

U.S. Army Burns Off Final Chemical Weapons

Paul Foy, Associated Press

STOCKTON, Utah (AP) — Gary McCloskey may have destroyed more chemical weapons than any man alive, but he barely reacted when the final weapons from the world's largest stockpile of warfare agents came out of an incinerator.

McCloskey, a 63-year-old engineer and manager for URS Corp.'s Federal Services division, was on hand as a U.S. Army depot in Utah finished destroying the last of 1.3 million munitions filled with a witches' brew of toxins, blister and blood agents. He was on a Pacific atoll in 1986 when the Army destruction campaign started, living just 300 yards from an incinerator.

"These things really are detoxified and are safe," McCloskey said Wednesday at the Deseret Chemical Depot, watching a video feed of mustard agent projectiles leave an incinerator on a conveyer belt. "This is the last tray of the last weapons to go through this plant."

The last 23 projectiles were baked for two hours at 1,500 degrees, purging them of mustard agent, which can produce painful skin blisters. The Utah depot — which at its peak held 13,600 tons of chemical agents, making it the world's largest — expects to complete the job by the weekend when it incinerates bulk supplies of Lewisite, a powerful skin, eye and lung irritant.

By then, the U.S. Army will have destroyed about 90 percent of its aging chemical weapons that accumulated through the Cold War.

"We can honestly say that the destruction of chemical agents ... has made the world a safer place," said Col. Mark Pomeroy, commander of the Deseret Chemical Depot.

The U.S. is part of an international treaty to rid the world of chemical weapons, a campaign taking place with spotty success around the globe. The goal was supposed to be accomplished by April 29 but will take years longer.

"Clearly, it's still a tremendous example of what the world can do," said Craig Williams, director of the Chemical Weapons Working Group in Berea, Ky., an advocate for safe disposal. "You've got 188 of 194 countries on the planet signing the treaty. It's an impressive effort, a great step forward for the safety of the world."

The U.S. has acknowledged it will take as long as 2021 to finish destroying the final 10 percent of its chemical weapons at depots in Pueblo, Colo., and Richmond, Ky. Russia is farther behind in its effort, having destroyed only about 48 percent of a large cache of chemical weapons, according to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague, Netherlands.

An international tribunal voted last month to waive trade or other sanctions and

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

instead subject the U.S. and Russia to increasing pressure and inspections. Each country must submit plans by April 29 detailing how they will finish the job "in the shortest time possible."

A third country, Libya, also is expected to miss the deadline. The recent uprising in Libya interrupted that country's work and exposed more chemical weapons depots than were thought to exist, Williams said.

In the U.S., the Army has finished destroying chemical weapons at depots in Anniston, Ala.; Pine Bluff, Ark.; Newport, Ind.; Aberdeen, Md.; Umatilla, Ore.; and a Pacific atoll where the work started in 1986, according to the Army's Chemical Materials Agency.

That leaves a stockpile of mustard agent in Pueblo., Colo., and a mixed inventory of mustard and nerve agents at Kentucky's Blue Grass Army Depot.

The Deseret Chemical Depot in Utah once contained 44 percent of the nation's supply of chemical agents. The depot didn't just hold obsolete U.S. weapons. A supply of nerve agent seized from Nazi Germany at the end of World War II was destroyed only months ago.

McCloskey said about 1,100 URS contract workers are being let go with generous severance, sent into early retirement or transferred to other chemical weapons depots. Others took advantage of the company's college benefits to learn a new trade. A small number will remain for cleanup duty. The Deseret Chemical Depot will be turned into an Army storage site for conventional weapons.

The heavily guarded Utah incinerator sits in the middle of a desolate base of nearly 3 square miles, surrounded by barbed wire and chain-link fences in remote Rush Valley. Underground bunkers were used to store the explosive shells, mortars, land mines, projectiles, rockets, spray tanks for use by war planes and bulk storage containers.

The Deseret Chemical Depot logged 14 million man-hours destroying weapons since 1996 without a single serious accident, Pomeroy said.

Chemical weapons were introduced into warfare during World War I, killing 90,000 troops on battlefields, according to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

As far as is known, the U.S. has never fired a chemical weapon in anger, although some consider the use of the defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War a chemical attack, Williams said.

Source URL (retrieved on 10/01/2014 - 10:57am):

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