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Years ago  

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Defence Staff frosty during frigate's protest to Mururoa

*When the New Zealand government sent a naval protest ship to witness a French nuclear blast at Mururoa Atoll 30 years ago, there were flashpoints on board, as former NZPA correspondent **David Barber** recalls*

Thirty years ago I stood on the bridge of the Royal New Zealand Navy frigate Otago and watched an orange fireball rise on the horizon and develop into the unmistakable mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion over France's Pacific test site on Mururoa.

Within minutes, the news - flashed down an open radio link to Wellington - had gone around the world, sparking a barrage of international protests that prompted New Zealand's prime minister Norman Kirk to say, "Never before has world opinion on nuclear testing been so stirred."

The Otago, sent by Mr Kirk to be "a silent accusing witness" as France continued to conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere over the South Pacific, was the first state-sponsored Ban the Bomb protest ship. It was also the first time a warship had carried out an operational mission in which the deadliest weapons aboard were its radio transmitters.

For the Otago's mission was not to try to stop the tests physically. While the operation might have smacked of gunboat diplomacy, Mr Kirk had specifically ruled out any military confrontation with the French or sailing downwind of radioactive fallout to halt any experiment.

I, as the New Zealand Press Association's correspondent, and Shaun Brown, reporting for radio and television under the old New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation umbrella, were on the end of those radio transmitters. Along with TV cameraman Wayne Williams, we were in effect Mr Kirk's not-so-secret weapons.

It was for his government a public relations exercise designed to put the French, who had never confirmed their tests since moving them to the Pacific from the Sahara in 1966, in the international spotlight. France and China were the last nuclear powers testing in the atmosphere.

Mr Kirk, whose Labour government had won power the previous year, saw his chance to embarrass the French.

The NZPA, which was linked to the international news agency Reuters and therefore to just about every major newspaper in the world, and the NZBC, which had extensive radio and TV connections, were each invited to send a correspondent.

To heighten the drama - and to have a government mouthpiece on board to talk to the world's media who inundated the vessel with calls - Mr Kirk put cabinet minister Fraser Colman, father of three young daughters, on the ship.

The military hierarchy, needless to say, was not impressed.

Defence headquarters moved to foil the entire operation from the outset, telling the prime minister I was not acceptable after NZPA nominated me as its correspondent.

The reason was a succession of stories I had written from the Vietnam War and elsewhere as NZPA's Asian correspondent over the previous three years - stories that ironically Mr Kirk had largely welcomed as opposition leader because they also tended to embarrass the former National government.

Fortunately, when the Prime Minister's Department unthinkingly passed on the message, the then chairman of NZPA, John Haringham, who edited the *New Zealand Herald*, dug in his heels for press freedom and said if Barber did not go, neither the NZPA nor any newspaper would send a journalist.

I finally sailed on the Otago from Devonport Naval Base on June 28, 1973, with somewhat condescending dockside assurances from both Mr Kirk and defence minister Arthur Faulkner that they had every confidence in me.

The same could not be said for the navy or the Otago's crew of nearly 250, who strongly rejected the tag of "official protesters" and "protest voyage".

Although they had been given the option of pulling out of the trip, they were also adamant that they were not "volunteers" but servicemen did as they were instructed.

A frigate is a tiny, very, cramped, ship and no provision had been made for a working space for Shaun or me, who were housed in separate chief petty officers' messes of modest walkin wardrobe size and sleeping 12 people.

After our temperatures had risen to a point of suggesting the vessel turn back because we could not do our jobs, we were given a tiny room housing some electronic gear at the stern where we perched on high stools, trying to control our typewriters as they slid from side to side with the ship's roll.

We sealed our occupation by hanging a small wooden sign on the door made by the ship's "chippy" and reading: "Newsroom. NZPA-NZBC. Otago-Mururoa Branch Office."

NZPA editors in Wellington had to do their own ranting and raving with the prime minister's office after my

first story filed over the ship's radio transmitters to Defence headquarters took 22 hours to reach the newsroom.

The navy apparently thought it incumbent on them to have every word checked and analysed by every admiral on shore and most of the lower ranks and NZPA was forced to seek reassurance at the highest political level that my stories would not be censored.

Navy humour or bloody-mindedness gave us the run of the officer's wardroom for meals and recreation but as relations with our CPO messmates warmed we adopted schizophrenic routine of spending half our time getting drunk or pretending to be drunk with them and the other half with the officers trying to appear sober.

We were aided in this by the Royal New Zealand Navy then being the last to give all sailors a daily tot (eighth of a pint) of rum as well as a daily beer ration, though self-discipline was the only ration for the officers who favoured more sophisticated tipples.

Gradually, we were accepted by officers and men who appreciated that, like them, we were only doing our job.

They also came around to respect their mission, cheering wildly when Mr Kirk directed the ship to ignore a French instruction to keep out of an arbitrary so-called danger zone and exercise its right to sail the high seas.

While initially they had only contempt for the flotilla of civilians protest boats heading for Mururoa, the crew developed a real concern for the ketch Fri, with French and New Zealand protesters including a pregnant woman aboard, which was seized by commandos as Shaun and I talked to it over the Otago's bridge radio.

The ship was idling 35km off Mururoa and there were just five of us on the bridge, shrouded in anti-flash gear, on the morning of July 22 when the French exploded a nuclear device from a balloon above Mururoa.

I reported over the air waves to Wellington: "Within a few minutes of the blast the cloud began to form and could be seen clearly on the horizon above Mururoa, rising through a layer of cumulus cloud and billowing out into a perfect mushroom."

My story led the front page of the *New York Times* and newspapers in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and South America, attracting wide spread condemnation of France in official and unofficial protest.

HMNZS Canterbury took over the vigil as the Otago sailed home to finish a record five weeks at sea.

Mr Kirk comment at the time: "By drawing the attention of millions of people round the world to what is happening at Mururoa, I believe we have created a new international awareness that all nuclear weapons tests must be stopped."