

RETROSPECTION - A HIGH PRICE TO PAY FOR BEING NUCLEAR FREE

New Zealand achieved a major breakthrough in stopping atmospheric nuclear testing in the South Pacific in 1973 but the price has been high for many of the sailors on the protest voyages by two New Zealand frigates.

There was a hugely positive outcome in creating so much worldwide opposition that France was forced to move its nuclear testing programme underground.

But the legacy has been a high rate of crew cancer deaths, with linkages to radiation poisoning. None of the crew were warned of potentially serious consequences.

Of the 245 crew of HMNZS Canterbury and 240 crew of HMNZS Otago, a combined 154 have died of cancer since 1973, many others are terminally ill, and there is genetic damage for some of their children and grandchildren.

Others, like me, have shown no ill effects.

Veteran Affairs has recognised some claims for disability but the government has never accepted any liability for what happened and no compensation has been paid.

Lying upwind of Mururoa atoll, just outside the territorial limit, the two warships separately observed the 30th and 31st tests of nuclear devices hoisted high into the atmosphere above Mururoa atoll under big balloons and then detonated.

Both warships monitored the French countdowns by radio and their crews and media reporters, dressed in anti-flash gear and dark goggles, were locked down below decks until minutes after the blasts when the decks were hosed clean and we were allowed up top to see the mushroom clouds.

Reporters from the NZPA and NZBC recorded what they saw.

Shortly after the 31st blast, I found myself next to National Radiation Laboratory scientist Jim McCahon who, with his Geiger counter, reported a "light dusting" of radiation from a sort of backwash from the prevailing upper atmosphere winds.

In London, the High Court has recently announced that veterans from New Zealand, Australia, Fiji and Britain can sue the British Ministry of Defence for compensation for radiation exposure from British nuclear testing in the Pacific in the 1950s.

As more Mururoa veterans succumb to cancer, the case to the New Zealand Government for compensation over the effects of radiation fallout will be pursued with vigour.

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