Documents confirm soldiers were exposed to nuclear tests in Australia

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Information recently unearthed in Australia has proven that the British and Australian governments intentionally used soldiers and civilians as human guinea pigs in nuclear tests conducted during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Surviving veterans of Britain's tests in Australia are using newly discovered documents in continuing efforts to win compensation for their injuries. Just four years ago, in 1997, the British government defeated a damages case at the European Court of Human Rights by insisting that there was no plan or intention to expose the 16,000 Australian troops and civilians and 22,000 British servicemen involved to harmful radiation.

In May this year, Sue Rabbitt Roff, an anti-nuclear activist and researcher from the University of Dundee in Scotland, challenged the official claim. She released an October 1956 document she had found in the Australian National Archives concerning the *Buffalo* trials, conducted at Maralinga, 850km north west of Adelaide. It listed 24 Australian servicemen who were deliberately given excessive doses of radiation in so-called protective clothing experiments.

"This puts the lie to the British government's claim that they never used humans for guinea pig-type experiments in nuclear weapons trials in Australia—a claim they made very strongly and ferociously in the court at Strasbourg in 1997," Rabbitt Roff commented.

For the 1956 *Buffalo* tests, the British military established an "indoctrinee" force of 280 soldiers, including 175 from Britain, 100 from Australia and five from New Zealand, who were "indoctrinated" on the effects of atomic weapons. For one test, known as the *One Tree* explosion, they were stationed eight kilometres from the blast, and then taken to the target point over the next two days, to be covered in dust.

In response to her information, the British Ministry of Defence eventually confirmed that trials had taken place, involving 24 men wearing three different types of protective clothing. Nevertheless, a spokesman insisted that the men were not guinea pigs, offering the absurd argument that the clothing was tested, not the soldiers wearing it. "They were told of the purpose of the experiment and were closely monitored to ensure [they were not] exposed to dangerous levels of radiation."

Sheila Gray, secretary of the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, told ABC radio: "It is true, they were not guinea pigs. They were sacrificial lambs. I have about 500 death certificates in my house at the moment. When you're talking of 30, 40 and even 100, with the same illness there is no coincidence. The only thing they have in common is they all served at the British nuclear tests. Every time we think we can't discover more, something else crawls out of the cupboard."

Following Australian media interest in Rabbitt Roff's information, another anti-nuclear activist, Ann Munslow-Davies, released about 50 classified documents given to her by a senior official in the nuclear program. They revealed plans to expose up to 1,750 troops to atomic blasts from September 1959 onward in *Operation Lighthouse*.

One document, headed *Operation Lighthouse, Secret Guard,* states: "The Australian Services are desirous that during the *Lighthouse* series, an indoctrination force of approximately 1,750 troops take part in an exercise involving construction of a trench system (upwind from ground zero) including command post, troop accommodation and weapon pits and that the system be occupied during the explosion. All participating troops to be blood counted before arrival on site."

Munslow-Davies pointed to the significance of such blood tests, which indicated medical experimentation. Another document, the minutes of the working party running the tests, stated that biomedical checks would be included, to "study the effects of heat and blast on men at rest and wrapped in a blanket designed for use in the tropics". The *Lighthouse* series did not proceed, but the documents suggest that similar experiments would have taken place in the earlier tests.

The Australian Department of Veterans Affairs is still refusing the soldiers involved access to pensions and health care given to war veterans, claiming that service in the blast zone was not hazardous. The veterans must not only have a

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radiation-linked cancer, but the onus is on them to prove it was contracted during the blasts. They have been consistently denied funding for medical tests to determine the extent of their radiation exposure.

Typical of the health consequences suffered by victims of the blasts is Rick Johnstone, a former airforce mechanic and head of the Australian Nuclear Veterans Association. After spending 11 years in the courts, he became the only veteran to win a court case against the Australian government. He has heart disease, vascular disorders, leukaemia, numerous carcinomas, calcified tendons and prematurely aged skin and sweat glands. His sons had birth defects—one did not develop any teeth and had chronic skin problems, while another had a harelip and an irregular palate.

The British government now faces another legal action from the widow of a pilot who flew through the mushroom cloud from a nuclear test in 1958. Shirley Denson, whose husband Eric committed suicide after years of depression, has just won legal aid to sue the government. Two New Zealand veterans are suing the New Zealand government and 30 Australian veterans are pursuing a compensation claim against the Australian government.

The British tests were conducted between 1952 and 1963, first at the Monte Bello Islands off Western Australia and then at Emu Field and Maralinga in the South Australian desert. At Maralinga, Britain secretly moved from atomic explosions to detonating thermonuclear devices.

The tests were a bid to catch up militarily with the United States after World War II and with the Soviet Union, after the USSR exploded its first nuclear weapon in August 1949. Britain built test sites in Australia after the US Congress passed the 1946 McMahon Act to outlaw the passing of classified atomic information to any other country.

Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies was willing to provide whatever the British government wanted, with virtually no questions asked. He gave permission for the tests without even consulting his cabinet, let alone parliament. Responding to a parliamentary question in 1953, he declared that the tests would produce "no conceivable injury to life, limb or property" and that they were essential to the "defence of the free world".

One result of the tests was an amendment to the McMahon Act, which enabled Britain to obtain access to testing sites in Nevada. "Minor" tests, codenamed *Vixen*, continued at Maralinga, however. These trials have left almost 24 kilos of plutonium, with a half-life of 24,000 years, scattered around a huge area.

In addition to troops and civilian workers, local Aborigines suffered deliberate contamination. They often went barefoot, wore few clothes, and slept on the ground, making them even more susceptible to radiation than clothed troops.

On one occasion in 1953, a blast known as *Totem* precipitated a poisonous cloud trailing fine, sticky dust that drifted over Aborigines living around Wallatinna and Wellbourne Hill stations. The cloud's smell made people vomit. It was so concentrated that air force crews could locate it visually at night. Various illnesses ensued and one boy went blind. Officials later stated that scientific predictions had underestimated the bomb's contamination by a factor of three and its power by a factor of two.

In 1957, Charlie and Edie Milpuddie and their two children strayed into a bomb crater before a decontamination team found them. The father and son registered as radioactive. The mother and daughter were not checked. They were simply showered in the team's caravan, put in a jeep and driven 200km away. The Australian Minister of Supply ordered their hunting dogs shot, as they had not been decontaminated. Edie Milpuddie was pregnant. At Yalata, she gave birth to a dead child. Her next child was born four years later, and died aged two, of a brain tumour. No follow up medical checks were performed on the family until 1985, 24 years later. By that time, Charlie Milpuddie was dead.

Facing mounting evidence of harm to servicemen and Aborigines, as well as long-term contamination of wide areas, the Australian Labor government established a limited Royal Commission in 1985, but even its recommendations for decontamination of test sites and some compensation for radioactivity victims were largely ignored by successive Australian and British governments.

An infamous 1956 letter by Alan Butement, an original member of the Australian Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee, summed up the government policy toward the victims, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Denouncing an Australian native patrol officer for raising concerns about the exposure of Aboriginal people to radioactivity, Butement accused him of "a lamentable lack of balance" in "apparently placing the affairs of a handful of natives above those of the British Commonwealth of Nations".

The Cold War race for nuclear supremacy may have ended, but this outlook—insisting that the strategic military interests of Britain and the Western powers must be protected at all costs—continues in the official cover-up of what took place at Maralinga.

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