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The WVS ladies— Mary and Billie Burgess



Mary (left) and Billie Burgess at the Ship Inn in Korea, 1954

Source: Australian War Memorial.

Apart from the wives and children living with the Gilbertese plantation workers on Christmas Island, the Grapple operation was a masculine affair, with thousands of men deployed from Britain to the central Pacific. In the early days of the military deployment, there were only two white women on Christmas Island: Mary and Billie Burgess.

For the first contingent of Royal Engineers redeployed from Korea to Christmas Island in 1956, construction of the military base was lonely and difficult work. In the build-up phase, UK troops worked hard, six days a week, to set up the camp and prepare wharves and port facilities. The central, urgent objective was to upgrade the Second World War airstrip on the island using concrete and tarmac, so it could land the larger jet aircraft used to drop the hydrogen bomb.

Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Marquis, commander of the 28th Field Engineer Regiment of the Royal Engineers, reported:

The men, aided by naval personnel and other small units of the Army, built ‘boffin town’ from prefabricated material. An air base, one-storey huts, a cinema, roads and power stations were built by the men, who worked round-the-clock shifts in six-day weeks.¹

For the young British soldiers and sailors serving on Christmas Island in 1956, the adventure of travelling to a Pacific island soon turned to boredom. Marquis described life on a ‘lonely island—a coral atoll, boasting little more than a few coconut palms. For entertainment, the builders of boffin town took to swimming, shark fishing, football, cricket and shell collecting’.²

Another thing lacking for the troops, month after month, was contact with women. Then the construction of a Navy, Army and Air Forces Institute (NAAFI) canteen was supplemented by a small club run by the Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS), an operation initially staffed by Mary and Billie Burgess.

1 ‘Round the clock work building “Boffin Town”’, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, June 1957 (extracted in *Sapper Magazine*, June 1957).

2 *Ibid.*

The WVS was founded in 1938 to recruit women into Air Raid Precautions services during the Second World War.³ Over time, the WVS expanded to provide a range of services for British military personnel and their families, including the staffing of canteens, entertainment and support services, often in liaison with the official NAAFI in British garrisons or camps:

The WVS is a civilian body, unpaid (apart from a very small expense allowance), and as the name implies, voluntary. It operates clubrooms for junior ranks and airmen and looks after the welfare of the troops. It also helps to maintain that thin veneer of civilisation, which we tend to discard in an all-male society.⁴

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Originally from Bristol, the two sisters had worked with the WVS in Korea before arriving on Christmas Island. The WVS ran three centres at Inchon, which provided a home away from home for the British and Commonwealth troops deployed in Korea during allied military operations between 1950–53.⁵ The Burgess sisters staffed a centre known as Ship Inn, where soldiers could use the canteen, access books from the WVS Library, play records or board games, and gain some maternal sympathy as they tried to ignore the slaughter underway on the frontline.⁶

As British engineers were transported from Korea to Christmas Island aboard HMS *Devonshire*, Oulton reported that he was ‘aghast’ when the War Office insisted that two WVS women should accompany the troops:

That’s quite impossible! Motherly types they may be, but after months of no female companionship, I’m afraid the troops will see these ladies getting younger and more attractive every day and soon we’ll have trouble. There’s also the constant thought that one day we might have a really hairy emergency on our hands. Do we really have to have them?⁷

3 Today, the organisation continues in the UK as the Royal Voluntary Service (RVS). This chapter draws on material in the RVS archives, with thanks to RVS Deputy Archivist Jennifer Harrison.

4 ‘Bon voyage!’, *Mid-Pacific News*, Vol. 3, No. 33, Thursday, 13 November 1958.

5 ‘With the WVS in Korea’, letter to WVS headquarters in London, 31 August 1956.

6 Photos of Billie and Mary Burgess at the Ship Inn can be found in the collection of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ID numbers MELJ0196-0198, MELJ0209 and MELJ0196.

7 Wilfred Oulton: *Christmas Island Cracker—an account of the planning and execution of the British thermonuclear bomb tests 1957* (Thomas Harmsworth, London, 1987), p. 142.

Oulton was overruled and as the Royal Engineers redeployed from Korea, the WVS staff were sent to follow them. Travelling to Christmas Island aboard a Royal Air Force (RAF) flight, the Burgess sisters recorded their first impressions in a letter home to England:

There below us lay the now famous Coral Island about which everyone is talking. Basking there in the brilliant tropical sunshine, looking every bit like the tropical isles one reads about in fairy tales. At last, travel-stained and a little weary, and covered in the inevitable dust, we reached the small green bungalow which was to be our home for as long as we were on the island.

It had been constructed from disused huts left behind by the American Forces and is an absolute model of ingenuity. A large lounge, bedroom, small kitchen and toilet (including a shower—another memory of the Americans) are all decorated in a cool shade of cream and pale marine green. So hurried were the preparations for our arrival that the painters were literally leaving by the back door as we were coming in by the front.⁸

The Grapple Task Force had planned a NAAFI compound for the troops, but the facilities were not ready when the Burgess sisters arrived:

Not only was our Centre not completed, but the NAAFI end of it was only in its primary stages. We cautiously asked when it was likely to be finished. They could not give us a definite date, but as soon as the canteen was finished they would be starting on our room. Here we were, with all our boxes and packing cases simply crying to be opened up. What were we to do?

In the end we decided to open them one at a time and to take (when transport was available) all the more valuable articles back to our bungalow and store them on our veranda. Soon there came to light all the various treasures which WVS members had contributed. The sewing machine was the first to emerge, followed closely by the delightful kitchen utensils, some of which, unfortunately, we shall not be able to put to full use until our tiny kitchen is equipped with the small stove we are hoping will be installed.⁹

8 'Early days on Christmas Island', letter from Mary Burgess, published on Royal Voluntary Service Heritage blog, 1 February 2016.

9 Ibid.

In early December 1956, the two women began preparations to mark Christmas for the troops involved in constructing the camp and airstrip on Christmas Island:

We had already approached the Army personnel with regard to a pantomime and, having found out that they were in the throes of producing a Christmas concert, we were determined to unpack next the boxes of costumes in order to help them. That afternoon we discussed with their producer what costumes would be required.

They were putting on a little panto of *The Christmas Carol* as one of their acts in the show, and among the costumes mentioned was a long pair of lace edged pantaloons for Mrs. Cratchett and a frock coat for old Scrooge. Imagine our great surprise and delight when the first article out of the costume box was indeed a pair of unmentionables for Mrs. C. and not long after a frock coat was discovered for the old miser.¹⁰

Other WVS activities involved visits to the military hospital, providing magazines and games to the patients, with Mary Burgess reporting:

We had a long natter with all the patients and they seemed very cheerful and quite delighted to see both us and the reading material. The chess sets and other games were also a great success.¹¹

From December 1956, the WVS organised Christmas parties each year for the wives and children of the Gilbertese workforce:

Girls in their party dresses, boys in their lava lava, all with gleaming faces, here and there were tiny children in grass skirts. Mothers with their offspring were all in their finery, some smoking pipes, which seemed to strike an odd note. Off we all set in a high spirits, everyone singing lustily their own native songs and popular English ones, even to 'she will be wearing khaki bloomers when she comes'.¹²

When he arrived on island, the Task Force Commander noted that the women 'were often to be seen cycling around the main camp, organising recreation for off-duty hours and were very highly regarded and appreciated by the men'.¹³

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 'Gilbertese children's party', typed report to WVS, December 1958.

13 Wilfred Oulton: *Christmas Island Cracker*, op. cit., p. 162.

The official handbook issued for new troops lauded the work of the WVS volunteers:

The Misses Billie and Mary Burgess of the Women's Voluntary Services have brought a touch of home to the camp. They are to be found in the main camp NAAFI organising games, dancing, Highland dancing and concerts, and generally helping to make off-duty hours in the recreation room pleasant and free from boredom.¹⁴

Decades later, returned veterans described the two women as 'a couple of tough old birds who knew how to handle themselves':

They oversaw much of the catering arrangements and acted as nurse, matron and surrogate Mum to many lonely serviceman stranded in the middle of nowhere for a year.¹⁵

The two sisters (aged in their mid-40s) won the hearts of the many troops in their teens and early 20s, away from home for the first time. Reflecting on the age difference, Royal Engineer Brian Tate noted that they were 'no NAAFI girls' but:

They must have been about 90 at the time, I should think—but every day they looked marvellous. Always made you welcome. Yeah, I say they would 90 years old—they were about 25 years older than what we were! But a nice pair of women.¹⁶

While the Burgess sisters were on Christmas Island, the initial three Grapple tests were conducted on Malden Island, but one veteran recalled:

They weren't bothered by the bombs, they took all that in their stride ... The only thing that bothered them was the frequency which their underwear disappeared from the washing line!¹⁷

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After a year's service, Mary and Billie Burgess left for Germany and other WVS volunteers arrived to continue WVS program. From September 1957, Freda and Elisabeth Hutchinson staffed the WVS clubrooms, as new troops deployed for the next round of tests on Christmas Island.

14 *Operation Grapple 1956–57*, Handbook for UK personnel, 1957.

15 'Does anyone know what happened to Mary and Billy?', *Fissionline*, No. 2, April 2013.

16 Derek Robinson: *Just Testing* (Collins Harvill, London, 1985), p. 37.

17 'Does anyone know what happened to Mary and Billy?', op. cit.

For the Grapple X test in November 1957 and subsequent tests on Christmas Island in 1958, WVS staff were required to evacuate their home on the day of the tests. During the Grapple Y test in April 1958, the two women joined Gilbertese labourers and their families below decks on board the HMS *Messina*.

They continued their work until 28 November 1958, when they left following the completion of the three Grapple Z tests. The task force newsletter farewelled them, noting that ‘they must be the only British women to have seen six nuclear explosions’.¹⁸

The WVS had a rather prim program of activities, including ballroom dancing classes:

In fact we have already enrolled the services of an instructor (a plumber who repaired our leaking tap, which, incidentally, is supplied with water from a converted petrol drum on the roof). A gold-medallist waiter is also among our ardent ballroom followers and he has volunteered to help us with these classes once they are under way.¹⁹

Given that most of the troops were working-class youth escaping post-war austerity in England and Scotland, they were often engaged in more mundane entertainment—fighting and drinking beer. Veterans’ accounts provide plenty of evidence of rough-housing, practical jokes and drinking.

In the early years, there were two NAAFI bars on the island—a small one at Port London and a larger one at the Main Camp. The official handbook for Operation Grapple suggested the latter bar was more popular:

A place to drink a nice cold beer or squash in the beer garden, pleasantly situated on the edge of the beach and listen to the pounding of the surf. Incidentally, the beer was specially canned for the operation, the lids being stamped ‘Operation Grapple, Christmas Island’ with the Grapple insignia.²⁰

NZ sailor Gerry Wright—who joined the Navy in 1955 at age 16—recalled a more basic set-up than the tourist paradise presented in the official handbook:

18 ‘Bon voyage!’, *Mid-Pacific News*, Vol. 3, No. 33, Thursday, 13 November 1958.

19 ‘Early days on Christmas Island’, op. cit.

20 From chapter 8, ‘Life on a desert island’ in *Operation Grapple 1956–57*, Handbook for UK personnel, op. cit., p. 57.

The wet canteen was a large army-built shed with a bar of beer crates, tastefully arranged within a barbed wire compound. The beer was British, usually chilled, and supplied in cans. Can spanners (tin openers to the non-veteran) were specially made for Operation Grapple and had the Grapple emblem stamped on them. Seating was metal frame stacking chairs with some cane furniture outside. Over time, the cane chairs disappeared to other locations, including the ships, leaving just steel tables and metal chairs.

Those fortunate enough to find a table under an overhead fan could enjoy a gentle breeze. They were also in the best position at a later hour to throw an open beer can up into the fan, which would then be hurled off in any direction like a hand grenade, spraying everyone in its path with beer.²¹

The British officers and scientific staff had their own mess and bar, but generally ignored any mayhem at the Other Ranks venue. Wright recalls:

There was just one gate continuously manned by British military police. It was accepted that the troops needed somewhere to let their hair down, so anything within reason was fair game inside the compound. The military police were there to ensure major injuries were sent for attention and drunks slept it off before going back to their units. It was not uncommon for a sleeping drunk to be carried by his boisterous mates to the lagoon and thrown into the water.²²

While participating in joint work activities, the Fijian military contingent faced racial restrictions common for the time. The Fijians were paid less than their British counterparts, and initially were restricted from buying beer. As with all soldiers, these regulations were soon ignored. The Fijians were popular with the British and NZ troops, as described by one Scottish veteran:

The Fijians were the most friendly bunch that you could ever meet and they were really easy to get along with. They weren't allowed any alcohol from the NAAFI, so we always bought them a couple of cases of beer and they, in turn, taught us how to catch crayfish and lobster. Sometimes they would come over to our tents and sing a few songs for us while one of them strummed a guitar.²³

21 Gerry Wright: *We Were There* (Zenith Print, New Plymouth, n.d.), p. 56.

22 Ibid.

23 Ken McGinley and Eamonn P. O'Neill: *No Risk Involved—the Ken McGinley story—survivor of a nuclear experiment* (Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1991), p. 50.

Others recall the racial divide that was common at the time. Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (FRNVR) sailor Amani Tuimalabe, who witnessed four nuclear tests and served on both the NZ warship HMNZS *Pukaki* and the British aircraft carrier HMS *Warrior*, noted:

No problem with the New Zealanders, I liked them, but the British! They look down on us. Even now, it's still like that—English people, they discriminate. New Zealanders are all right, Australians are all right—they are close by, they are brothers—but the British, they're like that. Duty time, it's okay, but break time, they look down at us.²⁴

Many Fijians in turn made firm friends amongst the Māori sailors from New Zealand and non-Anglo British troops. One returned Fijian sapper, Misaele Tikoinaliwala, was known for the rest of his life as 'Jamaica', after making friends with a British West Indian soldier who holidayed in Fiji after his Christmas Island deployment.²⁵

The rank and file soldiers and sailors seized every opportunity for rest and recreation on Christmas Island, given that daily work hours were often filled with mundane and routine tasks. The workload was different, however, for the RAF aircrew, whose task was to pilot the aircraft that would drop the bomb or fly through the resulting mushroom cloud, gathering radioactive samples that were vital evidence to determine the yield of the weapon.

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

25 Interview with his widow Miriama Tikoinaliwala, Nausori, Fiji, November 2016.

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