



# *Of Cabbages and Kings*



## The most useless weapon

In a recent newspaper report, the Veterans Administration announced that it was considering paying benefits to servicemen who were involved in the testing of mustard gas in WW II.

While not involved in the testing program itself, I can certainly sympathize with the soldiers who were. In 1944-45 I was exposed to nasty stuff on almost a daily basis.

For the uninitiated, mustard gas is actually a brownish-green, syrupy liquid that burns and raises blisters upon contact with the skin. Puss from the blisters causes more blisters. When inhaled, the fumes burn the lungs, and an extreme concentration can be fatal.

Developed during WW I, its purpose what not so much to kill, but to disable the enemy. This strategy was based on the fact that it requires seven people to care for one injured soldier. Thus, a large number of disabled puts more strain on the enemy than do actual casualties.

The gas was used on a limited basis in the First World War with only mediocre success. Its main attribute was to contaminate an area to preclude enemy advances. Still, that meant our own troops couldn't use the area either! Wind and weather conditions also discouraged the use of any kind of gas.

Assigned to the Chemical Warfare Service in 1942, I was sent to Assam, India, along with about

15 others. Our job was to care for a stockpile of a few hundred mustard bombs. The Army was keeping them in readiness for retaliation in case the enemy ever used chemical weapons.

It was a baseless threat.

These were 100-pound bombs produced years before, made of 1/8-inch rolled steel, each transported in its own wooden box. There were guidance fins at the rear and a tube down the middle to accept an explosive charge for arming.

However, there were very serious drawbacks. The liquid mustard gas was highly corrosive. That feature, coupled with the excessive heat and humidity of Assam, caused extensive rusting and dangerous interior pressures. Many of the bombs leaked and the shells of some were paper thin.

Knowing all this, it was commonly assumed that in being carried aloft in a plane, they would burst open upon reaching an altitude of lower atmospheric pressure. Our pilots swore they would never take them up.

Our job of caring for the bombs was made infinitely more difficult and dangerous when some desk-bound officer at Headquarters came up with the bright idea of venting the bombs to relieve the pressure. This meant we had to open each



box, gingerly remove the unarmed bomb, file off the rust, drill a hole in the nose and insert a screw. Replaced in the box, we were supposed to return periodically and open the screw to ease the pressure inside.

At all times we had to work upwind to avoid fumes from the leaking weapons. This was almost impossible, as there was very little breeze and the fumes spread in every direction. Some of the bombs were so badly corroded and leaking as to be unsalvageable, and they had to be buried in pits dug by native coolies. We were constantly busy decontaminating spills and leaks with a mixture of lime and dirt or sand. Under those conditions, it was not possible to avoid occasional burns and the inhalation of fumes.

In two cases, men were seriously burned when bombs broke open upon being lifted from the case. Along with these hazards, we had to always be on the alert for the many cobras who made their homes beneath the stacks of boxes.

In the end it was all for naught. The gas was never used, and in the fall of 1945 we buried the lot in huge pits bulldozed out of the jungle. We marked the site with a chain-link fence and stone markers which advised in seven different dialects: "Do not dig here before 1966."

Talk about a toxic waste dump!