

Chemical weapon excavation over at old Defense Depot

By Tom Charlier

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Although it proved much more costly and time-consuming than anticipated, the excavation of chemical-warfare munitions from a site at the old Defense Depot Memphis has been completed, officials said Thursday.

Working under a sealed tent to contain vapors, federal contractors recovered bomb casings, tainted soil and other material left from the 1946 disposal of World War II German mustard munitions and American chemical-warfare identification kits in a field on the northwest corner of the installation in South Memphis.

The project, conducted amid a longer-term environmental cleanup at Dunn Field, was intended to help make the depot property suitable for re-use in the future. The 642-acre base was closed in 1997.

Glyde Hunt, remedial program manager at the depot, said there were no releases to the environment during the excavation.

Last September three workers became ill during the excavation. But Hunt said there was no evidence the illnesses were caused by chemical agents, adding that intense heat might have been a factor.

The project cost \$10 million, nearly double the \$5.5 million that had been projected.

Hunt attributed the higher costs to the unexpectedly long period of time required for the excavation. Because of problems associated with the heat and the installation of the va-

por-containment structure, the work lasted about 12 months instead of three, he said.

The German mustard munitions had been shipped to the United States in bomb casings and placed on trains bound for Pine Bluff, Ark.

The bombs were unloaded in Memphis after containers in three cars were found to be leaking. At the disposal site, the mustard was drained into pits, neutralized and burned and the casings buried separately.

The material excavated from the three sites at the depot disposal field included:

- All 29 of the bomb casings reported buried at the site.

- A box of 24 empty bottles that were part of chemical agent identification kits.

- More than 100,000 vials containing sodium hydroxide pills, which were used to detect chemical vapors.

- Soil containing low levels of mustard, which was removed from the neutralization pit and sent to disposal sites out of state.

Officials now will develop a further cleanup plan to deal with other wastes buried in Dunn Field.

Reginald Eskridge, a community representative who attended the completion announcement Thursday, said officials did an "excellent job" with the chemical munitions removal.

"Our community is concerned about what happens next," Eskridge said.

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