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The Banaban—Tekoti Rotan

As a member of the Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (FRNVR 1133), Tekoti Rotan was based at Port Camp on Christmas Island in 1958. But Rotan used to sneak out of the military camp at night to meet with the Gilbertese labourers living in the nearby village:

That village was an escape place for me. When I had time in the night, instead of going watching the film, I skipped out to the village and go and yarn with the people out there.¹

Although he was serving in the Fiji Navy, Rotan was of Micronesian heritage. As one of the few military personnel to share a direct cultural connection with the Gilbertese workers on Christmas Island, Rotan bridged the gulf between soldiers and sailors from the South Pacific and civilian labourers from Micronesia.

In 1957–58, a fierce debate erupted between British officials over the best way to recruit more labourers to Christmas Island, now that the test site was being relocated from Malden Island. Some ministries pressed for increased numbers of disciplined Fijian military personnel, while the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) administration argued that more civilians should be recruited from overcrowded and underemployed communities in the Gilbert Islands.

1 Interview with Tekoti Rotan, Suva, Fiji, November 2016. Unless otherwise noted, direct quotes from Rotan are taken from this interview.



Tekoti Rotan in Suva, Fiji, November 2016

Source: Nic Maclellan.

One incident facing Tekoti Rotan puts a human face on this bureaucratic policy battle:

The funny thing is, when we sailors went there, we had this cloth hat to protect us from the heat. I always bring my hat down to hide myself from the Gilbertese people. So when we Fijians went to work, they start complaining: ‘What are these Fijians doing here? Now we’ve got a job, they’re coming again!’

They didn’t know that I could hear them. Three days this kept on, then I said to myself, ‘No, I’d better not do this, they’ll get very angry at me.’ So I went to them and shook their hand and said in i-Kiribati ‘*Kam na mauri!*’ [Greetings]. Most were shocked and said ‘you bugger!’

For Rotan, the cultural bond with the Gilbertese was a warm memory of his time on the island, as a 24-year-old, far from home:

I was fortunate because some of them were relatives from my mother’s side. My mother was from Kiribati and I was warned before I went to Christmas that ‘you’ll find some of your *kaivata* [countrymen] there’. So I said, ‘good, what are their names?’

Gilbertese men living on Christmas Island had arrived on the island from the GEIC’s western archipelago as plantation workers. They lived, together with their families, at the village near Port London—a total of about 260 men, women and children over the period of the operation. But with the plantation halting work during Operation Grapple, many were hired to support the British military effort with mundane tasks to improve conditions for the troops living under canvas. The islanders were initially deployed as general labourers, as laundry assistants and for ‘sanitary duties (i.e. emptying Elsan toilets), a task of relatively short duration for which extra pay would be awarded’.²

Under the direction of Percy Roberts (a New Zealander employed as a colonial service District Officer), the Gilbertese workers were also deployed on the wharves. They assisted with unloading barges as new supplies arrived from England and were transported from ship to shore. One report to Western Pacific Commissioner John Gutch noted:

2 ‘Employment of local labour in Operation Grapple’, note prepared by Task Force Grapple for discussions with his honour M.L. Bernacchi CMG OBE, Resident Commissioner Gilbert and Ellice Island Colony, 26 March 1958. Grapple archives GRA/S.102/36/ORG, Appendix A. Elsan was a popular brand of portable chemical toilets, widely used in the United Kingdom.

The landing of large quantities of stores and equipment and the construction of a major airfield on Christmas Island was a difficult and arduous task and its completion in time would not have been possible without the outstanding help of the District Officer and the island labour force.³

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Tekoti Rotan's travels from his home island to the Caroline Islands, the Gilbert Islands, Fiji and finally to Christmas Island reflect the many ways that resource extraction, military conflict, labour mobility and displacement have reshaped the lives of Pacific islanders.

Rotan was born on Banaba, known as Ocean Island to the GEIC colonial authorities. As with Nauru, the island of Banaba was rich with phosphate. It was the location of a major mining operation that eventually consumed two thirds of the island's land.⁴

Born in 1934, Rotan's childhood was disrupted by the Second World War, as Japanese forces advanced across Micronesia. Banaba was occupied by the Japanese military and the population dispersed, as Rotan recalled nearly 75 years later:

During the war, my family and other members of the Banaban community were uprooted and taken away to the island of Kosrae in the Caroline Islands as prisoners of war. I spent the rest of the war years on Kosrae. As a prisoner of war, I was educated in the Japanese school on the island of Kosrae. At that time I could speak and write in Japanese.

The British came back again and collected all the Banabans from Kosrae and Nauru and some of us went to Tarawa [main island and capital of the GEIC]. We were all gathered together in Tarawa and they tried to convince us that we must not go back to Banaba, because the land was not habitable for us.

The British were trying to get rid of us from Banaba because we were blocking the mining work in our own villages. So the war provided them with the excuse. In 1945, my community was further uprooted and we were brought by the British government to be settled on the island of Rabi in Fiji. The reason was because our home land Banaba was considered unsuitable for resettlement as the result of phosphate mining.

3 Telegram from Secretary of State for the Colonies Alan Lennox-Boyd to Western Pacific Commissioner John Gutch, 17 April 1957. CO1036/281.

4 The history of phosphate, Banaba and Rabi is movingly recorded by Katerina Teaiwa: *Consuming Ocean Island—stories of people and phosphate from Banaba* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2015).

The arrangement was alright, we'll come to Fiji for two years while you people prepare the island for us to go back. So we came—but when we came here to Fiji, it's not two years. We've been in Fiji ever since!⁵

In the 1950s, as they prepared a contingent to join the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya, the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) promoted their proud record of service to Empire in Bougainville and Solomon Islands during the Second World War. Seeking employment and training, many young Fijian villagers were attracted to sign up, but the Banaban elders on Rabi discouraged recruitment:

When we arrived in Rabi, there were less than 1,000 of us Banabans. Most of us were killed during the war and they were worried that our community would slowly be diminishing. So they said to our young men: 'None of you should volunteer to go to war. We want you to stay on the island. Produce! We want our community to grow.' So we stayed.

For myself, however, I still remembered the suffering we had under the hands of the Japanese. I think I had anger in me. I said, I must go and join the army someday, because I want to protect. No such thing should happen again to our people. So I convinced my father: 'Let me go to Suva to continue my education.' I studied bookkeeping, because at that time at school, we were over age, and I could not progress further.

That's the time that I heard of the recruitment for the Navy. The commanding officer happened to be a man who'd served in Kiribati, so he knows our people. So I went to see him and I joined. Then, because of the war, I failed my medical tests. They said I had TB—the aftermath of it was still there on my chest. Three months they gave me injections all the time. My body was stiff because of all the injections. Then when I went to the medical test, I passed, and that's how I joined the Navy.

While working at the Fiji naval headquarters at Lami in 1958, Rotan was intrigued when officers called for volunteers to go and help the British soldiers prepare Christmas Island for the testing program:

Most of us were young men and said, 'That's exciting, we'll go', without realising! We knew there was a bomb there, but we were just going to prepare the island, construction work, build the road, that's all we know. We didn't know that we'd be there during the actual test.

5 For other childhood memories, see the speech by Tekoti Rotan to International Meeting, World Conference on A and H Bombs, Tokyo, August 2002.

Because we were in the Navy, we were assigned to do stevedoring work on the wharf, carting building materials and foodstuffs from the big boat anchored outside. Because I was a Leading Seaman then, I was assigned a landing craft and one pontoon. We carry a big load from the ship, then I go up on the pontoon, take it out to the ship, load it up with goods or big machinery and bring it back to the shore.

As I was in charge of one of the landing craft, I was warned that in case of emergency, they told me where to go, where to rush to the army camp and where to pick up those people and move away from the island. So then I start to realise that this is not a fun thing.

Rotan returned early to Fiji because his wife was suffering ill health during her pregnancy, but still lined up, back to the blast, for one test:

Because I was there only for three months, I only witnessed one test. They told us to assemble on the beach. We had this broadcasting mike and as soon as the pilot takes off, we can hear everything, from their position on the air field and he's going up. When he's ready, he says, 'I'm ready now to release the bomb' and it's counting, 10 to 1, and then it goes.

We were looking at the sea. They said, 'Turn around', and the first thing we notice that lightning! That lightning came, phew! If it lasted more than five seconds, we would have been dead. It was very painful. After that, I would look up and we would see this ball of black cloud up there and then the fire inside start drifting off from the island.

For Rotan, the scale of the nuclear detonation and the attendant risk of fallout raised the stakes beyond normal military duty:

We were all young people. We'd all signed our death warrant when we joined the Navy, so we thought this is what we signed for. But that's the time we realised, you know, there was some danger in the work we were doing.

* * *

The status of the Gilbertese labourers on Christmas Island became a source of tension between the military command, different government departments in London and Colonial Office staff in the Pacific.

For the Colonial Office, seeking to improve revenues and living standards in the GEIC, the build-up of operations on Christmas Island created a great opportunity to provide waged employment for Gilbertese workers.

Despite penny-pinching in London, Operation Grapple provided a steady stream of funds that the GEIC Resident Commissioner would never otherwise see.

The military, however, were reluctant to be responsible for undisciplined civilian staff, plus women and children, who had their own housing and food needs. Before the tests began, Wilfred Oulton and the Grapple Task Force were also concerned about the presence of Gilbertese on Christmas Island when tests actually occurred. As the Malden Island tests were still being planned in early 1957, GEIC Resident Commissioner Michael Bernacchi was told:

Task Force Commander has now decided that it will be impractical remove civilian labour temporarily [sic] from Christmas during actual time of tests and that there is no alternative but to evacuate civilian labour for two months from 1 May till 1 July. So far as possible, number of labourers on island should be reduced minimum before this period. Task Force will assist with transport and movement of food etc supplies. They would prefer to move labour as short distance as possible (e.g. to Fanning Island).⁶

As the test site was relocated from Malden to Christmas Island in mid-1957, the Western Pacific Commission was 'concerned about the reference to tests being close to Christmas Island, but no doubt the authorities are fully aware of the distribution of population in the area ... Necessity to evacuate civilians from other islands should, I feel, be avoided'.⁷

Writing to officials in the Pacific, the Colonial Office in London confirmed that populated islands outside the prescribed danger area would take no extra precautions:

I am assured that neither Fanning Island nor other inhabited islands in the area, apart from Christmas, will need to be evacuated for tests and that the test will carry no risk for inhabitants of these islands or any in the Colony. Civilian population on Christmas Island will be evacuated but not for any great length of time.⁸

6 Telegram from Secretary of State for the Colonies to Sir John Gutch, High Commissioner Western Pacific, and Resident Commissioner M.L. Bernacchi, Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, 10 January 1957. CO1036/280.

7 Telegram no. 418 from Western Pacific Commission to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 12 August 1957. CO1036/282.

8 Draft telegram from D.J. Derox, Colonial Office, London, to Assistant High Commissioner, Western Pacific Commission, n.d. CO1036/282.

Under pressure from the Colonial Office, the Grapple Task Force again debated the status of the Gilbertese islanders on Christmas Island:

It is not intended to evacuate the civilian population of Christmas Island for any great length of time and our present plans are that on firing days, civilians will be embarked in a ship and sailed out of the immediate danger area. They will be landed again on Christmas Island as soon as the burst has taken place and there is no danger to human life.⁹

A September 1957 letter from the Secretary of State for the Colonies did, however, acknowledge there was a level of risk for people housed in vessels of the naval taskforce:

Should an accident occur, either due to a crash on take-off by the bomber or surface burst instead of a high airburst, then there may be a risk to ships lying in the anchorage.¹⁰

For the people on the ground, however, these bureaucratic policy debates meant little. Tekoti Rotan explains that safety regulations issued from London had little meaning for the islanders. One example is the supposed ban on the consumption of fish that might be contaminated with fallout:

The only warning we had before the test, was they warned the people: 'After the test, don't eat any fish!' But you know, I'm from Kiribati. I love raw fish and this is the only dangerous thing after the test. They said 'Don't!', but I ignored them.

I went to the Kiribati people and said: 'Hey, raw fish, we're not supposed to eat the raw fish!' But they said, 'Oh, we've been eating it and nothing's happened.' That was the biggest mistake for them.

As the tests were relocated from Malden to Christmas Island, the Grapple Task Force was more open to the use of Pacific labour—Gilbertese or Fijian—given the time and cost involved in shipping British troops halfway round the globe. However, by mid-1957, there were just 76 Gilbertese workers, together with their families, stationed on Christmas Island. London then proposed to increase the labour force to more than 200 Gilbertese workers by the end of the year. This expanded

9 Letter from Group Captain F.M. Milligan, Headquarters Task Force Grapple, to G.A.C. Witheridge, Ministry of Supply, 9 August 1957. GX/TS. 3001/8/Air.

10 Letter from P. Rogers, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 20 September 1957, marked 'Top Secret'. CO1036/283.

labour force would serve for one year and then local administrators would need to continue providing employment for half this labour force in subsequent years.

Initially, 24 further Gilbertese labourers plus their families were to be sent to Christmas Island from Tarawa aboard the *Constantine* in September 1957. However, the request floundered for months, due to lack of transport and uncertainty about the availability of housing for the extra labourers on Christmas Island. The acting Resident Commissioner complained to London:

District Officer has no labour reserves to draw from, other than those already at Christmas Island, and if more are required to bring numbers up to 90 by September, they will have to be specially recruited in the Gilbert and Ellice islands (not Phoenix, which proved unsatisfactory last occasion). This will involve chartering vessel immediately and with the *Tungaru* overhaul, the only possibility is the *Matapula*.

This would prove serious embarrassment administratively and would be uneconomical for small numbers involved ... Some indication of the length of time required, as taking Gilbertese away from home for long periods only leads to trouble. If families are to accompany, transport commitments would be trebled and could not be met with our resources without incurring delay and serious embarrassment, particularly in view of the Betio harbour project.¹¹

Officials in London sent dozens of telegrams and letters to officials in Tarawa and Suva, trying to find appropriate shipping to relocate the labourers required for work at the Christmas Island base. The incessant demands from half a world away clearly angered the local officials, who felt—correctly—that the Grapple Task Force and UK officials were trying to conduct operations on the cheap, drawing resources from the colonial administration that would create long-term problems for the local economy.

11 Telegram no. 89 from Acting Resident Commissioner, Gilbert and Ellice Islands, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 25 August 1957. CO1036/282. On 25 May 1957, the UK Government announced that Michael Bernacchi, who had left Tarawa due to ill health, would end his posting. He was temporarily replaced by his deputy Frederick Pusinelli as Acting Resident Commissioner. However, Bernacchi later returned to his post and played an ongoing role in negotiating with Grapple Task Force over labour supply for the operation. *Headquarter Information Note*, No. 23, Extraordinary edition, 25 May 1957. Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. F76/6/32 (1957). PAMBU document AU PMB Doc 493.

The acting Resident Commissioner in Tarawa believed that London-based officials did not understand that Christmas Island was nearly 3,300 kilometres away from the colony's administrative headquarters in the Gilbert Islands. In August 1957, he wrote tersely:

Although I am taking immediate action to comply with the Task Force request, I feel it my duty to stress the crippling effect which the diversion of the *Matapula* and *Tongaru* to Christmas Island will have on the economy and routine administration of this Colony, which cannot adequately be recompensed by simple reimbursement of expenditure. The Colony is dependent on these vessels for maintaining food supplies and collecting copra, neither of which can be neglected for any long period. I would therefore earnestly request reconsideration of outside assistance.¹²

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The colonial administrators in Tarawa were anxious that the expansion of facilities on Christmas Island would have long-term, adverse economic implications. The new tasks allocated to the Gilbertese labourers would undercut the plantation economy and the revenues raised for the whole colony from copra in the Line Islands. These concerns were backed by the Western Pacific Commission in Honiara, which told London:

Resident Commissioner points out that further tests will involve further interruption of copra production at Christmas Island. Over 12 months, crops now lying. Recent rain may result in increased percentage of germination and consequent loss of copra and of income to the plantation and revenue. Further delay in resuming plantation operation will involve further running down, extent of which is difficult to assess.

While these factors can doubtless be included in the claims for compensation, assessment of this will have to be authorised. Meantime, plantation owes the government about £30,000. Two years ago, there was hope of settling the case but until plantation can resume full operation, liquidation of debts is postponed, which is detrimental to the Colony, which with diminishing copra revenue cannot carry the burden indefinitely. Resident Commissioner suggested there is case for settlement of compensation and also that Grapple might buy or lease land occupied, particularly the airfield.¹³

12 Telegram no. 99 from Resident Commissioner, Gilbert and Ellice Islands to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 30 August 1957. CO1036/282.

13 Telegram no. 440 from acting High Commissioner, Western Pacific Commission, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 August 1957. CO1036/282.

As the government refused to tell him the date for the next test and how long the Grapple test series would continue, the Resident Commissioner proposed that the UK Government purchase the Christmas Island plantation:

While I regard it as absolutely incumbent on the Colony to afford Grapple every assistance, I am becoming increasingly concerned over the long-term implications of these latest developments. It is appreciated that it is difficult at this stage for the planners to envisage how long Christmas Island is going to continue to be required for nuclear tests, but Grapple's stake there is becoming considerable with permanent airfield, including installations of more permanent character than hitherto, and it is hard to believe that they will not continue to require the island as base for some years to come.

In the circumstances it is becoming virtually impossible to continue to regard Christmas Island as a normal economic commercial proposition. The plantation is heavily in debt at present, and whereas it was originally considered that if Grapple activity ceased in mid-1957, 12 months copra could be safely left on the ground and harvested afterwards, these latest developments might well result in the whole crop being lost.

There is also the loss of revenue to the government in respect of export duty on copra of order of \$14,000 per annum and this is most serious with the Colony on the threshold of critical financial period ... I am therefore coming increasingly to the conclusion that the logical solution of the problem is that the military to purchase Christmas Island from this government, with the Colony providing administration of labour and whatever other assistance is required.¹⁴

The archives reflect the ongoing battle between the more junior Colonial Office and the Ministry of Supply, Treasury and War Office. The Colonial Office was concerned that the War Office push to continue with further nuclear tests into 1958–59 would leave the colony in a financial hole, especially because the Ministry of Supply and Treasury were more focused on the military's needs:

The Colonial Office has two main interests in these operations. The first is to ensure that the safety of the inhabitants of the Colony, and in particular the Gilbertese labour on Christmas, is not prejudiced by them ... The second point of interest is to ensure that the Colony

14 Telegram no. 92 from Resident Commissioner, Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 25 August 1957. CO1036/282.

does not suffer financially from the operation ... With the extension of 'Grapple' activities beyond what was expected, the assessment and payment of compensation to the Colony for any loss incurred in respect to the coconut plantation on Christmas has been indefinitely delayed.¹⁵

Some London-based officials tried to smooth the waters, recognising that the local administration could face long-term financial damage:

We really recognise here that if Grapple does continue on the island and its activities interfere with the plantation, we shall have to come to some better arrangement with the Ministry of Supply for reimbursing the Colony for revenues of which it is thereby deprived: the principle of 'once and for all' compensation at the end of the exercise will no longer work ... Any extra identifiable costs incurred by the Colony as a result of Grapple X will be reimbursed by Her Majesty's Government [HMG] and the principle of compensation for loss of plantation revenue is also accepted, again subject to HMG being convinced that there is a clear case.¹⁶

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The inter-ministry debate came to a head in early 1958. The Grapple Task Force was eager to expand the labour force on Christmas Island, as they faced numerous logistic challenges to be ready for the April 1958 Grapple Y test.

The UK Government planned to issue instructions to make all the existing Gilbertese labour force available for work in support of military operations and also to increase the numbers. Islanders would be employed to undertake basic labouring jobs, in order to allow more British military personnel to undertake tasks directly related to the nuclear weapons program. Potential jobs for islander labour were identified as:

General labours in technical wing, DDT mixing for Auster flight, galley fatigues, store pumping parties, sanitary squad, general labours in equipment section, camp fatigues, groundsmen ... stores (lifting and sorting), assistance to electricians, plumbers etc, sorting and erecting huts, stevedores and shore offloading party.¹⁷

15 File note, D.J. Derox, Colonial Office, 18 September 1957. CO1036/283.

16 Personal letter from P. Rogers to R.J. Minnett, 20 September 1957. CO1036/283.

17 'Requirement for Gilbertese Labour', Appendix C, briefing note for M.L. Bernacchi CMG OBE, Resident Commissioner, Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, March 1958. CO1036/514.

GEIC Resident Commissioner Michael Bernacchi was eager for more local labourers to be transported from the Gilbert Islands to Christmas Island to undertake these tasks. However, the British military preferred more disciplined Fijian troops instead, as they argued in a March 1958 briefing note to Bernacchi:

Generally speaking, it has been found that Fijians work harder than Gilbertese. That this is so is probably not just a matter of temperament, but a combination of several factors such as a) Fijians have their own non-commissioned officers, b) they are a disciplined body, c) they are temporarily away from their homes and d) they live and work in units within the Task Force and are instilled with a spirit of competition. The Fijians have, amongst the unit sent to Christmas, more tradesmen than the Gilbertese.¹⁸

The debate came to a head when Bernacchi travelled from Tarawa to Christmas Island in March 1958 to meet with Royal Navy (RN) Captain J.G. ('Guy') Western, who was visiting the island from London as representative of the new Grapple Task Force Commander John Grandy. Bernacchi and Western met with District Officer Percy Roberts and other Grapple staff to thrash out the practicalities of bringing in extra Fijian or Gilbertese labour.

Colonial Office officials had drafted a briefing note for the Resident Commissioner to prepare for the meeting, which highlighted the cost to the GEIC of supporting Operation Grapple:

The Colony's problem is purely an economic one and this has apparently still not been understood. The Colony is prepared, and only too willing, to give Grapple what help it can within the limits of its resources, always providing it is told clearly what is required, and can be given some warning. The Colony however is desperately poor and must be adequately compensated for its efforts and losses.¹⁹

Officials were wary of the War Office suggestion that Gilbertese labourers should be put under military discipline:

The suggestion that the Colony should raise a Gilbertese military unit for employment at Christmas Island is impracticable. The administrative effort which it would entail would be beyond the Colony's present

18 'Employment of local labour in Operation Grapple', A note prepared by Task Force Grapple for discussions with His Honour M.L. Bernacchi CMG OBE, Resident Commissioner, Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, March 1958. CO1036/514.

19 'Grapple', Confidential Resident Commissioner's Brief, March 1958, p. 1. CO1036/514.

resources. The suggestion that the Task Force Commander might enlist the Gilbertese as locally enlisted personnel requires more careful consideration. What it comes down to is that they would be deprived of their families and provided with tent accommodation and military rations, but it would not overcome the problem of returning them to their families, say every 12 months.²⁰

At the face-to-face meeting on Christmas Island, the military made an offer to add another 270 Gilbertese labourers to the workforce in coming years. In return, Bernacchi gave way in his opposition to the deployment of more Fijian soldiers. The minutes of the meeting record:

The Resident Commissioner Gilbert and Ellice Islands had no objection to the employment of additional Fijian Military Forces by Task Force Grapple on Christmas Island, provided they did not replace or preclude the employment of Gilbertese labour. He agreed that the duties on which Fijian uniformed personnel were at present employed could not at present be undertaken by Gilbertese civilians.²¹

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When the government finally agreed that the Grapple X test would be conducted in November 1957, the Colonial Office had pushed for renewed arrangements for moving the Gilbertese to safety:

Because time is so short, it has been decided to carry out the November tests off the south east tip of Christmas Island: it would have taken too long to set up Malden again ...

The proposal is to remove the Gilbertese from Christmas Island before the bombing aircraft takes off and place them in a ship, in the Christmas anchorage, which has immediate notice to steam. They will remain in the ship until after the test when they will be returned to their village. Should an accident occur, either due to a crash on take-off by the bomber or surface burst instead of a high airburst, then there may be a risk to ships lying in the anchorage. This risk is not immediate and there will be ample time to direct the ships to move on to avoid the risk.²²

20 Ibid., p. 2.

21 'Minutes of a meeting held in residence of District Officer Christmas Island on 24 March 1958', Headquarters Task Force Grapple, marked 'confidential', 25 March 1958, p. 4. CO1036/514.

22 File note for draft correspondence from D.J. Dery, Colonial Office to acting High Commissioner, Western Pacific Commission. n.d. CO1036/282.

In the lead-up to the next test in April 1958, the pressure to increase the islander workforce created another problem. Looking after hundreds of additional Gilbertese would place pressure on the RN on the day of a nuclear test. Some Gilbertese workers and their families had been housed below decks during the Grapple X test, but larger numbers could not easily be accommodated aboard British warships.

At his March 1958 meeting with Commissioner Bernacchi, Captain Guy Western explained proposals to evacuate the existing Gilbertese workers and their families to neighbouring islands, or place them below decks in ships on the day of a nuclear test. In response:

The Resident Commissioner stated that his view was that if it was safe for service personnel to stay on the island, it was safe enough for Gilbertese. At the time of the first operation, the High Commissioner had, however, sought assurances from the Colonial Office that there was no danger and these were not then forthcoming in sufficiently explicit terms.²³

If Gilbertese workers were to be evacuated from the island aboard the naval task force 'it would in any case be necessary for women and children to be placed below decks in a ship, as the children could not be expected to carry out the safety drill'.²⁴

The meeting then agreed to recruit extra Gilbertese workers, but noted that some Gilbertese men might be left in their village huts during forthcoming tests:

The introduction of the full number of additional Gilbertese might be dependent upon the non-evacuation of male adults during tests. If agreed by the Task Force Commander, action would be initiated by the Task Force to give the High Commissioner a firmer assurance as to their safety.²⁵

As we'll see in the next chapter, not all islanders were protected below decks when there was a 'surface burst instead of a high airburst' in April 1958.

23 'Employment of Gilbertese labour and Fijian military personnel at Christmas Island', minutes of a meeting held at Headquarters Task Force Grapple, 26 March 1958. GRA/S.102/36/ORG, pp. 1–2. C01036/514.

24 Ibid.

25 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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