



# THE MEMPHIS DEPOT TENNESSEE

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## ADMINISTRATIVE RECORD COVER SHEET

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# Military residue from past is concern for today

By Tom Charlier  
The Commercial Appeal

Scratch the dirt beneath an old military base and there's no telling what kind of odd or dangerous souvenir will turn up.

Officials at Shelby County's two longtime installations — the Naval Support Activity Memphis in Millington and the old Defense Distribution Depot Memphis — have been served reminders of that in recent weeks.

At Millington, an airport contractor doing earth-moving work in a remote area off a runway inadvertently came across scores of 40-year-old cylinders containing ethylene oxide, a cancer-causing substance widely used in sterilizing medical equipment, pest control and chemical manufacturing. The material will be sent off for disposal at a licensed hazardous-waste facility.

At the Defense Depot, meantime, thousands of tiny vials containing a substance that officials called unidentifiable but nonhazardous were discovered at the site where a well was being drilled. The substance, believed to be an expired medical product such as eye ointment, was sent to a local land fill for disposal.

Both bases are in the midst of protracted efforts to deal with hazardous waste contamination resulting from decades-old disposal and operating practices. Although they presented no risks to the public, the recent discoveries underscored the

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## Past

potential pitfalls in cleaning up from the days of the Cold War, when the environment wasn't exactly the foremost of concerns.

"We're all paying for the sins of the past," said Glenn Kaden, environmental coordinator for the Base Realignment and Closure program at the old Defense Depot.

The depot discovery came during installation of a groundwater collection and treatment system designed to deal with contaminants found in a shallow aquifer. A network of wells has been installed to pull back a plume of trichloroethylene, a cancer-causing solvent, that has seeped off the base. The system also will retain chemicals that haven't left depot property.

The wells will pump the tainted water, which will be discharged into the Memphis sanitary sewer system for treatment at the T. E. Maxson South Treatment Plant.

Kaden said the vials were found where a contractor was installing a well in a corner of Dunn Field, a part of the depot where officials have documented the disposal of wide variety of wastes between 1954 and 1970.

Before drilling, the contractor tested the soil to determine if it had been disturbed, and,

finding that it had, set out to discover what had been buried. During the excavation, workers donned protective suits with respirators in case the buried materials were hazardous.

The vials were packed in containers similar in size to film canisters, Kaden said. They contained so little liquid that laboratory analysts couldn't identify the substance, he said, but the tests that could be conducted showed it wasn't hazardous.

"We don't know what it is. We know what it's not — it's not hazardous," Kaden said.

As part of the larger groundwater cleanup effort at the depot, crews will excavate areas where records indicate chemical warfare agents might exist. They include residues of German mustard bombs that were destroyed and where chemical agent identification sets were buried.

At the Millington facility, 135 cylinders of ethylene oxide gas have been recovered. Markings on the containers indicate they were filled in 1957 and 1958, according to a report issued by the base. The report said the contractor had been advised of potential hazards before the work began.

The metal cylinders were removed by a Navy contractor and taken to a fenced and locked storage site permitted by the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation. Some of the cylinders are in poor condition, and the gas they hold will be transferred to sound containers before being shipped off-site for disposal.

According to the base report, the ethylene oxide presented no danger to the public because it dissipates rapidly and is destroyed by sunlight, moisture and bacteria.

Base officials could find no records documenting the disposal of the cylinders or indicating why the ethylene oxide was buried rather than recycled.

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