



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**

**Defence: Chemical Weapons Testing**

**QUESTION**

**396**

**Tuesday, 20 August 2002**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## QUESTION

**Date** Tuesday, 20 August 2002  
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**Questioner** Allison, Sen Lyn  
**Speaker**

**Source** Senate  
**Proof** No  
**Responder** Hill, Sen Robert  
**Question No.** 396

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### Defence: Chemical Weapons Testing

**Senator Allison** (Victoria) asked the Minister for Defence, upon notice, on 25 June 2002:

With reference to the document recently released by the department, 'Chemical Warfare Testing Sites (File No. A6456 R8216/10)', written by a joint Australian/United States (US) survey team on suitable sites within Australia for chemical and biological weapons tests:

(1) Was this series of tests an extension of research on: (a) decontamination of water supplies containing nerve gas, carried out at Maralinga in 1959; (b) mustard gas tests, held on Brooks Island in 1944; and (c) malaria trials.

(2) (a) What other chemical and biological weapons have been tested in Australia; and (b) what are the details of these tests.

(3) Is it the case that Iron Range was the site of a 'simulated' nuclear test on 18 July 1963.

(4) Were chemical or biological weapons involved in Operation Blowdown.

(5) Were defoliating agents tested in Australia prior to their use in Vietnam.

(6) Have chemical weapons ever been stored in Australia; if so, where.

(7) Have there been any accidents involving chemical weapons in Australia; if so, what are the details of these accidents.

(8) Did any of these accidents involve sarin gas.

(9) Was sarin gas used by the Tropical Trials Unit.

(10) Can records from the Tropical Trials Unit be made available.

(11) What was or is the role of the Defence Standards Laboratories in Proserpine and Maribyrnong.

(12) Was Australia's cooperation with the US Government in providing 'tropical' chemical, biological and nuclear weapons testing grounds seen as necessary for Australia's entry into the then American/British/Canadian Tripartite Agreement as an equal fourth member.

(13) (a) What were the sea vulnerability trials, completed in 1963, and did they involve nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

(14) Was it the view of the Department of Defence representative on the sea vulnerability trials at the time that Australia's past acceptance of nuclear tests and the basing of U-2 aircraft on Australian territory, meant that biological warfare and chemical warfare testing was likely to be permitted.

**Senator Hill** (South Australia—Minister for Defence)—The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

(1) (a) No.

(b) No.

(c) No.

(2) (a) The activity referred to in the file was not a test but an inspection of two possible sites to assess their potential for use as test sites - tests which did not eventuate. There was a range of tests of chemical weapons in

Australia during World War II. Since World War II, the Defence Science and Technology Organisation and its predecessor organisations have not conducted chemical or biological weapon tests.

(b) Details of the World War II tests are in the public domain and are well documented in sources such as Bridget Goodwin's book, 'Keen as Mustard' published by the University of Queensland Press in 1998 and in 'The Gillis Report - Australian Field Trials with Mustard Gas 1942-1945' published by the Peace Research Centre at the Australian National University in 1985.

(3) Operation Blowdown took place in July 1963 in the Iron Range region of tropical North Queensland. Conventional high explosives were used to simulate, on a very small scale, the blast effects of nuclear explosion in a jungle environment. Fifty tons of TNT were used in a single explosion. The data collected allowed scientists to extrapolate what the effects on soldier mobility and patrol activity would be if a 10 kiloton tactical nuclear weapon had been used in the jungle.

(4) No.

(5) Yes. For example, a defence research project took place in June 1963 in the Wenlock Road area near Iron Range in tropical North Queensland. It tested the effectiveness of commercial herbicides to prevent secondary growth encroaching on Army installations in a jungle environment. Five commercial herbicides were used in the test. The data collected allowed scientists to study the utility of these herbicides in preventing secondary growth in tropical jungle. Information on this experiment was declassified in 1980. The total area treated was less than 800 square metres. It is very unlikely that there is a residual hazard almost 40 years after the experiment.

(6) Chemical weapons were stored in Australia during World War II at a wide range of locations. In his 1998 foreword to 'Keen as Mustard', Dr Peter Dunn, a DSTO scientist and world-recognised expert in this area, stated that "Immediately following World War II, all chemical weapons and bulk stocks of agents in Australia were destroyed. Since that time, no chemical weapons have been produced, stored or transported within this country." Details of the World War II storage areas are in the public domain, for example at <http://www.bicc.de/weapons/chemweap/asiapac/austra.html>

(7) During World War II, there was one incident resulting from a leaking drum of mustard gas, which caused injuries to some dock workers. Since the elimination of chemical weapons within Australia following World War II, there does not appear to be any evidence of further incidents.

(8) No.

(9) The Tropical Trials Establishment was established in the 1960s. It and its various successors, up to and including what is now known as DSTO Innisfail, have not conducted chemical weapon trials, including with sarin.

(10) The records of the Tropical Trials Establishment are treated in the same manner as those of other defence units, according to established archive policies. Over 25 files are already listed in the records of the National Archives and more are expected to be added over time.

(11) The Munitions Supply Laboratory traces its origins to 1909. It was established under that name in 1922, becoming the Defence Research Laboratories in 1948 and the Defence Standards Laboratories (DSL) in 1953. It continued under this name until it became the Materials Research Laboratories in 1974 and has had a range of names since then. Under the DSL title, its role gradually evolved from aiding defence industry, through routine testing, then development and testing and gradually towards a greater emphasis on self-generated research in defence-related science. This research included improving defence against chemical agents but not the offensive aspects of chemical warfare. No work on offensive or defensive biological warfare was undertaken.

The establishment at Proserpine, the Australian Field and Experimental Station, was used as a base for chemical warfare trials during World War II and appears to have been wound down or abandoned shortly after the War. There is no mention of it in DSTO's post-War history.

(12) Australia did not provide tropical chemical, biological or nuclear weapon testing grounds in cooperation with the US Government. Australia joined the Tripartite Agreement in 1965, after all nuclear weapons testing had concluded. As previously stated, DSTO or its predecessors have not conducted chemical or biological warfare weapon testing in Australia since World War II.

(13) The file quoted in the question indicates clearly that these were US trials, perhaps with a very small number of Australian observers. The trials appear to have used simulants and tracer material to test the ventilation and defence systems of warships in adverse chemical warfare situations. The file indicates that no live agents were used. There is no mention of nuclear weapons tests.

(14) The file does not contain details of the views of Defence representatives at the ship vulnerability trials. It does indicate that the Defence representative at a meeting to consider the Australian approach to the site review expressed the view that Australian cooperation on nuclear weapon issues and U2 basing indicated that cooperation on biological and chemical warfare research could not be ruled out.