

# BRITISH NUCLEAR BOMB TESTS IN AUSTRALIA

Anti-Nuclear & Clean Energy Campaign  
Friends of the Earth, Australia  
[www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear](http://www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear)



*"Little mention was made of course about the effects the bomb tests might have on the Indigenous Australian inhabitants of the Maralinga area, a community that had experienced little contact with white Australia. In 1985 the McClelland Royal Commission would report how Alan Butement, Chief Scientist for the Department of Supply wrote to the native patrol officer for the area, rebuking him for the concerns he had expressed about the situation and chastising him for "apparently placing the affairs of a handful of natives above those of the British Commonwealth of Nations". When a member of staff at Hedley Marston's division queried the British Scientist Scott Russell on the fate of the Aborigines at Maralinga, the response was that they were a dying race and therefore dispensable."*

– Roger Cross, 2001, "Fallout – Hedley Marston and the British Bomb Tests in Australia," Wakefield Press.

## The 12 nuclear bomb tests in Australia

All 12 tests used plutonium. Some of the plutonium may have been produced from uranium mined at Radium Hill in South Australia.

### Operation Hurricane (Monte Bello Islands, WA)

1. 3 October, 1952 – 25 kilotons (for comparison, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were 10-21 kilotons).

### Operation Totem (Emu Field, SA)

2. 'Totem 1' – 15 October, 1953 – 9.1 kilotons

3. 'Totem 2' – 27 October, 1953 – 7.1 kilotons

### Operation Mosaic (Monte Bello Islands, WA)

4. 'G1' – 16 May, 1956 – Trimouille Island – 15 kilotons

5. 'G2' – 19 June, 1956 – Alpha Island – 60 kilotons

### Operation Buffalo (Maralinga, SA)

6. 'One Tree' – 27 September, 1956 – 12.9 kilotons

7. 'Marcoo' – 4 October, 1956 – 1.4 kilotons

8. 'Kite' – 11 October, 1956 – 2.9 kilotons

9. 'Breakaway' – 22 October, 1956 – 10.8 kilotons

### Operation Antler (Maralinga, SA)

10. 'Tadge' – 14 September, 1957 – 0.9 kilotons

11. 'Biak' – 25 September, 1957 – 5.7 kilotons

12. 'Taranaki' – 9 October, 1957 – 26.6 kilotons

## Emu Field

At the time of the two 'Totem' nuclear tests at Emu Field in South Australia, the area was used, as the Royal Commission reported, for: "... hunting and gathering, for temporary settlements, for caretakership and spiritual renewal."

A major test named Totem 1 was detonated on October 15th, 1953. The blast sent a radioactive cloud – which came to be known as the Black Mist – over 250 kms northwest to Wallatina and down to Coober Pedy. The Totem I test is held responsible for a sudden outbreak of sickness and death experienced by Aboriginal communities, including members of the Kupa Piti Kunga Tjuta and their extended families.

The Royal Commission found that the Totem 1 test was fired under wind conditions which a study had shown would produce unacceptable levels of fallout, and that the firing criteria did not take into account the existence of people at Wallatina and Melbourne Hill down wind of the test site. In relation to the two Totem tests, the Royal Commission found that there was a failure to consider adequately the distinctive lifestyle of Aborigines and their special vulnerability to radioactive fallout, that inadequate resources were allocated to guaranteeing the safety of Aborigines during the Totem nuclear tests, and that the Native Patrol Officer had an impossible task of locating and warning Aborigines, some of whom lived traditional lifestyles and were located over more than 100,000 square kilometres.

## Maralinga

A number of Aboriginal people were moved from Ooldea to Yalata prior to the 1956-57 series of tests at Maralinga, and this included moving people away from their traditional lands. Yet movements by the Aboriginal population still occurred throughout the region at the time of the tests. It was later realised that a traditional Aboriginal route crossed through the Maralinga testing range. There are tragic accounts of Aboriginal families sleeping in atomic bomb craters. So-called Native Patrol Officers had the impossible task of patrolling thousands of square kilometres of land.

In relation to the Buffalo series of tests in 1956, the Royal Commission found that regard for Aboriginal safety was characterised by "ignorance, incompetence and cynicism", and that the site was chosen on the false premise that it was no longer used by the Traditional Owners. Aboriginal people continued to inhabit the Prohibited Zone for six years after the tests. The reporting of sightings of Aborigines was "discouraged and ignored", the Royal Commission found.

The British Government paid A\$13.5 million compensation to the Maralinga Tjarutja in 1995. Other Aboriginal victims – including members of the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta – have not been compensated and have not received an apology.

In the mid 1990s another 'clean up' of Maralinga was carried out – the fourth one so far. Before this latest 'clean up', kilograms of plutonium were buried in shallow, unlined pits in totally unsuitable geology ... and after the 'clean up', kilograms of plutonium are *still* buried in shallow, unlined pits in totally unsuitable geology. The plan was to vitrify contaminated material, turning it into a solid glass-like monolith. But the government later realised that there was far more contaminated material than they had originally estimated and budgeted for. So, to cut costs, they curtailed and then abandoned vitrification and simply dumped the plutonium-contaminated material in shallow pits.

Senator Nick Minchin said the Maralinga Tjarutja agreed to deep burial of the contaminated material –

but the burial was not deep and the Tjarutja did not agree to it.

Nuclear engineer Alan Parkinson, who advised the Maralinga Tjarutja on the clean-up and then became a whistle-blower, said on ABC radio in August 2002: "What was done at Maralinga was a cheap and nasty solution that wouldn't be adopted on white-fellas land".

Scientist and whistleblower Dale Timmons said the government's technical report on the Maralinga 'clean up' was littered with "gross misinformation".

Geoff Williams, an officer with the Commonwealth nuclear regulator ARPANSA said that the 'clean-up' was beset by a "host of indiscretions, short-cuts and cover-ups".

Nuclear physicist Prof. Peter Johnston (now with ARPANSA) noted that *"there were ... very large expenditures and significant hazards resulting from the deficient management of the project by DEST [the Department of Education, Science and Training]."*

Prof. Johnston also commented on plans for a national repository in SA (from 1998–2004):

*"DEST is responsible for the Former Nuclear Test site at Maralinga, as well as the Repository project. DEST was an ineffective manager of the Maralinga Cleanup in a number of key ways. The pattern of contracting ... services for the Repository project is similar to the Maralinga cleanup. ... The applicant has inadequate technical competence to manage its contractors."*

### More information:

Links to the Royal Commission and lots of other literature:

[www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear/links#b](http://www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear/links#b)

[www.australianmap.net](http://www.australianmap.net)

Information on the bungled 'clean up', the human guinea pigs scandal, the body snatchers scandal, etc:  
[www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear/issues/oz/britbombs](http://www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear/issues/oz/britbombs)