



THE DARK SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

Claire Saul talks to a veteran of Britain's nuclear tests.



In the early 1950s British and Australian servicemen took part in atom bomb tests in the Woomera and Montebello areas of Australia. In the late 1950s, Britain moved to the central Pacific. Known as Operation Grapple, British, New Zealand and Fijian servicemen participated in the development of the hydrogen bomb. Three tests were carried out at Malden Island and six at Christmas Island (Kiritimati). David Hemsley was serving with the RAF as an electronics technician when, at the tender age of 18, he was sent to Christmas Island, a posting he describes as "drawing the short straw".

"I did not relish the idea of serving on an island which at that stage had been subjected to four hydrogen bombs and two atom bombs detonated over or close to the south eastern part of the island," remembers David. "Unlike many of the National Servicemen, we regulars knew what was going on out there through others who had already been to these nuclear test sites. During our initial training we had learned of the horrors of nuclear, chemical and biological warfare, including the dangers of nuclear fallout. I had to go whether I liked it or not, but the whole time we were there it was always at the back of the mind, 'what the hell are we doing here?' I couldn't get away from the island quick enough."

David was based at the main camp and worked at the transmitting station a few miles away, around 30 miles from where the tests had taken place. Conditions were challenging, not least because of the infestations of bed bugs, plagues of flies and mosquitoes that caused distressing health problems, even though a light aircraft would regularly fly overhead to spray the camp with DDT. Being only 100 miles north of the Equator, the temperature was relentless, its effects amplified by the heat generated by the transmitters where David worked. In his few spare hours between shifts, he would wander off by lorry down the island to revel in the natural history of the place or

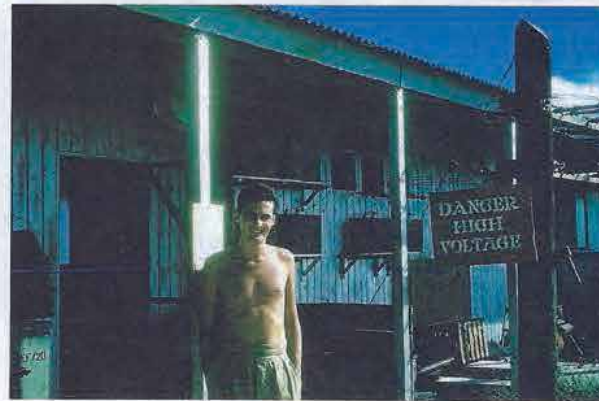
to work there. The sight of the skeletal remains of dead birds was disturbing but even more so were the stories of those who had been present at the nuclear tests. David continues to explain, "To work and live close to a nuclear test site and to see the devastation these bombs can cause was bad enough but to be placed only 30 miles away to witness a detonation, especially the first two on Christmas Island, would be distressing to say the least. Considerable damage was caused around the island along with that lingering doubt as to whether radiation was at a tolerable level. The toll on the sea birds and the marine life, especially with more nuclear tests to come, must have been considerable."

"There was no protective clothing or shelters. I never had the privilege of wearing a radiation film badge. Those who were given a film badge before a bomb was detonated promptly had it taken away so they had no idea if they had been exposed."

On David's return home, his parents remarked on how unwell he looked. Before long, on his next posting to Northern Ireland, it was discovered that his blood pressure was abnormally high and that his teeth needed some urgent attention.

"I was on my way to Cyprus when I realised my hair was falling out in unusual amounts and that I had a dull pain in my jaw," explains David. "After moving on to Borneo, Bahrain and Germany, I returned home for good in 1969. It was at my final demob medical that a serious problem was revealed. I was diagnosed with cancer, resulting in an operation, followed by six weeks of radiotherapy, from which it took an awfully long time to recover. But that wasn't the end of it. It was revealed to me that I was subfertile. Next came bladder cancer, requiring another operation, followed by treatment and annual check ups. Skin cancer has been removed from my face and back and a skin problem remains, something that quite a few of my former colleagues have also experienced."

"I received a chest x-ray and blood tests before my departure for Christmas Island and I was declared healthy and fit for duty. It seems to me that our genetic code given to us at birth had been subject to an unscheduled change, leaving many of the veterans and their



Left: The mushroom cloud of Grapple Y, which rained down on David and his comrades. Top: One of the British camps on Christmas Island around the time that David was there. Above: David at the transmitting station on Christmas Island, and David as he is today.


children with serious health problems. Many of these veterans have now left this world, some prematurely through illness indicative of nuclear radiation, but in spite of my own medical history I have survived and I feel I should help the BNTVA committee with their latest campaign."

The British Nuclear Test Veterans Association (BNTVA) have been campaigning for the support of the families involved, for recognition of the work of the servicemen and for the government to establish a £25m benevolent fund to finance medical treatment and to enhance the wellbeing of those veterans and their descendants in need. The association aim to inform the public about what happened during those tests on Christmas Island and also in the Woomera and Montebello areas in Australia.

While the BNTVA tries to make its voice heard, David is spreading awareness of the issues through a book he has written, sales of which will help to support the campaign. An Uncertain Future is a

fictional story about Christmas Island, based on fact. The book is interspersed with David's own sketches, some of which he drew while living on the island.

"We have the backing of John Baron MP and during the summer of 2014 the prime minister did publicly recognise us for what we did, so it is a step in the right direction, although too late for many of the lads," says David.

"Nevertheless, as I have always said, nil desperandum. We must never give up." 

An Uncertain Future by David Hemsley is published by Aspect Design (RRP £12.99) and is available by calling 01684 561567 or visiting www.aspect-design.net or www.bntva.com

