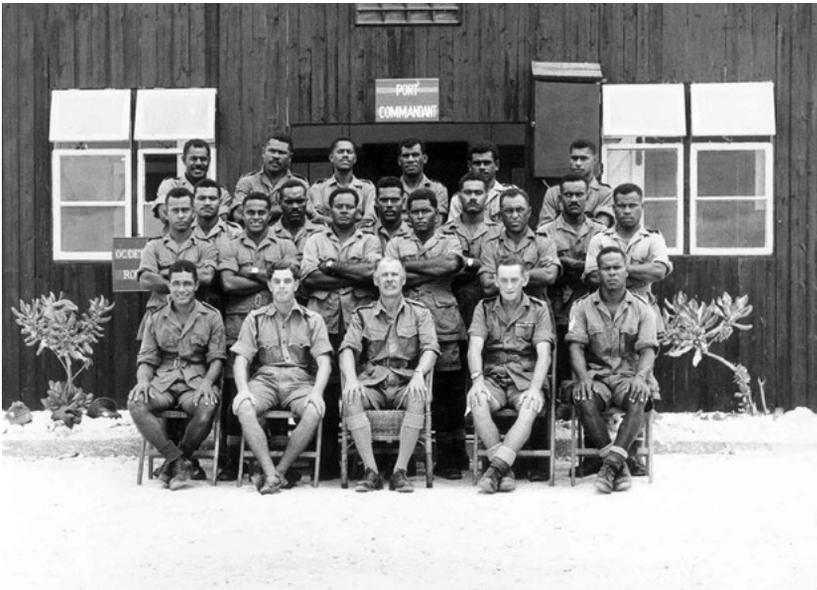


15

The soldiers—Isireli Qalo



English officers and soldiers from the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), Christmas Island, 1958

Source: Courtesy Mrs Loata Masi.

After the success of the November 1957 Grapple X test, with its yield of 1.8 megatons, the British Government decided to continue with Grapple Y and the Grapple Z series. To ensure that the remaining tests could be completed before a nuclear testing moratorium came into force, there was a major build-up of operations on Christmas Island throughout 1958.

The number of personnel surged in preparation for Grapple Y, with replacement British soldiers arriving aboard the troop ship TT *Dunera*. While the number of scientific and technical staff on the island remained steady at 114, British Army numbers doubled to 1,331 and the contingent of sailors increased to 851 during the year. The Royal Air Force (RAF) had the largest number of personnel deployed at any one time, with 1,426 aircrew serving on Christmas Island during 1958.¹

Members of the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) were also sent to the island as a small part of this much larger deployment. Fijian soldiers who staffed the test sites from 1958 to 1960 worked as engineers, labourers and stevedores for the loading and unloading of ships. Later, after witnessing the tests, RFMF soldiers were also involved in clean-up operations, such as capturing and killing birds blinded by the nuclear detonation.

Today, the surviving Fijian military personnel are anxious about possible long-term effects from radiation exposure, for themselves and members of their family.

* * *

The idea to send soldiers as well as sailors from Fiji was driven by the colony's Governor Sir Ronald Garvey. Eager to promote employment opportunities for young Fijians, Garvey lobbied London in late 1957 to send a detachment of RFMF engineers and 20 Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (FRNVR) ratings to Christmas Island:

Fiji Military Forces would include 16 sappers with dock construction experience, two of whom hold road machinery licences and one a heavy bulldozer licence. Remainder of party capable, under supervision, of road construction or stevedore duties.²

The involvement of Fijians was not entirely welcomed by the Resident Commissioner of the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC), who was eager to promote employment opportunities for Gilbertese rather than people from other British colonies. From his headquarters in Tarawa, Commissioner Bernacchi saw the renewed military build-up on Christmas Island as an opportunity to improve revenues for the GEIC.

1 Data from 'Number of men involved in each operation, by service or employer', Table A4.1, Appendix 4 in Lorna Arnold: *Britain and the H-Bomb* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2001), p. 241.

2 Telegram no. 332 from Sir Ronald Garvey, Governor of Fiji, to Alan Lennox-Boyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 December 1957. CO1036/283.

He was overridden by his superior John Gutch, the Western Pacific Commissioner based in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Gutch recognised the logistic pressures that could limit the use of civilian labour and grudgingly endorsed the use of RFMF personnel:

In view of (a) short term employment proposed (b) exceptional program of capital works now underway in Tarawa and British Phosphate Commission at Ocean Island (c) lack of civilian accommodation at Christmas Island, I have no objection to employing Fijian service (repeat service) personnel in this instance, and without prejudice to consideration of similar proposals in future.³

In the New Year, London quickly approved the deployment of Fijian soldiers and sailors, confirming that ‘employment would be for three months in the first instance and that costs, including indemnity against claims for disability pensions etc. arising from any injuries would be a charge on United Kingdom funds’.⁴

On 20 January 1958, RFMF Captain Viliame Umu and Sergeant Isoa Vavaitamana led the initial contingent of Fijian soldiers to Christmas Island. The opportunity to leave Fiji for the first time was a huge adventure for most of the young men. One of the first Fijian soldiers deployed to Christmas Island was Private Isireli Qalo (RFMF 19333) from Naceva village on the island of Beqa:

I was very young when I went to Christmas Island—many of us were young, some were kids. There were a number of us from the army infantry who were attached to the engineers from Samabula who went in one of the first trips to Christmas Island. We left the capital Suva and slept in Nadi before flying off in the plane to Canton Island where we stayed the night. The next day, we left Canton Island for Christmas Island.

For our work on Christmas Island, they divided us into two groups. One group stayed at the Main Camp and was involved in construction work. I was one of those delegated to Port Camp. Those of us at Port Camp did stevedoring work—unloading cargo from Britain for Christmas Island.⁵

3 Telegram no. 649 from Sir John Gutch, Western Pacific Commissioner, to Alan Lennox-Boyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 24 December 1957. CO1036/283.

4 Telegram no. 5 from Alan Lennox-Boyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies to Sir Ronald Garvey, Governor of Fiji, 6 January 1958. CO1036/283. This is one among many statements from the British authorities that they would be responsible for death or injury to Fijian service personnel in the course of their duties.

5 Interview with Isireli Qalo, Suva, Fiji, 1998. Most interviews excerpted in this chapter were recorded in the Fijian language in 1998, and the translations come from the book *Kirisimasi—Na Sotia kei na Leve ni Mataivalu e Wai ni Viti e na vakatovotovo iyaragi nei Peritania mai Kirisimasi* (Pacific Concerns Research Centre, Suva, 1999), with thanks to my co-authors Losena Tubanavau-Salabula and Josua Namoco.

Over time, successive deployments of Fijian troops lengthened to six and then 12 months. Josese Kalouvou (RFMF 19890) joined the army in 1958 as the RFMF expanded its recruitment of new troops. Under the command of Lieutenant Namosimalua Komaisavai, he was part of the next contingent to arrive in May 1958:

After the Malayan campaign, we were the first recruits in the army—there were about 500 of us. After we went through our basic training, they picked 22 from my group of recruits and we were to go to Christmas Island for six months. We did construction work there, constructing buildings for the army.⁶

Isireli Qalo said that much of their work was routine, with little variation because of the isolation:

It was a soldier's life on the island. We used to wake up every morning at 4 am. We got dressed, had our breakfast and then went for parade at 5.30 am. It was very hot on this island because it was near the middle of the earth [the Equator]. We worked every day and it was always hot. Contact between that place and home was very difficult.⁷

It was a major logistic exercise to feed the thousands of troops, but the kitchens were vital to keep up morale. The hardship rations issued to the original military contingents in 1956 had been replaced with more regular supplies of food, often shipped or flown from Hawai'i. Desalination plants provided fresh water supplies. Despite difficulties with refrigeration and a lack of fresh fruit or vegetables, the British Army ensured that the hard-working young men on the island were well fed with potatoes.

Private Eseroma Kuruwale (RFMF Engineers 18906) from Nakuruivau, Bau, Tailevu was flown to Christmas Island in May 1958. One of his fondest memories of the time was the food:

Meals were served in the early morning until it was close to lunch time. It was the same with our evening meals. Supper went on until night time. For the Fijian soldier, it was up to his appetite. All the other British soldiers had only one serve. For the Fijian, it depended on his stomach—Fijian soldiers went twice or three times.⁸

6 Interview with Josese Kalouvou, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 43–44.

7 Interview with Isireli Qalo, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

8 Interview with Eseroma Kuruwale, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 54–55.

Mosese Koroi, who spent a year on the island in 1958–59, agreed that ‘one thing good about being there was the food’:

We ate very well. Breakfast was being served from early mornings until 9.30 am and tea was at 10 o’clock. Lunch was served from 11.30 am onwards. Lunch was so good that there was no room for complaints. Relations between the soldiers from different countries were very good. Those of us in Main Camp numbered 1,000. One day, we would all eat at the same time. On other days, we would not know how many of us were there.

We were always eating. We were very flattered with the service provided by those working in the kitchen. They were really good cooks and their service was really good. All we had to do was eat. Potatoes! There were plenty of potatoes. They used to bring our *dalo* [taro] from Hawai‘i. One of us Fijian boys would be in the kitchen cooking this *dalo*.⁹

Despite this, the Fijians also supplemented the standard rations with seafood, caught from the surrounding lagoon and reef. Eseroma Kuruwale recalled that the soldiers often ignored official regulations that banned the consumption of fish following a nuclear test:

When we Fijians were there, we used to go spear fishing along the shores. We ate the fish on the beach. During the time that the bomb was dropped, it wasn’t allowed to eat fish, but you know, we Fijians always do it anyway. We were always yearning for fish. After a day or one week, we used to look for crayfish. We ate the crayfish which were very tasty. It was very easy to catch there. Not like in Fiji, where it is hard to find.¹⁰

* * *

From the 1950s to today, the British, NZ and Fijian veterans have faced penny-pinching by British officials, who often refuse to fund the commitments made by British political leaders. Files in the UK National Archives are full of correspondence between the Grapple Task Force, the Ministry of Supply in London, the commander of the RFMF and the Colonial Office, all seeking to shift responsibility for the employment of islander labour, the payment of pensions or the health care costs of military personnel who claim they were exposed to hazardous levels of radiation.

9 Interview with Mosese Koroi, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 52–53.

10 Interview with Eseroma Kuruwale, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

As London and Suva discussed further deployment of troops to Christmas Island during 1958, every meeting included discussion over the payment of war pensions and gratuities for Fijian Navy and Army personnel who served on Christmas Island.¹¹

British policy was clear. Fijian personnel serving on Christmas Island would receive disability pensions for illness or injury attributable to their involvement in Operation Grapple. Historic commitments made within the British Government to the colonial governor in Fiji are not legally binding with the independent Republic of Fiji. But the legal and administrative commitments made in the 1950s have a clear moral force, showing that the British authorities understood that they had an ongoing responsibility to address any injury or illness to the Fijian military personnel serving on Christmas Island, as well as to their families, widows and orphans.

While debating the best mechanism to pay the pensions, there is no doubt that London recognised its obligations to pay post-service pensions to the Fijian military personnel. This commitment is repeated in numerous letters and policy documents issued between government ministries:

The Ministry of Supply has confirmed that the Ministry will indemnify the government of Fiji against claims for disability pensions or gratuities arising from injuries or sickness attributable to service by Fiji Military Forces on Christmas Island and to injuries received by Fiji Military Forces en route from Suvo [sic] to Christmas Island and vice versa. The rates and conditions applicable to such pensions or gratuities will be the same as those already agreed in respect of the Fiji Military Forces who served in Malaya.¹²

A 1958 letter from the Ministry of Supply to the War Office reconfirmed the commitment for disability pensions arising for injuries or sickness:

Under the arrangements between us and the Fijian government, we have undertaken to indemnify the Fijian government against claims for disability pensions, et cetera, arising from injuries or sickness attributable

11 Correspondence is collated in the Colonial Office archive 'Proposal to Use Fijian Military Forces on Christmas Island', PAC 310/4/012. C01036/514. See, for example, 'Conclusions of a meeting held on Monday, 26 January 1959 at St Giles Court to decide the method of meeting claims for the employment of Fijian Naval and Army personnel at Christmas Island', Ministry of Supply minutes, 26 January 1959. DB/231/05. C01036/514.

12 Telegram no. 315 from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Officer Administering the Government of Fiji, 4 July 1958. PAC 310/4/012. C01036/514.

to service on Christmas Island or in transit. This we hope to do by payment of a lump sum in respect of each man, calculated by the government Actuary from information on the expectation of life on the individual and his rate of pension.¹³

A June 1958 letter from Ministry of Supply to the Government Actuary confirms that pensions would be paid to dependants as well as RFMF personnel, for both death and injury related to presence at the Christmas Island nuclear weapons base:

The Ministry of Supply has undertaken to indemnify the government of Fiji against claims for pensions to which men of the Fiji Military Forces or their dependents may be entitled as a result of death or injury sustained by them during their service at the Nuclear Weapons Testing Base at Christmas Island in the Pacific.¹⁴

In response, the UK Government Actuary confirmed:

This is a service which the Government Actuary would be prepared to undertake and I did not expect any substantial difficulty to arise in doing so. A substantial body of information regarding rates of mortality, et cetera, is already available to us from investigations made into the circumstances of pension schemes maintained for the benefit of government servants in overseas territories, including Fiji, or their widows and orphans.¹⁵

Despite this, Governor of Fiji was wary of lump sum payment, aware that it might be responsible for decades of funding for young men affected by illness or injury:

If a monthly pension were paid, this government would be liable to meet the additional cost in the event of the pensioner outliving the period on which the actuarial calculation has been based.¹⁶

From the beginning, the armed forces tried to avoid responsibility. The British Admiralty and War Office attempted to shift responsibility for managing the payment of troops, leaving the administration to the Governor of Fiji. In an echo of contemporary debates about the

13 'Fijian forces at Christmas Island', Letter from G.M.P. Myers, Ministry of Supply, London, to Miss J.B. Payne, War Office, London, 29 October 1958. DB 231/05. CO1036/514.

14 Letter from G.M.P. Myers, Ministry of Supply, London, to C.E. Clarke, Government Actuary's Department, 5 June 1958. DB 231/05. CO1036/514.

15 Letters from Government Actuary's Department, London to G.M.P. Myers, Ministry of Supply, 13 June 1958. DB/231/05. CO1036/514.

16 'Fijians for Grapple', telegram from the Governor of Fiji to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 23 August 1958. PAC 310/4/012. CO1036/514.

responsibility of the UK Government towards the government and people of Fiji, the Colonial Office condemned the parsimony of the armed services and Ministry of Defence (MoD) over the simple matter of meeting financial obligations to the Fijian service personnel:

We are somewhat dismayed both at the complexity of the proposed arrangements and at the idea that the burden of operating them should fall principally on the government of Fiji. It must be remembered that these troops have been made available by Fiji at the request of Her Majesty's Government, in order to relieve the call on United Kingdom troops. It seems to us unfair to seek to impose upon the government of Fiji the complex arrangements now proposed for financing them.¹⁷

* * *

The issue of injury, illness or death was not academic. Isireli Qalo reported that the Fijian troops, like the Gilbertese workers, were often allocated dirty, difficult or dangerous tasks:

I was involved in the unloading of the first bomb for Christmas Island. A cargo boat escorted by several warships brought the bomb to Port Camp. My job was to secure the unloading area and oversee the work of the Fijian boys.

Those doing the unloading were organised into sections. There was only one white fellow who was allowed in the secured area with me, to oversee the unloading. We took this thing from the Navy and took it onto the island.¹⁸

Before travelling to the island, Qalo was not aware of the full scale of the operation, until he witnessed the Grapple Y test in April 1958:

After some time there, we realised that we were doing work related to the tests. When it happened, I became afraid. We proceeded to the site where we were to sit during the tests. We were dressed in white clothes then moved away from the area where the bomb was to be tested. We had to press our eyes with our gloved hands until the explosion was complete.¹⁹

17 Letter from D.J. Derox, Colonial Office, London, to G.M.P. Myers, Ministry of Supply, London, 30 December 1958. PAC 310/4/012. CO1036/514.

18 Interview with Isireli Qalo, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

19 Ibid.

Decades later, the Fijian Christmas Island veterans have vivid memories of the day of the tests. As with the British troops, Fijian soldiers were lined up, backs to the blast, to prepare for a plane to drop the hydrogen bomb over the south-east corner of Christmas Island.

During his six months on the island, Josese Kalouvou witnessed two hydrogen bomb and one atomic bomb test:

When they dropped the bombs, we were told to move far away and not to look at it. There used to be blasts. When it exploded everything below—trees and everything else—blew into the air. When the planes dropped this bomb you were not allowed to see it. If you saw it you would go blind. We wore protective clothing to protect our skin. Even with this clothing we could easily burn.²⁰

Eseroma Kuruwale also recalled the routine:

The usual practice was having lectures on the bomb, one or two days before it was tested. One English Major explained the difference between hydrogen and atomic bombs—their different strengths. He explained briefly that if it fell on Fiji, the whole island would be vaporised.

Whenever the bomb was about to be tested, we used to be transported to the other side of Christmas Island at about 2 am in the early morning. We used to stay there until twilight, then we were transported back to the Main Camp in trucks. There we waited till daylight.

At about 8 o'clock there was a plane in the air, which was used to forecast the weather. The bomb was dropped at 8 o'clock. There was a count from 10 to 1, then zero. At that time, you were to close your eyes. Don't try to force your eyes to see the light or it will be damaged.²¹

Anare Bakale (RFMF Engineer 10820) said that 'from the time I arrived there in '58 until my return, I continued to feel the effects of the bomb physically and mentally':

At about 10.00 am before they exploded the bomb, our superior explained to us that the bomb would go off. We were advised that wherever we were working, we were to listen carefully to all instructions and follow whatever advice that came. When the instructions were given, we were asked to be on alert and be aware about our safety.

20 Interview with Josese Kalouvou, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

21 Interview with Eseroma Kuruwale, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

A plane was flying, carrying this thing [the bomb]. We heard this plane flying and instructions were being regularly relayed. Instructions continued from about 10.00 am to 1.00 pm. I think they said the bomb was going to explode at 1.00 pm.

They told us to close our eyes. If you opened your eyes, they will be injured forever. I swear that when I closed my eyes, I could still see the light from that thing. I also could feel the sound of this thing and it was the most terrible sound.²²

Bakale recalled the enormous power of the hydrogen bomb, which destroyed vegetation in the south-east corner of the island:

After two weeks, we went to see the site where this thing exploded. The whole place looked dry and black. Dead fish were floating in the sea. It was so horrifying. What if this explosion had hit us? I believe we would all have died.

The island is all sand and all the plants that grew are those that grow on sandy soil. I did not see any trees similar to the ones we have here in Fiji, only plants that grew on sandy areas. The plants were very green, but when the fallout from the explosion reached these plants, they withered as if they had been watered with boiling water. Nothing was left. Everything from the stem to the leaves disappeared. Only the sand was left.²³

22 Interview with Anare Bakale, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 53–54.

23 Ibid.

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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