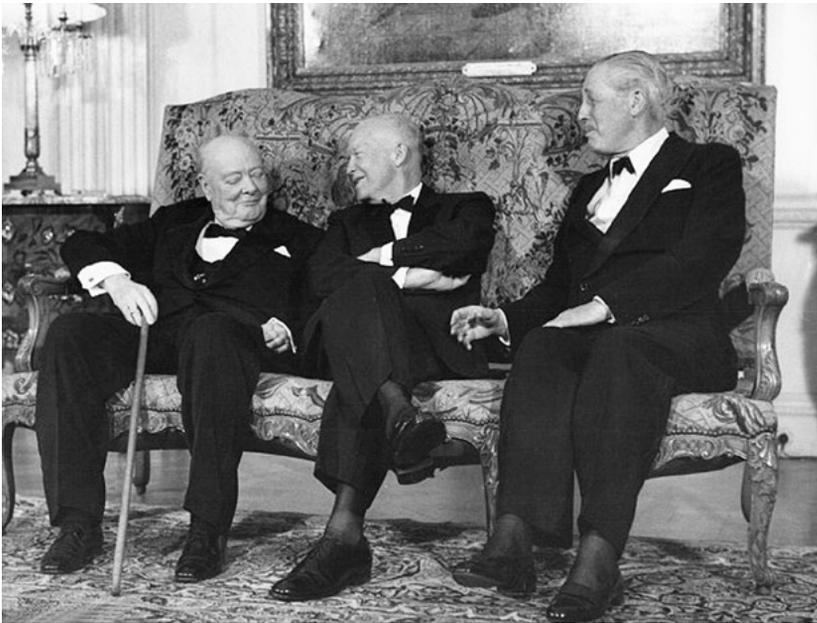


13

The Foreign Officer—Gillian Brown



Churchill, Eisenhower and Macmillan—improving US–UK relations

Source: Ed Clark/Life.

Throughout Operation Grapple, the British Foreign Office had its work cut out to maintain diplomatic relations with countries around the Asia-Pacific region. There was widespread opposition to the nuclear testing program in Japan, India and many South-East Asian nations, as well as island territories closer to the test sites.

Britain's crucial ally the United States was also an uneasy partner. Despite close military-to-military cooperation, the US State Department was raising concerns over sovereignty in the Line Islands. Even with the decline of McCarthyism in the United States by the late 1950s, US Congressmen were still concerned about Soviet infiltration of the British Government, following the 1950 arrest of atom spy Klaus Fuchs and the 1951 defection to Moscow of Foreign Office diplomat Donald Maclean and MI5 agent Guy Burgess.¹

With the Commonwealth Relations Office responsible for Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and the Colonial Office liaising with British colonies in the Pacific, much of the remaining day-to-day diplomatic legwork for the Foreign Office was undertaken by Gillian Gerda Brown.

Brown was one of the first female Foreign Office entrants recruited from elite universities. Born in 1923, she studied French and German at Somerville College, Oxford. Somerville is a non-denominational college established for women in 1879, which served as an important stepping stone into government for many women (Somerville graduates include the prime ministers Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher).

Brown graduated from Oxford during the Second World War, just as the UK Foreign Office was opening its doors to more women. At age 21, she joined the Foreign Office Research Department in 1944, but soon transferred to the main career path in the Ministry. Even with the loss of older male staff to the military, it was an uncommon achievement. Women in the UK civil service often faced petty discrimination as well as structural limits on their careers in Whitehall (the Foreign Office maintained—until 1973—a policy that female officials must resign if they married, so a woman could not have a diplomatic post *and* a husband).²

As the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union broke down, Brown was posted to Hungary between 1952 and 1954, working as Second Secretary at the UK Embassy in Budapest. Her talents recognised, she returned to London and in 1956 became active in the Grapple committee, liaising

1 Ben McIntyre: *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal* (Bloomsbury, London, 2014). It was only after the April 1958 Grapple Y test that the United States was willing to relax McMahon Act restrictions, with the signing of the 'Agreement on co-operation on the uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes' in July 1958.

2 For the challenges facing female British diplomats, see Helen McCarthy: *Women of the World—The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (Bloomsbury, London, 2014).

with British embassies in Washington, Tokyo and Paris (experience that served her well for the next posting as First Secretary in the UK Embassy in Washington from 1959 to 1962).

As a young Foreign Officer, Brown represented her department at the first meeting of the Grapple committee, created to coordinate between government ministries and the armed services, each trying to protect its financial and institutional interests. Task Force Commander Wilfred Oulton described ‘Miss Brown—Foreign Office’ as ‘a pleasant looking, quiet young woman in a brown woollen pullover and tweed skirt’.³

At these initial committee meetings, as the only woman representing a government ministry, Gillian Brown stood out from the crowd, sitting alongside a range of uniformed officers and be-suited officials: General Sir Frederick Morgan (controller of atomic weapons in the Ministry of Supply); Commodore Peter Gretton DSO, OBE, DSC (the Deputy Task Force Commander responsible for the naval squadron); and the ‘portly, ruddy faced’ Brigadier Ivor Jehu (Public Relations Officer for the Ministry of Supply).⁴

From mid-1956, a formal Atomic Weapons Trial Executive held regular monthly meetings at Castlewood House (the Ministry of Supply headquarters near St Giles Circus in London). The executive brought together representatives of all parties involved in the operation: headquarters staff of the Grapple Task Force; the Ministry of Supply (which was the lead ministry for the overall operation); Treasury; Foreign Office; Commonwealth Relations Office; Colonial Office; UK Atomic Energy Agency; Atomic Weapons Research Establishment; and the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry.

* * *

From the beginning, the project was shrouded in secrecy. Throughout the testing series, London sent a series of communications to British authorities in Tarawa, Suva, Honiara and other locations, setting out

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. 75.

4 Ibid.

guidelines for secrecy and classification of communications. Different topics were given rankings ranging from 'confidential' to 'TOP SECRET/Atomic', with documents, letters and telegrams to be coded accordingly.⁵

Any reference to the nature and purpose of the weapons test or the overall UK nuclear weapons program had the highest grade of 'TOP SECRET/Atomic'. The same classification was given to any design details of the bomb, the efficiency of each test weapon or the expected and measured yield of each weapon (though this did not preclude a statement to the effect that test weapons will be in the 'megaton range').

'Top secret' classification was issued for the overall size, shape and weight of each test weapon and the likely areas and degree of contamination caused by the nuclear detonation. The very fact that further megaton trials were due to take place was given the same classification, as well as any details of the method and route transporting the weapons from the United Kingdom to the Pacific trial site.

The code word FIRED (Round fired successfully) was unclassified. However, another code word ORKIDS (Round fired, but yield very disappointing) was allocated for less successful operations and deemed 'Secret/UK eyes only'. In part, this secrecy was directed at the US military observers monitoring the operation, who were not to be told that the tests had not reached megaton yield. Other code words were allocated for plane crashes or accidents, including SNODOP (Accident—round lost—Christmas Island involved) and CHEVIT (Accident—round lost—Christmas Island not involved).⁶

After the initial distribution of code words covering all eventualities for the tests, the lists were amended to add one extra code: 'Round fired. Yield not obviously disappointing.'⁷ This was an interesting addendum, given the explosive yield of the first three Grapple tests actually did disappoint the scientific staff, failing to reach a megaton yield, even as they were trumpeted by public relations officials as a great triumph.

5 'Operation Grapple X: security classifications', Telegram no. 483 from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to High Commissioner, Western Pacific Commission and Resident Commissioner, British Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, 4 September 1957. CO1036/282.

6 'Operation Grapple—list of code words', Appendices B and C to Grapex/57/P3. CO1036/281.

7 Memo from Ministry of Supply, marked 'Secret/UK eyes only': Addendum to appendix C to Grapex (57)/P3, 'limited distribution' (number 18 of 25), 30 April 1957. CO1036/281.

Even after the tests began and were reported in the British and international media, a culture of secrecy permeated the British bureaucracy. For example, in the official Colonial Office reports about the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) from 1956 onwards, there is no mention of the construction of the military base on Christmas Island, nor the testing of nuclear weapons!⁸

In the GEIC itself, the first test on Malden Island on 15 May 1957 was not even mentioned in the *Headquarters Information Note* issued by the Office of the Resident Commissioner in Bairiki, Tarawa. Indeed, the first item in the newsletter issued a week after the test was a proclamation ‘covering the double taxation agreement between the Colony and Norway, which was signed by his Excellency the High Commissioner on 20 May!’⁹

Secrecy even extended to restricting written evidence of key decisions in London. Minutes of the Atomic Weapons Trial Executive were individually numbered and tightly restricted to a small circle of government representatives. But there were occasions where key decisions were not fully recorded. One example was noted in August 1957 by committee chair Eric Jackson (Director General, Atomic Weapons in the Ministry of Supply):

For reasons familiar to the Executive, no minutes of the last meeting had been taken. The principal matter under discussion had been the site of the actual tests, i.e. Christmas (S.E tip) v Malden and the decision had gone in favour of the former.¹⁰

Even during the Cold War, at a time of concern about Soviet spying and popular opposition to nuclear testing, this culture of secrecy created practical difficulties. An ongoing problem was that overseas allies could not be told about the looming test program, the boundaries of the danger zone or the date of the actual test without a formal announcement from the government.

8 UK Colonial Office: *Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony and the Central and Southern Line Islands—Report for the Years 1956 and 1957* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1959) and *Report for the Years 1958 and 1959* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1961).

9 *Headquarters Information Note*, No. 22, 23 May 1957. Office of the Resident Commissioner, Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, F 76/6/32 (1957). PAMBU document AU PMB 493.

10 Item 1, minutes of the August 1957 meeting, Atomic Weapons Trials Executive, St Giles Court, 14 August 1957. CO1036/282.

While the military focused on operational matters, a major concern for Foreign Office officials was to calm international opposition to the tests. They also sought to keep out the small number of civilians from other countries that might transit through Christmas Island or the danger zone.

* * *

Given the presence of US and Japanese business interests in the Line Islands, Gillian Brown lobbied the Colonial Office in late 1956 to impose restrictions on movement near Christmas Island:

There are some legal complications involved in doing this, and we shall have to handle the matter rather carefully in order to avoid possible public complaint or even a claim for damages.¹¹

The Colonial Office agreed to restrictions, noting:

American civilians have no right to land on Christmas Island without visas, though American military aircraft and vessels could arrive simply by notifying us that they intend to do so. In view however of the close contact with the Americans, we agree with you that it is highly improbable that they would seek to embarrass us in this way during the tests.¹²

The date for public announcement of a danger zone around the Malden or Christmas test sites became a major battleground between different parts of the British Government. Internal correspondence between the Grapple Task Force, the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office highlights the tension between safety, security and political expediency. The military were eager for as much public notice as possible to keep aircraft and vessels far away from the Line Islands. In contrast, London-based officials sought to avoid any publicity that would exacerbate the growing international condemnation of the tests.

For security reasons, the Task Force Headquarters were reluctant to reveal the exact date of the tests, but officers deployed in the central Pacific were aware of the hazard that fishing boats might stray into the danger zone. At the same time, diplomats were well aware that early announcements

11 Letter from Gillian Brown, Foreign Office, to H.P. Hall, Colonial Office, 17 December 1956. CO1036/280.

12 Letter from H.P. Hall, Colonial Office to Gillian Brown, Foreign Office, 18 December 1956, p. 2. CO1036/280.

might strengthen the political opposition in neighbouring countries and territories—especially those like New Zealand and Fiji that were actively engaged in supporting the operation.

In January 1957, the Foreign Office proposed to close territorial waters around Christmas and Malden islands for the duration of the Grapple tests, but without giving any public notice of the closure. Foreign Office officials noted:

I think we shall also need to be quite clear in our own minds about how far the Task Force Commander should go in persuading any intruders to leave the danger area if they are found on the high seas.¹³

The Grapple Task Force also wanted operational control of air and sea movements at Penrhyn, a northern atoll of the New Zealand territory of the Cook Islands. At an executive meeting for the testing program, the Commonwealth Relations Office representative ‘had no doubt that the New Zealanders would agree to this so far as EENC movements were concerned but that they would not be willing to hand over control of the island or anything affecting the civil population’.¹⁴

However, the United States formally objected to this proposal, given that a number of the Line Islands—including Christmas—were subject to an ongoing dispute over sovereignty and control between the United States and United Kingdom.¹⁵

The British Embassy in Washington warned London that they would be breaching international law if they did not announce the closure of territorial waters, as the United States had done for its tests at Bikini and Enewetak atolls. On 9 January 1957, British Ambassador to the United States Sir Harold Caccia wrote:

If we do not announce the closure of our territorial waters, we shall not be following any American precedent and the Americans will think that we are acting illegally. But they will not go out of their way to make trouble

13 Letter from J.C. Hainsworth, Foreign Office, to G.A.C. Witheridge, Ministry of Supply, 9 January 1957. CO1036/280.

14 Minutes of the January 1957 meeting, Atomic Weapons Trials Executive, St Giles Court, 9 January 1957, p. 2. CO1036/280.

15 For details of the dispute over sovereignty, which was not resolved until Kiribati gained independence in 1979, see 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), pp. 323–324.

for us. Equally, they will not feel able to defend us, if our action makes any trouble for them. In these circumstances you will doubtless want to look again at the proposal to disregard what appears to be a requirement of international law.¹⁶

Foreign Office officials in turn complained about the US complaints:

The US reaction to our idea of avoiding any public notice, though understandable, is rather tiresome. In order to avoid political comment and, more important, possible confusion in the minds of mariners and airmen about the true extent of the danger area, we would have much preferred to give no advance notice. Nevertheless, in view of the US warning, we consider that we may have to after all.¹⁷

The Foreign Office canvassed a variety of ways that they could technically meet their obligations for notification, but without actually informing pilots and sea captains who might infringe on the danger zone:

Under international law, we are required to give the notification 'due publicity'. We do not think it necessary to send it out as a warning notice to mariners and airmen, particularly since—as the Task Force Commander has pointed out—these often go out in the form of wireless messages ... An alternative is to circulate it to diplomatic missions here ... This draws rather unwelcome attention to our action but seems a possible solution.¹⁸

The following month, the United Kingdom and United States went on to exchange formal diplomatic notes about Christmas Island and the proposed testing program. However, the British Government was reluctant to accept the US State Department proposal to publish the notes, arguing that:

The US note now refers in paragraph 8 to safety precautions that we have not disclosed in public; secondly, publication would of course stimulate other governments to press for exchanges of notes on questions of compensation.¹⁹

16 Letter from Ambassador Sir Harold Caccia, British Embassy, Washington to P.H. Dean, Foreign Office, London, 9 January 1957. CO1036/280.

17 Letter from J.C. Hainsworth, Foreign Office to G.A.C. Witheridge, Ministry of Supply, 16 January 1957. CO1036/280.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Memo from H.C. Hainsworth, Foreign Office, London to J.C.A. Roper, British Embassy, Washington, 7 February 1957, ZE212/10/0. CO1036/281.

* * *

By early 1957, the cult of secrecy amongst many British officials about the looming tests was already causing speculation and concern amongst the populations of inhabited islands across Polynesia.

In French Polynesia, for example, there was growing concern about the tests, even though the French dependency was located some distance from the proposed test site. Gillian Brown was in regular contact with the British consul in Papeete, Tahiti, as well as the UK Embassy in Paris, seeking to calm any public debate.

The Grapple Task Force were planning to establish a radiation-measuring station in Tahiti, to be operated by French officials. A second monitoring station was planned for Rangiroa atoll, 355 kilometres to the north-east, to be run by nuns from the local Catholic mission. However, because there was no suitable airfield in Tahiti or Rangiroa, Sunderland flying boats from the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) base in Fiji were chosen to transport the necessary equipment. Later RNZAF visits to Tahiti were scheduled to collect samples after the tests for rapid transport back to England.

The regular RNZAF visits provoked speculation amongst local Maohi leaders in Tahiti. In early January 1957, the British consul in Papeete telegraphed London, asking for instructions on what to say about the testing program:

Public and local legislative council anxious at rumours. Please reply whether permitted and how much to say.²⁰

Brown consulted with colleagues in the Ministry of Supply, which was ultimately responsible for the operation, noting:

The preparations for radiation monitoring [in Tahiti] are likely to attract increasing attention and if we show hesitance in revealing what they are, I suppose we might be wrongfully suspected of concealing dangers from the public.²¹

20 Telegram from British Consul, Papeete, to Gillian Brown, Foreign Office, London, 28 January 1957. CO1036/281.

21 Letter from Gillian Brown to D.H. Lovelock, Ministry of Supply, 30 January 1957. CO1036/281.

She also told the British Embassy in Paris:

We still feel we should if possible avoid saying in public that radiation measurements are being taken ... this is a subject that is very open to misinterpretation by the public. We do not wish to create an entirely false anxiety. Perhaps you could explain matters to the French authorities.²²

Radiation monitoring stations were mostly limited to British and Commonwealth territory for the first round of testing on Malden Island. For the November 1957 Grapple X test on Christmas Island, however, the system to monitor radiation was extended to locations controlled by the US military, such as Hawai'i and the Marshall Islands.²³ With the potential for local protests, Gillian Brown was initially reluctant to discuss the issue with US authorities, until just before the date of the test:

Will it be possible to defer such discussion in the interests of secrecy, say until early October? Operational requirements must of course come first, but if, as seems likely, discussions would involve local meteorological and civil aeronautics officials at Honolulu, Kwajalein and Canton, who would not otherwise be aware of our intentions and who would not be accustomed to handling top-secret information, the risk of a leak would be increased.²⁴

Similar concerns were evident in Tokyo, which continued to lobby for assurances over safety. In a letter to the Ministry of Supply, Brown noted:

I think our main concern would be to reassure the Japanese about the possibility of fish or the sea being contaminated, without, of course, giving any assurance that we might later have cause to regret.²⁵

A week before the first test on Malden Island, London-based officials were reluctant to reveal the actual date of the test to British colonial administrators in the Pacific:

The Ministry of Supply have not agreed that the Governor of Fiji or the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific should be given advance warning of the actual timing of the tests ... Arrangements have been made

22 Letter from Gillian Brown to A. Duff, British Embassy, Paris, 6 February 1957. CO1036/281.

23 Letter from Squadron Leader Wilson to UK Foreign Office, London, 21 August 1957. GX/TS.3010/8/air. CO1036/282.

24 Letter from Gillian Brown, Foreign Office, London, to G.A.C. Witheridge, Ministry of Supply, 9 September 1957. CO1036/282.

25 Letter, marked 'Top secret/UK Eyes only', from Gillian Brown to D.H. Lovelock, Ministry of Supply, 30 January 1957. CO1036/281.

that, should there be an accident, the operational command will inform both the Governor of Fiji and the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific directly of this and of precautions which should be taken.²⁶

Even after the later decision to continue the tests on Christmas Island, there was still a reluctance to share information with Colonial Office representatives in the Pacific. The Secretary of State for the Colonies noted that it was ‘most important that information about our intentions should be kept secret as long as possible’.²⁷

A Colonial Office file note marked ‘secret’ from August 1957 notes:

So far we have told the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific little more than the planned time and place of the operation. Speed and secrecy have precluded us from telling him more before now.²⁸

For safety of aircraft, the Resident Commissioner of the GEIC issued regulations to prevent planes overflying the test area. Following the first three tests on Malden Island, these safety regulations had expired on 1 August 1957. However, by early September, London was reluctant to inform the Resident Commissioner that he should renew the regulations preventing overflights:

I think it might give rise to suspicion that there is something in the wind if they are renewed now, and I suggest we simply ask the High Commissioner to prepare the necessary regulations and hold them in readiness until we give the word.²⁹

When Cabinet decided to continue with a further series of tests relocated to Christmas Island, British officials debated whether to inform other nations. In the diplomatic message sent to UK embassies in Washington, Tokyo and Paris a fortnight before the November 1957 Grapple X test, the Foreign Office stated:

Please inform United States authorities ... but it is not proposed to give advance notice to Japanese and French governments, as was done in January. French are not helping this time and the courtesy shown to the Japanese last time did us no good.³⁰

26 File note by Mr Howard-Drake, ‘Nuclear test in the Pacific’, 9 May 1957. CO1036/282.

27 Telegram no. 359, marked ‘Top Secret and personal’, from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to acting High Commissioner, Western Pacific Commission, 2 August 1957. CO1036/282.

28 File note by D.J. Derox, Colonial Office, London, 5 August 1957. CO1036/282.

29 File note for draft correspondence from D.J. Derox, Colonial Office to the Ministry of Supply, 3 September 1957. CO1036/282.

30 Telegram no. 4413 from Foreign Office, London to UK Embassy, Washington; UK delegation, New York; UK Embassy, Tokyo; and UK Embassy, Paris, 24 October 1957. CO1036/287.

Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Selwyn Lloyd delayed announcing the looming test until October at the United Nations, noting simply:

These tests will begin in the near future. They will be held in the vicinity of Christmas Island and will take the form of explosions at high altitude of devices in the megaton range. A danger area will be declared at the appropriate time. The additional radioactive fallout from the tests will be negligible.³¹

For the troops deployed on Christmas Island, from Britain, New Zealand and Fiji, the threat was not 'negligible', despite the statements from bureaucrats in London. Limited protective gear and radiation dose badges were 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 such gear, and served their term wearing standard army boots, shorts and shirts (discussed in Chapter 18).

From oral testimony and archival research, there is evidence that the troops were placed in hazardous positions, which increased the risk of ingesting or inhaling radioactive isotopes from atmospheric tests like Grapple Y, which blew fallout across Christmas Island. The Fijians, for example, ignored British regulations and caught fish and crabs that may have been contaminated by fallout. Fijian military personnel were involved in clean-up operations after each nuclear test, including dumping contaminated materials offshore or disposing of thousands of birds that were maimed, blinded or killed by the nuclear explosions.

For naval personnel in the British and New Zealand warships deployed for Operation Grapple, there were further hazards as some ships manoeuvred through the post-testing danger zone. On land, too, the Gilbertese plantation workers and their families have also testified of their concerns, as six further tests were conducted above the south-east corner of Christmas Island.

31 Ibid.

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.