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The high chief— Ratu Penaia Ganilau



Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (FRNVR) Commander Stan Brown prepare for the second Grapple test

Source: Courtesy Adi Sivo Ganilau.

Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, one of the most honoured figures in Fijian life, travelled briefly to the Line Islands in mid-1957 to visit the first contingent of Fijian sailors and witness a nuclear test. Today, Ratu Penaia's family continues to support Fiji's Christmas Island veterans, regarding their late father as one of the people adversely affected by the tests.

Ratu Penaia, born in 1918, was invested with the provincial title of *Roko Tui Cakaudrove* in September 1956. He was a political leader of note and one of the earliest Fijian graduates of the University of Oxford. As a company commander and later Commander of the Fijian battalion, he joined British counter-insurgency operations in Malaya in 1953 and was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) in 1956. He retired from the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) that year, with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.¹

Ratu Penaia's daughter Adi Sivo Ganilau says that his time in the army led to a lifelong commitment to 'supporting the troops':

I do know that he was a proud soldier. There was a special place in his heart for the military. He cared very much about the welfare of his men. That's the father that I knew. Even after military service, he went back to check on the men. That's the kind of soldier he was—he'd rather be with the men where they were serving.

Even later, when he was Deputy Prime Minister and President, he'd go out and visit them in the Middle East, Lebanon, Sinai or wherever. He had a very caring attitude towards people generally and the military was just special somehow.²

At the time of the Christmas Island tests, Ratu Penaia already held an authority that foreshadowed his later eminence. In later years, knighted as Ratu Sir Penaia Kanatabatu Ganilau (Tui Cakau, GCMG, KBE, KCVO, KStJ, DSO, MSD, ED), he was a government minister, Deputy Prime Minister and then Governor General of Fiji. He served as the Queen's representative in Fiji from 1983 until after Sitiveni Rabuka's 1987 military coup d'état, when he was appointed as the country's first president.³

1 Ratu Penaia's role in the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) deployment to Malaya is described in Manunivavalagi Dalituicama Korovolavula: *Vala Mai Malaya* (self-published, Suva, 2013).

2 Interview with Adi Lusiana Sivo Ganilau, Suva, Fiji, November 2016. Unless otherwise noted, direct quotations come from this interview.

3 Ganilau's role during the 1987 coups is detailed by the permanent secretary to the Governor General Peter Thomson: *Kava in the blood—a personal and political memoir from the heart of Fiji* (Tandem Press, Auckland, 1999), pp. 153–172. For contrasting views see: Eddie Dean and Stan Ritova: *Rabuka—no other way* (Marketing team international, Suva, 1988) and Brij V. Lal: *Islands of turmoil—Elections and politics in Fiji* (ANU E Press, Canberra, 2006), pp. 73ff.

He also held significant status in Fiji custom. In 1988, at Somosomo on the island of Taveuni, he was installed as *Tui Cakau*, serving in this high customary role until his death in 1993 (*Tui Cakau* is regarded as the most senior chief in the Tovata Confederacy, one of three in Fiji).

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In late May and early June 1957, Ratu Penaia Ganilau travelled to Christmas Island to observe 'Orange Herald', the second Grapple test. He was accompanied by Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (FRNVR) Commander Stan Brown, Lieutenant Charles Stinson and chaplain Reverend Osea Naisau.

For the 39 Fijian sailors deployed to support the testing program, morale was boosted by this visit from one of the highest chiefs in Fiji, as outlined in Ratu Penaia's biography:

In 1957, forty Fijian naval ratings were invited by the Royal Navy to travel to Christmas Island to show the Navy 'how to live on a small Pacific Island' while atomic bomb tests were carried out. It was deemed appropriate that a Fijian chief should also be present on this momentous occasion in Pacific history, so Ratu Penaia was invited.

The Fiji contingent sailed aboard two New Zealand frigates but transferred to HMS *Warrior* on arrival at Christmas Island. Ratu Penaia and Commander Stan Brown travelled up later and on their arrival Ratu Penaia was accorded a full Fijian ceremonial welcome aboard the *Warrior*, perhaps the first time that such a ceremony had taken place aboard a British warship.⁴

Grapple Task Force Commander Wilfred Oulton recalled the arrival of the two Fijian observers, five days before the 'Orange Herald' test:

Colonel Penaia was a magnificent figure of a man, 6 feet 5 or more in height and built like the Rock of Gibraltar, smartly dressed in a British army tunic with the Fijian version of the kilt. He had an excellent Korean War [sic] record and looked the part. He and Bill Cook rapidly found a mutual interest in whiskey and the drinking thereof. This soon developed into a contest to see who could drink the most without weaving. In the end it was declared a draw!⁵

4 Daryl Tarte: *Turaga—the Life and Times and Chieftly Authority of Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau (GCMG, KCVO, KBE, DSO, KStJ, ED) in Fiji* (Fiji Times, Suva, 1993), p. 69.

5 Wilfred Oulton: *Christmas Island Cracker—an account of the planning and execution of the British thermonuclear bomb tests 1957* (Thomas Harmsworth, London, 1987), p. 341. Cook was the chief scientist on Christmas Island. Oulton was in error—Ganilau served in the Malayan emergency, not the Korean War.

Ratu Penaia's biographer Daryl Tarte describes how the Fijian chief was flown by helicopter to Malden Island, then transferred aboard a British naval vessel to witness the test on 31 May:

On the day of the blast, 10,000 feet above Malden Island, some 35 miles distant, those aboard *Warrior* were dressed in white boiler suits, elbow length gloves and face masks. The *Warrior* lay with her starboard side to the blast and the men all faced to the port.

Ratu Penaia recalls a hot blast on the back of his neck and when he looked around after the count there was a huge fiery sun pulsating with energy looking like a massive ice cream cone with its stalk planted on Malden Island. 'That's the end of the world', he thought. As a military man he saw it as the ultimate weapon and he prayed that no one would have to experience it in battle: 'It was too awesome to describe.'

Later Brown and Ratu Penaia were taken ashore to Malden Island to check the radioactivity. They were given rubber boots to protect their feet but the Navy couldn't find a pair large enough for Ratu Penaia's feet. So he went without. 'It was rather frightening as bushes were still smouldering,' Brown comments.⁶

Official statements issued in London after the test argued that there had been no radioactive fallout, because the device was exploded high in the air. Despite this, the test actually did contaminate Malden Island with significant hotspots of fallout, which affected soldiers and scientific staff sent onto the island to gather equipment after the test.

Ernest Cox, an Assistant Trials Planning Officer from the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) was flown by helicopter from HMS *Warrior* to Malden Island after the test to retrieve scientific instruments. He soon noted that everything was not quite right:

I said to my army helper 'What the hell is wrong and what the hell are we doing here?' We both had a strange feeling. We noticed no flies, no movement of lizards and no booby birds. We found several burnt and dead birds and, in the distance, we heard one of the three wild pigs—but we didn't dare approach too close to it. It was badly burnt and was going around in circles, blind. I said 'This bloody place is contaminated, and what the hell are we doing here?'⁷

6 Daryl Tarte: *Turaga*, op. cit., pp. 69–70.

7 Denys Blakeway and Sue Lloyd Roberts: *Fields of thunder—testing Britain's bomb* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1985), pp. 156–157.

After two days on the island, Cox tried to shower off the dust:

I had just taken my shorts off, when a chap came in with a monitor and said 'let me run it over you'. He did, and to his amazement, I had a reading of 3.80 Rs and another chap with me had a reading of 4.20 Rs. The Health Physics chap said 'what the hell could the rate have been yesterday?' We would have liked to have known! This was a contaminated area and we should have been issued with protective clothing—we didn't see any, not even a film badge.

I was worried no more about that, but a few days after, I had another worry. Two thirds of my body was covered in blisters so thick you couldn't put a pin between them. It was horrible and frightening. The Medical Officer on HMS *Warrior* just stared at me and said: 'Bloody hell, I've never seen anything like this before'.⁸

Decades later, FRNVR sailor Amani Tuimalabe recalled stories about the visit of the high chief onto Malden Island soon after the Orange Herald detonation:

Ratu Penaia, he went there on shore and he's got no shoes, no boots to fit him. So big! So he went bare feet there on the shore on Malden Island, but it's contaminated there from the tests. There was radiation there because that's the closest island to where the bomb dropped. Nobody lived there, only pigs or seagulls. So he came back from the island and his legs starts to itch and his leg swelled up. End up going to hospital but no cure for that.⁹

Commander Brown and Ganilau were flown back from Malden to Christmas Island where Ratu Penaia's feet were found to be 'very hot' and he had to be washed down. That night they were invited to the officer's mess to mark the occasion:

It was a night of heavy drinking and Brown recalls having 'far too much.' He remembers Ratu Penaia coming to him in the early hours and saying 'they are trying to get me drunk.' But Ratu Penaia left most of them under the table and was up at daylight the next morning to catch the plane back to Nadi. Brown remembers feeling like death in the uncomfortable aircraft, but Ratu Penaia stretched out on the floor and slept all the way to Nadi.¹⁰

8 Quoted in Derek Robinson: *Just Testing* (Collins Harvill, London, 1985), pp. 44–45. Cox was evacuated to England for treatment.

9 Interview with Amani Tuimalabe, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

10 Daryl Tarte: *Turaga—the Life and Times and Chiefly Authority of Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau*, op. cit.



FRNVR sailor Amani Tuimalabe carries a memento of his service in Operation Grapple

Source: Nic Maclellan.

Shortly after returning home to Fiji, Ratu Penaia went to a fancy dress party at the Country Club on his home island of Taveuni, dressed in his anti-flash white overalls, gloves and mask. He shared with everyone the horror of the explosion.

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As a young girl, Adi Sivo Ganilau understood little of her father's 1957 trip. But nearly six decades later, she recalls the overalls that he wore as protection against the flash of the nuclear detonation:

He went there with Captain Brown to visit the men and just to find out how they were doing. All I remember is him getting prepared to go to Christmas Island. None of us knew where Christmas Island was, what he was going there for—I don't even know if my mother knew!

But I do remember him coming back with that boiler suit outfit. We found out later from photographs that that was what he wore on Christmas Island. We didn't even know what the mission was, the bomb testing and all that, until much, much later.¹¹

Ratu Penaia did not discuss the nuclear test with his children, according to his daughter:

He never talked about it, never to any of us. I don't know whether it's a cultural thing, but they just kept quiet about it. I don't know whether he discussed it with my mother, but the children, definitely not. From what other people say, he was not able to wear shoes because his feet were too big. They couldn't find a pair of boots that fitted him, so who knows, maybe that's where the contamination came from.

Over the next three decades, Ratu Penaia was knighted and honoured, serving the Queen as Governor General of Fiji. His later years, however, were dogged by ill health. In the early 1990s, Ratu Sir Penaia suffered from Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare auto-immune disease in which the body's immune system attacks the peripheral nervous system. Adi Sivo Ganilau recalls:

He had some kind of syndrome, Guillain-Barré syndrome, with blisters around his neck. Well before that, I remember he also had tumours that were treated in Fiji and also he was said to have an enlarged heart. But much later at Government House, when he had the Guillain-Barré syndrome, that was quite crippling. That was really the thing that caused his hospitalisation in America.

11 Interview with Adi Sivo Ganilau, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

We kind of accepted that his health problems were probably due to Christmas Island. We read up a bit about the Christmas Island testing in the newspapers. We just put two and two together, saying 'okay, this is probably due to his exposure on Christmas Island', because all the illnesses came upon him one after the other at the end of his life.

Ratu Penaia died of leukaemia and sepsis on 15 December 1993 at the Walter Reed Army Medical Centre in Washington DC—the major US military hospital.¹²

With seven children in the family, Adi Sivo notes that her two younger brothers were also affected by health problems:

My two youngest brothers were both born post–Christmas Island. They seem to be bigger than the rest of the children. I think after the youngest was born, my mother was advised not to have any more children. One thing I noticed with them as they grew older, they suffered just like other veterans with swelling in the legs. One of them particularly had some kind of skin disease that used to come on now and again and then disappear.

Supporting Fiji's nuclear veterans in a statement to the European Court of Human Rights, she reported:

My two youngest brothers, who were born on 30 March 1958 and 8 August 1960 (after the Grapple tests), are sterile and to date they have no children.¹³

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The tragedy of Ratu Penaia's death is marked by the fact that he was a committed monarchist and loyal to the United Kingdom, even as Fiji became a republic after the 1987 coup. He was appointed as a Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (KCVO) in 1982 for 'his personal service to the Queen and in perpetuating the special relationship between Fiji and the throne'.¹⁴

12 'Penaia Ganilau, 75, Fiji Leader Who Became the First President', Obituary, *New York Times*, 17 December 1993.

13 Adi Lusiana Sivo Ganilau, written statement to the European Court of Human Rights, 1998, in author's files.

14 Daryl Tarte: 'Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau' in *20th Century Fiji—people who shaped the nation* (University of the South Pacific, Suva, 2001), p. 177.

With their long history of service to the British Empire, the Ganilau family has never directly condemned the British authorities about the legacies of Christmas Island. Yet Ratu Penaia's children have clearly expressed their views through action.

Adi Sivo provided legal support to the Fiji Nuclear Veterans Association during their decade-long legal case in the United Kingdom (see Chapter 20), while Ratu Rabici Ganilau launched the book *Kirisimasi*, the first collection of testimony from Fiji's nuclear veterans, published in 1999 by the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC). In his foreword to the book, Ratu Rabici stated:

Pacific peoples have long expressed a desire to keep our region nuclear free. Fiji is proud to be the first country to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, to end nuclear testing in the atmosphere and underground. But we in the Pacific are still living with the radioactive legacies of decades of nuclear testing by Britain, France and the United States.

Fiji's nuclear veterans have long sought recognition for their participation in the Christmas Island nuclear test program. This book as a contribution to the history of our nation, but I hope will assist the veterans to gain recognition for their service and, if need be, obtain compensation from the British government for any illnesses they have suffered as a result of exposure to nuclear radiation.¹⁵

For Adi Sivo, the cultural respect for leadership shown by ordinary Fijians means that many people will be measured in their public criticism of the British authorities. But she argues that leadership should also involve a reciprocal respect for those that follow:

If you understand Fijian society, we look up to people who are in leadership positions. You want something done? We'll do it. But it works both ways and you've got to do the right thing by us. That's basically the underlying philosophy. In this case, going to Christmas Island, getting bombed and all that—now, please help us!

15 From the foreword to 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), p. iii. After a long illness, Ratu Rabici died in 2011, leaving his wife Bernadette Rounds Ganilau and an adopted daughter.

As they view the Christmas Island mission in a cultural setting, Fijians look at issues of respect, reciprocity and honour, based on the cultural values of *ka vakaturaga* (chiefly system). For Adi Sivo Ganilau, the British Government's responsibilities to its former subjects have long been neglected:

When approaching the Fiji Government (acting on behalf of Fiji's paramount chiefs), the British government (on behalf of Her Britannic Majesty, the Paramount Chief) would present traditional gifts (*tabua*, mats, pigs and *dalo*), inviting the Fijian servicemen to participate in Operation Grapple. This act in itself is a binding legal contract—there is precedence in Fijian jurisprudence.

The Fijian servicemen then go out and do the dastardly deeds. When the mission is over and they return home, the British Government as the contracting party performs a *Qusi ni Loaloa* [literally 'wiping off the black paint', meaning war paint] to thank them for their services. This is compensation.

Failure to perform such a ceremony would be unheard of and considered most *kaisi* [low-down, no class], especially coming from the upper echelons of the traditional hierarchy. That, in essence, is the Fijian cultural perspective on the Christmas Island bomb-testing mission.¹⁶

16 Personal communication to the author, May 2017.

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.