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The mothers—Sui Kiritome



Sui Kiritome and her daughter Rakieti in Tarawa, Kiribati, 2004

Source: Nic Maclellan.

Suitupe Benan Kiritome arrived on Christmas Island from the capital Tarawa in early 1957. She was accompanying her husband, Kiritome Itaia, who was posted to work as head teacher for the children of the Gilbertese labourers on the island. Kiritome Itaia was soon used as an interpreter for the British military to help pass on instructions to the islanders. During her time on the island, Sui Kiritome gave birth to two children.

At the time of her arrival, however, the Grapple Task Force was debating whether to relocate the Gilbertese community already living on Christmas Island. The closest inhabited location was Fanning Island, known to the islanders as Tabuaeran, which hosted a Cable & Wireless communications station and copra plantation. After debate between the Task Force and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) administration, nearly 60 Gilbertese workers and family members were relocated to Fanning in January 1957 aboard the GEIC's copra transport ship *Tungaru*, with a further 40 relocated in February on the MV *Tulgai*.¹

By mid-March, just two months before the first test on Malden Island, the remaining Gilbertese community at Port London was made up of 44 males, 29 females and 56 children (including 18 toddlers and babies aged less than two years old). The Grapple Task Force then proposed:

to remove all female and juvenile native population from Christmas Island for the duration of the tests and to reduce the male population to the minimum required to maintain administration and security ... Those remaining will be the District Officer, clerks, wireless operators, three police, mechanics, office assistants, servants, dependents (total 32 persons). All agreeable to remain.²

By the end of April 1957, a fortnight before the first test on Malden Island, another 31 Gilbertese men, 26 women and 47 children were to be relocated to Fanning Island. They were followed by another three females and the remaining children a week before the test. Two alcoholic 'indulgiers' were sent to Canton Island for the duration of the testing program.³

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Following the initial three tests on Malden Island, the UK military began to relocate the testing site to Christmas Island. Once again, authorities were uncertain how to deal with the Gilbertese population living in the village at Port London, as Mrs Kiritome explained:

1 Telegram no. 84 from John Gutch, Western Pacific Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 11 February 1957. CO1036/281.

2 'Evacuation of native population', Memo from Air Vice Marshall Wilfred Oulton, Headquarters Grapple Task Force, 29 March 1957, GRA/6/5/AIR, marked 'restricted'. CO1036/281.

3 Ibid.

I think it was sometime towards the end of 1957 when word came from the District Commissioner that, because of the nuclear test, all the local people on Kiritimati should be repatriated to Tarawa. We were then informed that all, except the teacher, wireless operator and constables, were to be taken to Fanning Island. So we went to Fanning during the first test.

We were in Fanning for three months, and then we returned to Kiritimati. We were in Kiritimati for some time before everyone else returned from Tarawa. Then, sometime at the beginning of 1958, the second test took place [Grapple Y].⁴

Despite the policy to keep all women and children below decks, Sui Kiritome was on deck and exposed to the aftermath of the massive atmospheric test on 28 April 1958, codenamed Grapple Y. Christmas Island veterans have long argued that the greatest radioactive fallout during Operation Grapple was created by this two-stage thermonuclear device, which detonated with an estimated yield of 2.8 megatons.

Royal Engineer Ken McGinley had arrived on Christmas Island aboard TT *Dunera* just weeks before the Grapple Y test. He recalled the enormous impact of the bomb, and the subsequent winds and rainfall:

This was the daddy of all bombs. There was something incredibly sinister about the shimmering line of energy, skimming over the ocean with amazing speed. I dived to the ground and as it hit, I felt an impact and a crack like lightning had hit close by. The huge fireball forming above me seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. I knew straight away we were far closer than we should have been from a bomb that size. It was truly awesome; a great rolling, roiling, boiling mass of fire. Then a spout seemed to rise from the ground and the familiar mushroom cloud began to form.⁵

4 This section is based on an interview with Suitupe Benan Kiritome, 3 May 1998, with thanks to her daughter Rakieta and son-in-law Ueantabo Neemia-McKenzie. Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotes from Mrs Kiritome come from this interview, which is published in Losena Salabula, Josua Namoce and Nic Maclellan: *Kirisimasi—Na Sotia kei na Lewe ni Mataivalu e Wai ni Viti e na vakatovotovo iyaragi nei Peritania mai Kirisimasi* (Pacific Concerns Resource Centre, Suva, 1999), pp. 59–61.

5 For his eyewitness testimony and photos of damage to the camp, see Ken McGinley and Eamonn P. O'Neill: *No Risk Involved—the Ken McGinley story—survivor of a nuclear experiment* (Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 57–68.

GRAPPLING WITH THE BOMB

The initial run to drop the bomb was aborted when reports of an approaching ship raised concern. An hour later, Squadron Leader Bob Bates released the bomb from his Valiant aircraft. The nuclear test was supposed to be an air burst at an altitude of 2,350 metres, high enough to avoid the irradiation of land and water that would generate extensive radioactive fallout.



Mushroom cloud from the Grapple Y test, 28 April 1958

Source: Alamy stock photos.

Despite later official denials, many contemporary reports state that the explosion was nearly a kilometre closer to sea level than expected. The detonation sucked up quantities of water and debris into the fireball and mushroom cloud, irradiating them in the process. Irradiated water and debris then fell back to ground, contaminating an area estimated at 80 to 160 kilometres.⁶

Twenty-three-year-old British soldier Archie Ross had arrived on Christmas Island on 4 November 1957, but his memories of the Grapple Y test remained with him years later:

I still remember, as though it was yesterday, the stem of the mushroom cloud reaching down to the sea and the waves parting like that famous scene from the film the Ten Commandments when Moses causes the Red Sea to part. I remember seeing the water rushing up the spout, followed by all the mud and sand from the seabed, all being sucked up into the cloud like a giant vacuum cleaner.⁷

In an interview translated by her daughter Rakieti, Mrs Kiritome described the movements of the Gilbertese on the day:

Just before the test, we were informed of the arrangements. We were told that the test would take place early in the morning around 5 or 6 am, and that we should be ready at the wharf for evacuation from the island. We were transported to the ships on landing craft. My husband, Kiritome, was the interpreter for the British officers. He assisted them during the evacuation of the island by ensuring that people take their allocated transport.

Evacuation of Kiritimati began about 3 am when the roll call was taken. People were grouped on the basis of their home islands and a representative from each island group was responsible for ensuring that people from his island were all accounted for. We were told that no one should remain on the island. People made their way to the landing craft as their name was called. We were told before leaving our houses that we should take down things hanging on the walls, as well as ensuring that our pets and animals are kept away from the light.

6 For details, see analysis by former Ministry of Defence (MoD) official John Large, in Appendix X, Case of *McGinley and Egan v the United Kingdom*, European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, France, 9 June 1998. § 68, Reports of Judgments and Decisions 1998-III, pp. 3, 7.

7 Alan Rimmer: *Between Heaven and Hell* (E-book, lulu.com, 2012), p. 26. Archie Ross had significant health problems later in life, and his first child was born with deformities. See Derek Robinson: *Just testing* (Collins Harvill, London, 1985), p. 32. Ross died in 2016, after a long involvement in the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association (BNTVA).

When we arrived on the ship, my husband was told to explain to the local people what was expected of them, and later, the progress of the test. A movie was shown, and sweets were shared around. When the countdown to the blast began, my husband told the people to put their hands to their ears to muffle the sound of the blast.

With UK naval personnel lining the decks to witness the rising mushroom cloud, the 24-year-old woman and her husband were invited to come on deck:

Just after the blast, the captain came to my husband and invited us to accompany him to the deck to see what happened after the blast. We went up on deck and we saw everyone on deck wearing protective clothes, covering their head, faces and bodies. Some of them were studying the effects of the bomb with binoculars. We didn't wear protective clothing—we went on deck wearing our normal clothes.

We were watching the black smoke or cloud from the blast which was drifting towards us. When it came overhead, I felt something like a light shower falling on me. I thought it was rain. My husband stood under a lifeboat so he was protected from the light shower ... It was just like rain. I felt wetness on my head, my face and skin.

When we got home later that day, we noticed that the door and glass windows in our house were broken. The concrete wall cracked, and our pet frigate bird was running around the house blind.

* * *

Given the yield of the test—the largest in the Grapple series—there should have been little surprise that fallout could reach the British naval task force, the military camp on Christmas Island and Port London village. Unlike Grapple X, which was conducted in the dry season, Grapple Y was undertaken in the wet season and the Grapple Task Force was well aware that rainfall over Christmas Island was more likely.

In preparations for fallout issued for the Grapple X test the previous November, Task Force Commander Oulton had acknowledged that 'there is a possibility of washout on Christmas Island itself':

If active material were allowed to drift over Christmas Island and were deposited locally by heavy rain, the possibility of a very hazardous contamination level cannot be excluded. It must be a firm requirement

that no rain shall fall on Christmas Island until the activity up to rain level has drifted clear of the island, for example, say 1–3 hours after the explosion unless the winds are light.⁸

There is extensive evidence that authorities knew of the danger of rain for Grapple Y.⁹ In the period leading up to the test, the commander of the bombing aircrew Group Captain Kenneth Hubbard noted ‘difficult and uncomfortable weather conditions which made life unpleasant for all concerned’.¹⁰ Several days before the detonation, the Commander of the Port Camp warned of a slight risk of rain on 28 April. On the day of the test, Group Captain Hubbard noted that:

Squadron Leader Bob Bates and crew, flying Valiant XD825, although scheduled for take-off at 0800 hours local, were delayed due to an unacceptable degree of cloud cover on the day—not unexpected as the previous two days had produced heavy showers from the intertropical front.¹¹

After he took off, the Valiant pilot announced that the target area was obscured by cumulus clouds which rose to 40,000 feet.

Mrs Kiritome’s testimony of black mist is corroborated by other sources. Leading Aircraftman Robert Brown belonged to an Royal Air Force (RAF) unit responsible for fire protection at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) installations on Christmas Island. He reported that 10 minutes after the detonation, he saw the sky over the Main Camp and the airfield was dark and overcast. About 20 minutes after the detonation, members of the RAF unit could see rain falling over both the camp and the airfield, with the RAF officer in charge stating: ‘The poor chaps over there are catching it.’¹²

Returning to base 30 minutes after the detonation, Brown noticed a thin layer of black misty cloud at about 1,500 feet over Port London —where the Gilbertese workers lived.

8 ‘Fallout predictions at Grapple X’, memorandum, Task Force Commander Wilfred Oulton, 8 November 1957.

9 See Annexes to *Suitupe Kiritome v United Kingdom*, European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, France, (49753/99), 1999.

10 Kenneth Hubbard and Michael Simmons: *Dropping Britain’s First H-Bomb —the story of Operation Grapple 1957–8* (Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2008), p. 169.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 170. Unlike other witnesses, Hubbard’s book makes no mention of rain or weather conditions after the test.

12 Statement by Robert Brown, in Annexes to *Suitupe Kiritome v. United Kingdom*, European Court of Human Rights.

For Sui Kiritome, the aftermath of her exposure was not immediately apparent, but she soon noticed effects:

Some time after the test, something happened to my head and face. Every time when I combed my hair, I was losing strands of my hair and something like burns developed on my face, scalp and parts of my shoulder. My face was the worst affected because I was looking up at the black cloud from the blast which was directly above us when the light shower fell on my face. The rest of my body was not affected because of my clothes. It was not really that painful.

When we returned to Tarawa, we went to see Dr Neete O'Connor. He treated me and he was surprised that nothing changed and that the burn mark on my face remained. The mark remains on my face till today. It has been on my face for the last 40 years or so now.

Sui Kiritome's first child Tabokai was born on Christmas Island in March 1957. When he was a few months old, a reddish rash developed around his neck. New Zealand official Percy Roberts arranged for the family to see a British medical doctor for treatment.

As she stood on the deck of the British warship for Grapple Y, Sui Kiritome was six months pregnant with her second child. Given 'the black cloud and smoke from the blast', Mrs Kiritome was anxious about possible health impacts when her daughter Rakieti was born on 24 July 1958:

A strange thing happened during her birth. Blood came out from all cavities in her body—from her eyes, nose, ear ... I was told by my husband that the doctor was very surprised to see what happened to the child.

* * *

As the Grapple series progressed, the Grapple Task Force abandoned more elaborate safety procedures for the islanders. For two of the smaller Grapple Z tests ('Pennant' on 22 August 1958 and 'Burgee' on 3 September 1958), the Gilbertese workers and their families 'were marshalled ashore in a safe place' even though officials acknowledged that anyone who deliberately or accidentally observed the initial flash of the nuclear test was 'likely to have their eyesight temporarily or permanently impaired'.¹³

13 Memo from Captain J.G.T. Weston, Headquarters Task Force Grapple, to H.P. Hall, Colonial Office, London, 5 November 1958. CO1036/284.

Taparu Kamabo, who lived on the island during 1958, reported that the blast of one test ripped off the doors and windows from his house. In a filmed interview, Kamabo explained:

Some children during that time got eye problems. They find it hard to see properly ... [some islanders] were given a choice—they were given things to cover their ears and eyes with. But especially those with big families went onto the ships, because they find it hard to put on those things. They were really afraid and frightened, but what else could they do, so they just sit and accept whatever may come.¹⁴

Tonga Fou arrived on Christmas Island from Tarawa to work as a labourer in 1957. Interviewed on the island five decades later, he noted:

It was a lot of fun—we worked with the soldiers, fishing together, playing together. In these days, we don't think about the bomb, because we enjoying ourselves ...

But the question I say is why? Why the British tried their tests on Christmas Island, why they come this long distance? For one reason. One reason. To take a picture of the H-bomb. But why are they not thinking that human beings are staying on the island? We don't know, but my feeling is that there is radiation. When I think of the people who were there at the bomb, how they died, it was mostly women, suffering with bleeding.¹⁵

Makurita Baaro—the Ambassador to the United Nations for the Republic of Kiribati—has recalled childhood memories of the way that children on Christmas Island were affected:

In 1963, I started school for the first time, and one of my classmates had no teeth. She never had teeth. Another boy in the same class had patchy white and brown skin and was forever teased for this. Both my classmates had something in common: they were born on Kiritimati where their parents were, when atmospheric tests were conducted between 1956 and 1962.¹⁶

14 Taparu Kamabo, speaking through an interpreter, in the 2012 documentary *Kiritimati—Between Sky and Ocean*.

15 Interview of Tonga Fou by Owen Sheers in 'Bomb Gone', *Granta*, No. 101, 1 August 2008.

16 Speech by Ambassador Makurita Baaro, Informal Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly to mark the 2015 Observance of the International Day against Nuclear Tests, UN Headquarters, New York, 10 September 2015.

In meetings sponsored by Pacific churches, i-Kiribati women living on Christmas Island at the time of the tests have reported effects on their children, such as Teamo Mikaere, whose son was visually impaired at birth.¹⁷ Ambassador Baaro notes that, in later years, there was great uncertainty in her country about potential health effects:

In Kiribati, no studies have been done on the effects of these nuclear tests on our people—we do not have the medical facilities nor the capacity to do this. I spoke to an elderly mother with two disabled children, born on Christmas Island in the late 1950s. Her accepting explanation, said with a smile, was ‘they were our children born during the testing time on Christmas Island.’ And that was it, for families, women and children alike were exposed to these tests.¹⁸

17 ‘Country report Kiribati’ in Morvan Sidal (ed.): *The Legacy of Nuclear Testing*, report of a Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) workshop, Kiribati, 7–9 February 2005.

18 Speech by Ambassador Makurita Baaro, op. cit.

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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