

8

The sailor—Paul Ah Poy



Paul Ah Poy (standing left) and sailors from HMS *Warrior* and HMNZS *Rotoiti*, May 1957

Source: Courtesy Paul Ah Poy.

Today, Paul Ah Poy often wears sunglasses to ward off the glare of the sun and bright lights. They also hide the terrible sadness in his eyes that comes from seeing his contemporaries slowly dying off, one by one, while waiting for the British Government to address their claims.

Paul was born on 1 June 1936 at Namatakula on the Coral Coast of Fiji's main island, Viti Levu. His father came from Canton (Guangdong), China, while his mother was born in Nawaisomo village on the island of Beqa. A veteran of the Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (FRNVR) and a merchant seafarer for most of his life, Paul spent many years on the ocean. Today, he is a landlubber, living in retirement with his wife in Suva, the capital of Fiji.

Still active at 81, he is President of the Fiji Nuclear Veterans Association and one of the leading campaigners seeking justice for the survivors of the British nuclear testing program. He speaks quietly, but with understated passion, about the legacy of his service on Christmas Island, which began months before the first British personnel arrived.

Paul's life as a sailor began in 1955, when he joined the navy at age 18:

I had just come out of school. There was not much jobs around and they were recruiting at that time for the Malayan campaign. We were excited to be able to travel overseas, so quite a few of us came up and joined the Navy—that was back in 1955.

In 1956, the New Zealand survey ship HMNZS *Lachlan* called into Suva to pick up a couple of scientists who'd flown in from Britain. There was room for two extra sailors. Together with another Fijian sailor Luke Qereqeretabua, I was one of those that got picked up to travel on the *Lachlan* to go to Christmas Island for the survey in preparation for the nuclear testing program.

I was an engineer rating, so I worked in the boiler room until we got to Christmas Island. When we arrived, I was given the opportunity to go onto the island. Since I was the youngest on the motorboat, I was the first one to jump onto dry land and I was quite happy about that.¹

Given his experience on the *Lachlan*, Paul was chosen to join the second FRNVR naval contingent posted to Christmas Island in 1957.² Over the next 15 months, he witnessed seven nuclear detonations during Operation Grapple:

1 This chapter is based on a series of interviews and discussions with Paul Ah Poy over 20 years, between 1997 and 2017. Unless otherwise noted, the direct quotes are drawn from an interview in Suva in November 2016. For further details about Paul's history, see Losena Salabula, Josua Namoce and Nic Maclellan: *Kirisimasi—Na Sotia kei na Lewe ni Mataivalu e Wai ni Viti e na vakatovotovo iyaragi nei Peritania mai Kirisimasi* (Pacific Concerns Resource Centre, Suva, 1999), pp. 25–28.

2 Statement of Paul Ah Poy's service history, dated 27 March 1998, in author's files.

Twenty sailors and 40 soldiers in our draft flew out of Nadi on RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] Dakota and Hastings aircraft, stopping overnight at Canton Island, then on to Christmas Island the next day. On arrival, we were all billeted at HMS *Resolution*, the naval establishment at the Port Camp, also known as Port London. The soldiers—all sappers—joined their colleagues who were engaged in the unloading of ships.

I was posted with three other ratings to the Landing Craft Squadron of the Royal Marines, to man a lighter engaged in ferrying cargo from ships to the port, where they were unloaded by soldiers or civilian labourers. We would go from the dock to the supply ship anchored out in the harbour. There would be soldiers and civilians on the ship to load the craft and we would take them back onshore. Mostly, it would take one whole day for a load or maybe two loads. We'd be transporting food, vehicles and some scientific stuff—we don't know what was in the boxes. Day in and day out, we had the weekend off and then started again on the Monday.

During my first six months on the island, I witnessed three hydrogen bomb tests. After my first six months, I was promoted as coxswain and they asked me if I'd like to go for R and R leave in Hawai'i or Fiji. I chose Fiji because my parents were still alive. I came back home in January 1958 on the RFA [Royal Fleet Auxiliary] tanker *Wave Master*. I was home for two weeks, then I flew back alone on a RAAF Dakota via Canton Island.

I stayed on Christmas Island for the whole period till the completion of the testing program. I was promoted to Leading Mechanic Engineer on arrival and posted back to the lighter *Prowler* as its coxswain. I witnessed another four bomb tests during my last six months of service on the island.

* * *

In the early days of Operation Grapple, most troops at Port Camp and Main Camp were living under canvas, using rudimentary sanitation and mess facilities. Task Force Commander Wilfred Oulton acknowledged the rough living conditions:

The tented accommodation was fine although Spartan; the food was pretty bad, understandably so in the early days before cold storage became available; but the flies were appalling. There were innumerable dead land crabs everywhere, which supported a large fly population, and any gash left lying around the cook house or mess tents immediately brought a great increase in the nuisance.³

3 Wilfred Oulton: *Christmas Island Cracker—an account of the planning and execution of the British thermonuclear bomb tests 1957* (Thomas Harmsworth, London, 1987), p. 160.

The military's solution was to order an Auster aircraft from England, equipped with agricultural pesticide spraying equipment. The plane, known as *Flit* after the popular brand of insecticide, was used to douse the whole encampment and airfield every day with DDT. One British veteran recalled:

We called the pilot 'Flight Sergeant Flit.' He was so bored with the job, that if he saw anyone out in the open, he used to dive-bomb them just for a distraction from his normal routine. A DDT soaking could have not done anyone any good.⁴

Paul Ah Poy vividly recalls the experience, worrying about the long-term health effects:

During my time on Christmas Island, we had a problem with flies, I think because the population had to increase to many thousands of men. At one time, they got about 200 soldiers to spray the plantation among the tents and everything to try and get rid of the flies.

You know, when you went to have your dinner, I'd look at my soup full of flies and I'd stand up and throw it away. The second day, still the same. The third day, I followed what the other troops were doing: take out all the flies, then drink your soup, otherwise you'd starve.

So to solve the problem, they got a light plane, a propeller driven plane from the UK and it was to spray the island five days a week. When they spray the island, I mean everything on the island: truck, man, woman, children. I got sprayed by DDT five days a week. Most of us didn't know what was coming down, whether it was mist or light rain, but it was DDT—a banned substance right now. So apart from the nuclear weapon, the radiation, we got DDT added onto it.

Billie Burgess, one of two Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) volunteers providing social services on the island (see Chapter 10), also reported the drenching of her sister with DDT:

As we are writing this, we are being drenched through the gauze windows of our bungalow with DDT spray. This is very necessary to keep down the breeding of the houseflies and often proves very amusing. The other day Mary was bringing a cup of tea round to the club room from the NAAFI

4 Letter to the author from P.D. Waltham, Hampshire, United Kingdom, 30 December 1998 (copy in author's files).

[Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes], when she was caught by an Auster which was flying overhead spraying the whole area with DDT. She was well sprayed and alas, the tea was ruined.⁵

Being dosed with DDT was not the only health hazard.⁶ Limited protective gear was issued to some troops for the early tests (such as white cotton suits to reduce the risk of flash burns). Most veterans testified, however, that they never received protective gear, and served their term wearing standard army boots, shorts and shirts.

After the tests were relocated to Christmas Island in mid-1957, inhabitants of the island faced a number of pathways for the ingestion or inhalation of radioactive isotopes that might later contribute to illness. After each nuclear test, Fijian military personnel were involved in clean-up operations, such as disposing of the many birds that were maimed, blinded or killed by the nuclear explosions.

As Paul explains, the Fijians often ignored British regulations and caught seafood that may have been contaminated:

We would spend the weekend fishing, catching lobsters, land crabs etc. Fresh drinking water we collected from the abandoned water tanks—probably contaminated by all the past tests. Most of the stones we stepped on turned into ashes.

The poor sea birds flew into what was left of the trees or the side of buildings, as most were blind. At our base, we had a trawler which would go out daily to trawl for fish. All the fish they caught would be tested on a machine. If they were clean they go to the pot, the contaminated ones would be taken away.

All our water was brought in by tanker from Hawai'i and then they shipped in evaporators from the United Kingdom. We Navy guys would run the evaporator converting seawater into freshwater. I can tell you, we were churning out tonnes of fresh water from seawater, but how about the radioactive material? It probably went into the tanks with the freshwater.

5 Billie Burgess: *WVS Club Christmas Island newsletter*, January 1957 (copy in author's files).

6 Unlike most medical authorities, the UK Government denies that constant spraying with DDT is bad for the health, even though the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has not undertaken any specific assessment of the risks associated with the use of DDT in nuclear testing. See statement by Secretary of State for Defence Derek Twigg, 'Nuclear Weapons: Testing', UK House of Commons, Hansard official report, 29 October 2007, col. 977W.

I wasn't really bothered about it, because I told my colleagues 'don't drink any water, the water is no good for you'. Beer is cheap on the island, you pay four pennies for one can. Maybe that's why I'm still alive today.

The UK Government has long argued that most military personnel were located too far away from the actual detonations to be exposed to hazardous levels of radiation. Despite this, Paul Ah Poy and other military personnel were engaged in duties that increased the risk of exposure. On one occasion, he helped to dump drums of radiation-contaminated waste into the ocean:

One clear sunny day, there wasn't much traffic in the port area. A huge truck arrived alongside our vessel. The normal stevedores did not load the special cargo into the *Prowler*, our lighter. Some Air Force personnel did the loading supervised by a Royal Navy Sub-Lieutenant. My three crew and I gave a hand and I happened to sit on one of the 44-gallon drums, after all 60 drums were loaded.

All of a sudden a Marine Sergeant came and pushed me off the drum and we both fell down on the deck. I thought he was only playing. As we got up, he took me to one side and told me: 'Do you know what's your cargo, son?' I answered: 'No Sarg.' He told me: 'Since you are the Skipper of this tub, I'll let you in on what you are about to do. Don't ever sit or touch those drums, they contain nuclear waste. You will take it out to sea and dump them over the sides when we were about five miles west of the island.'

The Navy officer came to me and said: 'What say, Cox'n, are we far enough?' I answered that we were beyond the four miles limit and it's time we head for home. He said: 'Right ho, boys!' The RAF boys and our crew started rolling the drums over the side and we returned to port.

* * *

After the three unsuccessful tests on Malden Island, operations were relocated to Christmas Island, for the Grapple X test of November 1957, the first truly thermonuclear detonation. The build-up for Grapple X involved 2,338 personnel (597 sailors from the Royal Navy [RN]; 625 soldiers from the British army; 1,009 RAF aircrew and 107 Atomic Weapons Research Establishment [AWRE] scientific and technical personnel).

Grapple X brought new routines for the naval personnel. A preliminary duty was to move the Gilbertese labourers and their families from their homes onto ships of the Grapple flotilla (precautions that were abandoned for later tests during the Grapple Z series in 1958). Meanwhile, thousands of military personnel would be lined up, backs to the blast, as Paul details:

On a normal test day, weather permitting, all Gilbertese civilians would be loaded on a Landing Craft Mechanised [LCM] and transported to a Landing Ship Tank [LST] anchored off the island. Its bow doors would open to let the loaded LCM to enter its flooded hold. They would remain there and watch movies until the test was completed.

With us service men, it was a different story. We would all get up at 4 am and were told to have an early breakfast, because there was quite a few of us: 400 of us at the Port Camp and maybe about 3,000 up at the Main Camp. After breakfast we moved to the assembly area by 5.30.

For some tests, we sailors would all board about eight LCM with motor running—50 men to a LCM. The loudspeakers in the port area would be issuing orders. We could hear the Valiant bomber jet engines being warmed up about 10 miles away at the airfield.

The announcement would tell us that the bombers were taking off, that was the crucial time. If an accident might happen, we would all proceed full speed to sea towards the windward side of the crash area. I wouldn't like to think of what might happen, had there been an accident.

We would then be ordered to disembark once the white-painted Valiants were in the air. First of all they'd call out our names to check that we were all there, all present. There would be no officers at all or any of the civilian scientists around at that time. We were told to sit down and wait for the time to be told to be ready. Sitting on the beach, there were 400 of us, soldiers, sailors and marines, and we would all sit down and then listen to the music from the loudspeakers. At about 7 am, we could clearly see two bombers in the sky about 10 miles away.

With loudspeakers broadcasting the communications between the command centre and the Valiant aircraft carrying the bomb, the waiting troops prepared for the moment of detonation. Even decades after the tests, the awesome power of the detonation still resonates in Paul's description:

I was afraid, really afraid. I shut my eyes and pressed my palms really tight into my eyes. Then they'd say 'get ready'. We were already very quiet and they'd count down from 10 to 1. When they got to 3, 2, 1, they'd say 'bomb gone' and then 'flash'.

At that time, some of us would open our eyes just slightly and we could see the bones through the palm of our hands. Then we close our eyes quickly again. We were all scared, and we'd feel the heat behind us. We were squirming, but were told 'keep still!' How can you keep still when you can feel the heat? It was just like someone holding a blowtorch just behind you. I was still squirming, then I feel the heat start to disappear, then a voice said 'shockwave' and oh boy, boom! There was a huge booming noise.

We were told 'open your eyes'. Then we could see the sand and the stone that went up in the air with the first shockwave. Before it came down again, the repeating shockwaves start to come in. They met the other shockwave and the stone and dust and pebble and sand went up while the top layer was coming down.

After the shockwave, we were told 'stop talking and stand up slowly'. We stood up slowly. 'Now turn around really slowly.' Some of us were scared to turn around, but I did follow the orders. Oh boy, you can look up skywards now. Look in the sky, there was no more sun. Instead there was a big round, like a full moon but quite huge, covering half of the sky.

To me it looked really beautiful. It looked golden, like looking at the moon. Then all of a sudden, it turned into a fireball and later into an ice cream cone, shaped like an ice cream cone with cream dripping down the side, then into a giant mushroom cloud.

Then two Canberra fighters would fly and scoop samples from the side of the mushroom and then keep on flying all the way to the UK to deliver the test samples within 24 hours. They were refuelled in the air by airborne tankers.

Paul explains that, at the time, the FRNVR sailors had limited knowledge of the potential hazards of radioactive fallout. The Fijian language even uses the term *kasigaga* (poisonous gas) rather than radiation:

We didn't know what was the meaning of radiation or nuclear testing or what not. I don't think that any place in the South Pacific at that time had a word for radiation or for nuclear weapons or atomic things like that. We don't know nothing at all.

During the Grapple Y test in April 1958, 23 Fijian sailors were stationed at HMS *Resolution* at Port London. Nearly 60 years after the test, Paul clearly described his memories of the heat and blast, as the 3-megaton thermonuclear weapon exploded over the south-east corner of the atoll:

I remembered vividly the month of April 1958. We were told that the next test would be the last of the dirty bombs and it was going to be a really big one. Oh boy, it really looked dirty, with its big black mushroom cloud before it turned white.

At that time we could feel the wind start to blow and the clouds were really looking nasty, all black. Then the voice said ‘it’s going to rain, run for your life, run and take cover inside your tents!’ Oh boy, we were not waiting for another order, we start to run. We ran for our tents and dove inside and we could hear the rain coming down. On Christmas Island it never rains, but that day it rained.

We ran out, because we wanted to have a bath in fresh water and we opened our mouths to the sky. I took off my shirt, kept on my pants, shoes. Some only in underwear, some took off their underwear. Black rain was coming, it was really nasty when you look up to the sky, it was really black. When it was coming down, the rain didn’t look like water from a tap, it looked quite different.

They didn’t tell us not to drink the water. I did—I opened my mouth and drank all the water I can before I went back inside. We stayed outside as long as we can because we were scared that someone might come and order us to go back into our tents.

* * *

Today, aged 81, Paul has a number of health problems that he attributes to exposure to radiation at Christmas Island. As well as the loss of hair and damage to his fingernails soon after the tests, Paul developed a rare skin disease. As detailed in Chapter 20, Paul’s wives have suffered a number of miscarriages and his daughter Anne was born physically disabled. She died at the age of three-and-a-half. His son is unable to have children.



Paul Ah Poy at the Remembrance Day march, Nausori, Fiji,
11 November 2016

Source: Nic Maclellan.

He describes his health concerns, similar to those experienced by other Christmas Island veterans:

When we went to Christmas Island we were all healthy, because we were medically checked out. But when we came back, we were not checked by a medical doctor. That's when things start to go wrong. I'm trying to get an answer as to why some of us got special clothing for the testing day and some of us not. I wasn't given any special clothing.

Some tufts of my hair began to fall off and fingernails. My gums started bleeding and teeth got loose. I suffered from migraine headaches until I was about 35. I remembered while serving in the merchant navy, I woke up at about 3.00 in the morning and lost my memory for about one full minute. It was really frightening, for it happened about three times.

One of my knee joints would just swell up whenever I bump something. My right wrist is troubling me up to this day. I have to wear dark glasses most of the time. A doctor in the United States removed 59 round growths from under my skin all over my body. It was tested and I was given the OK.

Others were not so lucky, suffering from leukaemia and other illnesses:

One 26-year-old sailor, Alipate Loloma, died just three or four years after Christmas Island. The doctor told us he died from leukaemia of the blood—we don't even know what's the meaning of that, what was the meaning of nuclear at that time. He left four children behind. But when Ratu Penaia died, we knew because it was in the papers all the time, we knew what was the meaning of leukaemia.

Ratu Penaia was one of Fiji's leading statesmen: Governor General and then President of Fiji Ratu Sir Penaia Kanatabatu Ganilau (Tui Cakau, GCMG, KBE, KCVO, KStJ, DSO, MSD, ED). His life—and death—paralleled that of many other Christmas Island veterans.

This text is taken from *Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-bomb tests*, by Nic Maclellan, published 2017 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.