

# 18

## *The last soldiers—Josefa Vueti*



Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) soldiers deployed to Christmas Island, 1958

Source: Courtesy Mrs Loata Masi.

By mid-1958, the small Fijian contingent on Christmas Island amounted to two officers and 60 other ranks, of which 22 were construction engineers.

With the decision to continue testing on Christmas Island after the April 1958 Grapple Y test, the Governor of Fiji approved the deployment of further forces. In June 1958, the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) headquarters in Suva wrote to the Grapple Task Force confirming:

The government of Fiji has approved in principle the employment of a maximum of 80 Fijian servicemen from the Fiji Military Forces and the FRNVR with Task Force Grapple until September 1960 ... No difficulty is anticipated in meeting the Grapple requirement for 40 construction engineers from 1 January 1959 onwards. The provision of 20 other ranks of the FMF for stevedoring duties represents no problem.<sup>1</sup>

The Fijian contingent was just a small part of the general deployment for the final four Grapple tests. As with previous operations, there were a mix of service and civilian personnel deployed for Grapple Z, amounting to 4,375 men. With the new UK naval task force deployed offshore, there were 1,438 soldiers and 2,017 aircrew—the largest number for any of the test series in 1957–58. With 182 scientific and technical staff on the island, it was also the largest contingent of non-military personnel.<sup>2</sup>

The Grapple Z series involved four nuclear detonations at the south-east point of Christmas Island in August and September 1958: two atomic weapons tethered from balloons, and two airburst hydrogen bombs.

Despite a general wind down of operations after Grapple Z, with many British personnel heading home, the UK Government decided to maintain the facilities on Christmas Island, in case further tests were needed in 1959. To limit the cost of sending troops from England, a new Fijian contingent was deployed later in 1958 under the command of Lieutenant Etuate Nima Senibici. RFMF troops were to serve 6–12 month stints over the next two years.

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1 'Employment of Fijians at Christmas Island', Letter from Headquarters, Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), Suva, Fiji, to Headquarters, Grapple Task Force, London, 11 June 1958. G000/2. CO1036/514.

2 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. During the Grapple Z series, beyond the engineers deployed on land, 16 Fijians were attached to 269 Squadron involved in reconnaissance, meteorological patrol and air-sea rescue.

Josefa Vueti was just 20 years old when he served on Christmas Island in 1958–59. Hailing from the village of Natogadravu in the province of Tailevu, Vueti joined the army in 1956. He travelled to Christmas Island as a Private in the RFMF in late 1958, after the last bomb had been tested:

I was told that I was to go to Christmas Island. However, I did not know what I was to do there. I was just told to go.

In the weeks before we were to leave our trip was delayed because the bomb had just exploded. It was exactly a week after the bomb had exploded that we left for Christmas Island. I spent a whole year there. I was supposed to stay there for only six months but it was extended for another six.

On Christmas Island, we worked. We stayed at the Main Camp, living in tents. We were to build the houses and to complete construction works. When the boats arrived, we used to go down to Port Camp to load and unload the boats and the equipment for work done at the island. My pay there every fortnight was one pound, one shilling.<sup>3</sup>

The main RFMF Engineers contingent was posted with varying British units to supplement their workforce. The Fijian soldiers were under 12 Independent Field Squadron from April 1958 to February 1959; under 36 Corps Engineer Regiment, Royal Engineers, from February 1959 to November 1959; and under 73 (Christmas Island) Squadron, Royal Engineers, from November 1959 to April 1960.

There was a gulf of experience and understanding between most Britons and the Pacific islanders. This is best symbolised by the UK Treasury officials that approved funding for uniforms and tools for the Fijian troops, but queried the proposed budgets for *dalo* (taro), *yaqona* (kava) and Fijian newspapers, which would provide small comfort and memories of home for the islanders sent to Christmas Island.

For example, a 1959 letter from the Ministry of Supply to the Governor of Fiji asks ‘on what grounds it is considered that Fijian newspapers and supplies of kava should be provided at public expense?’<sup>4</sup>

3 Interview with Josefa Vueti, 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 Lewe ni Mataivalu e Wai ni Viti e na vakatovotovo iyanagi nei Peritania mai Kirisimasi* (Pacific Concerns Research Centre, Suva, 1999).

4 ‘Fijian troops at Christmas Island’ Draft telegram to the Governor of Fiji, Annex A to Ministry of Supply letter to Donald J. Derx, Colonial Office, London, 29 January 1959. DB/231/05. CO1036/514.

As military operations wound down, these costing pressures grew even greater, with the troops forced to bear the consequences of London's parsimony. Despite the precedent set with the deployment of Fijian troops to Malaya, the Ministry of Supply disputed the cost of kava and newspapers proposed by the Governor of Fiji for Christmas Island, noting: 'We are withholding payment of this item and for supplies of *dalo* until some explanation is received'.<sup>5</sup>

For months, penny-pinching UK bureaucrats continued to quibble over funding for these supplies, finally noting:

We have received a reply from Suva which we regard as generally satisfactory on these points, with the exception of the proposed man day rate for supplies of *yagona*. The Commander FMF suggests that the amounts charged for supplies so far support a rate of one shilling, 5 pence per man per day, which he considers not excessive or unreasonable. On the scanty evidence we have here about consumption ... we think that three quarters of a penny per man per day is nearer the mark ... I should be grateful for a quick reply as I am holding up a further Fijian claim for payment.<sup>6</sup>

Josefa Vueti reflected on the differences between the Fijian troops and the remaining British force involved in maintaining the facilities:

While at Christmas Island we did not go anywhere else. Fijian soldiers did not have any leave like the other soldiers. The Europeans went on leave after six months to Hawai'i. For us, if you were sent there for one year, it was for one year. You were never sent on leave to any other place. Even when we returned to Fiji, we still worked another week before going on leave.

We were poorly paid compared to the British soldiers. The wages of the British soldiers were so high compared to us. The British soldiers gave us drinks—they made us drunk! Our overseas allowance at that time was two shillings a day. I deducted this two shillings for my mother, and took just one pound for myself. One pound a week—that's what I got drunk on. I had a white friend there who used to buy me drinks and got drunk every day. I had no money with me. When I came back I did not even buy anything, even clothes.<sup>7</sup>

5 Letter from G.M.P. Myers, Ministry of Supply, London to Donald Derox, Colonial Office, London, 11 May 1959. CO1036/514.

6 'Fijian troops at Christmas Island', letter from Ministry of Supply, London to Donald J. Derox, Colonial Office, London, 18 June 1959. CO1036/514.

7 Interview with Josefa Vueti, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 44–47.

Niko Buke joined the RFMF in 1950. After a couple of years he was decommissioned, but was recalled in 1958 for service on Christmas Island. With other servicemen, he underwent five weeks of training at the RFMF barracks in Nasese. A carpenter by trade, he was drafted into the Engineers section for construction work, but did other odd jobs as well on Christmas Island.

We were engineers and were sent to do construction work and also help in the clean-up operation. We also did some work on the runway on the island.

Christmas Island was an island isolated from other places. You could not go anywhere else. The nearest island had i-Kiribati people living on it and we were not allowed to go there.

We were never told about the conditions on Christmas Island—nothing about contamination or anything of the sort. We never tried to ask—this was the army, so you just followed orders. We also ended up doing stevedoring work, moving lots of heavy equipment from the ships and barges onto the island. We also loaded some materials onto the ships. There were a lot of metal and other heavy equipment around.<sup>8</sup>

Buke spent six months on the island. Even after the departure of the 4,000 troops who had served on the island in 1958, there was a lot of accumulated rubbish, with broken-down vehicles, drums of unused asphalt and other materiel. Niko Buke thought it was a long way from an island paradise:

There was a lot of rubbish and metal debris on the island. The sea did not look good. We were told that the sea and the fish were contaminated. However, we Fijians did not care and went ahead catching fish and crabs. We got poisoned along with some of the white boys.

The place was very hot, even during the nights. We used to take off our shirts to cool off, although they did not allow us to. The island had lots of coconut trees on it. However, the coconut trees did not look healthy. They were like the *drala* tree that we have here in Fiji. Some coconut trees were just stumps and others seemed deformed with extra trunks growing out of them.

We always felt sick, although it was not noticeable. I got sick a lot when I was there.<sup>9</sup>

8 Interview with Niko Buke, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 48–49.

9 Ibid.

Epeli Cama (RFMF Engineers 19318) was a Lance Corporal in the Engineers detachment. He had served on attachment with the NZ Army for a year, but on his return to Fiji was approached about serving on Christmas Island from 1959 to 1960. He left Fiji in a British oil tanker, *Tank Wave Master*, with RFMF Captain Viliame 'Bill' Masi and five others:

I only knew about the work that we Fijian soldiers were to do when I reached the island. We were to do construction work for the British soldiers who were conducting nuclear tests on Christmas Island. But when I reached there, they had already completed the tests.

This island was a reef covered by sand washed on it by the tide. There were coconut trees. It was a place where the sunshine was really hot. They supplied us with sunglasses to use during work because of the heat and sunshine. We wore hats and no shirts during work because of the sun.

Our drinking, bathing and washing water was produced from processed seawater. The place also had a lot of flies. Everyday a plane would spray DDT over the camp to lessen the flies.<sup>10</sup>



Captain Viliame 'Bill' Masi and British officers inspect Fijian troops on Christmas Island

Source: Courtesy Mrs Loata Masi.

10 Interview with Epeli Cama, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 55–57.

Emori Ligica (RFMF 19612) was another member of the Engineering contingent:

We did construction work on Christmas Island where the British soldiers were camped for the tests. We went during the clean-up operation, but construction of buildings, roads and other work was still being done on Christmas Island.

There were about a hundred Fijian soldiers there. Troops were exchanged every six months. We went and stayed there on different times. Those who were married spent six months there, before returning. We single young men usually spent between 10 to 11 months on Christmas Island.

On Christmas Island we wore boots and trousers. We never wore any shirts because it was too hot there. There were no strict regulations about things on the island or along the beach. Since they had conducted nuclear tests there, they told us not to eat anything in the sea or on land. However, they just told us—there was no strict enforcement of regulations to stop us from eating anything from the sea. We Fijians used to eat a lot of fish. The place had a lot of *lairo* [land crabs]. This was what we usually ate during our break from work. We were always fishing and eating things from the beach.

I knew that the military had all the power to stop us. They knew the many effects of the bombs. The fallout may have contained many types of harmful gases. They should have restricted us from eating from the sea, from eating the crabs or anything from inland like coconuts. These may have been contaminated, from the things emitted by the bombs during the tests.<sup>11</sup>

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Two atomic explosions had damaged the terrain at ground zero on the south-east corner of the island: ‘Pennant’ and ‘Burgee’, which were tethered from balloons and fired during Grapple Z. These tests had the lowest yield of any of the nine Grapple tests, but also produced significant fallout, because they were conducted at lower levels, irradiating hundreds of tons of soil, plants and other debris, which were dispersed by the winds as fallout.

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11 Interview with Emori Ligica, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 50–52.

Like other soldiers, Emori Ligica took the opportunity to explore the island, including areas that were off limits:

At one time, we went to the other part of the island. I asked some of those who were with me, which included some British soldiers, why this part of the island was burnt. The British soldiers said that this was the damage done by the hydrogen bombs that were dropped in this area. We thought that the same could happen to the lives of human beings. The trees were all destroyed. If this happened to the trees then all these different illness could happen to us.<sup>12</sup>

Eveli Cama was also concerned about the damage caused by the Grapple Z tests:

I watched a film of the first test that was conducted on the side of the island they called South East Point. They showed this film only once. In the film, the navy ships were always ready to evacuate everyone (soldiers, navy and air force) in case of an accident.

The side of the island called South East Point was burned. The heat from the explosion must have caused it. The film showed us how terrifying this test was. Some of the British soldiers said that South East Point got burnt because of the heat from the explosion. This means that Christmas Island and all living things in and around it had been contaminated by the tests.

I believe if they clearly told us everything about the aim of Christmas Island (everything that happened including the poisonous gases from the tests, the environment, and the weather), most of the 300 of us would have refused to go.<sup>13</sup>

Malakai Niubasaga (RFMF Engineers 19765) travelled to Christmas Island in 1959.

At one time a couple of European soldiers and one of my Fijian colleagues came and invited me to go to the island where the bomb had fallen. I asked the European gentlemen, why is this place like this? We saw that everything was burnt out and black. When I looked, it was so terrifying whatever happened there.

It was so shocking since the bomb had fallen 60 miles away. They said that, that was how strong that bomb was. I was very amazed at how this happened. After that we returned and I kept on thinking about what happened there.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Ibid.

13 Interview with Eveli Cama, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

14 Interview with Malakai Niubasaga, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., pp. 57–58.

Osaia Colelala (RFMF Engineers 19679) echoed his fellow soldiers:

I was one of those who went to Christmas Island in 1959 after the British nuclear bomb testing. It's true that I didn't experience the bomb's explosion, but I did see the destruction that it had made around Christmas Island. In my view, it was frightening for this thing to be exploding in the air—on the island nothing was alive.

In the six months I was there, I saw a lot of frightening things. Every living thing on top of the island was poisoned, including the sea. We used to find dead fish on the shore, which had been poisoned by what came out of the weapon we'd been working on. It was this same sea water which we drank when it was recycled for drinking. Maybe this is why we have health problems since returning.

When I came back, I got married. I had four children. One died. I think it was something to do with what our bodies experienced in that place.<sup>15</sup>

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With the departure of most British troops at the end of testing in 1958, the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) maintained a small operation until March 1960. By mid-1959, a new Navy, Army and Air Forces Institute (NAAFI) Fleet club at HMS *Resolution* had opened with a billiard room, table tennis, gift shop and bar complete with darts board and a snack bar.<sup>16</sup> Services provided to the remaining detachment included weekly visits to the hospital, arrangements for the development of photos or delivery of flowers to family members in the United Kingdom and organising variety shows.<sup>17</sup> The daily routine was disrupted by a short visit by the Duke of Edinburgh in April 1959, during a Pacific Tour.

At the end of 1959, it was announced that personnel would be reduced to 1,700 by the start of 1960 and just 300 by the following July. Epeli Cama recalled the British authorities decided the Fiji deployment should be wound up, with troops being transported back to Suva:

15 Interview with Osaia Colelala, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit., p. 57.

16 'WVS report for March and April 1959, Junior Ranks Club, Christmas Island', Report to WVS Headquarters, 1 May 1959.

17 'WVS report for January and February 1959, Junior Ranks Club, Christmas Island', Report to WVS Headquarters, February 1959.

One hundred and five of us Fijian soldiers left Christmas Island for the last time in 1960. The directive came from the British that all Fijian soldiers were to leave after we had finished our work. I was a very sad farewell to the British troops when we returned to Fiji.

It seemed that when we returned we were already contaminated. I left the army in 1960 and got married in 1962. My wife had a child before we got married. Up until today, I have not been able to have children. I have been to various medical people. The doctor declared that I could not have any children because of problems with my reproductive system.<sup>18</sup>

Returned soldier Niko Buke believes his service on Christmas Island affected his health after returning to Fiji, and that the British authorities have a responsibility to look after the ageing men who served Empire:

We have to be compensated for suffering. We were working on this barren and isolated island in the middle of the sea. Now I am beginning to realise the bad effects of all this. We have to be compensated for all the health problems that we are suffering. This compensation is our right. We should be compensated because we never received the same amount of pay paid to British veterans. We were under the leadership of British officers.

My wife and I never had any children. We married very young, yet this thing happened to us. We could not have children. We have two adopted children.

Many of those who served together have passed away. There are not many of us around anymore. Those that died were not supposed to die. Those of us still around are lucky to be alive. If I had known that we would face all these things, I would not have gone.<sup>19</sup>

Josefa Vueti agreed:

We should be remembered, because we took Fiji's name there. We did not go of our own free will. We went as Fijian soldiers. I thank God for allowing this opening where this issue about those of us who went to Christmas Island is brought up. We should be remembered.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Interview with Epeli Cama, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

19 Interview with Niko Buke, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

20 Interview with Josefa Vueti, Suva, Fiji, for *Kirisimasi*, op. cit.

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