

Operation Grapple

(Auckland Museum, n.d.)



HMNZS Pukaki at sea, HMNZS Pukaki was involved in Operation Grapple as a weather ship. Royal New Zealand Air Force Museum [LBA1250](#)²
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Operation Grapple was a series of four British Nuclear weapons tests carried out in 1957 and 1958 at Malden Island and Kiritimati Island in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (Kiribati). More than five hundred New Zealanders, who were serving with the Royal New Zealand Navy, were witnesses to nine nuclear explosions known as Operation Grapple.

Following the Second World War, the development of atomic and thermonuclear weapons by the United Kingdom was considered a vital national policy. The New Zealand Government at the time supported the production and testing of these weapons as it believed that this would materially enhance the security of New Zealand and the rest of the Commonwealth. ¹<http://aucklandmuseum.com/#ref1>

In February 1957 the New Zealand Prime Minister pledged support for Britain, and the New Zealand Cabinet approved participation in Operation Grapple. Two Royal New Zealand Navy frigates, HMNZS Pukaki and HMNZS Rotoiti were sent to join the naval task force as weather ships. ²<http://aucklandmuseum.com/#Ref2> HMNZS Pukaki was sent on four separate deployments to participate in all nine hydrogen bomb tests between 1957 and 1958, HMNZS Rotoiti participated in the first three tests at Malden Island between May and June 1957 and the Grapple X test in November 1957. ³<http://aucklandmuseum.com/#Ref2>

Operation Grapple ended in September 1958, when the United Kingdom and United States signed the US-UK Mutual Defense Agreement, a bilateral treaty between the UK and US on nuclear weapons testing. However, this agreement did not put an end to the nuclear testing in the Pacific. In 1966 France began testing nuclear weapons at Mururoa atoll in French Polynesia, New Zealand was involved in ongoing protests over the French nuclear tests, eventually sending two navy frigates HMNZS Otago and Canterbury into the test area. ⁴<http://aucklandmuseum.com/#Ref3>

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 Veterans who served during Operation Grapple, recall the radiation being so strong they could see the bones in their hands, as clearly as an x-ray. In 2005 The Nuclear Test Veterans' Association commissioned Dr Al Rowland from the Institute of Molecular Biosciences at Massey University to do chromosome research on Grapple veterans.

"Dr Rowland says the findings are unequivocal: in a matched control group of men of the same age, his team found an expected frequency of 10 chromosome translocations per 1000 cells, but in the veterans' group, the average number of translocations was considerably higher at 29 chromosome translocations per 1000 cells. Workers who were close to the Chernobyl nuclear accident or involved in the clean-up after the accident had about 20 translocations."⁵ (<http://aucklandmuseum.com/#ref4>).

The effects of radiation from the blasts of the nuclear tests, had long term effects not only for the veterans but for their families too. The recent exhibition at the Royal New Zealand Navy Museum: [Operation Grapple - We Were There](https://navymuseum.co.nz/whats-on/past-exhibitions/operation-grapple-we-were-there-exhibition/) (<https://navymuseum.co.nz/whats-on/past-exhibitions/operation-grapple-we-were-there-exhibition/>), explores some of the lasting effects of Operation Grapple on these veterans and their families.

FURTHER READING

- Wright, Gerry (2007) *We were there: Operation Grapple - the story of New Zealand's involvement in the British nuclear weapons tests at Christmas Island 1957-58*
- Glackin, Russ. [Operation Grapple](#).⁶ National Museum of the Royal New Zealand Navy.
- Jimmy Ellingham, (June 12, 2021) [Harrowing Stories Reveal Decades of Fallout for Nuclear Test Veterans](#).⁷ Stuff.
- Tim Newman (May 27, 2019), [Legacy of nuclear test still remains for navy veteran after 60 years](#).⁸ Stuff.
- Becky Alexis-Martin, (July 4, 2019) [The Atomic History of Kiritimati: A Tiny Island where humanity realised its most lethal potential](#).⁹ The Conversation.
- <https://theconversation.com/the-atomic-history-of-kiritimati-a-tiny-island-where-humanity-realised-its-most-lethal-potential-114870>¹⁰
- Auckland War Memorial Museum, [Remembering Mururoa](#).

REFERENCES

1. (<http://aucklandmuseum.com/>) Involvement of RNZN in British Nuclear testing-1957-1958, Veterans Affairs.
2. (<http://aucklandmuseum.com/>) Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H Bomb Tests, Nic MacLellan.
3. (<http://aucklandmuseum.com/>) NZHistory, [Nuclear-Testing in the Pacific, Nuclear Free New Zealand](#). (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/nuclear-free-new-zealand/testing-in-the-pacific>)
4. (<http://aucklandmuseum.com/>) [Massey University, Al Rowland in New Zealander of 2009 list](#). (<https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/about-massey/news/article.cfm?marticle=al-rowland-in-new-zealander-of-2009-list-11-12-2009>)

These records were created from research by Arthur Venus and Gerry Wright. Operation Grapple was the British Nuclear testing programme in the Pacific.

Results

Displaying 1 - 20 of 571 records					
Photo	Family name	First names	Force	Wars	Service #
	Adams	Richard John	Navy	Regular Military Service	13403
	Agnew	Richard Arnold	Navy	Regular Military Service	13756
	Aitken	Thomas	Navy	Regular Military Service	13263
	Allison	Charles John	Navy	Regular Military Service	13742
	Alexander	Colin John	Navy	Regular Military Service	816489
	Allen	Dennis Robert	Navy	Regular Military Service	15603
	Alsweller	Henry Silvester	Navy	Regular Military Service	12496