Warfare in Australia*.

Plunkett has spent the best

part of a decade searching archives and interviewing the dwindling numbers of veterans from the Royal Australian Aircraft chemical weapons unit - known simply as 1st Central Reserve.

Using his contacts at his workplace, the Department of Defence, he has talked to about 35 of the men, but is losing two or three a year. Soon, there will be none left.

We have come to Glenbrook, one of four disused railway tunnels used for storage in NSW, with Geoff Burn, one of the youngest veterans at just 84.

Burn's job was to maintain the store, check for any leakages and move the chemical drums and bombs when necessary.

"It was a very boring bloody operation, I can tell you," he says, as we survey his wartime

workplace.

"It was a waste of three years of my life and all the other guys would agree with me.

"We used to volunteer for other things every time they came up, but when it came to the crunch, they would say we were so-called 'experts'.

"Mustard gas was banned after World War I. I'm not proud of what I did, but that's what we were chosen for and that's it."

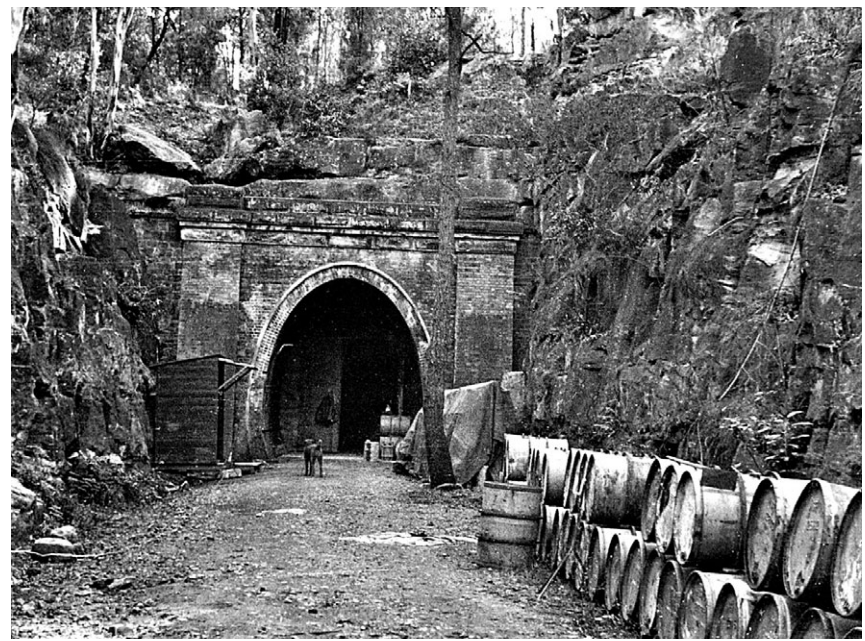
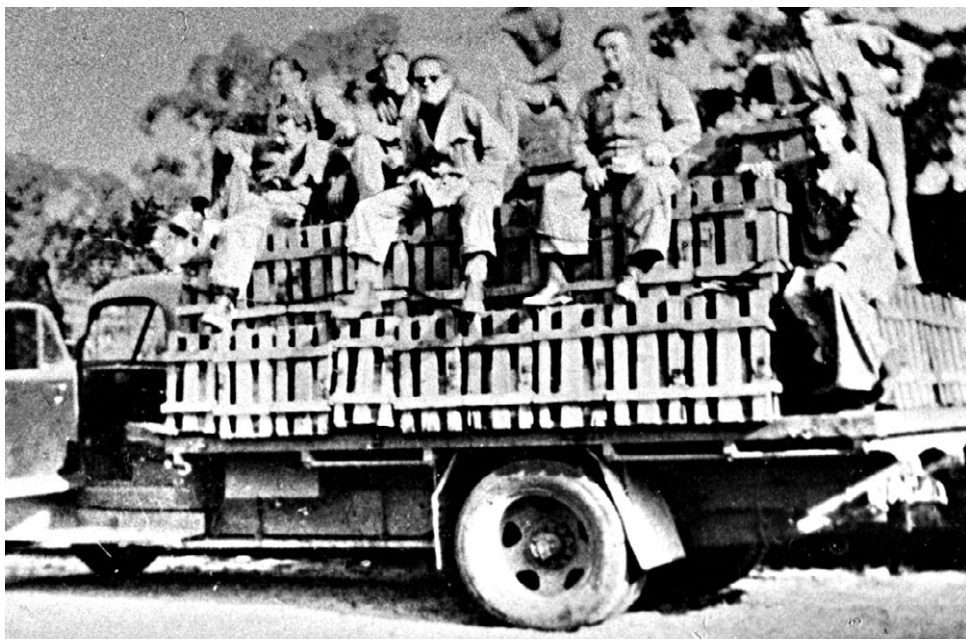


The story of the chemical armourers has leaked out slowly since the 1970s, when

THE BIG



Geoff Burn (third from left) and his fellow "mustard gas men" at the Glenbrook tunnel, one of several places used to secretly store mustard gas during World War II.



ABOVE LEFT: Glenbrook chemical weapons armourers, including Burn (second left) and Harry Briggs (standing far right), with a truck containing crates of mustard gas. ABOVE RIGHT: The Glenbrook tunnel with drums of mustard gas outside awaiting storage.

both Labor and Liberal governments admitted chemical weapons had arrived from the UK during the war.

Both claimed - falsely - that all stocks were safely incinerated shortly after the war ended.

The reality that mustard gas drums were dumped in the ocean off Jervis Bay and the Queensland coast only became public in the early 1990s, the same time that Plunkett was compiling a government report on objects dumped in the ocean under licence.

"All sorts of weird and wonderful things turned up and I saw one entry off an old record," he recalled.

"It said something along the lines of, 'Moreton Island, Queensland, mustard gas cylinders (?)'. I was blown away that chemical weapons would even have been here."

That discovery started a quest through public records and then oral histories from those involved. It transformed a dry government report with limited circulation or readership into a book rich in human drama as well as technical and historical detail.

One Glenbrook armourer quoted in the book, Noel Stoneman, talks about the shame of the secrecy that - for some - lasted a lifetime.

"Because most times we were working with rubber gloves and respirators ... we had lovely complexion of skin, nice soft hands, and we were regarded as bludgers because it appeared as though we weren't doing anything," he said.

"But of course, we couldn't divulge anything."

It was a reunion in 1990 of chemical armourers organised by veteran Frank Moran at Penrith RSL that proved pivotal in loosening a secret that the veterans had kept - often even from their own families - for more than half a century.

"That reunion lasted four days, but I wouldn't have minded if it had lasted 40 years," Burn said. "It was fantastic."

Finally, after years of denial and secrecy, the armourers could tell their story. There was

a brief flurry of publicity, including a documentary and a few newspaper articles.

But still, when Plunkett approached former members of the 1st Central Reserve, he found them guarded at first.

"They took their oath very sincerely. I think that's a generational thing, I don't that would happen now even with people of my generation," he said.

"But as soon as they opened up, I couldn't stop the talking.

"Letting them off the leash is the way I describe it, going wild telling all these stories. None held out in the end."



The first thing Harry Evans says as he sits in his room at the Mayflower Retirement Home in Gerringong is that he is short of breath.

"Very short," he says. "That's why we moved out of the self-care cottage to Pioneer Lodge, so we could get oxygen easily.

"If I just take myself quietly I can go without for a week or a fortnight. But if something upsets me, I am gasping again and I need oxygen so they bring it to me in my room."

At 91, Evans is the oldest chemical armourer alive but his feisty good health and cantankerous dislike of the Department of Veterans' Affairs belies his complaint that the gas harmed him.

He drove a semi-trailer for the RAAF during the war, picking up the mustard gas drums at Darling Harbour and driving them up the Great Western Hwy to Glenbrook.

There was more than one tight spot, none more so than the time a drunk driver slammed into him and his top secret poison cargo.

"Coming out on a Saturday afternoon, raining, I'm in low gear and I seen this car coming towards me out of control, he drove underneath the trailer,"

Evans remembered.

"The police came and got him for drink driving. They wanted to question me but I told them they cannot talk to me about what's on the load. 'I know what it is', I said, 'but I'm not telling you nor anybody'.

"'You're wasting your time trying to talk to me', I told the police."

Evans took both his oath of secrecy and military discipline very seriously, which was why, when he was burned by leaking canisters one time as he tied down his load, he told no-one.

Rolling up his sleeves, the scars from the characteristic mustard gas blisters are still visible. For years, he told everyone that he had had an accident with burst steam pipes.

"I couldn't let anyone else to tie my load down because the boss said I would be court martialled if I dropped any," Evans said.

"With that hanging over your head you made sure you tied down the bloody load

yourself. You didn't rely on the others to do it. That's how I got these arms."

Like many of the armourers, he did not wear the protective clothing issued to him because it was impractical.

"You try and tie knots in a rope with a pair of gloves on - bloody impossible," he said.

"Some of the canisters had a small leak. My arms broke out in huge yellow blisters, hanging down from my arms. It's only in the last couple of years that it's cleaned up."

Men did not wear protective clothing because they were young and stupid, or it was too hot, or because you could not drive a truck through a city wearing a gas mask without blowing the secret.

Evans only told his sons the truth after the armourers' reunion in 1990, and this is the first time he has told the public at large.

"Chemical warfare wasn't allowed and I couldn't tell anybody about it because I was in it," he said.

In later years, the secrecy

has caused untold grief when applying for pensions from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. One veteran was referred to a psychiatrist because his type of work "never occurred".

Others were refused a Gold Card because, according to a letter written to Burn: "You did not incur danger from hostile forces of the enemy whilst serving inside Australia during (the war)".

Another veteran - luckier than either Burn or Evans - qualified because he had escorted mustard gas on a ship to Queensland, thus leaving Australia on active service, if only for a week.

"To gain (a Gold Card) you must have actually incurred danger from hostile forces of the enemy," the department told Burn.

"The person must have actually been at risk of harm or injury."

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



Burn at the chemical weapons storage tunnels where he was stationed at the fake town of Marrangaroo near Lithgow during World War II. Picture: GREG TOTMAN



During World War II a bomb storage depot near Lithgow was disguised to look like a country town, called Marrangaroo. The hotel was actually the mess and the butcher's was the guardhouse.

So not only were men like Burn and Evans conscripted into an illegal activity with no recourse, then prevented from leaving work that was both boring and dangerous, but they were later penalised for it by the government.

No wonder that Evans, once he starts on the Department of Veterans' Affairs, is a hard man to stop.

"Veterans affairs are there to look after their bloody selves," he said.

But he insists that he has no regrets about what he did during the war, just how he has been treated since.

"I had no choice," he told Plunkett.

"When you're in the Air Force or the Army, for that matter, you haven't got a choice; the boss says 'Jump!' you say, 'How high?'"



During the course of the conversation, Evans mentioned the base where he and many others started their service - Marrangaroo. The town that never was.

Here the secrecy reached an

almost comical pitch, a bomb storage depot on the outskirts of Lithgow, disguised as a village with its own butcher, petrol station and hotel.

The former guard house, disguised as Alf Jones the butcher's and the quartermaster's store, disguised as a petrol station with dummy pumps, have long since gone.

But Marrangaroo is still an Army base, used mainly to train soldiers to defuse bombs in the large bush territory at the base of the Blue Mountains.

The mess is still a mess, still disguised as Ryan's Hotel and XXX painted on the roof, although the horses tied to the

hitching rail have gone, as have the papier mâché chickens that were moved around by hand.

On a cool autumn day, it's a beautiful spot and peaceful, so it's not hard to imagine why it would feel like a prison to a 19-year-old volunteer soldier, eager to see the world and to engage the

enemy.

"We arrived there very, very late and it's the coldest bloody place I've ever been in my life," one armourer, Ivor Conway, told Plunkett.

"I thought, if I've got to stay in this place, that's it."

Then Conway was taken to the Glenbrook tunnel and he saw a deeply tanned soldier with just a pair of shorts and boots.

LEFT: Harry Evans is a World War II veteran who transported mustard gas to secret locations in regional NSW. INSET: The scars he received from the chemical.



An Army volunteer showing the results of exposure to mustard gas during a trial set up by chemical armourers.

"He had spots all over him (from mustard gas burns) like a blood leopard and I thought, 'Oh no!'."

"You know, I could tell straight away, this guy has been burnt so many times and I thought, 'I don't want to do this'."

The tunnel at Marrangaroo is still there, part of the same line as the Glenbrook tunnel, only this one is open and empty. It is under the Mudgee road, about a kilometre from the base and the town that never was.

Not even a graffiti signature marks its wartime use.

Burn remembers having good times with his mates, running 10km after a night out from Lithgow to camp for roll call at 7.30am after missing a ride with the milk truck.

He remembers buying beer in quart bottles at the

Donnybrook Hotel ("It was bloody terrible stuff"). There were good times too, but the best times were at the other storage tunnel, in Picton, where he and his mates were billeted in the back room of the pub.

But his eyes only really light up when he describes the couple of times when he made it into an airplane, once even firing the machine guns on a Beaufort bomber.

Perhaps the cruellest blow came when he turned up at an RSL function wearing the insignia for the RAAF Chemical Warfare Section, designed after the 1990 reunion when their role finally became public.

One of the other veterans started asking him about it, sceptical, perhaps believing he was making it up.

Yet the danger faced by Burn and his mates was real enough. He was lucky not to lose an eye when mustard gas vapour dropped on him in Queensland, burning his face and blinding him for days.

Two of the armourers died in accidents, one flinging himself from a top floor hospital window, mad with the pain from the gas burns.

At the end of the war, the unit's commanding officer, Group Captain T Lightfoot, stood up for his men, in a commendation dated June 13, 1945.

"It is desired to record officially the outstanding services rendered by the RAAF during the recent war years, and since the war ended, by all Chemical Warfare personnel," he wrote.

"It is considered that some of the personnel concerned are deserving of special mention and a list is, therefore appended for your consideration with a view to arranging for some recognition of their devoted duty."

More than 60 years after their mission ended, surviving veterans are still waiting for "some recognition".

Simple plaques outside the tunnels at Picton, Glenbrook and Marrangaroo would be a start.

Chemical Warfare in Australia by Geoff Plunkett can be obtained from the publisher, phone 9542 6771. Cost \$45 including delivery.



“Some of the canisters had a small leak. My arms broke out in huge yellow blisters.”