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The Task Force Commander— Wilfred Oulton



Grapple Task Force Commander Air Vice Marshall Wilfred Oulton

Source: UK Government.

In February 1956, Air Vice Marshall Wilfred Oulton was appointed as Task Force Commander for Britain's hydrogen bomb testing program. His commanding officer, Air Vice Marshall Lees, told him 'to go out and drop a bomb somewhere in the Pacific and take a picture of it with a Brownie camera'.¹

As they prepared for the operation, the British military were well aware of the environmental and political fallout of the Bravo test and US testing in the Marshall Islands. On the very day that he found out about his job, Oulton was told 'we can't have another incident like the American trouble at Bikini' and presented with a bundle of documents to browse in preparation for the task:

Extracts from American journals, notes on visits and so on, including reports on the US test in which Japanese fishermen were injured by fallout and on the wave of shrill criticism which ensued.²

For Oulton, who had joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1929 and gained rapid promotion during the Second World War, the timeline to prepare for Britain's hydrogen bomb test was daunting. At the time of his appointment, he had no staff or offices and an uncertain budget. Within a year, however, he had to establish a military base and scientific facilities on an atoll thousands of kilometres away in the central Pacific.

The Task Force chose the name 'Grapple' for the operation. The image of a cormorant mounting a four-pronged grappling hook was used as a logo, decorating specially made ties that were distributed to headquarters staff. Each prong of the grapple symbolised one of the four key institutions involved in the deployment to Christmas Island: the British Army, the RAF, Royal Navy (RN) and the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) at Aldermaston.

Christmas Island—known today as Kiritimati—lies 232 kilometres north of the Equator, and 2,160 kilometres south of Honolulu, Hawai'i. With 388 square kilometres of land and a lagoon shoreline extending for nearly 50 kilometres, it has the largest land area of any coral atoll in the world.

1 Wilfred Oulton: *Christmas Island Cracker—an account of the planning and execution of the British thermonuclear bomb tests 1957* (Thomas Harmsworth, London, 1987), p. 7.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 24.

A small airstrip—known as Casady Field—was built on Christmas Island during the Second World War, with a US military contingent deployed to hold the island against Japanese forces. Allied governments were concerned that the Japanese, advancing eastwards across Micronesia, might construct their own airstrip on the atoll to attack vital transport routes between Hawai‘i and Australia.

In 1956, the island was an isolated outpost of the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC), which spread over a vast distance in the central Pacific. Britain had declared a protectorate over the Gilbert and Ellice Islands in 1892, but with the discovery of valuable phosphate on Banaba (Ocean Island) in 1900, the government transferred its administrative headquarters from the Gilbert Islands to Banaba. During the First World War, British, Australian and New Zealand troops clashed with German forces in the Pacific territories, and London soon began to combine a range of Pacific dependencies in one jurisdiction. W. David McIntyre, in his history of the collapse of British power in the Pacific, notes:

This process started on 10 November 1915 when, by Order in Council, the protectorate became the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. To this was added Ocean Island on 27 January 1916, along with the northern Line Islands that had been annexed in 1888, which included Washington (Teraina) and Fanning (Tabuaeran), where a trans-Pacific cable station was to be built. Later in 1916, the Tokelau group was added; Christmas Island (Kiritimati) followed in 1919. The new Crown Colony, known in Whitehallspeak as GEIC, then sprawled over 5,000,000 km² of ocean.³

Before the massive military build-up in the mid-1950s, the Line Islands had a very small population. As one of three archipelagos in the GEIC, the Line Islands are nearly 3,300 kilometres from Tarawa, the administrative capital of the colony, where Resident Commissioner Michael Louis Bernacchi was based.⁴ Some of the Line Islands hosted Gilbertese plantation workers transferred from the Gilbert Islands (the easternmost archipelago of the colony). Christmas, Jarvis, Washington and Fanning

3 W. David McIntyre: *Winding up the British Empire in the Pacific Islands*, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014), p. 15.

4 Michael Louis Bernacchi CMG OBE (1911–1983) had previously served as a Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Navy (RN) and as a Colonial Office district officer in Malaya. During the war, as a young naval officer, he was engaged to Elaine Chapman of Navua, Fiji (Engagement notices, *The Argus*, Melbourne, 4 May 1943, p. 6). Chapman encouraged Bernacchi to consider the Pacific islands as the site for his postwar career—she was the granddaughter of Sir Maynard Hedstrom, founder of Morris Hedstrom and Company (the largest trading corporation in Fiji, with subsidiaries in Samoa and Tonga).

islands all hosted plantations managed by Burns Philp & Company or other smaller firms, under the occasional supervision of Colonial Office staff.

The plantation on Christmas Island was first established by French priest Emmanuel Rougier, who leased the island from 1913. Rougier planted more than 800,000 coconut palms on the island, which formed the basis of the copra plantation staffed by Gilbertese workers. However, during the Second World War, his nephew Paul, who managed the plantation, was a collaborator with the Vichy regime in occupied France.⁵ In response, the United States and United Kingdom assumed joint control of the island in 1940. By the mid-1950s, the Gilbertese plantation workers were monitored by a New Zealander, Percy Roberts, the only official of European heritage on the island until thousands of British personnel arrived.

The Micronesian atolls were alien terrain for the English and even for the Fiji islanders deployed to support the British operation. Fijian soldier Josefa Vueti later described the low-lying islands as starkly different from the fertile hills and river valleys of his homeland:

This island had no hills. It was flat all around, and the only trees there were coconut palms. There was just a small area that was the highest point a few feet high. In the middle of the island were some bushes where there was a small pool of water. There were *via* [a variety of wild bush taro] growing there. Our staple foods like *tavioka* [cassava] and *dalo* [taro]—there are none there, although we once tried to plant some vegetables there.

Despite this, the place had lot of seafood. There was fish, *lairo* [land crabs] and *urau* [crayfish]. Every week, we always used to eat these. There were *lairo* crawling everywhere, all the time. Even though the dining place had food and lots of it, we Fijian soldiers always went to the sea to fish. It was really easy getting fish from the sea. Everything was there: *urau*, *kawakawa*. Name whatever fish you wanted—you got it. It was very easy. You really did not need a proper spear—you could use a piece of iron. We never worried about food there, there was so much of it.⁶

5 For portraits of Emmanuel and Paul Rougier, see Eric Bailey: *The Christmas Island Story* (Stacey International, London, 1977), pp. 43–52.

6 Interview with Josefa Vueti, Suva, Fiji, 1998. For full interview see Losena Salabula, Josua Namoce and Nic Maclellan: *Kirisimasi—Na Sotia kei na Lewe ni Mataivalu e Wai ni Viti e na vakatovotovo iyanagi nei Peritania mai Kirisimasi* (Pacific Concerns Resource Centre, Suva, 1999), pp. 44–47.

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In his 1987 memoir *Christmas Island Cracker*, Oulton presents a boy's own view of the challenges facing his Task Force: establishing a weather forecasting service over extensive areas of ocean; building navigation, radio and communication systems on neighbouring islands; constructing fuel tanks and a water distillation system; establishing a radiation monitoring system across thousands of kilometres from Australia to Hawai'i and Tahiti; setting up a network of airport transit stops from the United Kingdom through Canada and west coast USA, then on to Hickam Air Force Base in Hawai'i and Christmas Island.

Oulton was under pressure to get the test program underway as soon as possible, because of growing international pressure for a moratorium on the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere.⁷ In mid-1956, the Task Force prioritised the rapid upgrade of facilities on Christmas Island. But this posed logistic nightmares: could engineers be deployed halfway around the world to build an army base and airstrip before the global testing moratorium could be finalised?

Naval staff on the Grapple Task Force began to assemble a flotilla of Navy and civilian vessels to transport equipment from the United Kingdom: graders, bulldozers, fire engines, concrete laying plant and more. The light aircraft carrier HMS *Warrior* left Portsmouth on 2 February 1957 to serve as flagship for the operation, supported by other ships from Britain and New Zealand.

To get started, Oulton looked for military troops already deployed in the Asia-Pacific region. The 55 Field Squadron of 28 Royal Engineers Regiment had remained in Korea after the Korean War, when the rest of the regiment returned to England. These engineers had hoped for some leave at home after wartime service, but Oulton decided to give them bad news—they must travel from Korea directly to the central Pacific:

The timescale is very tight and I think we could save some time by sending 55 Field Squadron and some supporting units direct from Korea to Christmas Island—except possibly for a few compassionate cases. They could get cracking building a camp in the port area, ready for the main

⁷ This debate culminated in a moratorium on testing between 1958 and 1961 and, ultimately, the 1963 United Nations Partial Test Ban Treaty: *Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapons Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Underwater*, 5 August 1963.

force to move in and start work without delay. Of course, they have as yet no idea that they will not be coming home on leave. I think it would be sensible and prudent to go to Korea to break the news and sell them the idea that it would be fun to try out the charms of a coral island!⁸

The engineers were not impressed, as they had just been given permission to purchase overcoats and warmer clothing to cope with the Korean winter!

The first Grapple team reached Christmas Island on 19 June 1956. Cargo ships from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary arrived a few days after, and the troop ship *Devenish* arrived with the Royal Engineers from Korea. More vessels arrived in July and the following month HMS *Messina* arrived to serve as the Task Force headquarters (the ship was also equipped with desalination equipment and freezers to provide fresh water and food for the troops ashore).

By the end of the year, work was progressing on the core infrastructure, according to a December 1956 report from the colony's Resident Commissioner Michael Bernacchi:

Rapid progress is being made in the preparation of the base at Christmas Island for Britain's nuclear test next year. Men of the Royal Engineers, helped by Gilbertese workers of Christmas Island Plantation, have already completed 25 miles of good roads, an auxiliary airstrip and a 7,000 foot runway for bombing aircraft.

With the cooperation of the Royal and merchant Navies, many thousands of tons of heavy equipment and stores have been landed at Christmas. Transport Command of the Royal Air Force are maintaining a regular service between Christmas Island and Honolulu with Hastings aircraft, flying in mail and fresh food. The Royal Navy has also landed parties at Malden Island, 400 miles to the south of Christmas, where a forward airstrip will be constructed.⁹

8 Wilfred Oulton: *Christmas Island Cracker*, op. cit., p. 66.

9 Office of the Resident Commissioner: *Headquarters Information Note*, No. 52, 14 December 1956, Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. F76/6/32 (1957) p. 3. PAMBU document AU PMB Doc 493.



THE MAIN CAMP, CHRISTMAS ISLAND, PACIFIC

Postcard of tent city on Christmas Island

Source: Reprinted from *Kirisimasi* (courtesy Pacific Concerns Resource Centre, Suva).

Malden is uninhabited, low-lying and arid, with sparse vegetation. It lacked even basic infrastructure until the Royal Engineers landed ashore in 1956 to construct a small airstrip and fly in equipment for the nuclear testing program.

The decision to conduct the Grapple tests at Malden Island was kept secret from the public for many months. The description of Malden as ‘a forward base and instrumentation site’ was declassified in January 1957, but the Ministry of Supply decreed that ‘Malden should not, in classified or unclassified material, be referred to as a target island’.¹⁰

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Despite the attempts at secrecy, public concern was sparked by the growing activity on Christmas Island and related Air Force and scientific visits to other Pacific territories. For the Colonial Office, it was important to notify key authorities as soon as possible, in order to dampen down protest. The official British historian of the tests acknowledged:

¹⁰ ‘Atomic Weapons Trials Executive—Operation Grapple’, Memo from D.A. Lovelock, Ministry of Supply, marked ‘Confidential/UK eyes only’, 22 January 1957. Grapex (57)/P.1.

Since Castle Bravo, international protests against testing were an ever present political factor and American experience showed that some local opposition to testing in the Pacific and the use of certain islands was likely.¹¹

The growing public awareness of the British hydrogen bomb program was causing problems for Commonwealth allies like New Zealand, which administered the Polynesian territories of Western Samoa, Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue.

After the formal announcement of the tests by UK Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden, Western Samoa petitioned the United Nations Trusteeship Council to halt the operation (at the time, Samoa was still a dependent trust territory of New Zealand).¹²

Vigorous interventions by Sir Leslie Monroe, New Zealand's representative on the Trusteeship Council, rejected claims by the Soviet delegate that the tests threatened the health of the people of Western Samoa. After debate, the Trusteeship Council rejected the petition by a vote of 9–1, with only Russia voting in favour. The resolution did, however, assure the people of Western Samoa that the United Kingdom would take the necessary precautions 'to guard against possible danger to persons or property'.¹³

In late 1956, New Zealand newspapers carried short items suggesting that the tests would not actually take place on Christmas Island, but over another atoll. During a session of the Cook Islands Legislative Council in late October 1956, the visiting representative of the NZ Government George Walsh MP stated that the test area would be situated many miles north of Christmas Island.

This sparked widespread commentary in the Pacific media, given that the only British-controlled atolls north or west of Christmas Island were inhabited. Gilbertese were working on a Washington Island plantation run by Burns Philp & Company. Fanning had an important trans-Pacific

11 Lorna Arnold: *Britain and the H-bomb* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2001), p. 101.

12 Telegram from High Commissioner for Western Samoa to Minister of External Affairs, 8 and 12 May 1956, cited in John Crawford, *op. cit.*

13 The UN Trusteeship Council debate was widely reported in the Pacific: 'UN will not stop Pacific H-bomb test', *Fiji Times*, 23 July 1956, p. 1; *NZ Evening Post*, 21 June 1956; *Dominion*, 21 July 1956; *Pacific Islands Monthly*, March 1957.

telegraph cable station run by Cable & Wireless Ltd, managed by Tong Ting Hai (a Chinese refugee who was father of a future President of the Republic of Kiribati).¹⁴

For this reason, there was (accurate) media speculation that the tests would be held to the south, not the north, of Christmas Island. In December 1956, the regional news magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly* reported:

An air of mystery surrounds the exact point of the intended British atom bomb tests next year. It is, of course, well known that the base of operations and the place from which the bomb dropping aircraft will take off is Christmas atoll, in the northern Line Islands. But some time ago, a senior boffin associated with the tests let drop, while visiting New Zealand on high-level talks, that the actual explosion would take place over another atoll. This being the case, the only possible other atolls are Jarvis, Malden or Starbuck, as being of sufficient distance from inhabited islands.¹⁵

The speculation increased concern in the Cook Islands, as the main inhabited atoll to the south of Christmas Island was Tongareva (Penrhyn Island), located 550 kilometres to the south of Malden. At the time, about 1,600 people were living on the islands of Rakahanga, Manihiki and Penrhyn in the northern Cook Islands. *Pacific Islands Monthly* reported that ‘a section of public opinion in the Cook Islands was campaigning against the possible dangers to the inhabitants of the northern Cooks’.¹⁶

Customary leaders on the Rarotonga Island Council soon submitted a report to the Cook Islands Legislative Council, expressing concern about the proposed British tests on Christmas Island and asking ‘that the testing area be situated at some greater distance than the Cook Islands’.¹⁷

14 Tong Ting Hai arrived in the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands as a refugee from Hong Kong after the Second World War. Tong married an i-Kiribati woman, Nei Keke Randolph, and fathered six children. His third child, Anote Tong, went on to serve for three terms as President of the Republic of Kiribati between 2003 and 2016 (personal communication to author from President Anote Tong, November 2015). For a vivid description of the Cable & Wireless station and its ‘Chinese headman Tong Ting Hai’, see Des Kinnersley: ‘Life on a remote Telegraph Cable Station in the early 1960s’, *Overseas Telecommunications Veterans Association newsletter*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, June 2002, pp. 93–95.

15 ‘H-bomb tests—North, South, East or West of Christmas Island?’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, volume XXVII, No. 5, December 1956, p. 55.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Cook Islands*, paper number 3, 1956. See David Stone: ‘The awesome glow in the sky: the Cook Islands and the French nuclear tests’, *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 1967, pp. 154–155.

Before the first test on Malden, RN and Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) vessels visited Rakahanga and warned inhabitants not to drink water from wells and roof tanks or to eat fish and crops. British naval vessels later transited through Penrhyn where a weather station was established and reefs were blasted for shipping access (leading to reports of the disease ciguatera at the time of the tests).

Today, some Cook islanders are concerned that they may have been exposed to fallout. As a 10-year-old girl, Tauariki Meyer was on the beach at Rakahanga in 1957 when she saw a brilliant flash across the sky. Tau later reported that the ground shook, the lagoon changed colour and fish floated up dead. Decades later, Tau Meyer is confined to a wheelchair with a diagnosis of spinocerebellar ataxia, a genetic condition that causes immobility and progressive degeneration.¹⁸

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The official response to debate in the colonies was to clamp down on information that might cause public alarm. A meeting of the Atomic Weapons Trials Executive in December 1956 noted: 'A large build-up of publicity was not wanted and material for release to the press had to be spread as evenly as possible.' The chairman of the meeting agreed: 'publicity must be kept under strict control.'¹⁹

To feed the press with the official line, the Ministry of Supply pushed other government departments to generate 'innocuous' stories for Christmas 1956, featuring military personnel serving on Christmas Island. Brigadier Ivor Jehu, the Ministry's head of public relations, wrote to the Colonial Office stating:

In order to enable normal service publicity about troops in overseas stations, and particularly Christmas fare material, to be issued without playing up H-bomb activities, and also to discourage speculative stories arising from the press possibly contacting personnel returning from Christmas Island, we consider it urgently necessary to get out innocuous material about the area.²⁰

18 'Fallout from nuclear tests in the Pacific continues', *Cook Islands Herald*, cited in *Britain's Pacific Nukes*: pacificnukes.wordpress.com/cook-is/.

19 Minutes of the December 1956 meeting, Atomic Weapons Trials Executive, St Giles Court, 12 December 1956, p. 2. CO1036/280.

20 Letter from Brigadier Ivor Jehu, Ministry of Supply, London to H. Hall, Colonial Office, London, 7 December 1956. CO1036/280.

Jehu created a range of propaganda initiatives to influence public opinion in Britain, at a time when there was growing debate about government proposals for civil defence measures to protect the population against Russian hydrogen bomb attacks.

Staff at the Grapple Task Force headquarters organised for toy manufacturers to donate a large number of toys, and troops deployed on Christmas Island were ordered to write out individual labels with Christmas greetings for children. Nearly 2,000 toys were then distributed to hospitals on Christmas Day 1956, bearing the troops' messages from the central Pacific. The exercise was widely publicised through the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), newsreel films for cinemas and articles in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Sketch*.²¹

When a copy of the December 1956 *Pacific Islands Monthly* article was forwarded to London, the Ministry of Supply called on the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office to monitor the media in Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Ministry officials urgently requested that copies of any press reports about the hydrogen bomb tests in the Pacific be sent to London.²²

Despite efforts to spin the media, journalists began to comment about potential hazards from the looming tests. This was even true in the South Pacific colonies, where the press began to reflect the significant popular opposition to the proposed testing program to the north. In February 1957, the Indo-Fijian newspaper *Jagriti* editorialised:

People living in the vicinity of the islands where the atom and hydrogen bombs have been tested are afflicted with hazardous diseases. Full information has not been given so far about them. Nations engaged in testing these bombs in the Pacific should realise the value of the lives of the people settled in this part of the world. They too are human beings, not 'guinea pigs'.²³

21 Joan Smith: *Clouds of Deceit—the deadly legacy of Britain's bomb tests* (Faber and Faber, London, 1985), p. 84.

22 File note, 9 January 1957. CO1036/280.

23 Editorial, *Jagriti*, 20 February 1957. Cited in Brij V. Lal: *Broken waves—a history of the Fiji islands in the 20th century*, Pacific Islands Monograph Series, No. 11 (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1992), p. 158.

The *Fiji Times*, the main English-language newspaper in the British colony, gave front page coverage to international protests against the nuclear tests. An April 1957 editorial in the *Fiji Times* noted:

Nobody knows how many people will die or how many children will be born mentally or physically deformed because of atomic or hydrogen bomb tests, past or future. That is why there is so much disquiet in so many countries and among so many peoples of varying political beliefs about the continuation of such tests by the United States and Russia and about the forthcoming tests on Christmas Island ...

The free nations should seek foreign agreement with Russia to curtail or suspend completely all tests until their effects on the future of mankind can be more accurately assessed. To continue with indiscriminate and unrestricted tests in the present state of uncertain knowledge will be irresponsible folly indeed.²⁴

The preparations for the testing program were also raising concern amongst leading businessmen with interests in the Pacific islands, who were worried about their properties and workforce—like James Burns of Burns Philp & Company.

24 Editorial: 'Bomb tests', *Fiji Times*, 4 April 1957.

This text is taken from *Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-bomb tests*, by Nic Maclellan, published 2017 by ANU Press,
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