

24 June 2008

ADJOURNMENT

Second Reading

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (8.35 p.m.) — I rise tonight to acknowledge the World War II service of a resident of my electorate, Mr Geoff Burn. Originally from Tasmania, Mr Burn enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force at the age of 18 in 1942, and like many young men of the time sought adventure as a wartime fighter pilot. Instead, he was unwittingly seconded to a secretive RAAF unit that would store, test and decommission deadly chemical weapons, including mustard gas and phosgene, until after the conclusion of the Second World War.

It is not a widely known fact that chemical weapons were brought to Australia by England from 1942 and later by the United States. This was a response to the threat posed by the Japanese occupation of the Pacific and the fear that their advance would continue south to Australia. The chemicals were stored in various locations around Australia, including in a tunnel at Glenbrook, near Penrith, as well as at locations in Queensland and in Darwin. The RAAF had even constructed from scratch an entire 'hoax' town, complete with a fake pub, at Marangaroo in the New South Wales central west to camouflage the storage of the chemical arsenal from enemy spy planes.

Mr Burn and the other men in his unit were young, inexperienced and ill prepared for the gruelling task that lay before them. In the course of their duties, which included extensive testing of the weapons throughout Australia, exposure to the toxic chemicals was routine. Those exposed suffered from horrible burns, rashes and respiratory illnesses, which for many people continue to recur in old age.

I understand that Mr Burn and the majority of his colleagues have experienced difficulties in receiving appropriate recognition and compensation for their work in this unit despite the risk that it posed to their health. This has largely been because they were not posted overseas during World War II, making them ineligible to receive a gold card, and also because the secret nature of their postings resulted in the omission from their Defence records of details of their service in the Chemical Warfare Unit. This is a difficulty that the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel has recognised. I note the minister's interest in this matter and his acknowledgement in correspondence to me earlier this year that Mr Burn was, despite the lack of specific mention in the official records, a member of the RAAF Chemical Warfare Unit and involved in the storage and experimentation of chemical weapons during World War II.

The Chemical Warfare Unit was a group of men who made sacrifices for their country during World War II and still bear the scars from their work more than 60 years on. I think it is appropriate to recognise in this place their contribution, and I would like to read from a commendation from Group Captain T Lightfoot, Director of Armament at Air Force Headquarters in Melbourne during World War II. The commendation, written in June 1945, requests the director of personnel services to make the appropriate notations of service on the records of those who had served in the Chemical Warfare Unit, but unfortunately this request was not met. So I would like to read into Hansard tonight an extract of that commendation and give Mr Geoff Burn and his fellow RAAF armourers the recognition they deserve for their service:

... the officers in charge (from time to time) of the various storage depots know just how much effort was expended by the personnel under them in the execution of their arduous and at all times dangerous duties.

... ..

The intake of CW stocks from the UK involved much hazardous work in the off-loading from ships of bombs and bulk containers, the destruction or decanting of 'leakers' and the decontamination of ships holds.

... ..

... the various grades of mustard gas were burned under tropical conditions, where scientific trials have proved that mustard gas is more dangerous and persistent than in temperate conditions.

... ..

... at times they literally paddled in liquid phosgene on the ground, the concentration given off being such that service respirators broke down and the personnel had to be temporarily relieved.

... ..

... such concentrations of mustard gas were encountered that no service protective equipment was adequate to counter them.

... ..

It is fair statement that the disposal of these gas stocks rank with the more difficult and dangerous tasks undertaken by RAAF ground staff personnel.

I wish to thank Mr Geoff Plunkett for his assistance in providing that extract. I do not have the power to correct the official records of each and every member of the Chemical Warfare Unit, but, as someone entrusted with the great privilege of being elected to this place, it is my honour to ensure that the service of Mr Geoff Burn and his colleagues is appropriately recognised here in the nation's parliament. I salute you.