

Cover-up of British nuclear testing in the Pacific exposed

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A recently uncovered British government paper provides evidence of a 70-year official cover-up of the consequences of the United Kingdom's thermonuclear tests in the Pacific after World War II.

London human rights law firm McCue Jury & Partners has obtained documentary material that it claims exposes as lies decades of official assurances denying radioactive fallout and exposure. Data from the previously suppressed paper suggests key evidence was buried in critical hearings and court cases.

In 1957–58, during what was called Operation Grapple, Britain deployed some 14,000 servicemen, supported by 276 Fijian troops and two New Zealand Navy frigates, to Malden Island and Kiritimati (Christmas) Island in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. These are now part of Kiribati, which has a population of about 138,000 and is spread across 33 atolls, halfway between Hawaii and Australia.

The UK conducted nine atmospheric nuclear explosions involving atomic and hydrogen bombs. The program culminated in the UK becoming the third recognised nation to possess thermonuclear weapons and saw the restoration of the nuclear Special Relationship with the United States in the form of the 1958 US–UK Mutual Defence Agreement.

The US also carried out 24 nuclear tests near Kiritimati in 1962 in Operation Dominic.

Through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, McCue Jury has obtained a 2014 internal report by the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE), part of the UK Ministry of Defence, (MoD) titled *Review of environmental monitoring data for Christmas Island (CI) 1957–1958*.

Writing on Substack on March 20, Oli Troen, a senior associate acting for test veterans and their families, argues the document points to a long-running institutional effort to deny the extent of radioactive fallout at Kiritimati.

The paper reveals that environmental data from the 1950s in fact showed alarming fallout levels in areas where troops were stationed and indigenous populations lived. Elevated radiation readings were taken at Port Camp, where Royal Navy personnel were based during one detonation. None of

this had ever been disclosed. Troen writes that officials classified the paper as a “draft” and then buried it.

For decades, the British ruling elite maintained that there was no dangerous fallout. The MoD claimed that few people were exposed to any radiation or contamination and that studies had shown little or no health effects. Successive governments dismissed repeated claims for compensation.

Veterans' campaigner Tom Watson, a former Labour Party MP, posted in his March 19 newsletter, under a heading “A bomb in the Pacific, a lie in Whitehall,” a litany of occasions when the issue was raised directly in the House of Commons and with ministers. Spokesmen for successive governments—Labour and Conservative—had flatly declared there were no significant health risks to veterans. In 1997 ministers said surveys had found “no radioactive contamination which would present a hazard to the inhabitants of Christmas Island.”

The 2014 paper, however, states that factual data “refutes claims made by AWE, and by extension, HMG (Her Majesty's Government) in the public domain.” It cautions that “if the importance of this data is identified by others, there is potential for substantial detriment to the reputation of AWE, MoD and HMG.” It specifically expresses concerns about “adversarial lawyers” obtaining the evidence through a Freedom of Information request.

The report was prepared while veterans were pursuing claims in the War Pension and Armed Forces Compensation Tribunal. It warned that the data “could potentially be used to challenge the validity of statements made by AWE, MoD and HMG regarding the occurrence of fallout” and could “potentially overturn the accepted and previously reported information provided by HMG in judicial proceedings.”

Operation Grapple was a crime carried out by British imperialism to further its interests. The British ruling class sought nuclear status at the expense of poisoning the Pacific and its people. The tests were bound up with boosting the geopolitical position of Britain as its empire and economic strength waned by proving to Washington that Britain had a place among the nuclear powers.

Several inconclusive scientific inquiries helped whitewash the tests. A 2010 British government study concluded that the fallout did not reach concentrations that could affect the surrounding environment. An analysis of illnesses among veterans of Operation Grapple and other weapons tests produced statistics that proved difficult to interpret.

A 2005 study by New Zealand's Massey University examined 50 sailors who observed the tests from ships. It found that DNA repair mechanisms in the veterans were "not deficient," but blood tests for chromosome translocations discovered a statistically higher rate of certain abnormalities among the group.

British veterans and island communities have long claimed the testing program exposed thousands to radiation and living with lasting illness. Some veterans believe that cancers, bone problems and genetic defects passed on to subsequent generations are consequences of their radiation exposure.

A group of 1,011 British ex-servicemen were denied permission to sue the MoD by the Supreme Court in March 2012, on the technical grounds that too much time had elapsed under the terms of the Limitation Act 1980. Two veterans in 1993 took a claim over their health defects to the European Court of Human Rights, which rejected it in a 5–4 split decision. An appeal to the court to reopen the case was declined in 2000.

At the time of the tests, about 260 people lived on Kiritimati, working coconut plantations. According to Troen, "Survivors and their descendants continue to suffer with a myriad of injuries, from thyroid cancers and fertility problems to children born with disabilities. Yet the UK has offered nothing: no compensation, no medical support, no environmental clean-up."

Researcher Christopher Hill wrote in the *Diplomat* on October 30, 2024, that one of the detonations "cracked the walls of [people's] homes and smashed their doors and furniture." Coconut trees were damaged and many wild birds were blinded by the flash.

Teeua Tekonau, chair of Kiritimati's Association of Atomic Cancer Patients, told Hill: "Many, many died of cancer... And many women had babies that died within three months." People who drank from coconuts grown on the island become sick. Teeua's younger brother, Takieta, died of leukemia at the age of two in November 1963.

In January 2015, Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama announced his government would offer a paltry \$F9,855 (\$US4,450) in compensation payments to the 24 surviving Fijian servicemen who participated in Operation Grapple.

The law firm McCue Jury and Watson has called for a full investigation. Troen notes that the legal implications of the disclosure and cover-up "are serious and wide-ranging." The

evidence could lead to a revival of veterans' civil and War Pension Tribunal claims, previously decided on evidence that the MoD knew to be false. Criminal offences could apply to officials involved in the cover-up.

The veterans, many now in their 90s, are demanding a Special Tribunal to establish the truth and fast-track their claims before more of them die waiting. They are seeking criminal investigations into those responsible and a public inquiry. They also insist the government must consider the implications for the people of Kiritimati.

In the wake of the criminal World War II bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Pacific islands were treated as expendable nuclear laboratories. Between 1946 and 1958, the US carried out 67 atmospheric and underwater nuclear explosions and biological weapons tests in the Marshall Islands. France, in defiance of intense local opposition, conducted 193 tests in French Polynesia from 1966–1996.

Throughout the Cold War, the imperialist powers sought to assert their strategic domination against the USSR with the construction of potentially catastrophic nuclear weapons. The colonial territories in the Pacific were cynically used as dumping grounds for radioactive contamination, while workers and island populations bore the health, environmental, and social consequences.

This history is a stark reminder that nuclear weapons remain fundamental instruments of predatory state power. The entire Indo-Pacific region is being re-militarised by US imperialism and its allies in preparation for war against China. Last October Trump announced the resumption of US nuclear weapons testing, escalating the threat of a nuclear war.



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