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NEWS FEATURE - EPIC NUCLEAR PROTEST

Forty years ago the crews of two New Zealand frigates showed the world that France could not go on testing nuclear weapons in the atmosphere above a remote atoll in the South Pacific.

In July many of the survivors of separate epic voyages to Mururoa atoll by HMNZS Otago and HMNZS Canterbury meet in Tauranga for a 40th reunion which will celebrate how a tiny country changed world opinion.

Less well known was that they were supported on their separate 8,400-kilometre return voyages by Australia, with mid-Pacific re provisioning and fuel oil transfers from the 25,000 ton HMAS Supply.

The New Zealand Government decided in 1973 that France's refusal to accept an International Court of Justice ruling to stop atmospheric nuclear testing could not go unchallenged.

Prime Minister Norman Kirk said the two frigates would be "silent witnesses with the power to bring alive the conscience of the world" and to reinforce the move he sent Cabinet Minister Fraser Colman as well.

Both warships observed atmospheric nuclear tests at the 13-mile mark, outside the territorial limit at Mururoa atoll, with journalists on board reporting on both the month-long voyages and France's 30th and 31st blasts to the world.

On board the Canterbury, two "light dustings" of radiation were picked up by National Radiation Laboratory scientist Jim McCahon following what was believed to be a miscalculation on lower level wind direction by the French.

Between 1962 and 1990 France tested 167 nuclear devices at Mururoa, 44 of them in the atmosphere with an overall yield equivalent to 12,000 kilotons of TNT, before world opinion led France to shift underground in 1974 and end all testing in 1996.

The peaceful protest voyages were later described as highly-effective modern-day gunboat diplomacy, marking the start of New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance and opened the door for the eventual declaration of a nuclear-free South Pacific.

Mururoa Veterans are organising the 40th Anniversary reunion on the 20th of July 2013, and it will be a chance for the New Zealand Government and the Royal New Zealand Navy, together with surviving crew members, to recognise an outstanding achievement.

The reunion will also recognise Australia's contribution because without HMAS Supply the month-long protest voyages of the Otago and Canterbury would not have been possible.

HMAS Supply spent two-and-a-half months deep in the South Pacific "steaming around in circles keeping the Kiwis going", according to the Naval Tankermen Association.

Recognition for the 235 crew of the Otago and 245 crew of the Canterbury later came with the award by the Government of the New Zealand Special Services Medal (Nuclear Testing).

As for the history-making ships themselves, the Otago was cut up for scrap in Auckland in 1987 and the Canterbury was sunk off the Bay of Islands in 2007 to create a fish and diving reef.

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