

The Advertiser: Maralinga Dossier

A collection of articles by journalist Colin James.

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www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/sectionindex2/0%2C5935%2Cwoomera^woomera^T EXT%2C00.html

... but that page is no longer available and doesn't seem to be captured by web archive services (e.g. <http://web.archive.org>)

List of articles in this file:

Mums, babies had picnics during tests, 08 May 2003

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6406995%255E26839,00.html

Nuclear tests no one knew about, 10 June 2003,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6571804%255E26839,00.html

What killed the Woomera babies, 07 May 2003,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6406997%255E26839,00.html

Nuclear dust settled across 1950s Adelaide, 06 May 2003,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407001%255E26839,00.html

Deaths, serious illness over three decades leads to call for inquiry, 03 May 2003

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407003%255E26839,00.html

Just like your dad, 03 May 2003,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407060%255E26839,00.html

Health card victory for test veterans, 08 Mar 2003,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407061%255E26839,00.html

Shut your eyes and dig, British military's advice for surviving an A-bomb, 08 Jun 2002,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407063%255E26839,00.html

Found: hidden documents on A-bomb tests, 24 April 2002,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407066%255E26839,00.html

Nuclear bombs 'caused cancer', 03 Jan 2002,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407068%255E26839,00.html

Maralinga tests on nerve gas, files show, 31 Dec 2001,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407069%255E26839,00.html

Secret atomic child files opened, 05 Sep 2001 ,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407070%255E26839,00.html

Atomic tests payouts reach \$5m, 25 Aug 2001,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407120%255E26839,00.html

Water 'fouled by nuclear waste', 20 July 2000,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407123%255E26839,00.html

Atomic waste 20m from public road, 19 July 2001,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407125%255E26839,00.html

Maralinga veterans urged to have a say, 18 July 2001,

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407127%255E26839,00.html
How a dying rabbit lifted the lid on what Maralinga was really like, 14 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407158%255E26839,00.html
“The key that unlocks the lies of Maralinga, 13 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407160%255E26839,00.html
Cloak of secrecy thrown on veterans, 12 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407162%255E26839,00.html
Hospital with no patient records, 11 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407164%255E26839,00.html
Aborigines died in test site bunker, 10 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407166%255E26839,00.html
Disabled son linked to atomic tests, 09 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407180%255E26839,00.html
Nuclear truth revealed, 07 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407182%255E26839,00.html
Atomic bomb fallout covered the city, 07 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407181%255E26839,00.html
How the RAAF used ocean as a nuclear dump, 06 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407184%255E26839,00.html
Crawling into a hotbed of radiation, 05 Jul 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407185%255E26839,00.html
Civilians exposed to atomic bomb test radiation, 03 July 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407196%255E26839,00.html
Dark secrets, 30 June 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407198%255E26839,00.html
17,000 people exposed to atomic tests, 30 June 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407197%255E26839,00.html
Files on atomic tests not inspected, 07 June 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407200%255E26839,00.html
Time for a payout and an apology, 26 May 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407209%255E26839,00.html
Still searching for answers, 26 May 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407203%255E26839,00.html
Inquiry into 179 files on Maralinga, 26 May 2001,
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407202%255E26839,00.html

Links to *Advertiser* articles.

All these articles are in this file so the only point of this list is to provide working weblinks if you want to find the articles online ...

- [Nuclear tests no one knew about](#)
- [Mums, babies had picnics during tests](#)
- [What killed the Woomera babies](#)
- [Nuclear dust settled across 1950s Adelaide](#)
- [Just like your dad](#)

- [Spate of deaths, serious illness over three decades leads to call for a national inquiry](#)
- [Health card victory for test veterans](#)
- [Shut your eyes and dig, dig ... that was the British military's advice for surviving an A-bomb](#)
- [Found: hidden documents on A-bomb tests](#)
- [Nuclear bombs 'caused cancer'](#)
- [Maralinga tests on nerve gas, files show](#)
- [Secret atomic child files opened](#)
- [Atomic tests payouts reach \\$5m](#)
- [Water 'fouled by nuclear waste'](#)
- [Atomic waste 20m from public road](#)
- [Maralinga veterans urged to have a say](#)
- [How a dying rabbit was all it took to lift the lid on what it was really like at Maralinga](#)
- [The key that unlocks the lies of Maralinga](#)
- [Cloak of secrecy thrown on veterans](#)
- [Hospital with no patient records](#)
- [Aborigines died in test site bunker](#)
- [Disabled son linked to atomic tests](#)
- [Atomic bomb fallout covered the city](#)
- [Nuclear truth revealed](#)
- [How the RAAF used ocean as a nuclear dump](#)
- [Crawling into a hotbed of radiation](#)
- [Civilians exposed to atomic bomb test radiation](#)
- [17,000 people exposed to atomic tests](#)
- [Dark secrets](#)
- [Files on atomic tests not inspected](#)

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Mums, babies had picnics during tests

8 May 2003

WOOMERA residents who held picnics to watch the British nuclear tests have questioned why a large number of babies died in the town.

Pauline Lister, 74, of Glenelg, said yesterday residents would drive to "picnic spots" to look at mushroom clouds from the nuclear explosions at Maralinga, 600km to the west, in the 1950s.

She and her husband, a junior doctor at the Woomera Base Hospital, and their two children left several years later when residents started "dying like flies" from cancer. Wives of servicemen working on the missile tests also began experiencing large numbers of miscarriages and stillbirths.

"All of my friends were having miscarriages at the time," Mrs Lister said.

"We knew they (government officials) were blaming the heat but we knew it wasn't the heat.

"But we couldn't do anything about it. We either stayed there or got out and so we got out.

"We kept saying to each other that if you want to have children, don't have them at Woomera because they will die."

Mrs Lister was responding to a report in *The Advertiser* yesterday which revealed the Woomera Cemetery contains the gravesites of 68 children, including 22 stillborn babies and 34 newborns, who died when they were only days or hours old.

"It was really sad," Mrs Lister said. "Everyone seemed to die."

Servicemen and their wives were told to sign the Official Secrets Act when they arrived at Woomera, she said.

"We were allowed to go out to the desert to watch the nuclear tests which was very exciting because how many people in the world got to see an atomic bomb," she said.

"We had a picnic area and we would look through binoculars or with the naked eye at these huge stalks which would turn into mushroom clouds.

"It was considered quite rare so it was quite something to see."

A spokeswoman for Defence Minister Robert Hill said yesterday medical staff would investigate sealed records on the baby deaths in Woomera for evidence of radiation exposure.

She said Senator Hill believed the consequences of radiation exposure as a result of nuclear tests in central Australia had been "exhaustively considered in the past".

He would make a statement if the inquiries found anything of "public importance".

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Nuclear tests no one knew about

By COLIN JAMES

10jun03

THE Australian Government approved British missile tests in South Australia without knowing the missiles were nuclear-tipped, say secret documents.

This was after an edict in the late-1950s by the British Government that the Australian Government could not be given any details of the supersonic cruise missiles because they were mainly designed by the US.

It is the first time details have publicly emerged that nuclear missiles fired from bombers were tested in the early-1960s in SA.

Until now, the only publicly known nuclear tests were the bombs exploded at Maralinga and Emu Field during trials in the 1950s, followed by another 300 explosions during the early 1960s.

The Advertiser has learnt Australian military and scientific personnel were barred from participating in the testing of the air-to-ground missiles as information was strictly restricted to the British and US military.

A two-page letter with no details of the potential radioactivity accompanied classified maps were given to the former South Australian premier, Sir Thomas Playford. The maps showed how British jet bombers carrying the missiles flew over SA, Victoria and New South Wales in 1963 to test their inboard systems before jettisoning their payloads.

The maps – obtained by *The Advertiser* – were part of limited information provided to Sir Thomas by the government of former Liberal prime minister Sir Robert Menzies, which agreed not to seek details of the missiles under an nuclear weapon information-sharing agreement signed between Britain and US in 1958.

The declassified documents show the Menzies government originally was told the warheads of the Blue Steel missiles would only contain high explosive – and public safety was not a concern.

"The weapons would carry the mechanical and electrical components of nuclear warheads and may carry some high explosive but there would be no fissile (atomic) material and therefore no new safety problems are involved," said a top-secret memo to Sir Robert by one of his advisers, M.C. Timbs, on June 4, 1959.

However, two weeks later, Sir Robert was told in a top secret cablegram from the Australian High Commission in London that the British Government did intend to use radioactive warheads after all.

"We think Prime Minister (sic) should know that United Kingdom (sic) here have now advised us that although the warheads would not contain fissile material they may at some stage contain a small amount of radioactive material," it said. "The explosions would not give rise to any significant radiation. This varies from their earlier approach when we were assured that high explosives only would be used."

A cablegram sent to the Australian High Commission on November 8, 1961, said the Blue Steel trials had been given the go-ahead after a formal agreement that no information would be provided to the Australian Government.

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What killed the Woomera babies

By COLIN JAMES and PAUL STARICK

07may03

THE Woomera Cemetery contains the gravesites of 22 stillborn babies who died during the British nuclear tests, an inspection by *The Advertiser* has revealed.

There are another 34 gravesites for babies who died when they were only hours, days or several months old, with a further 12 gravesites for children who died between the ages of one and seven years. Men and women in their 40s and 50s also feature prominently in the cemetery.

Former Woomera servicemen and their families who lost children have declined to speak to *The Advertiser*, citing the Official Secrets Act or continuing grief.

However, one mother, 58, who now lives at Salisbury, said: "We were very close to the bombs and we know now that the mushroom clouds came over Woomera so what is there to say we weren't exposed to radiation."

Questions about the deaths of the babies at Woomera have arisen in the wake of new fears the British nuclear tests have caused genetic defects and multiple cancers in the families of servicemen posted to Maralinga.

A Far North resident who visited the cemetery last week said she was "horrified" at the large number of gravesites for stillborn babies.

Julie Wilkinson, of Wirraminna Station, said she had heard "general local talk" about children dying because of extreme heat "and assumed like everyone else that everybody does it tough out here".

"Nothing could be further from the truth," she said yesterday.

"At least half of the cemetery is full of stillborn babies. I have spoken to a couple of nurses about this at the Woomera Hospital and they both agreed heat and dehydration have no effect on the rate of stillborn babies.

"In one situation there is a whole row of stillborn babies and surely this can't be blamed on heat and a lack of airconditioning."

The Department of Human Services said it did not have any records from the Woomera Hospital as it was a Defence Department facility operated by the Federal Government.

A spokeswoman said the number of deaths was "certainly a cause for concern" but was unable to comment.

A State Government hotline for families who had bones removed from their dead children for secret testing for radioactive fallout said it had not received inquiries about the Woomera deaths. Attempts by The Advertiser to locate the doctor in charge of the Woomera Hospital during the 1950s and '60s were unsuccessful.

Other former hospital staff also declined to comment, saying only that they did not believe extreme heat was the sole cause for the deaths.

Woomera was well-established as a base to test British long-range missiles when the nuclear tests moved to Emu Field, 480km to the northwest and then to Maralinga, 400km to the west. Two atomic bombs were exploded at Emu Field in 1953, with another four detonated at Maralinga in 1956 and another three in late 1957.

Woomera is believed to have been exposed to further radioactive contamination by another series of tests known as the "minor trials", when at least another 300 nuclear devices were detonated at Maralinga.

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Nuclear dust settled across 1950s Adelaide

By COLIN JAMES

06may03

RADIOACTIVE clouds from the British nuclear tests at Maralinga passed over Adelaide on at least three occasions in the late-1950s. Two monitoring stations at

Urrbrae and Roseworthy secretly set up by a prominent scientist, Hedley Marston, revealed the radioactive fallout settled throughout the metropolitan area and other parts of the state.

Later, research by a Commonwealth government committee revealed it contained three highly dangerous by-products of atomic bombs – strontium-90, caesium 137 and radioactive iodine.

Secret tests conducted by successive federal governments between 1957 and 1978 confirmed the presence of strontium-90 in the bones of dead South Australians from stillborn babies to adults.

The radioactive isotope – which causes leukemia and other cancers by penetrating bone marrow – was also found in sheep bones, flour, milk, soil, cabbages and rainwater.

Now, up to 40 years later, mothers of some of the children who had bones removed have been asked if they want small plastic bottles containing the ash samples returned to them. The repatriation of the remains follows international controversy over the detection of strontium-90 within the populations of Britain and the US.

Publicity here and overseas forced the Federal Government 18 months ago to prepare a database with the details of 21,830 Australians who had bones removed.

In SA, there were 3058 individual bone samples taken from dead South Australians – predominantly stillborn babies, infants, toddlers, young children and teenagers.

A hotline set up in February by the Department of Human Services has received 192 inquiries from families asking whether bones were taken from their children. The database prepared by the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency has resulted in 45 of these people being told bones were taken.

Five families have asked for the small plastic bottles containing ash from these bones to be returned to them. That leaves the Department of Human Services with a further 895 plastic bottles which are labelled with the donor's name and identification number.

Counsellors have done their best to explain to the families why the bones were removed – and how the discovery of strontium-90 in populations worldwide eventually led to the banning of atmospheric nuclear testing. What they haven't been able to answer are questions about what effects, if any, strontium-90 ingestion has on the human body.

This is because no research has been conducted in Australia on what drinking strontium-90 in cow's milk or eating it in bread has done to our health, especially children who were born between the 1950s and 1970s. That research – on a national scale – is long overdue.

How it is done is something for scientists to decide but with growing reports of multiple cancers, leukemia, birth defects and premature deaths among veterans of nuclear tests and their families, the time of ignoring the inevitable has passed.

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Spate of deaths, serious illness over three decades leads to call for a national inquiry

By COLIN JAMES

03may03

A FAMILY is undergoing genetic testing to determine if a series of premature deaths is linked to the British nuclear tests 50 years ago.

A mutated gene already has been discovered in the daughter of a former RAAF serviceman who served in the Monte Bello Islands, Maralinga and Woomera before dying from cancer at 44.

Susan Powell, 38, of Perth, had both her breasts removed when she was 28, an eight-year-old brother and baby niece died of brain tumours, a 16-year-old nephew was diagnosed with brain tumours last October and a brother had a hip replaced when he was 30.

His 13-year-old son was diagnosed last year with Hodgkins lymphoma, a 16-year-old niece has a condition called Turner's syndrome and a malignant melanoma was removed from a nephew when he was 19.

The spate of deaths and serious illnesses over three decades has prompted the family of Robert Williamson to call for a national investigation into whether the British nuclear tests have caused birth defects within the families of 17,000 Australian men who participated.

The family is convinced its problems have been caused by Mr Williamson's exposure to radiation during the first British nuclear test at the Monte Bello Islands, off Western Australia, in October 1952.

Mr Williamson's only surviving son, Kenneth, has gained his father's Defence Department service history through the Department of Veteran Affairs. It contains false information about his father's rank, position and location.

"We've got to the stage now where we have started to ask questions about what has happened to our family and so far we've been getting very few straight answers," he said.

The family's fears gained fresh momentum in March when Mrs Powell underwent genetic tests which revealed she had a mutated gene triggered by radiation.

Mrs Powell said the family was not looking for public sympathy.

"We just want to know why this is happening and to make sure our children and their children are going to be safe from what we have been put through," she said.

"We also want to know how many other families of veterans like us are out there and whether we are alone."

Leading geneticist Professor Grant Sutherland said the nuclear tests could not be blamed for birth defects and serious medical conditions within the families of veterans.

Professor Sutherland, who is advising the Federal Government on a study into the deaths of an estimated 10,000 veterans, said there was no medical research to support widespread claims the nuclear tests caused genetic defects or multiple cancers.

The internationally renowned DNA expert believes individual members of the Williamson family are carrying a mutant gene inherited from Mr Williamson's parents or created during his conception. "I would be 99.9 per cent sure the mutated gene wasn't caused by exposure to radiation," he said.

His opinion has been disputed by a researcher who has spent several years investigating the long-term health effects of British nuclear tests.

Ann Munslow-Davies, of Perth, said no research had been conducted on birth defects reported by veterans' families in Australia, Britain and New Zealand "and that's exactly the point".

"We simply don't know what has caused this and that's why proper research is needed to find out," she said.

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Just like your dad

By COLIN JAMES

03may03

DIANE Williamson's life has been a tragic whirlwind of inexplicable illness and death. The past 30 years have been a numbing procession of hospital visits and funerals as the 66-year-old has prematurely lost three of her six offspring while serious health problems have been experienced by two of her surviving children. One granddaughter died at the age of 11 months from a brain tumour, another had a malignant cancer removed at the age of 19 and a third has now been diagnosed with two brain tumours at 16.

Mrs Williamson is at a loss to explain why her family has been so devastated. She is convinced their misfortune is directly linked to her late husband's participation in the British nuclear tests 50 years ago.

Whatever secrets Mr Williamson had about the tests, he took them to his grave. Like thousands of other Australian servicemen sworn to secrecy, he never spoke about what he did, only telling his wife that he was at the Monte Bello Islands when the first nuclear device was exploded in Operation Hurricane, in October, 1952. "I can't think of anything else which could be causing what has happened to us," Mrs Williamson says. "What has happened just isn't normal, and the more things keep happening the more questions we have."

Robert "Bob" Williamson was 19 and a Royal Australian Air Force reservist when a young Diane Moseley agreed to meet him for a blind date in Perth in 1952. The couple married the following year, producing six children between 1954 and 1964. Mr Williamson joined the RAAF as a military policeman, shifting his family to Adelaide in the early-1960s when he was posted to the Edinburgh Air Base. The family returned to Perth in the late-1960s when Mr Williamson, by then a sergeant, was discharged from the RAAF.

He continued to work – in mines, as a cinema projectionist, and as a truck and taxi driver – before becoming ill with cancer in the mid-1970s. Mrs Williamson says her

husband never appeared to fully recover from an injury he sustained playing football on the Maralinga Oval in the early-1960s. Dispatched to the atomic test site on a routine patrol, he split his left index finger to the bone. The wound would not heal, with doctors determining more than a decade later it had become cancerous. They amputated down to the first knuckle but the cancer spread to Mr Williamson's arm and chest, prompting more operations and treatment. He died on April 14, 1978, aged 44. His official cause of death is listed as "disseminated squamous cell carcinoma of the left middle finger".

His death came five years after his fourth child, Graeme, died at the age of eight from a brain tumour.

The rest of the 1970s were a "blur" for Mrs Williamson, as she struggled with the loss of her husband and then another son, Alan. Life did not become any easier for Mrs Williamson and her children in the 1980s and 1990s – 11-month-old granddaughter Natalie died of a brain tumour, son Jeffrey, 36, died of cancer and daughter Susan, 28, had both breasts removed.

"When Natalie died, I was just numb," says Mrs Williamson. "At Jeffrey's funeral, I said 'What a bloody waste'. I thought that was it. Then Susan was diagnosed with breast cancer and we started thinking there had to be something more to it." The final blow came last October when Mrs Williamson's grandson, Matthew, was diagnosed with two brain tumours at the age of 16.

Mrs Williamson says her friends regularly ask her how she has managed to cope. "I made up my mind a long time ago that I couldn't fall apart because I still had the rest of my family to look after," she says. "It's happened and we can't take it back, so we just have to get on with life. It's everyone who is still alive who keeps me going. But I worry now about what else could come. It's on my mind all the time."

The traumatic events of the past 30 years are also playing heavily on the mind of Mrs Williamson's only surviving son, Kenneth. The 46-year-old government worker says he is determined to find out why his family has suffered so much tragedy, and has begun searching for records of his father's service during the British nuclear tests.

"When we talk to people about what has happened, they are amazed and bewildered. Nothing like this has happened to anyone else we know so we want to know why it is happening to us," he says.

"I want to know what Dad did while he was with the RAAF, because I know he told Mum he went to Monte Bello. We've got five deaths and several instances of serious illnesses in three generations of our family, and it's all becoming a bit hard to comprehend."

Mr Williamson has not been spared. In 1986, his left hip turned black and died, requiring its replacement at the age of 30. His right hip was also dying but did not require replacement until five years later.

In February last year, Mr Williamson's son, Scott, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, requiring chemotherapy and checks for another five years.

"It's got to the point where I'm going to have genetic testing to try to find out what the hell is going on," he says.

The decision to undergo genetic testing was reinforced with the discovery of a tumour in the brain of Mr Williamson's 16-year-old nephew, Matthew. A second,

different tumour was discovered several weeks later in what doctors say is a medical rarity. It is the fourth time Matthew's mother, Jacinta Williamson, has been forced to confront cancer since she met Jeffrey Williamson in 1972. Their baby daughter, Natalie, died in April, 1983, during an operation to remove a tumour one-third the size of her brain. "It was almost as though she knew she was going to die," recalls Mrs Williamson. "As she was going into the operating theatre, she sat up and waved goodbye with the biggest smile on her face." Mrs Williamson, 43, suffered three miscarriages before her fit-and-active husband developed liver cancer in October, 1991. He died seven weeks later, aged 36.

The speed of his decline shocked Mrs Williamson, who has been forced to confront cancer in her family two more times. Her eldest son, Robert, had a malignant melanoma removed from his right foot in 1999 when he was 19. Last October, Matthew was diagnosed with the two brain tumours which have required six months of operations and radiotherapy. Doctors have been unable to explain what is happening. One told Mrs Williamson when Jeffrey died that "some families are cancer families and some families are heart families and that we must be a cancer family", she says.

"The day Matthew was diagnosed with two different brain tumours, which is extremely rare, I knew there was more to this than just being a cancer family. I think there must be some sort of gene running haywire through the family. Something has happened to us," she says.

"We've spoken to our doctors about everything, and how it's not right, and we've been told we need to do genetic testing. Our kids need to be given the opportunity to know how much at risk they are and whether or not they are willing to have children and put them at risk as well, so that's our next plan."

Mrs Williamson says she can only describe her life as "surreal".

"One day, I am going to fall apart. I know that and I know I have to plan for it," she says. "But right now, I have to look after Matthew and his brothers and that's what I am going to do."

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Health card victory for test veterans

By COLIN JAMES

08mar03

THOUSANDS of Australian army, naval and air force personnel were exposed to radiation during the British nuclear tests in the 1950s, a Federal Government review has determined.

An expert committee which examined the veterans' entitlement scheme has recommended the nuclear veterans become eligible for benefits such as "gold cards", which provide free medical treatment.

It also has called for the Federal Government to urgently complete a scientific investigation into the deaths of servicemen following the 12 nuclear tests at Maralinga, Emu Field and the Montebello Islands, off Western Australia, between 1952 and 1957.

In a major win for veterans, who have campaigned for more than 30 years for compensation, the committee said any still alive should be immediately admitted to the entitlements scheme, rather than when the study is completed at the end of this year.

The committee said it had been persuaded by 160 submissions that Australian servicemen were provided "on loan to an experimental nuclear weapon test program under the control of another country without prior scientific examination, independent advice or assessment of the potential dangers that could occur".

"The British atomic test series was an unparalleled event in Australia's history, in which Australians were exposed to unusual risks from ionising radiation and toxic materials," its report says.

"On the basis of what is now known about the risks of cancers from ionising radiation, and the inadequacies of some of the precautions taken in the conduct of the tests, individuals were put at risk of contracting disease through their exposure in the tests." The committee says there was "an inadequate response by successive governments over many decades to the concerns raised by veterans".

"It is a sad fact that the recognition of the unusual hazards faced by the participants has not led to prompt action to ensure a more appropriate compensation arrangement with ready access, given the nature of the hazards," it says.

The submissions received by the committee detailed how the tests:

WERE conducted in undue haste with immature technology, inadequate understanding of the science and poor planning and management.

THERE were inadequate safety provisions in place and insufficient knowledge of the long-term risks involved.

HEALTH physics teams were inexperienced and the various test management and safety committees, including an Australian safety committee, were ill-informed and negligent.

AUSTRALIAN servicemen were used as guinea pigs in the tests by being deliberately exposed to radiation.

PARTICIPANTS have suffered chromosomal damage while there have been second and third-generation effects among their offspring.

THE extent of radiation exposures and shortcomings in safety management have been deliberately hidden from the Australian public.

THE whole Australian population was at risk of some level of exposure through fallout.

CIVILIANS were also exposed to risk through their involvement at the test sites during and after the explosions.

There also was evidence critical documents were missing from official records, other files were being withheld and key records of dosage levels received by individuals had been tampered with.

Shut your eyes and dig, dig ... that was the British military's advice for surviving an A-bomb

By COLIN JAMES

08jun02

A TOP-secret military handbook has provided new evidence that servicemen were deliberately exposed to radiation during the British atomic tests.

The 240-page document was issued by the British military in 1957, the year after hundreds of officers were ordered to stand and watch several nuclear explosions at South Australia's Maralinga.

The Advertiser has obtained the handbook as special legislation is being drafted in Canberra to force authorities to hand over hundreds of files to a national inquiry into claims thousands of veterans have suffered serious illnesses.

The Nuclear Handbook for Instructors and Staff Officers used extensive data collected during the Operation Buffalo tests at Maralinga in 1956 to explain the: EFFECTS of ground, air and underwater nuclear explosions.

PROTECTION from radioactivity, including decontamination procedures and uniforms.

MEASURING of fallout and how to monitor the progress of mushroom clouds.

MEDICAL side-effects such as blindness, burns and other injuries.

The document includes detailed drawings of nuclear devices, diagrams explaining the nuclear process, graphs showing radiation produced by various atomic bombs and maps depicting the impact on settled areas of England.

Veteran groups seeking compensation believe the handbook conclusively proves the Australian tests were used by the British military to gather information on men, clothing and their equipment.

Operation Buffalo involved four atomic explosions, during which men were sent into contaminated areas without protective clothing and ordered to stand within 1000 yards of Ground Zero.

Successive British and Australian governments have strenuously denied men were exposed to radiation during the test program, which involved the detonation of 12 atomic devices between 1952 and 1957.

The tests were the first opportunity Britain had to test nuclear weapons after the US dropped bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 to end World War II.

Researcher Ann Munslow-Davies said the only sources of information for the handbook were the tests at Montebello Islands off Western Australia, Emu Field and Maralinga.

"There was no other way the British could have got any of this information anywhere else as the Americans were not providing anything to them," she said.

"They came to Australia to conduct their first tests because they were frozen out by the Americans.

"This document is all about what they found out when they put men right near the explosions and ordered them to stand there and watch," Ms Munslow-Davies said.

"There is absolutely no other place they could have got all of this very detailed information from. It's as simple as that."

The handbook includes diagrams of British soldiers sheltering behind walls and in trenches, in similar positions to those used by servicemen at Maralinga.

It also has various maps and scientific drawings on predicted fallout from bombs and the distances at which soldiers will suffer adverse effects from radiation.

CLOSE YOUR EYES

Troops must avoid looking at the flash and keep their eyes closed for about three seconds as soon as the flash of light is experienced

SEEK COVER

The radiation will pass through glass but is stopped by opaque substances and will not penetrate the walls of buildings, however thin. Even a leaf will give some protection

PROTECT YOUR HEAD

Head cover is a vital necessity, even if it is only a ground sheet or a sheet of corrugated iron

DIG A TRENCH

If there is sufficient warning of a nuclear attack, the obvious step is to make for the best shelter available as quickly

as possible. If none is available DIG! DIG! DIG!

AVOID RAIN

Radioactive rain may continue to fall from the base surge cloud for some time.

Shelter from the rain, to prevent the clothing becoming contaminated, can be the only precaution to be taken immediately

WASH YOURSELF

Contamination is removed from the exposed portions of the body by vigorous scrubbing with soap and water

CLEAN YOUR UNIFORM

Clothing can be decontaminated by laundering, dry cleaning, vacuum cleaning and natural decay

KEEP EATING AND DRINKING

An appreciable amount of radioactivity may be detected in food and water from contaminated areas. This food and water may still be acceptable for consumption, particularly in an emergency

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Found: hidden documents on A-bomb tests

By COLIN JAMES

24apr02

THOUSANDS of top secret documents on the British nuclear tests at Maralinga have surfaced 17 years after they should have been presented to a royal commission.

The Australian Democrats have demanded the documents be tabled in the Senate, saying they contain valuable information which could help veterans seeking compensation.

The Federal Government has requested more time, saying many of the documents must be cleared by the UK Government before they are made public.

References to the documents were unearthed in the Australian National Archives by researchers investigating the long-term impact of the nuclear tests on the health of more than 25,000 servicemen and civilians.

They include files dealing with how much radiation was ingested by the men, chemical warfare sites in Australia, the clandestine introduction of nuclear weapons into Australia, radiation dosage records and official investigations into the health effects of the nuclear tests.

Democrats nuclear spokeswoman Lyn Allison had asked for the documents to be tabled in the Senate by March 20 so they could be made available to veterans. A reply from Defence Minister Robert Hill said preliminary advice from the Department of Defence was that they could not be released.

"National Archives records indicate some of the documents have restrictions on access that may prevent tabling," he said.

"Apparently, some documents were provided in confidence by foreign governments and disclosure would require consultation and consent."

Senator Hill said other documents were under the control of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet as they were provided to the 1985 McClelland royal commission into the nuclear tests.

"I have requested that Defence liaise with Prime Minister and Cabinet to advise me which documents may be tabled," he said. "Unfortunately, this process will delay a final response to the Senate's request."

The existence of the latest documents follows the discovery last year that the Defence Department withheld more than 240 files from the McClelland royal commission.

Veteran groups regard the latest documents as critically important as they appear to deal directly with the health effects of radiation exposure at Maralinga.

Their researcher, Ann Munslow-Davies, said it was time all documents relating to the nuclear tests were made public.

"We are talking about 50 years now that these documents have been hidden and kept secret," she said. "The question must be asked what is in them and what are the British and Australian governments trying to hide."

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Nuclear bombs 'caused cancer'

By COLIN JAMES

03jan02

A BRITISH court has set an international precedent by finding a nuclear test veteran contracted cancer as a result of radiation exposure.

The Pensions Appeal Tribunal in Edinburgh last week found lymphatic cancer in a soldier who participated in Britain's atomic bomb program in the 1950s was caused by radiation.

The ruling has been hailed as a breakthrough for thousands of Australian veterans and their widows who have been seeking compensation for radiation-related illnesses and deaths.

Australian veterans said yesterday the finding had enormous implications as successive Australian governments had denied that test participants had been exposed to radiation.

They will ask an inquiry, established by the Federal Government late last year to investigate the deaths of thousands of veterans, to obtain a copy of the finding.

The tribunal awarded a pension to a Scottish veteran, Tom Duggan, after deciding his non-Hodgkins lymphoma was caused by radiation exposure during his participation in British atomic tests at Christmas Island (now Kiribati) in 1958.

The tests followed the detonation of 12 bombs at Maralinga, Emu Field and at the Montebello Islands, off Western Australia, between 1952 and 1957.

Mr Duggan's lawyer, Ian Greenhalgh, produced a British Ministry of Defence document during his hearing which confirmed radiation was measured at Christmas Island during the tests.

The document was written by the same scientist who wrote another document which said soldiers could not have been exposed to radiation because none was detected on the island. Veterans campaigning for compensation said the conflicting documents proved the British and Australian governments had covered up the effects of the blasts.

Mr Greenhalgh, who acts for the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, said it appeared someone in the British Government had decided to "play fast and loose with the facts".

"The Government has consistently said there was no exposure to radiation, and claims that these men would have got cancer regardless of taking part in tests," he said.

"The Government's claims just aren't true. The veterans believe they were there as guinea pigs as we needed to test the effects of our new weapons on man."

A Scottish-based researcher who has spent several years investigating the health effects of the atomic bomb tests said there was growing evidence of criminal liability. University of Dundee medical sociologist Sue Rabbitt Roff said the liability rested with the British Government at the time of the tests "and on the part of the present Government which is perpetuating the criminal liability".

"Tom Duggan's decision is vital because it shows that it is now accepted that low levels of radiation can cause cancers," she said.

"Put simply, the Government was in violation of its own standards and knew it would cause injury to these men. The truth is finally catching up with them."

The latest cover-up claims come several days after British police confirmed they began an investigation three months ago into the British nuclear test program.

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Maralinga tests on nerve gas, files show

By COLIN JAMES

31dec01

AUSTRALIAN defence scientists conducted top-secret experiments with nerve gas during the British atomic tests in the 1950s, classified documents show.

The chemical warfare program included Maralinga, where investigations were undertaken on the contamination of water supplies by nerve gas and nuclear explosions.

Documents obtained by The Advertiser also show Australian scientists closely monitored a US project in which volunteers were used to test a pill to treat the effects of radiation.

The US scientists earlier developed a kit they claimed would make water contaminated with radiation safe for drinking within 15 minutes.

The top-secret memorandums reveal the Australian Army wanted scientists to investigate how water supplies could be decontaminated during nuclear and chemical warfare.

Nuclear test veterans seeking compensation said yesterday the documents raised new questions about the nature of the British nuclear tests in Australia.

Long-term campaigner Avon Hudson, of Balaklava, said the documents proved the tests went beyond the explosion of nuclear devices at Maralinga, Emu Field and the Montebello Islands off Western Australia.

"These documents are the only ones we have ever seen which show that chemical warfare was part of the whole program," he said.

The memorandums issued from the Defence Standards Laboratories detail how the Victorian facility began experiments with nerve gas in 1957, with further work on the decontamination of water supplies beginning in 1959.

One document says the nerve gas experiments were overseen by a Dr J. Tregellas-Williams, whose "initial work is being concentrated on a study of the hydrolysis of nerve gas GB at various PH". The memorandum says another scientist, Dr P.W. Bowe, began work on the contamination of water supplies by nerve gas and nuclear devices in 1959. Another DSL document says US scientists had found chemicals "called ion exchange resins" that could "remove up to 98 per cent of the lethal radioactivity" from water supplies.

The memorandum, dated May 7, 1958, to the chief superintendent of the DSL, F.A. Fox, said Australian military liaison officers based in Washington were seeking more information.

Veterans Affairs Minister Danna Vale said yesterday that if the documents had not been examined by the McLelland Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia "we would be interested in looking at them".

The documents are available for public scrutiny at www.atomicsurvivors.org
www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407069%255E26839,00.html

Secret atomic child files opened

By COLIN JAMES and SAMANTHA MAIDEN

05sep01

ADELAIDE medical institutions received secret payments for 10 years to send the bones of more than 3000 dead babies and children to Melbourne for radiation contamination testing, a federal report has revealed.

Security agents collected chest, leg and spinal bones from the Royal Adelaide Hospital, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science and the former Adelaide Children's Hospital before transporting them in sealed bags to the Australian Radiation Laboratory.

The report – released yesterday – prompted federal Health Minister Dr Michael Wooldridge to announce that families would be allowed access to records to determine whether their children were part of the clandestine program set up by the Menzies Government in 1957.

The details could be made available by the end of the year – pending a decision on "proper ethical protocols".

Part of an international operation codenamed Project Sunshine, the program involved removing 21,830 bones from bodies in Australia and Papua New Guinea for burning in a high-temperature furnace.

Ash samples initially were sent to Britain and the US before being retained in Australia when laboratory facilities became available in the early 1960s.

The bones were tested for strontium 90, a fission by-product from the British nuclear tests that were conducted in Australia between 1952 and 1957.

In its report, the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency revealed it had kept ash samples from bones collected from hospitals in Adelaide, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane and Melbourne between 1957 and 1978, when the program was officially stopped.

The agency said it also had 3078 records of SA specimens collected during the program, which detected varying levels of strontium 90 in all capital cities.

The records were kept for the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee, which set up the program to monitor radioactive fallout from atomic tests at Maralinga and Emu Field in SA and the Montebello Islands, off Western Australia.

Strontium 90, which causes leukemia and other cancers, was spread across SA and the eastern half of the country by mushroom clouds from the 12 tests, eventually settling in top soil, vegetables, fruit and grain crops.

The report reveals secret inducements of \$50 and \$100 had to be offered to pathologists and mortuary technicians to encourage them to provide the bones for testing.

It also reveals the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee knew there could be potential public anger – and sought to conceal the program and the payments.

"You may have perhaps considered it possible that the question of the sampling and radiochemical assaying of bones would not be regarded kindly by the general public," the committee's secretary, J.R. Moroney, wrote in a letter to pathologists in 1957.

"Consequently, I would be grateful if, in the future, you could treat this matter and its related correspondence as either confidential or personal, as you wish."

In a further letter in 1958, Mr Moroney wrote to the pathologists saying: "I think it is only fair to remind you that the committee will be very pleased to come to some financial arrangement for the work that is to be done for us in your department."

Ten years later, Mr Moroney wrote again to the pathologists, offering an annual payment of \$50 saying it was "becoming increasingly difficult to sustain an interest with a tendency for specimens to be overlooked".

He suggested hospitals could disguise the payments by setting up special accounts for "pathological services".

In 1979, Mr Moroney wrote to hospitals to say the payment was being increased to \$100 because of the "ravages of inflation".

Melbourne legal firm Slater and Gordon, which specialises in class actions, said it had already been contacted by several angry families about compensation.

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Atomic tests payouts reach \$5m

By COLIN JAMES

25aug01

THE Federal Government has spent more than \$5 million on court cases and compensation involving veterans of the British atomic tests, it has emerged.

Industry Science and Resources Minister Nick Minchin has revealed 79 court cases have been started since the program finished in SA in the early 1960s but only four have gone to trial.

The remaining cases either had been withdrawn or confidentially settled out of court, with only one resulting in a \$867,100 payout ordered by a judge in 1989.

Senator Minchin said the total cost of defending the cases – and paying compensation – had reached \$5.13 million.

More than 350 compensation claims had been lodged by servicemen, public servants or civilians over the past 20 years, of which 27 had been successful.

Senator Minchin said 342 claims from servicemen had been rejected, including some where the Commonwealth "accepted liability for conditions arising from a member's service" but would not pay compensation.

Of the successful compensation claims, only nine payments had been paid to Australian servicemen since 1981, with seven cases still under consideration.

A further five payments had been made to Aboriginal people, three to civilians and 10 to families of veterans who had died.

Three of the payments, which averaged \$126,561, had been made this year.

The Australian Democrats spokeswoman on nuclear affairs, Lyn Allison, said the Federal Government's treatment of the nuclear test veterans was "no better" than its Labor predecessors.

"It is tragic and heartless that Australian governments have knocked back 96 per cent of compensation claims by servicemen and civilians," she said.

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Water 'fouled by nuclear waste'

By COLIN JAMES

20jul01

RADIOACTIVE waste from British nuclear tests at Maralinga contaminated ground water at the Defence Science and Technology Organisation facility at Salisbury, it has emerged.

Tests by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation found "unusually high" levels of a radioactive material, caesium 137, in an unfenced pit in a paddock in the 1950s.

A confidential report prepared by ANTSO has revealed the caesium 137 was detected in ground water samples taken from the 20m by 30m pit as part of an investigation into 172 contaminated sites at the DSTO and the adjacent RAAF Edinburgh air base. The DSTO later told employees the contamination was restricted to an area near the pit, with senior management saying there was no risk to public safety as it had not contaminated ground water used for irrigation by nearby market gardeners and orchardists.

The ANTSO report in 1993, never publicly released, said the caesium 137 was a "fall-out product from nuclear bomb testing" which had got into water beneath the pit from nearby radioactive waste dumped in the 1950s. "Since soil samples taken from this bore hole did not contain caesium 137, it is believed the caesium activity in the sample arose by migration of caesium 137 containing water into the bore hole during sampling," it said.

"As such, there is a strong suggestion that a source of caesium 137 is in the vicinity of the bore hole and, therefore, that an amount of bomb waste material may have been buried at Site Number Two (the official name for the pit)."

The buried material included contaminated aircraft and rocket components.

Caesium 137 is a highly carcinogenic compound which causes birth defects. It is found only in the radioactive fallout from nuclear explosions and even low levels of exposure are regarded as extremely dangerous.

The material heavily contaminated RAAF aircraft which flew into mushroom clouds during the Maralinga tests in 1956 and 1957 to track the clouds' movements across southern Australia.

The material was washed off the aircraft by airmen working in purpose-built decontamination facilities. They either hosed it into drains at Edinburgh or collected it as sludge for disposal in sealed drums. Many of the airmen have since died prematurely from cancers, heart failures and brain tumours.

The ANTSO report found the DSTO did not identify the origin of the caesium 137. It said only that the "presence of this radionuclide, which is not natural, suggests a radioactive material has been buried in the vicinity of the bore hole from which the water sample was collected". The water sample was analysed by the ANTSO as part of a confidential investigation by environmental consultants Kinhill Metcalf Eddy. The study began after plans were announced to reduce the size of the DSTO facility and Edinburgh from 1800ha to 700ha, with the remaining 1100ha to be sold for residential and industrial development. Investigations identified 172 contaminated sites.

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Atomic waste 20m from public road

By COLIN JAMES

19jul01

RADIOACTIVE waste from the British atomic tests at Maralinga remains buried at the RAAF base at Edinburgh, it has emerged.

The material includes equipment used by aircrew when they flew through mushroom clouds as they tracked their movement across southern Australia, including Adelaide. Former RAAF airmen and civilians have provided eyewitness accounts to The Advertiser of how contaminated aircraft parts were dumped in pits at the air base, the largest of which is less than 20m from Heaslip Rd. Documents obtained by The Advertiser also reveal radioactivity continued to be measured at a former decontamination facility at Edinburgh, known as Hangar 594, as recently as the early 1990s.

The facility was established to wash and strip aircraft that had been used during the Operation Buffalo and Operation Antler series of atomic tests at Maralinga in the state's far north in 1956 and 1957.

RAAF airmen who cleaned the aircraft have told The Advertiser that parts which could not be decontaminated were removed from the planes and dumped in the pit near Heaslip Rd, which is less than 5km from the Angle Vale housing development.

They also have provided statements detailing how sludge containing radioactive dust was washed into a sump near the facility and into the public sewerage system.

Two Angle Vale residents who saw the pit in the late 1950s before it was sealed with concrete said it had been progressively filled with aircraft parts and equipment.

"There were gas masks, fibreglass cones and aluminium fittings," said one man, who asked not to be named because of his links to the defence industry.

Another former Angle Vale resident said that, as a 12-year-old, she had regularly seen the pit while riding her horse about the time the first Maralinga bomb exploded on September 27, 1956. "It was this big rectangular pit and they put all sorts of things in there – gas masks, coils, furniture," said the woman, who also asked not to be identified.

The pit was one of six toxic waste dumps at the airfield identified by consultant engineers Rust PPK during a 1994 investigation into 172 contaminated sites at Edinburgh and the adjacent 1100ha Defence Science Technology Organisation facility.

However, unlike a similar dump at DSTO's Salisbury facility which contained radioactive material from the Woomera missile tests, the RAAF sites have not been remediated as they are located on land which has not been identified for potential residential development. The DSTO radioactive waste was removed from a pit several years ago and is stored in drums at Salisbury inside a secure facility, Building 6, until it can be transported to a nuclear dump proposed for the state's Far North.

The RAAF sites are unlikely to be cleaned up because of the cost.

Rust PPK has recommended to the Defence Department that only those sites in areas earmarked for development be remedied.

While preliminary surveys confirmed the waste dumps were contaminated and contained various material, detailed investigations were not undertaken after Rust PPK said "detailed risk assessment is not appropriate".

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Maralinga veterans urged to have a say

By COLIN JAMES

18jul01

SURVIVING veterans of the British atomic tests in SA have been urged to attend a public meeting in Adelaide.

The meeting has been called by anti-nuclear campaigners to commemorate Hiroshima Day on Sunday, August 5.

Its organisers have decided to focus the meeting on the British atomic tests following a series of articles in The Advertiser.

Spokeswoman Irene Gray said it was hoped surviving Maralinga veterans, who were battling the Federal Government for compensation, would recount their experiences at the meeting.

Mrs Gray said the widows and relatives of veterans who had died would also be invited to speak about their ongoing fight for recognition.

The keynote speaker will be Melbourne science lecturer Dr Roger Cross, who recently wrote a book on the struggle by Adelaide biochemist Hedley Marston to reveal how radioactive fallout reached Adelaide and other capital cities. Other speakers would include Aboriginal representative Rebecca Bear-Wingfield and the veteran widely credited with first exposing the truth about the nuclear tests in 1973, Avon Hudson.

Mrs Gray said the continuing human and environmental legacy of the explosions between 1952 and 1957 "may not be the kind of issue we want to confront".

"We may feel it's better to leave it for others to deal with but when we come to realise that ordinary Australian servicemen and Aboriginal families were put on the front line of nuclear weapons testing without the full knowledge of the risks to their health and the subsequent imposition on friends and family, surely we must consider future government policies to do with nuclear weaponry," she said.

"We invite anyone who was at the tests, and their families, to come along and share their experiences so that everyone can learn what happened." The meeting will start at Trades Hall, South Tce, at 1.30pm.

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How a dying rabbit was all it took to lift the lid on what it was really like at Maralinga

By COLIN JAMES

14jul01

A CONTAMINATED rabbit sent in a thermos flask to England has been cited as proof Australian servicemen were exposed to radiation at Maralinga.

The partially-blinded rabbit was tested by scientists after a soldier watched it run into the wall of a shed inside a contaminated area.

The soldier caught the severely malnourished rabbit by its ears and killed it with a rock before alerting British officers. A scientific team sent to retrieve the rabbit recorded high levels of radiation when swept with a Geiger counter.

An official report in November, 1956, said the animal's teeth were exposed as the "fur and skin in the vicinity of the mouth had been eaten away". Its eyes "popped out" while it was being examined. "The left eye had festered and appeared to be blind, although the eyelids were still open," it continued.

The rabbit was put into a deep freezer before being placed in "a one gallon thermos flask for immediate despatch to the United Kingdom" where it was tested for radiation.

In a letter to Australian scientists on February 12, 1957, a British scientist, G.C. Dale, said the rabbit "would appear to be suffering from external radiation as well as ingestion trouble".

The discovery of the contaminated rabbit contradicts repeated claims by successive federal governments that servicemen were not exposed to radiation during the British tests.

The rabbit was found in an area at Maralinga known as the Forward Zone, where more than 3000 servicemen and civilians were based for the tests in 1956 and 1957. This included an "Indoctrination Force" of 283 officers and support staff who were "exposed to the full effects" of nuclear explosions on September 27 and October 4, 1956.

The Advertiser yesterday reported how the Defence Department stated in 1980 that the men "had not entered any areas which presented a radiation hazard" during the tests.

The department also denied the men had been exposed to dangerous levels of radiation, despite being positioned less than 1km from the blasts.

According to the report, the men were located "up wind" of the detonation points "beyond the residual radiation fields generated by radioactive debris".

"Thus, with the wind directions at the times of the tests, no effects due to these residual ionising radiations were experienced by any of the Indoctrinees at these times," it said.

"The levels of thermal, optical, blast, shock and non-ionising electromagnetic radiation emanating from both tests were not in any way sufficient to cause injury or ill health."

The whistleblower who first exposed the truth about the atomic tests at Maralinga, Avon Hudson, said yesterday the Defence Department report was "typical of the lies that have been told and continue to be told" about the atomic tests.

For almost 30 years, Mr Hudson has assembled evidence of an orchestrated cover-up by the British and Australian governments of how servicemen and civilians were exposed to radiation.

Mr Hudson, 65, of Balaklava, first made his concerns public in 1973, when he prompted questions in Federal Parliament about the dumping of radioactive waste at Maralinga.

Twenty-eight years later, the former engineer who built towers for nuclear explosions, remains convinced thousands of documents remain hidden from public scrutiny.

"There are truckloads still to be uncovered," Mr Hudson told The Advertiser. "There are medical records for every man sitting somewhere which will never, ever be released. They are there so they can be manipulated. They (government departments) can doctor them, delete them, remove them from files whenever they are challenged. "It's what they have been doing for years and don't think for one moment they aren't still doing it ...

"You would think that after 50 years, there is no secret left worth pursuing. But they are still trying to cover up their sins of the past and their crimes against humanity.

"Everyone I know who went to Maralinga has had their lives destroyed to the point where some have died very early while the rest have had to suffer maltreatment at the hands of the government.

"This is the shame of what the authorities have done. Nobody is going to put the wrongs right and we are no closer to a resolution today than we were thirty years ago. "I feel that we are all going to die before there is any recognition, any sort of medal, any sort of pension. They are just never, ever going to do it. That's the sad fact of it. We are just not a priority."

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The key that unlocks the lies of Maralinga

By COLIN JAMES

13jul01

PETER Webb's mates gave him a signed key to the rest of his life when he celebrated his 21st birthday at Maralinga.

But the 66-year-old former soldier's life has been far from perfect ever since.

A fortnight after his party, the Australian Army private stood with 260 military officers to watch an atomic bomb explode less than 1km away.

Seven days later, he was put into a trench with two British officers for a second nuclear explosion a similar distance from Ground Zero.

Nearby were 109 Australian, British and New Zealand servicemen sitting in other partially-covered trenches, a Centurion tank or standing in the open.

Despite having his 21st key and an engraved silver mug presented by officers he served under at Maralinga, Mr Webb has struggled for more than 35 years to prove he was deliberately exposed to radiation.

Mr Webb, from Melbourne, remains adamant the men – known as the Indoctrination Force – were used as human guinea pigs as part of a secret plan to test the biological effects of nuclear explosions.

His claims are supported by documents obtained by The Advertiser which detail how the British and Australian governments organised the "exposure of the indoctrinees to the flash, heat and blast" of an atomic explosion on September 27, 1956, at "a distance of about 4.5 miles (7.2km)".

The next stage was a "conducted tour to examine the effects of the explosion" on targets such as vehicles, bunkers, aircraft, supply dumps and weapons.

During a protracted exchange with various federal departments, Mr Webb has been sent conflicting letters about whether he was at Maralinga, whether he was exposed to radiation and what his radiation counts were.

He believes his inability to obtain information is part of a cover-up over how he and other members of the Indoctrination Force were exposed to the One Tree and Marcoo blasts – and how close they were.

"For the first test at One Tree, we were moved to the top of a small hill looking directly at the tower on top of another hill about 1000 yards away," he told The Advertiser.

Mr Webb, who unsuccessfully sought compensation for skin cancers in 1996, said the men were ordered to stand with their backs to the 100m-high tower until the 15-kiloton bomb detonated with a "deafening roar and vivid flash". "About 30 seconds after the detonation a gale force wind roared through, scorching our bare skin and taking sand, small rocks, branches, grass and all types of debris through our area," he said. "We were ordered to turn around and about five minutes later, as the mushroom cloud started to form, the wind returned and all the debris and rubbish was sucked up. One of our vehicles, a three-ton truck, was blown over.

"We were covered in dust and lounged around for about three hours before we were loaded on to vehicles and driven into Ground Zero.

"We were told we could look around and see what damage had been done to the equipment. The sand had been turned to glass by the heat of the blast. Many of the vehicles had been crumpled like empty cans and turned over or blown along like leaves in the wind.

"We were in the Ground Zero area for about two hours and people in full white protective suits kept coming and going from the direction of the atomic crater. There were even portable decontamination showers.

"We weren't issued with protective clothing. We just wore our shorts, short-sleeved shirts and boots.

"Some guys starting vomiting and were taken to a field post or the Maralinga Hospital. After we were transported back to our camp our radiation badges were collected in buckets and we were given new ones. We were later told there had been negative results but we've never been allowed to see them."

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Cloak of secrecy thrown on veterans

By COLIN JAMES

12jul01

AUSTRALIAN soldiers exposed to radiation during the British atomic tests were ordered to not tell anyone how close they were to the nuclear explosions.

Nuclear test veterans who have been seeking compensation for serious illnesses for more than 30 years were advised as recently as 1994 that they were still covered by the Official Secrets Act, which carries penalties of up to seven years' jail.

While prosecution was unlikely as the tests had been examined by a royal commission, the federal Attorney-General's Department said it could not guarantee action would not be taken if veterans disclosed classified details of the explosions.

This includes members of the Royal Australian Armoured Corp who were told not to reveal the distance from which they saw two bombs explode on towers in October, 1953, at Emu Field, which is located 480km northwest of Woomera.

The Advertiser has obtained a secret order posted on bulletin boards which said they could "not be precise about distances even if you know them as you may convey valuable information in this way".

They could provide "general" descriptions of the explosions as you saw them, "the camp and its operations", "the fact that certain service equipment has been tested", "the presence of your friends or friends of your friends" and "the fact that no animals were used in the tests". The order which came from the test program's chief scientist, Sir William Penney, said that "if you are uncertain about any points then say nothing".

The secrecy had been implemented by the British government of former prime minister Sir Winston Churchill, which sent a top-secret memorandum to the Menzies Government in October, 1952, banning publication of details of the imminent explosion at the Monte Bello Islands, off Western Australia.

The British rebuked the government after details of the test, which sent a mushroom cloud drifting over the northern half of Australia, were reported by newspapers in Australia.

The memo said that it was "of the utmost importance nothing should be said about the explosion".

"Particular matters to which exception has been taken are the reported statements that it was a different kind of explosion from any conventional bomb, that the observers had been 12 miles away ... that the weapon was an atomic fission bomb and the cloud formation after the explosion was due to meteorological conditions," it said.

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Hospital with no patient records

By COLIN JAMES

11jul01

MEDICAL records from the Maralinga military hospital seemingly vanished more than 30 years ago, depriving servicemen of evidence they suffered illnesses caused by radiation.

Now, after years of official claims the files cannot be found, The Advertiser has obtained the only Maralinga Village Hospital record known to privately exist in Australia.

The two-page document is proof the hospital files must have been kept by either the British or Australian governments after the atomic test program.

The British-run hospital was set up in 1956 to treat servicemen and civilians for injuries or illnesses sustained during Operation Buffalo and Operation Antler in 1956 and 1957.

However, when ailing servicemen later requested copies of their in-patient records to support compensation claims, successive federal governments either said they did not exist or could not be located.

Servicemen remain convinced their medical records, their radiation counts and other details of their duties during the atomic tests have been deliberately concealed to stop compensation claims.

The suspicions of a former Australian Army engineer, John Woodleigh, were fuelled when he was sent his Maralinga Hospital file by the Defence Department in 1978 to deny him compensation for a stomach illness.

The record – which showed Mr Woodleigh spent 10 days in the hospital in August, 1957, suffering chronic vomiting – was used by the department to prove the condition existed before a tour of duty in Malaya in the 1960s where he claims to have contracted the illness.

Mr Woodleigh, who later changed his surname by deed poll to Hutton to honour his dying stepfather, told The Advertiser he began seeking further copies of the document after royal commissioner Jim McClelland revealed in 1991 that he had not sought the Maralinga Hospital records during his inquiry into whether the atomic tests caused illnesses among servicemen.

Mr Hutton then wrote to former prime minister Malcolm Fraser, who replied: "I regret to advise that I have no idea where they (the records) would be kept."

In November, 1992, the Defence Department said it had "no knowledge of the whereabouts of the requested files". The same month, the Primary Industries Department, which has responsibility for Maralinga issues, said it had "made numerous attempts to locate these records" since 1982 without success.

It also was told by the Department of Defence it did not know the whereabouts of the files.

"The Department of Defence has assured me that an examination has been undertaken of all possible sources in an attempt to locate these records, with no success," said litigation section head John Willis. Mr Hutton, 64, of Sydney, said his hospital record made a mockery of the claims.

"When they sent it to me, they outsmarted themselves. It's proof the records were there and just vanished. You just have to ask yourself the question why?"

www.theadvertiser.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,6407164%255E26839,00.html

Aborigines died in test site bunker

By COLIN JAMES

10jul01

FOUR Aborigines were found drinking alcohol in a concrete bunker before a nuclear bomb was detonated at Maralinga, it has been alleged.

The son of a dead veteran has provided a written statement to The Advertiser saying his father privately revealed the incident shortly before his death in 1984.

The man, who asked not to be named because of links to the Federal Government, said his father, a former Polish army sergeant, told him he encountered the

Aborigines when he worked as a mechanic during the Operation Buffalo tests in 1956.

His task was to position test vehicles on blast sites and retrieve them after they were exposed to the effects of the blast.

"It was on one of these outings Dad had a smoko and went to go to the toilet," said his son. "He walked a few metres away from the test site and started to unzip his pants when he noticed a concrete roof perfectly level with the top of the ground.

"He found a square concrete room, with a window with no glass, a doorway but with no door. He crouched down and saw up to four Aborigines inside drinking spirits and wine, heaps of it.

"He shouted out `What the hell are you doing here? You are not supposed to be here'. They flicked their hands at him as though to shush him away.

"He complained to the supervisor with him and was told, `Forget about it, don't worry about it and say nothing.' After the explosion Dad went out to see the vehicles he had placed and looked around and there was no trace of the building."

The allegations support evidence given by two servicemen to a 1984 royal commission that the bodies of four adult Aborigines were found in a crater at Maralinga in 1961.

The inquiry heard how inadequate efforts were made to remove Aborigines from within a 300km radius of the atomic tests, leading to a separate incident in which a nomadic family slept inside another contaminated crater at Maralinga. An Australian soldier who helped the family, John Hutton, told The Advertiser yesterday he was ordered to never speak about the incident otherwise he would be shot or imprisoned. Mr Hutton, 64, of Sydney, said he was at an area known as Pom Pom on May 14, 1957, when an Aboriginal man wearing a loin cloth, Charlie Milpuddie, approached a monitoring unit's caravan carrying several spears, dingo pelts and a billy can.

"We ran the counter over him and he was red hot (with radioactivity)," he said. "A sergeant came out from Maralinga and went to the crater from Marcoo (a ground explosion on October 4, 1956) to get his wife (Edie, who was pregnant and later had a stillborn baby), a boy and a baby girl. They were hot as well. We gave the man and the boy a shower but his wife was pretty shy and only let us wash her hair.

"We had to shoot two of their dogs because they couldn't be decontaminated. The family were driven to the mission at Yalata."

The Milpuddie family were among an estimated 1200 desert Aborigines exposed to radiation from the nine atomic tests held at Maralinga and Emu Field, 480km northwest of Woomera, between 1953 and 1957. Many subsequently suffered from leukemia and other cancers, birth defects, thyroid problems, blindness, infertility and growth deficiencies.

The Aborigines were poisoned when they were hit by radioactive clouds during the tests and for many years afterwards when they entered areas contaminated with radioactivity.

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Disabled son linked to atomic tests

By COLIN JAMES

09jul01

BEVERLEY and Des Freeling will never know why their only child was born with severe disabilities, but they believe the British atomic tests at Maralinga are to blame.

Mr Freeling, 77, of Findon, was one of several hundred civilians ordered to gather on the Maralinga Village oval to watch the explosion of a nuclear bomb during the Operation Antler series in 1957.

He also accompanied a senior police officer on a sightseeing trip into a contaminated area to view a crater left by an explosion the previous year.

Mr Freeling spent considerable time at Maralinga, during and after the atomic tests, as the manager of Shell, which supplied bitumen and fuel for the top secret project.

He married Beverley in 1962 and their son, Darryn, was born four years later with multiple disabilities which have left him a quadriplegic confined to a wheelchair.

Mrs Freeling, 64, told The Advertiser she had always suspected 35-year-old Darryn's disabilities were caused by her husband's exposure to radiation at Maralinga.

"There will always be a question mark in my mind," she said. "I would like them (the Federal Government) to say to me, 'No, it's definitely not Maralinga', but I don't believe they'll ever tell us the truth even if they do find out."

Mr and Mrs Freeling are among hundreds of atomic test personnel around Australia who suspect their exposure to radiation has led to infertility, miscarriages, stillborn babies and birth defects.

Health surveys obtained by The Advertiser detail a range of problems among the children of former servicemen. They include spinal problems, deformed teeth, misshapen limbs, enlarged hearts, melanomas, chronic asthma and cancers.

Many of the children died soon after birth, while others lived only until their early 20s or 30s. Mrs Freeling said Darryn barely survived birth and his disabilities became more evident as he grew older.

He required full-time care until he was 27, when respite accommodation was found for him after years of seeking help from government departments.

Mrs Freeling said she had sought blood test results for Darryn when he was younger but was denied access to the information by the Women's and Children's Hospital.

"I wanted to know what his blood group was but a specialist there told me it had nothing to do with me because I didn't need to know," she said.

"It was quite typical of how I've been treated over the years. It seemed nobody wanted to know about disabled children, especially those who needed full-time care. When I tried to find out about Darryn's disabilities, it's almost as if he never fitted in. The best they (medical specialists) were able to come up with was that he's a spastic quadriplegic."

Mr Freeling said he was never warned about the potential dangers of radiation during his various stints at Maralinga, which ranged from two years to several months. He remembered assembling with other civilians at Maralinga Village in September,

1957, when a British officer told them to turn their backs to the bomb and put their hands over their eyes.

"There was this boom and we were told we could turn around and look at the mushroom cloud (about 14km away)."

Many of Mr Freeling's friends and acquaintances at Maralinga have since died, with cancer particularly common. He suffers skin cancers, depression and high blood pressure.

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Nuclear truth revealed

By COLIN JAMES

07jul01

AN Adelaide scientist took on politicians and physicists to disclose the radioactive fallout from the Maralinga tests of the 1950s

By all accounts, Hedley Marston was not someone to cross. Bombastic and bullying, pugnacious and vindictive, pretentious and egotistical, the University of Adelaide biochemist was renowned for throwing his considerable weight around the corridors of science. Despite never completing his degree (although later awarded an honorary doctorate), Marston's reputation as one of Australia's foremost scientists was cemented when his university team determined anaemic sheep and cattle in many parts of the country were being deprived of an essential element, cobalt.

It was his work on cobalt in the 1930s which would later have him chosen to oversee an official program to secretly test the thyroids of cattle and sheep for traces of radioactive iodine during the British nuclear testing program in Australia between 1952 and 1957.

What Marston discovered – and how he later publicly fought Australian physicists charged with ensuring the tests did not pose a threat to public safety – enshrined his place in the country's political and scientific history.

For it was Marston who first challenged the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee's repeated public assertions that the atomic explosions off the coast of Western Australia and deep within the SA desert did not endanger the Australian public.

In *Fallout* (Wakefield Press, \$24.95), Dr Roger Cross, a University of Melbourne science lecturer, examines how Marston used radioactive samples secretly collected in Adelaide to take on the committee in the prestigious Australian Journal of Science. The samples provided incontrovertible evidence that fallout from the tests at Maralinga contaminated Adelaide and other parts of SA, despite claims by the committee's British-trained spokesman, Sir Ernest Titterton, and the Menzies government's supply minister, Howard Beale, to the contrary.

Politicians such as Mr Beale and then SA premier Sir Thomas Playford instead used newspapers such as The Advertiser to promote the economic and strategic benefits of

the tests, a strategy supported by pre-prepared statements assuring the public there was no danger from fallout. Marston, meanwhile, was gathering information to show that the committee and its political masters had concealed how fallout from the tests at Montebello Islands, off WA, had contaminated the northern half of Australia. Together with his field surveys of contaminated animals, he then used air filters at Roseworthy and Urrbrae to collect samples which confirmed that a highly radioactive material, strontium 90, was carried in radioactive clouds from Maralinga across the Australian mainland. Strontium 90 is among the most dangerous of all nuclear test by-products, being absorbed into human bones, especially those of children, by the consumption of milk produced by cows which eat contaminated pasture. Hedley Marston prepared a controversial paper revealing his findings. His subsequent battle with the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee to have it published, and its unprecedented demand for a right of reply, dominate Dr Cross's fascinating and educational account of one of the most shameful periods in this country's short history.

Stressing he has not set out to provide a definitive record of the atomic tests, Fallout nonetheless is compulsory reading for those in search of the truth about the tests and their continuing legacy.

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Atomic bomb fallout covered the city

By COLIN JAMES

07jul01

RADIOACTIVE clouds from two atomic tests at Maralinga were swept across the Nullarbor Plain to Adelaide, classified documents have revealed.

Despite repeated official denials the fallout was dangerous, levels recorded at secret sampling stations exceeded those now permitted under federal health standards.

The Advertiser has obtained classified documents which reveal radioactivity was detected in Adelaide, Woomera, Oodnadatta, Ceduna, Giles, Cook, Cleve, Leigh Creek, Tarcoola, Marree, Port Augusta and Mt Gambier after atomic bombs were exploded at Maralinga in 1956 and 1957.

Fallout from the first SA tests at Emu Field, 480km northwest of Woomera, as part of Operation Totem was not officially monitored, but The Advertiser understands air sampling devices in the Adelaide central business district also detected radioactivity.

Fallout from the first Totem explosion on October 15, 1953, heavily contaminated nearby cattle stations, particularly Welbourn Hill and Wallatina, with station owners, their families, workers and desert Aborigines exposed to a mushroom cloud dubbed "The Black Mist".

Adelaide was hit by radioactive fallout from the final and biggest explosion of the four-bomb Operation Buffalo series on October 22, 1956, with further fallout detected 12 months later after three bombs exploded during Operation Antler. The

contamination occurred when inversion layers either trapped the mushroom clouds and pushed them towards Adelaide or forecast winds changed direction and dispersed the clouds to the east, rather than north as planned.

The clouds were tracked across SA, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland by RAAF aircraft, which became so contaminated they had to be cleaned at a special facility.

A national monitoring program established by the Menzies government in 1956 detected three nuclear byproducts – strontium 90, caesium 137 and radioactive iodine – in human and sheep bones, air samples, rainwater, soil, cabbages and flour in SA. Similar results were obtained in Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, the Northern Territory and Tasmania. Strontium 90 is one of the most dangerous nuclear fission byproducts. It has a half-life of 28 years and lodges in bone tissue, causing leukemia and cancer. It was still being detected when the national program of testing the bones of dead children and adults was officially stopped in 1971.

The compound continued to be detected in milk samples randomly collected from Adelaide and other capital cities until 1984. No official monitoring for strontium 90 has occurred since then.

Caesium 137, which causes cancers and birth defects, was detected in SA children and adults during a Royal Adelaide Hospital study in 1962.

The results of the study were secretly presented to the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee, established to monitor radioactive fallout two years after the first atomic tests were held at Emu Field.

The AWTSC assembled official data to deny radioactive fallout was dangerous, leading to a confrontation with Adelaide University biochemist Hedley Marston, who secretly gathered contaminated air samples at Urrbrae and Roseworthy.

The committee then tried to stop Dr Marston from publishing a paper detailing how his air samples and contaminated thyroid glands from sheep and cattle proved the SA public had been exposed to strontium 90.

Four Adelaide hospitals – the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science, Adelaide Children's Hospital, the RAH and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital – provided bones from dead children, including stillborn babies, for strontium 90 testing for 14 years. AWTSC chairman Sir Ernest Titterton told successive federal governments the levels were so low the radioactive fallout could not have endangered Australians.

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How the RAAF used ocean as a nuclear dump

By COLIN JAMES

06jul01

RADIOACTIVE waste from aircraft which flew through mushroom clouds during the British nuclear tests was secretly dumped off the Australian coast.

Steel drums containing liquid waste were designed to burst on impact while others holding engine parts and instruments were weighted with concrete.

Royal Australian Air Force crews were ordered to machinegun floating drums to ensure they sank at sites near the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, the Gulf of Carpentaria, off Broome in WA and near Tasmania.

Classified documents obtained by The Advertiser reveal the dumping began in 1954 and continued until the practice was banned in 1958.

A 1980 RAAF report said for at least four years drums with contaminated engine parts, liquid waste, cleaning equipment and clothing were disposed "by dumping at sea".

The material included sludge from radioactive dust washed off the aircraft by RAAF servicemen, many of whom have since died from cancers and other illnesses.

Dust and other radioactive debris also accumulated in the interiors of the aircraft when they tracked radioactive clouds across SA, the Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

The 1980 RAAF report said the decontamination of the aircraft at a purpose-built facility at the RAAF Amberley air base in Queensland was "rather excessive but was considered necessary as the aircraft were going to disposal for scrap".

"The length of time since contamination (and cleaning) ensured that all short-lived (radioactive) elements would have decayed and any activity remaining would probably be the more dangerous materials such as strontium 90 and caesium 137 which would remain active for many years." The Advertiser reported last week official tests on the bones of children and adults between 1957 and 1971 detected traces of strontium 90, a carcinogen which lodges in bone tissue and caesium 137, linked to birth defects.

The RAAF approved the sea dumping of waste in 1954 after nine Lincoln bombers which had tracked radioactive clouds from the Operation Totem explosions at Emu Field, 480km northwest of Woomera, in October, 1953, were sent to Amberley for decontamination. Five of the bombers were found to be "highly contaminated".

A RAAF report prepared after an inspection in November, 1953 of the aircraft which were isolated at Amberley said it was "highly undesirable to leave radioactive waste (from the planes) in a thickly populated and busy area" such as the base.

Removal of the waste by road for land dumping or "to a sea port for burial or dumping presents difficulties due to the chance of contaminating vehicles and might attract undesirable attention," it said.

"Dumping at sea from the air is considered to be the most suitable and cleanest method of handling the wastes but for liquids it would involve the use of containers which must burst on impact with the water.

"The dropping area is to be in water at least 20 fathoms deep and must be at least 200 nautical miles from the nearest shipping route and at least 200 nautical miles from the nearest land."

Records of how much waste was dumped at sea no longer exist but the Federal Government was told in 1984 a plan to dispose of 7.1 tonnes off the Sunshine Coast in September, 1958, was cancelled because of the international moratorium outlawing the practice.

The waste instead was flown to Maralinga, where it was dumped in pits along with other radioactive material from seven nuclear tests conducted in 1956 and 1957.
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Crawling into a hotbed of radiation

By COLIN JAMES

05jul01

SERGEANT Arthur Young's job during the British atomic tests was to crawl through contaminated aircraft with a Geiger counter to measure their radioactivity.

He later told his three children some of these aircraft were so "hot" after they were used to track mushroom clouds across SA they were secretly buried in the desert near Woomera.

Other planes coated in radioactive debris were washed by Royal Australian Air Force ground crew dressed in shorts and singlets.

Some of the planes were later sent to the Amberley air base in NSW where they were stripped and sold as scrap.

Mr Young told his children about his duties as a RAAF instrument fitter during the atomic test program before he died in March, 1987, from an aggressive brain tumour, aged 65. His 52-year-old wife, Olive, a former telephonist who he met and married while at Woomera in September, 1956, died 16 months later from stomach cancer. Their eldest daughter, Sandra Wellington, believed the cancers were caused by exposure to radiation when they lived at Woomera during the British atomic tests in the mid-to-late 1950s.

The 44-year-old clinical nurse specialist from Coffs Harbour told The Advertiser it was statistically rare for two spouses to die so close together from cancers.

"From my experience as a nurse, I have no doubt that environmental causes were responsible. In my book, it was radiation," Mrs Wellington said.

Mrs Wellington, who is attending a training course in Adelaide, said after her father's death government departments refused to provide her mother with information about what his duties were at Woomera.

The aircraft tested by Mr Young included 10 Lincoln bombers and two Dakota transporters assigned to the Australian Radiation Detection Unit at Woomera during the British atomic tests at Maralinga, 525km to the west. The planes and their aircrew were heavily contaminated by radioactive material when they were dispatched from Woomera to follow radioactive clouds from four bombs exploded during Operation Buffalo in October, 1956, and three detonated during Operation Antler 12 months later. Mrs Wellington said her mother washed her father's clothes when he returned from helping to clean the aircraft.

The aircraft were repeatedly sent into the mushroom clouds despite being contaminated.

"It's no surprise so many of the men who flew in them and cleaned them have either died or become so ill," Mrs Wellington said.

"I remember Dad saying some were so hot they were taken out to the desert near Woomera and buried. He used to say how fortunate he was because he got to go inside the aircraft while others had to clean them down in their shorts and singlets.

"When my father died, my mother asked the government if there was any link to his brain tumour and she was told nothing could be proven.

"After Mum and Dad died I used to worry about us and what the hell we would be in for. Thankfully nothing has happened so far but who knows about the future."

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Civilians exposed to atomic bomb test radiation

By COLIN JAMES

03jul01

ROBIN Craig had an unenviable task during his seven months as an SA police officer stationed at Maralinga for the British atomic tests in the 1950s.

Before each of three bombs exploded during the series codenamed Operation Antler, the 23-year-old constable had to assemble the civilian population of the Maralinga Village at its community oval.

Mr Craig, 67, of Athelstone, was ordered by British military officers to conduct roll calls to ensure up to 400 people, from bankers to postal clerks, were accounted for before the devices were detonated.

He has told The Advertiser the civilians would gather on the oval, with the instructions they could not leave until after the bombs exploded on towers less than 40km away, between September 14 and October 9, 1957.

"Everyone had to go to the oval about an hour before the bombs went off so they could be accounted for. We could see the towers from where we were," he said.

"When there was 10 minutes left to go, nobody could go anywhere. If they had to go to the toilet or anything, they had to do it in their pants.

"Instructions would come across from the British that we had to stand with our backs turned to the bombs and put our hands over our eyes.

"When they went off there would be this almighty flash which could blind you and it was like a hot towel was being put on the back of your neck.

"After that we were actually told it was all right to turn around to look at them. The last one was hotter than the other two, that's how close we were."

Soon after the explosions, the Maralinga Village was hit by strong wind gusts which coated buildings and equipment with contaminated radioactive dust.

Mr Craig was sent to Maralinga on May 15, 1957, where he was issued with a BSA Gold Flash motorcycle and sidecar, which he regularly rode through areas contaminated by tests during Operation Buffalo the previous year.

On one occasion, soon after his arrival, Mr Craig was told by a guard that "it was okay to go into the forward zone (where a bomb had exploded the year before) if I stayed between the yellow tapes on either side of the track". "The forward zones were really busy places, with a couple of thousand of civilians staying in camps doing building work, excavating and building roads." he said.

Mr Craig said he was never issued with protective clothing during his time at Maralinga – instead wearing khaki shirts and pants through highly contaminated areas.

The only protection he had was a "small, sticky radioactive badge which got all sweaty and dusty and was bloody useless, if you ask me".

"Nobody ever told me to shower or anything. I would bring my dirty clothes home and wash them," he said.

"I never saw any white radiation suits where I went."

Mr Craig, who is still fit and healthy, said many of the people he knew at Maralinga had since died from cancers and other illnesses, many of them when they were relatively young men in their 30s and 40s.

"There's a whole heap of blokes I knew who have died," Mr Craig said. "In fact, I'm one of the last left from the group I got to know."

Mr Craig was among 8907 civilians named last week by the Federal Government as being participants of the atomic tests held in Australia between 1952 and 1957.

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Dark secrets

By COLIN JAMES

30jun01

JUDY Morton was six when the radioactive cloud, later dubbed Puyu (Black Mist) by desert Aborigines, rolled across her family's expansive cattle station, Welbourn Hill, from the secret atomic test site at Emu Field. The 54-year-old, pictured left, cannot remember the blast or its immediate after-effects but she can remember her mother complaining how a thick coat of sticky dust was left throughout their homestead, on its vegetable garden and inside its rainwater tanks.

She also can remember how her brothers, Ern and Peter, were out mustering cattle when the bomb, the first of two in a series known as Operation Totem, was detonated less than 300km away at 7am on October 15, 1953.

Ms Morton later convinced her mother, Ellen Giles, to give evidence to a royal commission into the British atomic testing program held in Australia throughout the 1950s, which had unconditional support from the Menzies government.

Mrs Giles told royal commissioner Jim McClelland in 1984 the fallout was greasy and had to be washed from her house. Seventeen years later, Ms Morton's anger about how her family was exposed to radioactive contamination is intensifying, not diminishing.

Together with hundreds of other Australians, she blames the British and Australian governments for a variety of health problems she has suffered, ranging from chronic asthma and severe sinusitis to a detached retina. She also, reluctantly, has revealed for the first time she has been unable to have children.

Such is her anger that over the past three years, she has spent more than \$8000 on medical and legal fees trying to establish whether she has a case to sue the Federal Government for negligence.

One respected infertility expert, a former director of obstetrics and gynaecology at Adelaide University, Professor Lloyd Cox, has provided a written opinion stating his belief that her infertility is "consistent with radiation in her childhood".

"In my opinion, there is a prima facie case for considering that radioactive fallout might have had some effect ... this is a possibility arising from the radiation level that could have been found at her home near Maralinga," he says.

Ms Morton was not the only woman to experience such problems at Welbourn Hill. Her 21-year-old governess later suffered a miscarriage and developed throat cancer. One of her nieces also learned she was infertile and tried to conceive through the in-vitro fertilisation program before dying from cancer, aged 34.

Ms Morton says it is "criminal" how she, her family, their employees, nearby desert Aborigines, servicemen, civilians and the wider Australian public were repeatedly exposed to radioactive contamination when 12 atomic devices were exploded at Emu Field, the Montebello Islands, off Western Australia, and Maralinga between 1952 and 1957.

An investigation by The Advertiser has confirmed Ms Morton is among people from around Australia who have developed serious health problems following the tests, particularly the army, naval and air force personnel sent to the test sites, the civilians who supported them and residents in areas contaminated by radioactive fallout. Like many others, Ms Morton has found it virtually impossible to obtain detailed information on what happened before, during and after the tests to ensure human health was protected and risks were kept to a minimum.

A classified report obtained by The Advertiser not only confirms Welbourn Hill and another nearby station, Wallatina, were heavily contaminated by the radioactive cloud but also that the event occurred because of errors made with weather predictions by British and Australian scientists.

It is among hundreds of classified British and Australian documents obtained by The Advertiser which challenge repeated official statements that the atomic tests were safe and did not pose risks to the Australian public. The documents also highlight how the royal commission, headed by Mr McClelland, a former Whitlam government minister, was never told the full truth about what happened at the tests and the continuing legacy left on men, women and children across the country. Ms Morton's anger is typical of that felt by individuals who have lost loved ones, given birth to children with defects or suffered serious health problems because of their involvement with the nuclear tests.

Included are hundreds of veterans who have unsuccessfully sought compensation from successive federal governments for physical and mental illnesses they believe

were caused by radioactive poisoning, and the trauma they experienced from being exposed to nuclear weapons as they exploded often less than 10km away.

"I am just so angry that all this was ever allowed to happen. I can't understand how the prime minister of a country can allow someone to come in and detonate bombs when they knew it was dangerous. History will not be kind to Mr Menzies," says Ms Morton. "I'm sure there has been a coverup ever since and it is time the truth was told. It's scandalous. The Howard Government is worrying about saying sorry to Aborigines, but that pales into insignificance with what the Menzies government did. They polluted half of South Australia, killed people and destroyed people's lives. I can't believe it happened and I can't believe they aren't going to do anything about it." Ms Morton's anger was reignited this week when Human Services Minister Dean Brown told an estimates hearing at State Parliament that the bones of dead SA children, including stillborn babies, were routinely collected between 1957 and 1981 for testing for radioactive contamination. The bones were sent to the Commonwealth Radiation Laboratory in Melbourne, where they were burned at high temperatures in purpose-built furnaces.

Ash samples were initially sent to Britain and the US, before being kept in Australia when facilities became available, to be tested for traces of a highly radioactive material, strontium 90. Strontium 90 is one of the most dangerous by-products of a nuclear explosion, lodging in bone tissue, especially that of babies and toddlers, causing leukemia and other cancers.

It was sent into the atmosphere through the mushroom clouds created by atomic bombs, eventually drifting back to land as tiny particles ingested through the food chain, particularly the consumption of milk from cows which had eaten contaminated pasture. Varying levels of strontium 90 also settled on reservoirs, rivers, rainwater tanks, soil, vegetable, cereal and fruit crops, depending on their proximity to the radioactive clouds created by the atomic tests.

Maps obtained by The Advertiser reveal these clouds spread across most of mainland Australia from all of the British atomic tests. Secret reports prepared by nuclear physicists 12 months before the series began in 1952 calculated that with the first bomb, exploded in Royal Naval frigate HMS Plym at the Montebello Islands off the WA coast, near Port Hedland, 40 per cent of its radioactivity would be retained within its mushroom cloud as steam created by the bomb's enormous heat rose to an expected height of 25,000ft (7500m). In the case of the bombs exploded on dusty ground, such as those at Emu Field and Maralinga, it was estimated their fireballs would "sweep nearly everything up to 30,000 feet", including rocks and soil, in huge mushroom clouds. While the rocks and soil would drop back to the ground, the clouds would also consist of fine dust particles, to which radioactive particles would adhere.

As they drifted away, these clouds would carry "at least 90 per cent of the bomb debris, remaining airborne for days or even weeks". The reports went on to note that the areas in the immediate vicinity of the bomb blasts "are almost certainly completely safe again for permanent occupation a few days after the explosion". It is reports such as these which have surfaced almost 50 years since Sir Robert Menzies personally approved the British nuclear-testing program, without telling his cabinet.

For the first test, the Australian government was given no information about the weapon to be tested, its possible mainland fallout or long-term health implications. Instead, after a sometimes-heated exchange, the Menzies government was allowed to send only two observers to watch as the British blew up HMS Plym at Montebello under the codename Operation Hurricane. Instead of dissipating, as the British had claimed, the mushroom cloud was made buoyant by the huge amount of steam it contained and travelled across the northern half of Australia, dispersing radioactive contamination on its way.

It was not until 1955, three atomic bombs and their resulting mushroom clouds later, that the Menzies government established a special committee to oversee the nuclear-testing program to ensure the safety of the Australian public was not being endangered. The Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee set up a monitoring program which involved a network of sampling stations across the nation, testing of the thyroid glands of sheep and cattle, random sampling of milk supplies, flour, water, rainfall and soil in all capital cities – and the testing of human bones. The program tracked the fallouts from the remaining eight explosions, all of which contaminated parts of Australia including Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart. The program was stopped in 1984.

In annual reports to federal parliament, the committee's chairman, Sir Ernest Titterton, repeatedly confirmed traces of strontium 90 and other radioactive elements, caesium 137 and radioactive iodine 131, were detected each year between 1957 and 1971. However, considering his earlier role as a key scientist responsible for the Australian component of the nuclear tests, his critics say it is hardly surprising Sir Ernest consistently stressed levels were always too low to present a danger. In his 1971 report, he described them as "to be so trivial, they are meaningless".

The only radiation monitoring now done in Australia is under the auspices of an international treaty where stations at secret locations take random air samples to ensure foreign powers do not covertly test nuclear weapons. If there is still strontium 90, caesium 137 or radioactive iodine in the Australian environment, the public is highly unlikely to ever find out.

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17,000 people exposed to atomic tests

By COLIN JAMES

30jun01

THE Federal Government has released a preliminary list of more than 17,000 military and civilian personnel who served at the British atomic tests in the 1950s.

The register – first recommended by a royal commission in 1985 – will be used to conduct national studies into how many of the men have died since the tests, especially how many suffered from cancer.

The mortality and cancer studies are expected to confirm long-standing claims by veterans that thousands of army, navy, air force personnel and civilians died as a result of being exposed to radiation.

The veterans plan to use the register in their campaign to win compensation for mental and physical illnesses they believe were caused by their involvement with the nuclear explosions.

Their claims have been strengthened in recent months by the release of secret documents detailing how hundreds of servicemen were deliberately exposed to radiation as human guinea pigs.

The Advertiser has obtained new evidence that, in addition to servicemen, civilians were ordered to watch four explosions at Maralinga during the 1956 test series codenamed Operation Buffalo.

The Advertiser has also obtained documents which confirm earlier reports that inadequate attempts were made by the British and Australian governments to remove desert Aborigines from the vicinity of the tests.

The Veterans Affairs Department said it had been unable to compile a list of Aborigines who may have been involved with the 12 explosions at Emu Field, Maralinga and the Montebello Islands, off Western Australia, between 1952 and 1957.

Instead, the 257-page list posted on to its website yesterday contained the names of 1658 army, 3235 navy, 3223 air force and 8907 civilian personnel who were part of the five-year program. The list was compiled from extensive searches of Defence Department records, personnel files of private contractors, the 1985 royal commission report, security cards issued for Maralinga and lists previously prepared by veterans groups or government departments.

However, the Veterans Affairs Department warned the roll was likely to contain errors because "of the length of time that has elapsed and the difficulty in locating and verifying authentic records".

Veterans Affairs Minister Bruce Scott last night said a consultative forum would meet next month to determine how the health studies would be conducted, with a senior researcher expected to be announced in August.

"This is a major task and when complete will provide information about the nature and extent of any health problems suffered by veterans of the atomic tests," he told the SA RSL state congress in Adelaide.

The Atomic Participants Nominal Roll can be inspected on www.dva.gov.au while veterans or civilians with corrections or additions can call 1800 445 006.

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Files on atomic tests not inspected

By COLIN JAMES

07jun01

THE FEDERAL Government has not inspected 176 classified files on Maralinga atomic tests despite contrary claims by federal Veterans Affairs Minister Bruce Scott.

The Veterans Affairs Department this week wrote to a Senate committee saying it had not requested access to the Defence Department files which Mr Scott said two weeks ago were being examined.

He told The Advertiser on May 25 he had asked the Veterans Affairs Department to investigate if the documents had been provided to a royal commission ordered by the Hawke Labor government into the British atomic testing program in Australia.

"We (the Veterans Affairs Department) are getting the documents scanned today (May 25) to see if there is anything there which is important. I have issued instructions to the Veterans Affairs Department to scan through the documents," Mr Scott said. "If there are any relevant documents in these 179 files we will know very shortly".

Mr Scott earlier revealed on ABC Radio 891 that the Defence Department had provided the files to the National Australian Archives in 1986, the year after royal commissioner Jim McClelland delivered his findings.

Veterans Affairs Department secretary Neil Johnston on Monday, however, wrote to a Senate committee saying the files were "ones which have not yet been examined by the NAA to determine open access" by the public.

"The Department of Veterans Affairs has not made a request to (the archives) for access to these files and therefore does not possess these files or copies of the files," he said.

Mr Johnston said the "176, not 179" files were under the control of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet as "I believe" they were part of the McClelland royal commission.

"Accordingly, my department is unable to comply with the request, as the files in question are not under the control, possession or jurisdiction of the department to provide."

Mr Johnston was responding to a request for Mr Scott to provide the files to a Senate estimates hearing.

Democrats Senator Lyn Allison asked the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation committee to seek the documents after Mr Scott said he wanted "no stone left unturned" to ensure there was "no cover-up" over the 12 British-Australian nuclear tests throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

Senator Allison said yesterday it was "time to lift the lid on the cover-ups over the British tests", in which about 20,000 military personnel, civilians and Aborigines are believed to have been exposed to radiation.

"The royal commission findings have been ignored, the clean-up was botched and inadequate, veterans have died fighting the Government for compensation in the courts and the secrecy that started in the 1950s continues today," she said.

A spokesman for Mr Scott, Mark Croxford, said last night the files had not been inspected as they had not been cleared by the National Australian Archives. Mr Scott had written to Arts Minister Peter McGauran to expedite the process.

"We are taking action but these things take time," he said.

Time for a payout and an apology

By COLIN JAMES, 26may01

IF anyone in Australia has a strong case for unconditional compensation, surely it must be the Maralinga nuclear test veterans and their families. Revelations about how the Australian and British governments formulated plans to put 385 servicemen into trenches near an atomic explosion can only be described as appalling.

Documents detailing the plan have surfaced 20 years after The Advertiser published reports widely credited with forcing the Hawke government to call a royal commission into the 12 atomic tests held on Australian territory between 1952 and 1957.

The reports – compiled by investigative journalists David English and Peter De Ionno in 1980 – revealed how servicemen had been exposed to radiation during the tests through lax procedures and direct orders from their superiors.

English and De Ionno told how Aborigines across Central Australia, including respected Pitjantjatjara elder Yamy Lester, had been blinded or injured by a radioactive cloud dubbed the "Black Mist". The pair raised serious questions about how many nuclear veterans had died, or were dying, from cancers and other radiation-related illnesses, gathering evidence of more than 40 deaths across Australia by 1980.

Predictably, the reports were condemned as inaccurate and baseless by a succession of defensive government politicians and their spokespeople.

Now, 20 years later, those politicians and spokespeople owe everyone, especially the veterans and their families, an explanation – and the truth.

Veterans Affairs Minister Bruce Scott's announcement yesterday that a nominal roll of nuclear veterans will be released next month as a precursor to an extensive health survey will be welcomed by the surviving servicemen and their families. For too long, they have been denied access to documents which, they believe, will prove they were deliberately exposed to radiation at the nuclear test sites. This has not deterred a core group of veterans, their families and researchers determined to expose the truth of the nuclear-testing program.

Their campaign centres on claims by the veterans and their families, especially their widows, that they are entitled to compensation because of serious illnesses caused by exposure to radiation.

While the Howard Government has paid compensation to some veterans in confidential out-of-court settlements, it has adopted the long-standing position that, unless cancers developed within 25 years of service, veterans or their widows must be able to prove radiation made them sick. This is virtually impossible without access to medical records and other files which detail when they were at the atomic tests, what radiation counts they measured, what activities they undertook and what illnesses they suffered. It is time those documents, if they exist, are released.

Still searching for answers

By COLIN JAMES and BRONWYN HURRELL, 26may01

RIC Johnstone was not surprised when top-secret documents surfaced this week detailing how the British and Australian governments planned to send 385 soldiers and airmen into trenches at Maralinga to monitor the effects of two atomic explosions on human beings. The only Australian nuclear-test veteran to successfully sue the federal government for compensation for radiation poisoning, the 68-year-old former mechanic has spent most of his adult life trying to prove that hundreds of servicemen were used as guinea pigs in the red sands of the SA desert almost 50 years ago.

It has been a quest which has pitched the national president of the Australian Nuclear Veterans Association against successive federal governments, all of which have refused to compensate more than 8000 Australian servicemen and 8000 civilians assigned to the nuclear-test program at the Montebello Islands, off Western Australia, Emu and Maralinga between 1952 and 1957. An estimated 6000 servicemen have since died, their widows unable to access classified documents which would prove that multiple cancers, heart failures and birth defects in their children were caused by radiation poisoning from 12 bombs the men were ordered to watch explode.

Mr Johnstone was a 21-year-old Royal Australian Air Force mechanic when he lined up with other servicemen on September 27, 1956, to witness his first explosion at One Tree, Maralinga.

It was one of four explosions under the codename Operation Buffalo which Mr Johnstone and colleagues from the RAAF, Australian Army and Royal Australian Navy would observe as they stood in their khaki shirts, trousers and caps, with their backs turned to the detonation site, known as Ground Zero.

The drill for each of the explosions was the same. Mr Johnstone and about 283 Australian, British and New Zealand servicemen based at Maralinga were ordered to assemble 7.2km from Ground Zero. They would listen, with their hands over their tightly clenched eyes, for five minutes while a countdown played through a loudspeaker. Officers would order them to wait for two seconds after the countdown finished before turning around and looking at the explosion.

"There would be this almighty big white flash inside your head, as though your skull was lighting up from the inside and this heat would hit the back of your neck," Mr Johnstone recalls from his home in Gosford, New South Wales. "Then this hot wind would sweep across and make your clothes flap. The next thing you would hear was what sounded like 500 trains coming straight at you from across the desert. You'd turn around and see this huge fireball going up into the sky, looking as big as Earth. "It would just keep getting bigger and bigger and it would seem to last for hours."

Within 24 hours of each test, Mr Johnstone was ordered to drive a towing vehicle into the radioactive site, dubbed the hot zone, where he would retrieve vehicles parked to test the effects of the explosions. Sometimes he would wear a white radiation-protection suit, with breathing apparatus. On other occasions he would be ordered just to wear his khakis. He and other mechanics would then wash the vehicles with high-pressure hoses, removing large quantities of contaminated soil.

MR Johnstone would give blood samples each time he entered and left the hot zone, or finished washing and dismantling the vehicles. His body and clothing would also be swept with Geiger counters to measure his radiation count. Officers would record these measurements in pencil before Mr Johnstone would be ordered to shower.

Mr Johnstone had been at Maralinga for almost 12 months when he developed serious diarrhoea and vomiting. It got to the point, he says, where "I couldn't suit up any more because I didn't know when I would have to be sick or go to the toilet". In late-1957, he was transferred to the 3rd RAAF Hospital at Richmond, NSW, where he was admitted for radiation poisoning.

Three months later, he was discharged from the RAAF on the grounds he was medically unfit for further duty. In 1989, he won a landmark case in the NSW Supreme Court against the federal government, receiving \$867,100 in compensation after his lawyers obtained medical records confirming he had been treated for radiation poisoning.

But when his records from Maralinga were handed over, all traces of the details of his radiation readings had been erased. "It was only then I realised why they were written down in pencil. When we got them, all that remained were ticks showing each time I had been checked. There was nothing to show I had been exposed to radiation," he says.

Other veterans have been told their records do not exist or that they are not entitled to see them. Mr Johnstone believes they have been shredded, along with any other evidence which could prove long-standing allegations that the Australian and British governments deliberately exposed servicemen to radiation to test the effects on their bodies and the uniforms they were wearing.

The search for the missing documents has been spearheaded by Mr Johnstone's organisation, formed at Maralinga in 1956 as a social group which planned to later meet for reunions "so we could have a few beers and catch up". Instead, it became one of a number of veteran groups in Australia, Britain, NZ and Canada which have spent almost half a century trying to prove what happened at Maralinga and the other test sites.

Mr Johnstone, who has endured severe anxiety disorders, hypertension, skin lesions, melanoma and the removal of his gall bladder and part of his liver, says that of the seven original members of his association, he is the only survivor. Five of his colleagues died of multiple cancers, one died from heart failure and another was killed in a trucking accident. At the last meeting of the association late last year, the only people who attended were veterans' widows and lawyers.

Mr Johnstone has been lobbying the Howard Government for compensation for these widows and surviving veterans of the nuclear tests, to date to no avail. One of the biggest obstacles for the Maralinga survivors is proving their medical conditions were linked to their duties at the nuclear test sites. While the Commonwealth has settled claims against some diseases, such as rare types of bone cancer, it will not recognise those involving general problems such as cancer, tumours or birth defects.

More than 30 test survivors with outstanding claims are convinced their health problems have been caused by exposure to radiation. But many are starting to lack

the money or energy to keep up the fight. Mr Johnstone hopes the new evidence which has emerged this month may give the campaign a fresh impetus.

The first breakthrough came when an Australian researcher based at Scotland's Dundee University, Susan Rabbit-Roff, produced documents detailing how 24 British servicemen were used in clothing trials to test different materials against radiation. Mrs Rabbit-Roff, who has been campaigning against Maralinga for several years, says the documents further challenge British and Australian claims there was no harmful testing of servicemen.

Her argument was reinforced earlier this week when secret documents located by the daughter of a late nuclear veteran revealed the Australian government had planned to put 385 servicemen into trenches at Maralinga during an explosion to test the effects of radiation. The plan, codenamed Operation Lighthouse, was aborted only when the British, US and Soviet governments agreed to a temporary moratorium on all nuclear testing in October, 1958.

The documents, dated between July, 1958, and September, 1958, were found in dusty folders in a Perth back-yard shed five years ago by a 36-year-old registered nurse, Ann Munslow-Davies. She was 16 when her father died at the age of 48 and she promised him she would uncover the secrets behind Maralinga and help other men gain compensation for their medical bills.

Mrs Munslow-Davies, of Maitland, NSW, backed up Mrs Rabbit-Roff's latest claims by publicly revealing the documents which, she says, show the Australian government was a "full and active participant" in planned nuclear tests on humans – disproving the theory that the government of former Liberal prime minister Robert Menzies did not know what was happening.

Mr Johnstone says the documents not only show Operation Lighthouse was discussed at secret meetings of the inter-departmental Board of Management for Atomic Tests in Melbourne but when he was at Maralinga he personally saw soldiers walking around radioactive sites without protective clothing.

"The Government might dismiss this latest stuff and say there wasn't an issue because it never happened but of course they used us as human guinea pigs. They just did it in smaller groups," he says.

"I'll never forget one day when I was out getting a contaminated vehicle in the hot zone and I saw these two Diggers walking around in their shorts, singlets and boots pushing this big reel for cabling. I asked them what the hell they were doing out there and they told me they had been told by an officer to walk in and get the reel. He stayed behind miles away."

Mr Johnstone is supported by Brisbane nuclear veteran Terry Toon, who was in Maralinga for 11 months in 1956 with the army engineer corps. He says he saw up to 250 servicemen, known as "indoctrinees", forced to roll around in radioactive bulldust.

Mr Toon, 62, who is secretary of the Australian Atomic Ex-Servicemen's Association, says servicemen were dumped 5km from Ground Zero after the blast at Marcoo on October 4, 1956.

"I didn't know what was going on. They were all rolling around in (contaminated) red bulldust. It was ridiculous," he recalls.

Mr Toon, who was 19 when he witnessed four nuclear blasts, is one of the 30 survivors now seeking compensation.

Mr Johnstone says the main priority now for the nuclear veterans is convincing Veteran Affairs Minister Bruce Scott to waive legislation prohibiting the men and their widows from receiving compensation because they did not see active service. He says the minimum they should receive are Veterans Affairs Department "gold cards" entitling them to free medical treatment at public and private hospitals. "Look, we are not asking for a million dollars each in compensation or anything like it," he says. "We're just asking for some recognition of what happened and what it has done to us. We have blokes all around Australia who are dying hideous deaths. All we want is for them to have some help to pay for their medical bills and for their widows and children after they have gone."

Mrs Munslow-Davies says compensation was paid to her family after her father's death – but not because of radiation. He hurt his knee while on a tour of duty in Malaya, which contributed to rheumatoid arthritis, which in turn affected his heart, leading to his death. Many nuclear veterans who had served overseas received compensation in a similar way, she says.

"Most of the guys who were overseas found claims for any little thing – and they will get it on those grounds, but they will not get it for radiation. All the guys that didn't go overseas got no claim whatsoever. People trying to claim through Commonwealth compensation have to prove 50 million other things. They're basically bashing their heads against a brick wall," Mrs Munslow-Davies says.

She believes the men in the services during the nuclear-testing era considered risks were a part of serving their country.

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Inquiry into 179 files on Maralinga

By COLIN JAMES, 26may01

THE Federal Government has begun an investigation into whether the Defence Department withheld files on the Maralinga atomic tests from a royal commission. Veteran Affairs Minister Bruce Scott confirmed yesterday the department had supplied 179 files to the National Australian Archives in 1986, a year after the royal commission was completed.

He said he did not know whether the classified information had been provided to royal commissioner Jim McClelland or whether it could have affected his findings.

"All I can say is that I don't know and, because of that, I have asked my department to look at this material and determine its significance," Mr Scott said.

"The Defence Department also has been asked to conduct a thorough review of all of its files to ensure everything which should be out in the open is made available.

"What I want to do is make sure there is no stone left unturned, and there isn't material which has not been examined and that there hasn't been a cover-up of any kind."

Mr Scott's revelation came after documents emerged earlier this week showing the Australian and British governments developed a plan in 1958, codenamed Operation Lighthouse, to position 385 servicemen in trenches near two nuclear explosions to monitor the effects of radiation.

The Operation Lighthouse documents, handed by the Defence Department to the National Australian Archives in 1986, were not among government files on Maralinga searched in Australia and Britain by lawyers acting for Mr McClelland. Mr Scott's admission that other documents could have been withheld from the commission came as he announced that a list of servicemen who served at nuclear test sites at Maralinga, Emu and the Montebello Islands between 1952 and 1957 would be released next month.

Work on the list began only last year, despite being a key recommendation of the report handed by Mr McClelland to the Hawke government on November 20, 1985. The report strongly criticised the British and Australian governments over the management of the 12 atomic tests, saying they were held without regard to the health of personnel, Aborigines or the Australian public. Mr McClelland found the tests had increased the risk of cancer among servicemen, Aborigines and civilians and exposed the Australian public to radioactive fallouts.

However, the risk could not be quantified, prompting Mr McClelland to recommend the establishment of a national register of 8000 servicemen, 8000 civilians and Aborigines exposed to radiation.

Mr Scott said the list would be used as the basis of a national survey on the health of surviving Maralinga veterans. It also would be used to determine the cause of death for an estimated 6000 servicemen whom veterans' groups believe have died since participating in the test program.