

**ESSAY EXTRACTS**

Workshop Three

In the pages that follow there are a wide selection of extracts from the eight essays that were written in response to the oral histories collected by the NTV Oral Histories project.

The essays, oral histories and accompanying images can be accessed in full on the British Library website.

Full instructions for the related activity can be found in the NTV Workshop Three Teaching Notes. Practical instructions are below:

1. Print pages 2 – 16
2. Cut up the quotes
3. Shuffle!
4. Follow the instructions in the teaching notes

**Derek Woolf** refers to himself as ‘one of the lucky ones’. This is a common feeling expressed by veterans but Derek feels this more strongly than most, due to his position as a medic who treated people on the island he saw the acute mental and physical effects of the tests more directly.

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**Pete Peters**was a Royal Air Force squadron leader who played a vital role in the reconnaissance of American and Russian nuclear tests. He talks about the fate of his fellow comrades, where British pilots took samples from American nuclear tests. The prevalence of cancers among Pete’s comrades provides an indication of the risk involved in these cloud-sampling missions.

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**John Oates** has been physically fit and healthy his entire life. However he found the experience of returning home from Christmas Island to be jarring. He struggled to readjust to civilian life.

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**Bryan Hackett** witnessed a nuclear detonation at Operation Buffalo in 1956. Bryan worked as a clerk and did some typing. The experience described by Bryan of seeing his bones through his hands is a common experience remembered by British nuclear veterans.

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**Ken McGinley** describes wives and children arriving on Christmas Island in 1958 on HMT Dunera. They were brought over to the atoll with fresh troops to boost morale following the successful detonation of Grapple X. After a week of sightseeing, the 30 wives and 31 children set sail back to the UK with their fathers, who had completed their duration of service. Not long after returning home, the wives and children began to experience ill-health conditions. One mother reported how her six-month old daughter began to lose her hair. The family doctor could not identify the cause.

**Derek Addy** has suffered with his mental health since the tests. Derek attributes a nervous breakdown in the 1980s to the trauma of his test participation, during which he was twice ordered to travel through radioactive plumes during two separate nuclear detonations aboard HMS Diana in 1956.

He recalls the experience of trying to mop up contaminated seawater that had washed onto the deck of the ship.

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**Ken McGinley**, founder of the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association (BNTVA), suffered with a range of unexplained illnesses after serving on Christmas Island. What he perceived at the time as a rain shower offering relief from the sun, he later understood as potential fallout from Grapple Y, Britain’s largest ever nuclear bomb.

He and other veterans later believe that exposure to the rain was connected to ill-health in later life, including Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma.

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**Eric Waterfield** describes how he discovered lung complications upon returning home from Britain’s first atomic test in Western Australia. By Christmas 1955, Eric was suffering from major lung problems.

Eric also discusses health problems suffered by his children, which he believes were connected to the intergenerational health effects of radiation exposure.

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**Brian Tomlinson**, who was stationed at Maralinga (South Australia) during Operation Buffalo in 1956, reflects on the lack of information he had while working on the nuclear tests and how that exclusion still bothers him...

While at Maralinga, Brian was tasked with the particularly dangerous job of walking towards one of the bomb craters until a Geiger counter he was holding reached a certain agreed upon level.

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**John Simes**, was attached to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) during Operation Grapple. He recounts a chance meeting with an AWRE scientist in a shop in the year 2000. The scientist said ‘I’m surprised you’re still here’ to John, presumably in reference to the health implications of his work on Christmas Island.

While on Christmas Island, John assisted the AWRE in tasks such as setting up measuring equipment and building towers. In his interview, John also remembered AWRE scientists joking about his future fertility.

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Test veterans witnessed something that very few people have ever seen: a nuclear explosion. **Gordon Coggon** explains how the experience of seeing the blast and the possibility of seeing it again scares him to this day. He has dreamt over the years since of being lost in a ‘fiery fog’.

Gordon was blinded for two weeks by the second bomb test that he witnessed. He argues for the importance of educating young people about the legacies of nuclear weapons testing.

Gordon’s experiences at nuclear test sites have stuck with him and he has had nightmares. While on Christmas Island, Gordon suffered with heart problems and since returning home has faced other issues, including significant anxiety around his health.

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**Terry Hilliard** flew a plane through a radioactive mushroom cloud during the Grapple Z tests, expressed the uncertainties he still feels because the test programme was top secret, so many veterans remain uncertain about the levels of radiation servicemen were exposed to.

Cloud samplers like Terry have often suffered increased rates of cancer and other diseases due to their clearer exposure to radiation immediately after bomb detonations.

Hilliard described watching an Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) film which a soldier picks up debris from the nuclear test with his bare hands.

**George Swain** remembers enjoying his experience at Operation Grapple, even stating that he would do it again if given the opportunity. While not a common opinion expressed by veterans, George is not the only veteran to have enjoyed his time at British nuclear test sites.

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**John Morris** describes his complicated feelings about the tests, which many veterans share. These feelings include pride in themselves and their military role, but also moral concerns about creating what Morris describes vividly as a ‘monster’.

After participating in Operation Grapple, John and his family have suffered significant health complications. Due to this, John has become a strong advocate for compensation of veterans and nuclear disarmament. John Morris describes wanting the same recognition for nuclear test veterans that war veterans receive.

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**Arthur Dixon** discusses ill-health among veterans who served on Christmas Island. He struggles to reconcile the discrepancies in veterans’ health, with some veterans dying in middle-age and others living into their 80s and 90s. In Dixon’s experience, the vast majority of veterans have suffered some sort of illness, though the question of whether this has arisen from their service has proven almost impossible to answer.

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**Richard Bonas** recalls volunteering for a physiological course at a biochemical warfare establishment in Wiltshire. He and other volunteers were subjected to a series of chemical weapons experiments, which included the use of mustard gas. Richard describes the effects of inhaling the nerve agent, sarin gas. The experience gave him a sensitivity to light that tormented him whilst on Christmas Island, where he spiralled into depression. Richard’s experiences reveal a troubling set of medical and military assumptions about the soldier’s body and consent.

Decades after their military or civil service, many veterans have struggled with ill-health they believe is a direct result of that service. A forty-year campaign for justice, which was started by the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association (BNTVA), remains unresolved and of the twenty-two thousand Commonwealth service personnel who were present at the British nuclear tests, only a few thousand are still living today.

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**John Morris** describes the tragic circumstances in which he and his wife lost their baby son, Steven. Initially, the local coroner and police force believed that baby Steven had been lost to cot death, and even arrested John and his wife. After being discharged three days later, John and wife were able to see the death certificate for Steven, which stated bronchial pneumonia as the cause of death.

John and his wife had to lobby for 50 years for full access to the autopsy report, which stated that Steven’s lungs had not properly formed. John and his family believe that Steven’s death and the deaths of other veterans’ children were linked to their involvement in British nuclear weapons tests.

In June 2022, he met with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and demanded a medal on behalf of the LABRATS organisation during its ‘look me in the eye’ campaign. (LABRATS = Legacy of the Atomic Bomb Recognition of Atomic Bomb Survivors)

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**Ken Sims**, who travelled to Maralinga (South Australia) with the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE), was amazed by the power of the atomic detonation and found it hard to describe what he witnessed.

Ken recounts seeing a large smooth conical shape where the bomb had been detonated and turned the sand to glass. Seeing this amazed John, and the extent of the damage was clearly devastating. This experience made John hope that nuclear weapons would never be used in war.

**Colin Capon**, an RAF chef, describes trading with Aboriginal people at Yalata, which sits on the traditional lands of the Wirangu. Yalata highlights the role of ‘nuclear colonialism’ in Australia, since the settlement was formed when Pila Nguru people were moved from Ooldea mission due to British tests.

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The Grapple task force in the Pacific resolved that the safe limit set by the International Commission on Radiological Protection should be reduced, to limit the cost of evacuations.

A meeting in November 1956 noted that “only a very slight health hazard to people would arise from this reduction – and that only to primitive peoples”.

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The British atomic tests were held at three sites in Australia: Monte Bello Islands off the coast of Western Australia, and Emu Field and Maralinga in the South Australian desert.

In the Pacific, the British test authorities settled on Malden Island, then later Christmas Island, now known as Kiritimati and part of the nation of Kiribati

In all cases, the tests caused significant harm and ongoing issues for Indigenous people of the areas affected, and more broadly for anyone in range of the nuclear fallout.

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In the case of the tests held in Australia, toxic clouds from the explosions often travelled huge distances across the continent, despite assurances provided by the British and the official Australian observers that there was no risk to anyone.

The selection of the test sites reflected colonial misunderstandings about the ecological intricacy of the Australian interior, the Monte Bello archipelago, or the coral atolls of Christmas and Malden.

The aftermath of the Grapple Y nuclear detonation affected **Gordon Coggon** deeply. Gordon recollects how fish and birds were killed. He was extremely troubled by the unknown effects of the bomb blast. If the fish and birds were dying, what might happen to him?

The uncertainty over the effects on his body, especially when tasked to clean up the birds and fish without adequate protective clothing, lasted for the rest of his life.

It seems clear that remembering the scene of thousands of dead fish, and birds falling from the sky had a traumatic effect on him.

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Travelling to a nuclear test site was for most servicemen the first time they had been abroad, let alone to the other side of the world.

All but the most senior members of the military had little or no idea what was required of them until they were on their way to the various test sites.

Most military personnel were young – in their early 20s – and a proportion of them were undertaking National Service. While for many it was a great adventure, with excitement often came trepidation – especially when the nature of their mission was revealed to them.

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**Teeua** is chair of Kiritimati’s Association of Atomic Cancer Patients, and one of only three survivors of the tests still living on Kiritimati:

*Many, many died of cancer … And many women had babies that died within three months … I remember the coconut trees … when you drank [from the coconuts], you [were] poisoned.*

Both Teeua’s parents and four of her eight siblings had died of cancer or unexplained conditions, she said.

Her younger brother, Takieta, died of leukaemia at the age of two in November 1963 – less than a year after Operation Dominic ended.

Her sister **Teraabo** discovered a tumour in her stomach shortly after the trials, and was only able to have her stomach treated once she moved to the UK in 1981, by which time the tumour had turned malignant.

**Sui** [explained](https://natlib.govt.nz/records/20529405?search%5Bi%5D%5Bsubject_text%5D=Nuclear+weapons+testing+victims+--+Fiji+--+Attitudes&search%5Bpath%5D=items) how she was only 24 when she started to lose her hair, and “burns developed on my face, scalp and parts of my shoulder”.

In a similar manner to claims made by British nuclear test veterans. Sui attributed her health problems to being rained on during Grapple Y – which may have been detonated closer to the atoll’s surface than the task force was prepared to admit.

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The shockwaves produced by a nuclear explosion can cause widespread destruction over vast areas, including buildings, infrastructure, and natural landscapes.

The immense pressure and heat generated by the blast can demolish structures while also disrupting ecosystems by displacing wildlife and irreversibly altering habitats.

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The release of radioactive materials into the environment following a nuclear explosion poses a significant threat to human and environmental health.

Wildlife and ecosystems exposed to radiation may experience genetic mutations, reproductive abnormalities, and population decline, which can have long-term implications for biodiversity and ecological balance.

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In the past, countries such as the United States, the former Soviet Union and the United Kingdom tested their nuclear weapons in the open atmosphere and in the sea — and around Pacific Islands, the Australian desert, mainland US, remote parts of the USSR and other places. These tests left contaminated landscapes and spread their radioactive clouds far afield.

Thanks to global treaties, nuclear tests were largely moved underground after 1963, a slightly preferable scenario environmentally speaking. And since a 1996 test ban, only India, Pakistan and North Korea have tested weapons at all. North Korea is the only country known to have conducted tests in the 21st century.

The thermal radiation released by a nuclear explosion can cause widespread fires, consuming vegetation, forests, and urban areas. These fires can be exceptionally intense and harmful, releasing toxic smoke, particulate matter, and pollutants into the atmosphere.

The combustion of organic matter can also generate secondary pollutants, making the air quality even worse and leading to respiratory problems for both humans and animals.

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Since the initial Grapple tests did not produce a thermonuclear explosion, the task force embarked on further trials between November 1957 and September 1958, known as Grapple X, Y and Z.

This time, the residents were not evacuated to other islands. Rather, families were brought aboard ships in the island’s harbour and shown films below deck.

After these tests, the islanders returned to find the large X and Y detonations had cracked the walls of their homes and smashed their doors and furniture.

One islander found their pet frigate bird, like so many of the wild birds on Kiritimati, had been blinded by the flash of Grapple Y.

No compensation was ever paid to the islanders, although the Ministry of Supply did reimburse the colony for deterioration of “plantation assets”, including £4 for every damaged coconut tree (equivalent to £120 today).

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Radioactive fallout resulting from nuclear explosions can persist in the environment for extended periods, leading to contamination of soil, water, and vegetation.

The deposition of radioactive isotopes can cause contaminants throughout the food chain, leading to continuous health risks for both ecosystems and human populations.

Inevitably, contaminated areas may become uninhabitable for several generations, necessitating extensive remediation efforts to restore environmental quality and safeguard public health.

Nuclear explosions can lead to habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, and ecological imbalances. Displaced wildlife may struggle to find suitable habitats, while ecosystems may experience disruptions in nutrient cycling, soil fertility, and water quality.

The loss of biodiversity can have cascading effects on ecosystem services, such as pollination, seed dispersal, and pest control, further destabilizing fragile ecosystems and compromising their resilience to environmental stressors.

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Consequences of nuclear explosions on the environment can have far-reaching impacts on global climate patterns, which may affect temperature, precipitation, and weather systems.

The release of soot, dust, and aerosols into the atmosphere can cause atmospheric cooling, which in turn may disrupt regional and global weather patterns.

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Humans face life-threatening burns depending on the power of the bomb. A similar effect is assumed for other mammals. They also suffer from the pressure of the blast, which causes lung damage and haemorrhaging.

Animals that aren't killed immediately are more likely to die from infections in the days and weeks following the explosion.

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Plants are not spared the effects of a nuclear blast. The sheer force strips trees of their foliage, tears down branches and uproots vegetation.

For fish the impact is similar to that of a non-nuclear explosion, but on a much larger scale. The US tests in Alaska, and those of France in French Polynesia in the late 1960s and early 70s were associated with large-scale die-offs of fish, as their gas-filled swim bladders ruptured.

Marine mammals and diving birds suffered similarly, post-mortem analysis showed. However, marine non-vertebrates appeared to be more resistant to pressure waves as they do not have gas-containing organs.

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During the Cold War, the United States detonated scores of nuclear weapons in atmospheric tests in the Pacific. Entire islands were incinerated and many are still uninhabitable. Local residents were forced to leave. A 2019 study found that some of the affected areas had radiation levels 1,000-times that of those found in Chernobyl and Fukushima.

Significant long-term environmental consequences of nuclear testing are the contamination of surface soil and groundwater, land disturbances in the form of craters or partially collapsed mountains and the addition of radionuclides to sediments in seabeds.

Atmospheric nuclear tests spread radionuclides — unstable particles that releases radiation as they break down — far and wide, contaminating topsoil.

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In underground testing, high pressure conditions can propel radionuclides into the atmosphere — a phenomenon known as venting — where they can be carried by winds and deposited far away from the test sites and enter food-chains.

Underground tests deposit huge quantities of radioactive material which will remain there for millions of years. The long-term ecological damage from such contamination is unknown.

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"The legacy of nuclear weapons testing has been absolutely catastrophic for humans and for the environment," said Alicia Sanders, the policy research coordinator at the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. One of the unique consequences for the environment, she added, "is that it lasts essentially forever."

The first major effects are felt in the microseconds after the explosion.  The massive energy released in the thermal emission from the blast — comprising light and heat — kills any organisms unfortunate enough to be near the epicentre.

Depending on the size of the bomb, even organisms several kilometres away face lethal temperatures.

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**John Morris**, who joined the Army through National Service, believes in the power of a medal as recognition for what he did for his country, and compares it to what soldiers received after World War Two. He describes how a medal marks a time in history, which will help people to look back and learn from the past and to remember those who are no longer here.

Underground testing also poses a threat of radionuclides leeching into drinking water. Studies at the US nuclear testing site near Las Vegas, found that some contaminants released by underground nuclear tests can get into the surrounding water. Plants and animals are particularly liable to pick up radioactive strontium and caesium, which are easily spread in water.

With a half-life of 30 years, undergground contaminants can also cause health issues in the food chain for decades. "Animals will eat from contaminated land and that becomes very dangerous. These can be key sources of food for people," ICAN's Sanders said (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons).

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**David Taunt**was sent to Christmas Island to participate in the joint US-UK nuclear testing operation, Operation Dominic in 1962.

During later life David began to face a number of health issues and began to wonder what caused them, which led him to become involved in the BNTVA.

Due to serving in a joint US-UK nuclear testing operation, David has been able to claim monetary compensation from the USA through the RECA scheme.

David talks about the way the nuclear test veteran medal was awarded and describes how its arrival in the post has caused anger amongst veterans.

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**Terry Hilliard** refers to the case of Squadron Leader Terry Gledhill, who during Grapple would make an assessment of the nuclear clouds before being the first to fly into them to gather samples.

It was not until after Gledhill’s death in 2015 that his family started to get full access to his medical records, which have proven a turning point in the legal campaign against the UK government.

The so-called ‘Gledhill memo’ has been particularly influential, as it suggests that the authorities may have hidden the results of blood tests carried out on British troops before and after tests. These results could have provided data by which veterans could understand their radiation exposure.

**Nick Kettlewell**, an officer on HMS Diana, talks about the secrecy requirements of his work. The Official Secrets Act shocked most British troops into a lifetime of secrecy, many reluctant to tell their families or friends even decades after the event.

Nick discusses telling the troops about the upcoming tests; civilian as well as military personnel were subject to strict secrecy. For merchant seaman it came as a complete surprise when they discovered they would be involved in the British nuclear testing programme.

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**Terry Hilliard**, an RAF pilot who collected nuclear cloud samples during Operation Grapple, gives his views on the refusal of the UK government to compensate its nuclear test veterans.

He points out that the UK is the only state, barring North Korea, not to offer a statutory compensation scheme for its nuclear test veterans.

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**David Whyte**drove a heavy road roller to ground zero for several weeks following the Grapple Z series. David remembers the death of **Derek Redmond**, a fellow serviceman, on Christmas Island. Derek was doing similar work to David before he passed away.

The fact that a decision was made to bury Derek Redmond at sea made many veterans suspicious about his cause of death. David has been involved in nuclear test veteran campaigning since the 1980s.

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**Ray Carbery,** fromthe Isle of Man joined the Army before leaving for Christmas Island in 1958 on HMT Dunera. He was only told later that he would be part of Operation Grapple, the UK’s nuclear test programme.

While on the island, Ray worked as a refrigeration technician as well as taking on other jobs. He witnessed five bomb tests. His time on Christmas Island had a lifelong impact on him.

Uniquely, Ray and all other nuclear test veterans residing on the Isle of Man were awarded financial assistance from the Isle of Man government in 2008.

The veterans have mixed opinions on the importance of recognising military service through the award of the Nuclear Test Medal by the UK Government. The medal was awarded in 2023, or 70 years after Britain’s first atomic test.

For many, a medal isn’t a symbol, it is a story about a moment in time and about the person who is awarded the medal. Each medal may be the same, but every person awarded that medal has a different story.

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The medal campaign was controversial for some - whilst most nuclear test veterans were thrilled to finally receive medallic recognition, some actively received it as an additional moral injury to compound their suffering, and questioned what use a medal might be to those in need of practical and financial support.

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**Ken McGinley** told *The Sunday Post* in November 2022, “…this is just the start of the process…We want things like an apology, compensation and a full public inquiry into the treatment of nuclear test veterans…The issuing of a medal is an easy option but it’s hopefully the beginning of getting justice.”

All veterans and their families agree on the need for the truth. The British government is the last nuclear nation left to acknowledge potential harm caused to service personnel by their weapons testing programme.

Successive years of campaigning and court battles (with some even reaching the European Court of Human Rights), have left their mark on many veterans with prevailing suspicions of a ‘cover up’.

‘Truth’ for nuclear test veterans means transparency: a government enquiry, access to documents and medical records that will either prove or disprove an increasingly held conviction they were used as ‘Guinea Pigs’ during the tests.

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We cannot arrive at recognition for nuclear test veterans without talking about intergenerational injustice and moral injury.

One thing that our test veterans unanimously agree on, is that their story must be remembered for generations to come.