

FRONTLINE 2:

The Rainbow Warrior, secrecy and state terrorism

A Pacific journalism case study

Abstract: France detonated 193 of a total of 210 nuclear tests in the South Pacific, at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, before halting them in 1996 in the face of Pacific-wide protests. On 10 July 1985, French secret agents bombed the Greenpeace flagship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour, killing photographer Fernando Pereira, in a futile bid to stop a protest flotilla going to Moruroa. The author was on board the *Rainbow Warrior* for more than 10 weeks of her last voyage. He was awarded the 1985 New Zealand Media Peace Prize for reportage and investigations into the ‘Rainbow Warrior and Rongelap Evacuation’. The following year, the author’s book *Eyes of Fire* told the inside story of state terrorism in the Pacific. He has subsequently reflected on a 20-year legal struggle by Television New Zealand and other media campaigners to prevent the French spies gagging reportage of their guilty plea from a public video record and the lingering secrecy about the health legacy of nuclear tests in the Pacific. In the context of the *Frontline* project for journalism as research, his work inspired a microsite—a community-driven collaborative project in 2015 coordinated by the publishers, Little Island Press, interrogating participants over a three-decade period and ‘challenging the nature of mainstream media in New Zealand’ with an alternative reader’s media model.

Keywords: bearing witness, conflict reporting, environmental journalism, exegesis, investigative journalism, journalism as research, journalism history, journalism research, scholarship, state terrorism

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Introduction

THE YEAR 2015 seemed to be a remarkable one of memories and reflection for freedom of speech and bearing witness struggles in the Pacific region. The townsfolk and children of the remote Timor-Leste border town of Balibó marked the 40th anniversary of the murder of five young Australian-based television newsmen dubbed forever as the Balibó Five.

On 16 October 1975, the five journalists—Greg Shackleton, Gary Cunningham (New Zealand), Tony Stewart, Malcolm Rennie and Brian Peters (both British) from channels Seven and Nine—were reporting on Indonesian special forces incursions into independent Timorese territory. They were brutally killed with impunity.

Weeks later, a sixth journalist from Australia, Roger East, who ventured to Timor-Leste to investigate the murders and set up an independent Timorese news agency, was himself executed by the invading Indonesian forces on 8 December 1975. Their fate has been told in the compelling 2009 Robert Connolly film *Balibó*. But the impunity lingers on, not only for the journalist atrocities but for more than 150,000 Timorese victims of the 24 years of Indonesian occupation.

In July 2015, President Joko Widodo of Indonesia appeared to have turned a new leaf on media relations over the two Melanesian provinces that collectively make up the West Papua region by declaring an ‘open door’ visa policy for foreign journalists. This is far from the reality. Māori Television sent a crew (Adrian Stevanon and Karen Abplanalp) there in August—the first New Zealand TV journalists to visit West Papua in more than 50 years—to bear witness. But their stories, such as a New Zealand aid-assisted thriving kumara (sweet potato) industry in the Baliem Valley, were hardly a testimony to media freedom (Stevanon, 2015). Radio New Zealand International also sent a crew, Johnny Blades and Koroi Hawkins, two months later in October (Blades, 2015).

For me, as a journalist and media educator who has worked in the Asia-Pacific region for almost four decades, the media freedom and bearing witness issue that has outweighed all others is the bombing of the original Greenpeace global environmental flagship *Rainbow Warrior* by French secret agents on 10 July 1985 and the killing of Portuguese-born Dutch photojournalist Fernando Pereira. The thirtieth anniversary of the sabotage, New Zealand’s first and only example of state terrorism, came and went in a rather muted fashion (compared with events marking 20 years, for example).

Skipper Peter Willcox, the American who captained the *Rainbow Warrior* when she was bombed in Auckland Harbour, came to New Zealand a week before the 30th anniversary but left almost immediately—on a new Greenpeace assignment in charge of the ship’s namesake *Rainbow Warrior III*, an impressive ‘super green’ vessel, bound to tackle the tuna fishing outrages in the Pacific.

A cohort of the original crew on the bombed ship live on Waiheke Island in Auckland’s Hauraki Gulf today while others live in different parts of the world, such as Amsterdam and Dublin.

But for all of us, including me as an independent journalist on board the ship for the final humanitarian voyage to Rongelap in the Marshall Islands to evacuate people irradiated by US nuclear testing, the bombing and the justice and truth-seeking in memory of Fernando have been critical influences in our lives.

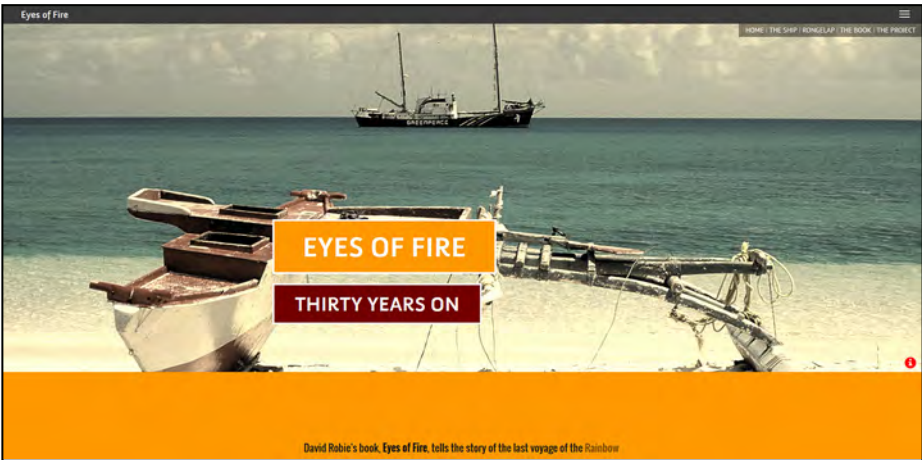


Figure 1: The *Eyes of Fire* microsite cover image of Rongelap and navigation.

For July 2015, the Pacific and community publishing specialist Little Island Press developed a three-month microsite project as a public good designed to recreate the history of the *Rainbow Warrior* and Rongelap as an inspiration to future generations through story-telling, community engagement, including most of the original protagonists on the bombed ship, contemporary environmental themes and an inquiry into the legacy of activism. It was a remarkable project and this article interrogates the academic and journalism terrain in an exegesis alongside a new edition of the book and an article by me published on the microsite, ‘Rainbow Warrior redux—French terrorism in the Pacific’ (Robie, 2015a & b).

Part 1: The exegesis

At the core of this exegesis lies the notion of ‘bearing witness’ and academic arguments around journalism methodology as research. According to a *Collins English Dictionary* definition, to bear witness is to: ‘1. give written or oral testimony, or 2. be evidence or proof of’, while synonyms include, ‘bear out, testify to, be evidence of, attest to, be proof of, or give evidence, testify or give testimony’. In an environmental journalism context, bearing witness draws from the Quaker spiritual tradition that was inspirational in the establishment of Greenpeace. The idea was to ‘become living testimonies’ for or against something that activists themselves ‘had experienced firsthand’:

Bearing witness is defined as the obligation to take action according to our conscience: If something is wrong, we stop it. If we can’t stop it, we expose it. If we can show alternatives, and offer solutions, even better. (Wyler, 2008).

According to Greenpeace activist and historian Rex Wyler, using the media to ‘tell the earth’s story’ has been a hallmark of the environmental movement since the beginning. ‘However, we now face increasingly consolidated media ownership. The corporate owners have learned how to package their agenda as news, ignore the environment and bury human rights’ (Ibid.). Many books and films have explored the bearing witness philosophy as testimony to integrity and truth adopted by journalists, for example, Marijana Wotton’s 2005 documentary *Bearing Witness* about women reporting conflict, and David Dudge’s book *Silenced* published in the same year.

Unlike in Australia (see Bacon, 2006, 2012; Davies, 2014; Mason, 2014; and Nash, 2013, 2014, 2016); and several other countries, there has been limited contemporary debate about journalism as research in New Zealand. I wrote about the New Zealand academic environment for journalism as research in *Asia Pacific Media Educator* in 2015: ‘Clearly there is a legitimate case for practice-led research in journalism studies to be given greater recognition within the PBRF [Performance-based Research Fund] context in New Zealand’ (Robie, 2015c). But I also argued that New Zealand media academics needed to do more work in articulating and clarifying the boundaries for a rubric on ‘journalism as research’. This process has perhaps more recently been facilitated with the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia definition of research as revised in 2015 (JERAA, n.d.). The national statement introduces journalism as an academic research discipline ‘contributing to the body of scholarly knowledge about the contexts, tools, creation, distribution, consumption, impacts and social relations of journalism via journalism studies and journalism practice’. Specifically, about journalism practice, the statement includes:

Journalism practice is the process by which information is independently researched, gathered, analysed, synthesised and published, or by which innovative approaches to journalism are developed. (Ibid.)

The statement also notes that the Excellence in Research for Australia framework (ERA) ‘acknowledges in-depth, original journalism practice and publication as equivalent to traditional research outputs’. This was a logical step following *Frontline* editor Wendy Bacon’s 2012 commentary addressing the interface between professional, or practice-based journalism and scholarly journalism practices (p. 153). She mirrored the rise of similar debates in other countries, noting Sarah Niblock’s argument, for example, that the rise of the journalism academic ‘who was often an experienced practitioner, was breaking down the “once barricaded boundary lines between journalism practices and journalism theory”’.

She described a breed of new academics who were keen to conduct research but who argued that while textual analysis could reveal significant conclusions

about editorial decisions, a study of journalism that excluded the experiences of those within the industry left ‘many important and practical questions unanswered’. (Bacon, 2012, p. 154, citing Niblock, 2007, p. 21)

In a recent article in *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, analysing my work in *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face* and *Eyes of Fire*, David Blackall wrote of my commitment to research and ‘a journalism education that delivers peace and political independence in the Pacific region, freeing it of what he calls “colonial legacy conflicts”’ (2015, p. 333). As an example, he referred to a deadly accident on Moruroa Atoll in 1979 which led to my cover story in the 16 February 1980 edition of *NZ Listener* (Robie, 1980):

These sorts of accidents, and the resultant pollution, are often absent from corporate news because the corporations responsible strive to keep them secret. Since the time of nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific, Robie has written about these tragedies and the ensuing deception by the US and French militaries. He has reported these events extensively, almost single-handedly, while immersed in the story. (p. 334)

A special edition of *Asia Pacific Media Educator* themed around ‘Can journalism be counted as academic research output?’ concluded in an editorial that ‘varying interpretations of “research” and “scholarship” by journalists-turned-educators and media academics who had never worked in the news industry have constructed what seems to be an unsurmountable obstacle’ (Loo, 2015). But the themed edition included 14 contributed articles, most arguing for journalism as research. Editor Eric Loo also noted that the University of the Philippines was among institutions that offered vocational-oriented undergraduate and postgraduate journalism programmes, ‘which recognise journalism as non-traditional research outputs’ (p. 1).

In a forthcoming book, *What is Journalism? The Art and Politics of a Rupture*, Monash journalism professor (and former documentary maker) Chris Nash outlines challenging ideas about time and journalism and the relationship with history. He argues that journalists ‘work both within and across temporal boundaries in the daily practice of their profession and lives’ and in a Bourdieusian field context (Nash, 2016).

Journalists have to anticipate the relevance and likelihood of future events, their characteristics and their meaning in order to be on location at the correct time and to ask the right questions, e.g. for a press conference or interview. Anticipation depends on the continuation and predictability of process to generate future outcomes. Predictability depends upon the interpretation of past events and processes. (Ibid.)

Nash adds that the ‘same temporal process of referencing the past to predict the future’ also applies to assessing the value and meaning of events and processes. Nash’s book, which offers searching case studies of the work of ‘real time systems’ artist Hans Haacke and independent journalist I. F. ‘Izzy’ Stone and his iconic *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*, strikes a chord with my three decades of work related to the *Rainbow Warrior*. This particularly relates to experience of institutional pressures leading to certain forms of knowledge being sidelined and silenced.

Background

The sabotage of the *Rainbow Warrior* happened during the height of New Zealand’s strong anti-nuclear stance and while many of its citizens were hostile to French nuclear testing in the Pacific and promoting the notion of an ‘independent Kanaky’ in New Caledonia (Fraser, 1990; Robie, 1989, 2014; Ross, 1993, 2016). French authorities had become increasingly defensive over its nuclear testing and the *force de frappe*. In 1973, New Zealand dispatched a protest frigate to the Moruroa test zone. Australia and New Zealand also filed proceedings against France in the International Court of Justice the following year. Although New Zealand won a judgment, France had announced it was halting atmospheric tests.

France detonated 193 out of a global total of 210 nuclear tests in the South Pacific, at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, before halting them in 1995 in the face of Pacific-wide protests. (The other 17 were at Reggane and Ekker in Algeria). Opposition in New Zealand to nuclear weapons and testing grew sharply. By 1976, 333,000 had signed the Campaign Half Million and by 1984 more than 66 percent of New Zealanders lived in Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones (Dewes, 2015). However, nuclear-free policies were also gaining ground across the Pacific with Belau/Palau adopting a nuclear-free constitution in 1979, followed by newly independent Vanuatu (1982) and the Solomon Islands (1983). Even in French Polynesia, the capital Pape’ete’s airport suburb of Fa’aa had declared itself nuclear-free. (New Zealand followed with its own *Nuclear-Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act 1987*.)

On 10 July 1985, French secret agents of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE) bombed the Greenpeace flagship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour, killing photographer Fernando Pereira, in an attempt to prevent a protest flotilla led by the *Warrior* going to Moruroa. Campaign coordinator Steve Sawyer described the consequences and drama that unfolded as:

[Having] all the elements of a best-selling spy thriller, replete with high-level diplomatic meetings, political scandal, nuclear intrigue, government cover-up, military strategy, submarines on secret missions, trade sanctions, and a pair of saboteurs masquerading as honeymooners. (Sawyer, 1986, p. 1325)

The sabotage of the environmental ship was ‘one of the most serious international incidents suffered by New Zealand in peacetime’, reflected Sir Geoffrey Palmer, then Deputy Prime Minister and Attorney-General, in a Victoria University of Wellington seminar in May 2015 marking the thirtieth anniversary of the bombing.

These actions constituted an unlawful violation of New Zealand sovereignty as international law and constituted serious offences under the *Crimes Act 1961*. A [Portuguese-born] Dutch national was killed as a result of the action. The news broke in a dramatic fashion and inflamed New Zealand public opinion. It strained relationships between France and New Zealand to breaking point. Wars have begun over less. (Palmer, 2015, p. 1)

This was the context in which I wrote *Eyes of Fire* and three years later a sequel, *Blood on their Banner* about nationalist struggles in the region, which featured the first military coup in Fiji; the start of the decade-long Bougainville war and many assassinations of political leaders across the Pacific.

There is also a subtext to this work: secrecy. There is a myth in New Zealand that somehow local media broke the story of French secret service involvement with the greenlight from the highest government levels. In fact, it was dogged investigation by a police reporter on *Le Monde* which revealed the existence of a ‘third team’ in the sabotage scenario, the actual bombers, and laid the evidence to the front door of the Élysée Palace in a front page scoop for his newspaper. The background to journalist Edwy Plenel’s revelations was published in his book *La Troisième Équipe—Souvenirs de l’Affaire Greenpeace*, published in 2015 to mark the thirtieth anniversary. Today, Plenel is the founding publisher of one of France’s leading investigative journalism websites, Mediapart <https://www.mediapart.fr/>. Plenel also unmasked the real identities of the two agents who had planted the bombs, Colonel Jean-Luc Kister and Jean Camas, during his 2015 investigation.

It took two decades of legal battles for courtroom videotapes showing the guilty pleas of the two spies arrested in 1985 (Captain Dominique Prieur and Major Alain Mafart), who agreed to the lesser charges of manslaughter and arson, after originally being charged with murder, to be screened for the public. (They delivered the bombs to the actual bombers.) The story of the struggle to broadcast this historic footage and how a remarkable triumph in the public right to know was achieved and balanced against privacy rules has been another of my topics in reporting on this issue (see Robie, 2007, 2014).

Microsite brief and discussion

In early May 2015, while embarking on a revised text and additional research material to examine a decade from the previous edition of *Eyes of Fire*, the

publisher Tony Murrow, indicated he wanted to produce more than a contemporary book examining the past from the point of view of the present. He was determined to publish a microsite dedicated to the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing and the Rongelap evacuation that would bring the history ‘alive’ for a younger generation of New Zealanders as a public good, with Little Island Press, a Pacific-focused community publisher, collaborating with three Auckland University School of Communication Studies departments and Greenpeace New Zealand. As well as material from the book itself, it would include additional articles and photographs not previously published, contributions from other participants along with multimedia interviews and ‘oral histories’. Some of the contributors included Remi Parmentier, a founder of Greenpeace France; Pierre Gleizes, author of *Rainbow Warrior, Mon Amour*; and the ship’s second mate Bene Hoffman, who dusted off his on-board diary about the evacuation of Rongelap and published this for the first time. As Murrow recalls: ‘The project goal was to present a more rounded view of the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior* ... This event has been presented as a seminal moment in New Zealand history, giving this small nation an international profile and sense of identity it did not previously possess’ (Murrow, 2015).

The result was a rich resource of oral histories of the activists and those involved at the time providing fresh perspectives on developments since the bombing in the context of wider Pacific politics and global environmentalism, including interviews with the skipper Peter Willcox, who has also penned his own book (2016); first mate Martin Gotje; third engineer Henk Haazen; deckhand Bunny McDiarmid (now co-executive director of Greenpeace International); relief cook Margaret Mills, and early Greenpeace stalwarts Hilari Anderson and Suzie Newborn, and myself. Current affairs and reflective video stories focused on the legacy of the *Rainbow Warrior* affair and activism in New Zealand, current environmental campaigns, contemporary youth responses, and profiles of independent photographers Gil Hanly and John Miller who captured the saga on film. As one young Samoan neophyte journalist, Mabel Muller, reflected on her assignment:

I think it’s awesome. Further on in the future I’ll be able to look back and think, ‘My gosh. I was part of that thirtieth anniversary.’ Imagine the fiftieth and looking back—they had a thirtieth and I was part of it. It was a really good opportunity for us to grow as future journalists. (Interviewed by Kata, 2015)

Most mainstream media have been rather simplistic or self-serving in the way they have reflected on the ‘seminal moment’, such as the *New Zealand Herald*’s ‘miserly bean-counter demanding a receipt’ online special feature which focused mainly on the success of the newspaper’s reporting at the time (2015). There

was a ‘complex back-story’ to the events that led up the bombing, which most media ignored. For example, the *Herald* never mentioned Rongelap Atoll or the United States nuclear testing programme in the Pacific in its thirtieth anniversary publications—the very reason why the *Rainbow Warrior* was on the first half of her Pacific voyage. Only the French were cast as villains. Murrow argues that the *Eyes of Fire* microsite project was ‘intended to provide that depth’.

The microsite project ran as a campaign from May until the thirtieth anniversary of the bombing in Auckland’s Waitemata Harbour on 10 July 2015. More than 60 people were directly involved—two-thirds of them young AUT journalism and television students.

For the students involved, the project was an opportunity to not only discover the back-story, but also to meet some of these people who were on the ground throughout the last voyage. Over half the original crew of the *Rainbow Warrior* were interviewed by students, including the skipper [Peter Willcox] and the campaign manager [Steve Sawyer]. Students also investigated activism today in order to see what, if any, difference there was between the world of the crew members and contemporary activists and their movements. They also ran stories on current issues in the region, showing how, although there are no longer nuclear tests in the Pacific, that part of the world still suffers environmentally and socially. (Murrow, 2015, p. 1)

For both LIP and the three AUT School of Communication Studies sections concerned, the project was ‘ambitious but extremely worthwhile’. Murrow recalls: ‘We witnessed the skill and enthusiasm of these young students as they interacted with seasoned activists more than twice their age, and saw an unexpected transference of knowledge and of hope that provided the interviews with great energy and purpose’ (Murrow, 2015, p. 2).

Behind the politics of the bombing, these students were told of the evacuation of Rongelap atoll by the *Rainbow Warrior* and her crew—fourteen days to shift a community of 350 from their radiation-polluted paradise to Mejato, 120 kilometres away. They learnt how these fourteen days had a lasting impression on the crew, motivating almost all of them to continue their activism.

This project was not another ‘Snowfall’. It was a real and deeply engaging community-driven collaboration that in many ways challenged the nature of mainstream media in New Zealand. The values that the project offered were hope, engagement, integrity, courage and enthusiasm. These students and their lecturers showed they had that and more. (Ibid.)

Features of the innovative collaboration involved:

1. A series of mini journalism reports by the Television Journalism students

(led by lecturer Danni Mulrennan) including a final news bulletin incorporating all twelve news stories.

2. A series of five studio-based in-depth interviews by the Television and Screen production students (led by Gilly Tyler) of key players at the time of the bombing.
3. A series of six in-depth reports by a student of the school's Pacific Media Centre, including international interviews via Skype.
4. An anchor article for the microsite, entitled '*Rainbow Warrior* redux: French terrorism in the Pacific', researched and written by David Robie.

The television journalism students won the annual 2015 Ossie Award for Best Innovative Journalism for what the judge, media writer Myriam Robin of *Crikey*, said was a 'multimedia-rich' website. She added in her citation:

The *Eyes of Fire* project used the online medium well, through a clear easy-to-navigate and multimedia-rich website, but also contained significant amounts of more traditional print and video reporting, which was tightly edited and interesting. The two were combined well to both entertain and impart information. Looking through it was an education [on] the *Rainbow Warrior* and its significance. (Ossie winners, 2015)

A postgraduate PMC student, Alistar Kata, of Ngapuhi/Cook Islands heritage, who was also contributing editor of the Pacific Media Watch freedom project at the time, was a key contributor to the microsite before graduating and joining the *Tagata Pasifika* television magazine programme. Collectively, her multimedia package of stories and interviews totalling more than 35 minutes was a strongly researched and insightful reportage on the legacy of the nuclear-free New Zealand and Pacific movement, the aftermath of the bombing and the future of New Zealand activism as the country faced the growing impact of climate change. As part of her research, Kata also conducted a 16-minute studio interview with then Greenpeace New Zealand executive director Bunny McDiarmid, who had been one of the crew members on the bombed ship (Kata, 2015).

On reflection after the end of the project, the idea of news as a commodity—'this now seems a twentieth century approach to me,' argues Murrow—versus the idea of news as a supplement to a related subject/topic is strongly demonstrated by the *Eyes of Fire* microsite.

One of the key aspects of the new information age is that presented by hypertext (in fact, the term is hypermedia), that encourages us to follow links to related content and, hopefully, get more information about the topic we are interested in.

This works well for us when we are interested in something, but doesn't fit in with the companies that own the news. They need to monetise content

in small units. For them, the only option seems to be that of entertainment, where a range of thin, unrelated items can sit alongside advertisements and the reader is expected to browse (as opposed to research) as an entertainment.

For me, the microsite has shown an alternative to this. It doesn't present a new business model, but it does present a new model for readers, journalists and book publishers. Under this model we persevere with the hypermedia approach first mooted in the 1960s and developed throughout the 1970s and 80s. By the 1990s CERN had made it the basis of the worldwide web.

As a publisher, Murrow accepts that there are boundaries to the subject (the scope). He argues that this notion is very much in keeping with the book publisher's duty to keep authors 'on topic' and the book itself within a certain 'length'. Also research, investigative reporting with depth and storytelling are encouraged, such as with *New Journalists*, in particular Joan Didion (Marsh, 2015), 'who put themselves inside the story. The *Rainbow Warrior* video interviews, with these young journalists, were a little like that to me.' This publishing format makes sophisticated use of hyperlinks to ever deepening context and enriched information. It also provides a multilayered tapestry of experience, such as through Alistar Kata (2015b), now a *Tagata Pasifika* journalist, who reports on the events and reflections with depth and a Pacific perspective. Her searching questions draw out the past and their present significance.

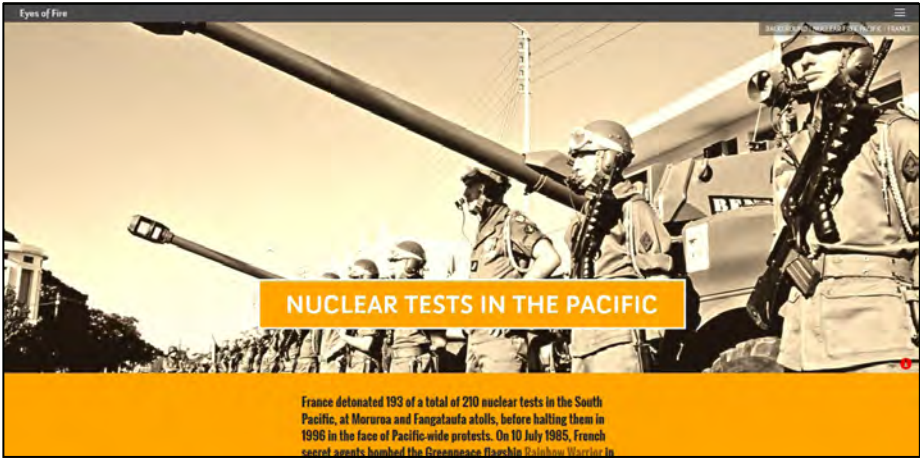


Figure 2: Header display to the microsite main article.

Part 2: The article

France detonated 193 of a total of 210 nuclear tests in the South Pacific, at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, before halting them in 1996 in the face of Pacific-wide protests. On 10 July 1985, French secret agents bombed the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland Harbour, killing photographer Fernando Pereira in a futile bid to stop a protest flotilla going to Moruroa.

*New Zealand journalist **David Robie** was on board the Rainbow Warrior for more than 10 weeks of its last voyage. His book *Eyes Of Fire* tells the story and here he reflects about the Rainbow Warrior's legacy in the Pacific.*

Microsite link: eyes-of-fire.littleisland.co.nz



The bombed *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour ... not the only Pacific target of the French military.

Rainbow Warrior redux: French terrorism in the Pacific

NEW ZEALAND wasn't the only target of French 'black ops' in the South Pacific three decades ago. Nor was the *Rainbow Warrior*.

The attack on the Greenpeace environmental flagship on 10 July 1985 was part of a Pacific-wide strategy to crush pro-independence and nuclear-free movements in New Caledonia and French Polynesia—and also in the then recently independent Vanuatu—during the 1980s.

And Operation Satanique, as the 'satanic' *Rainbow Warrior* sabotage plan was aptly named, got the green light because of the political rivalry between then socialist President François Mitterrand and right-wing Prime Minister Jacques Chirac that pushed them into point-scoring efforts against each other.

Although misleading and laughable as early Australian or New Zealand press reports had been about who was thought to be responsible for the bombing in Auckland Harbour—such as focusing on mercenaries, or the French Foreign Legion based in New Caledonia and so on—there was certainly a connection with the neocolonial mind-set of the time.

New Caledonia then had the largest military garrison in the Pacific, about 6000 French Pacific Regiment and other troops, larger than the New Zealand armed



New Caledonia ... highly militarised with French troops and hostility to Kanak independence in the mid-1980s.

forces, with about one soldier or paramilitary officer for every 24 citizens in the territory—the nearest Pacific neighbour to Auckland.

A small Pacific fleet included the nuclear submarine *Rubis*, reputed to have picked up one unit of the French secret service agents involved in the Operation Satanic attack on *Rainbow Warrior* off the yacht *Ouvéa* [the yacht delivered the bombs to New Zealand], then scuttling her in the Coral Sea, and finally spiriting them to safety in Tahiti.

A long line of human rights violations and oppressive acts was carried out against Kanak activists seeking independence starting with a political stand-off in 1984, a year before the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing.

Parties favouring independence came together that year under an umbrella known as the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) and began agitating for independence from France with a series of blockades and political demonstrations over the next four years.

Melanesian activism

Collectively, these indigenous Kanak (Melanesian) protests were known as *les événements*. The struggle echoed the current indigenous Papuan (Melanesian) activism in West Papua today with advocates seeking political justice, self-determination and ultimately independence from Indonesian colonial rule. The Greenpeace tragedy was one of several happening in the Pacific at the time, and this was really overshadowed by the Rongelap evacuation when the *Rainbow Warrior* crew ferried some 320 islanders, plagued by ill-health from



The French submarine *Rubis* in Pape'ete Harbour, believed to have spirited the Ouvéa crew to safety.

the US atmospheric mega nuclear tests in the 1950s, from their home in the Marshall Islands to a new islet, Mejato, on Kwajalein Atoll.

Over the next few years, after the start of the Kanak uprising, New Caledonia suffered a series of bloody incidents because of hardline French neocolonial policies:

- The Hienghène massacre on 5 December 1984 when 10 unarmed Kanak political advocates were ambushed by heavily armed mixed-race French settlers on their way home to their village after a political meeting. (Charismatic Kanak independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou lost two brothers in that ambush when almost all the menfolk of the village of Tiendanite were gunned down in one deadly night.)
- The assassination of Kanak independence leader Eloi Machoro and his deputy, Marcel Nonaro, by French special forces snipers at dawn on 12 January 1985 during a siege of a farmhouse at Dogny, near la Foa.
- The infamous cave siege of the island of *Ouvéa* when French forces used a 'news media' helicopter as a ruse to attack 19 young militant Kanaks holding gendarmes hostage, killing most of them and allegedly torturing wounded captives to death. The 11th Shock Unit carried out this attack—the same unit (known then as the Service Action squad) to carry out Operation Satanic against the *Rainbow Warrior*.
- The human rights violations involved in this attack were exposed in



Rainbow Warrior crew helping Rongelap islanders board the ship for one of four voyages relocating them to Mejato islet in May 1985.

the 2012 docu-drama movie *Rebellion* by director Mathieu Kassovitz, based on a book by a hostage negotiator who believed he could have achieved a peaceful resolution.

- France had its problems in Vanuatu too. Founding Prime Minister Father Walter Lini's government expelled ambassador Henri Crepin-Leblond shortly before the election on 30 November 1987, accusing Paris of funding the opposition Union of Moderate Parties—a claim denied by the French.
- There were also riots in French Polynesia when young Tahitians set the capital ablaze with demands for an end to nuclear testing and to colonial rule. But these developments came a decade later in September 1995 after mounting tensions.
- Two years later, in December 1997, a French Polynesian journalist known for his liberal views, *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti* editor Jean-Pascal Couraud, known as 'JPK', disappeared and was believed to be assassinated by local presidential special ops militia.

Social scars

The social scars from these events affected France's standing in the Pacific for many years. While relations have dramatically improved since then, it still rankles with both many New Zealanders and Greenpeace campaigners that Paris has never given a full state apology.

Interviewed on *Democracy Now!* recently, *Rainbow Warrior* skipper Pete

Willcox, who is returning to New Zealand to skipper the ship for a tuna fishing campaign, criticised the failure of France to apologise for being ‘caught red-handed’ in state terrorism.

However, the American also delivered a strong warning about climate change – the main contemporary environmental issue. Explaining his more than three decades of campaigning, Willcox said:

We know what climate change is doing. We’re the richest country in the world. We can support, if you will, a drought.

Countries like in East Africa and other places of the world, Bangladesh, where it’s going to displace millions of people, can’t deal with it. And it’s coming.

And it’s only coming because we’re not willing to change the way we produce energy, we make energy. We have the technology. We don’t have the will. And that’s just ridiculous. (*Rainbow Warrior 30 Years On*, 2015)¹

Tailed by agents

In January 1987, a year after my book *Eyes of Fire* was first published—four months before the first Fiji military coup, I was arrested at gunpoint by French troops near the New Caledonian village of Canala.

The arrest followed a week of my being tailed by secret agents in Noumea. When I was handed over by the military to local gendarmes for interrogation, accusations of my being a ‘spy’ and questions over my book on the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing were made in the same breath.

However, after about four hours of questioning I was released. My report filed for *Islands Business International* at the time began:



DAVID ROBIE/EYES OF FIRE

French CRS special police confronting Kanak activists demanding independence in New Caledonia.

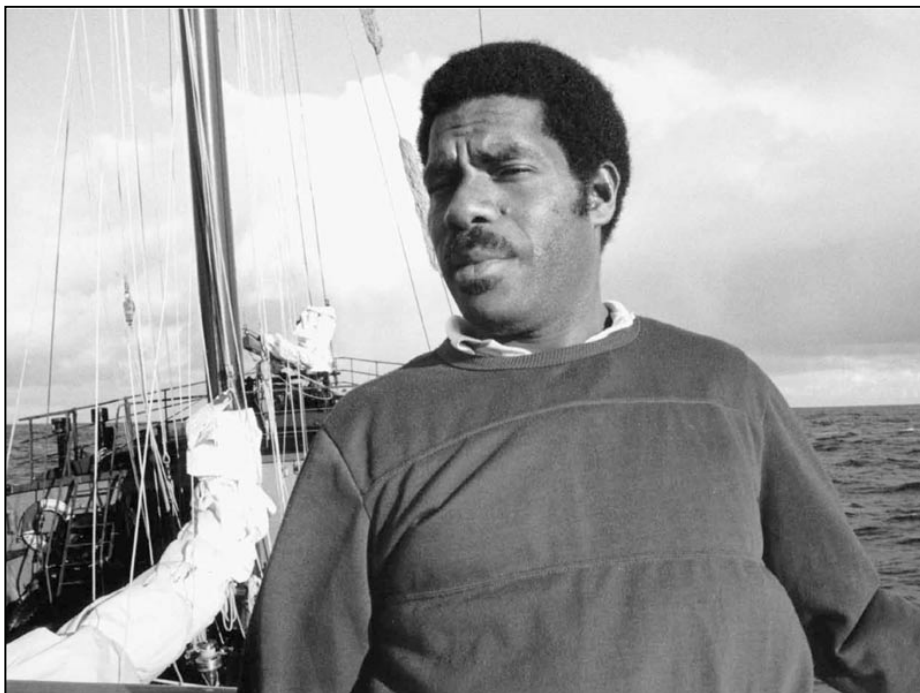
It began like something out of a B-grade police comedy. As the French say in New Caledonia, 'c'est le cinema'. But the funny side quickly turned sour. At first the French authorities gave me a two-hour grilling at Tontouta international airport. A police 'welcome squad' awaited me at the arrival lounge when I flew in to cover political developments ... leading up to [the] referendum on independence and the military 'nomadisation' of Kanak villages in the *brousse* ...

Then I was tailed constantly and kept under surveillance by security police in Noumea. Later, I was actually arrested by soildiers armed with automatic rifles, submachine-guns and bayonets near the eastern township of Canala and interrogated incommunicado for four hours ... The deputy commander of [Canala *gendarmerie*] ... accused me of taking unauthorised photographs of military installations, loosely using the word 'espionage' ... Although calm, at one point [during the interrogation] I snapped, 'Is this a democracy?'

The officer replied, 'No, this is France ...'

'Non ... non ici c'est le Kanaky! [this is Kanaky]' interrupted Edmond Kawa [an FLNKS official with me]. The gendarme gave him a warning. (Robie, 1989, p. 261)²

The drama over my reporting of the militarisation of East Coast villages in an attempt by French authorities to harass and suppress supporters of Kanak independence was a reflection of the paranoia at the time, so aptly portrayed in the 2011 Mathieu Kassovitz-directed historical drama *Rebellion*.³



DAVID ROBIE/EYES OF FIRE

Charles Rara, Vanuatu's representative on board the Rainbow Warrior.

Then it seemed highly unlikely that in less than two decades nuclear testing would be finally abandoned in the South Pacific, and Tahiti's leading nuclear-free and pro-independence politician, Oscar Manutahi Temaru, would emerge as French Polynesia's new president four times and usher in a refreshing 'new order' with a commitment to pan-Pacific relations.

Although Tahitian independence is nominally off the agenda for the moment, far-reaching changes in the region are inevitable.

President Baldwin Lonsdale made some telling remarks about the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing in a welcome for the ship's namesake, *Rainbow Warrior III*, in Port Vila recently on her post-cyclone humanitarian mission.

He recalled how the Vanuatu government representative, the late Charles Rara, sent by founding Prime Minister Walter Lini on board the *Rainbow Warrior* to New Zealand, had been ashore on the night of the bombing. Rara was at the home of President Lonsdale at St John's Theological College in Auckland, where he was studying.

'When Charles got back to the ship that night, he found the *Rainbow Warrior* had been bombed, it had been destroyed,' President Lonsdale said.

'I think the main intention of the French [military] who carried out the bombing was because the Greenpeace movement was trying to bring about peace and justice among island nations.'

Rara shared a cabin with Portuguese-born Dutch photojournalist Fernando Pereira, who drowned while trying to recover his cameras when a second bomb destroyed the propeller shaft just behind his cabin.



DAVID ROBBIE/EYES OF FIRE

Fernando Pereira and Rongelap Islander Bonemej Namwe ride ashore in the 'bum bum' runabout at Rongelap in May 1985. Born on Kwajalein, Namwe, was then aged 62 and had lived most of her life on Rongelap.

(Ironically, when the *Rainbow Warrior* was bombed, my passport also sank with the ship because I had forgotten to collect it from the safe in the ship's bridge. I recovered it later from Devonport Naval Base dry dock and it is now a prized memento.)



David Robie's bombed passport ... it sank with the *Rainbow Warrior* but was recovered later and restored.

'Living reef'

After being awarded \$8 million in compensation from France by the International Arbitration Tribunal, Greenpeace finally towed the *Rainbow Warrior* to Matauri Bay and scuttled her off Motutapere, in the Cavalli Islands, on 12 December 1987 to create a 'living reef'.

An earlier compensation deal for New Zealand mediated in 1986 by United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar awarded the Government \$13 million (US\$7 million)—the money was used for an anti-nuclear project fund and the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust.

The agreement was supposed to include an apology by France and deportation of jailed secret agents Alain Mafart and Dominique Prieur after they had served less than a year of their 10-year sentences for manslaughter and wilful damage of the bombed ship (downgraded from charges of murder, arson and conspiracy).

They were transferred from New Zealand to Hao Atoll in French Polynesia to serve three years in exile at a 'Club Med' style nuclear and military base.

But the bombing scandal didn't end there. The same day as the scuttling of the *Rainbow Warrior* in 1987, the French government told New Zealand that Major Mafart had a 'serious stomach complaint'. The French authorities repatriated him back to France in defiance of the terms of the United Nations agreement and protests from the David Lange government.

It was later claimed by the Tahitian newspaper *Les Nouvelles* that Mafart was smuggled out of Tahiti on a false passport hours before New Zealand was even told of the 'illness'. Mafart reportedly assumed the identity of a carpenter, Serge Quillan.

Captain Prieur was also repatriated back to France in May 1988 because she was pregnant. France ignored the protests by New Zealand and the secret agent pair were honoured, decorated and promoted in their homeland.

Supreme irony

It is a supreme irony that such an act of state terrorism should be rewarded in this age of a so-called 'war on terrorism'.

In 2005, their lawyer, Gerard Currie, tried to block footage of their guilty pleas in court—shown on closed circuit to journalists at the time but not previously seen publicly—from being broadcast by the Television New Zealand current affairs programme *Sunday*.

Losing the High Court ruling in May 2005, the two former agents appealed against the footage being broadcast. They failed and the footage was finally broadcast by Television New Zealand on 7 August 2006—almost two decades later.

They had lost any spurious claim to privacy over the act of terrorism by publishing their own memoirs—*Agent Secrète* (Priour, 1995) and *Carnets Secrets* (Mafart, 1999). (See Robie, 2007, 2014, p. 271)



French secret agent Alain Mafart pleads guilty to reduced charges of manslaughter and wilful damage in November 1985 (courtroom CCTV footage).

Mafart recalled in his book how the international media were dumbfounded that the expected huge High Court trial had ‘evaporated before their eyes’, describing his courtroom experience:

I had an impression of being a mutineer from the *Bounty* ... but in this case the gallows would not be erected in the village square. Three courteous phrases were exchanged between [the judge] and our lawyers, the charges were read to us and the court asked us whether we pleaded guilty or not guilty. Our replies were clear: ‘Guilty!’ With that one word the trial was at an end. (Cited in Robie, 2014, p. 271).

Ironically, Mafart much later became a wildlife photographer, under the moniker Alain Mafart-Renodier, and filed his pictures through the Paris-based agency Bios with a New York office. Greenpeace US engaged an advertising agency to produce the 2015 environmental calendar illustrated with wildlife images.

As Greenpeace chronicler and photojournalist Pierre Gleizes describes it: ‘Incredibly bad luck, out of millions, the agency bought one of Alain Mafart’s pictures to illustrate a Greenpeace calendar. Fortunately, someone saw that before it got distributed. So Mafart got his fee, but 40,000 calendars were destroyed.’ (Robie, 2015, p. 176-7).

The actual bomber recently outed himself and apologised to Greenpeace, the Pereira family and the people of New Zealand, describing the operation as a ‘big, big failure’. Retired colonel Jean-Luc Kister, went public with simultaneous interviews with TVNZ’s *Sunday* programme reporter John Hudson and French investigative journalist Edwy Plenel, publisher of *Mediapart*, admitting his role:

Thirty years after the event, now that emotions have subsided and also with the distance I now have from my professional life, I thought it was the right time for me to express both my deepest regret and my apologies ...

For us it was just like using boxing gloves in order to crush a mosquito. It was a disproportionate operation, but we had to obey the order, we were soldiers. Many times I think about these things because, for me, I have an innocent death on my hands.

French nuclear swansong

France finally agreed to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty after a final swansong package of eight planned nuclear tests in 1996 to provide data for simulation computer software. [Two decades later, French President Francois Hollande visiting Tahiti in February 2016 admitted that Tahitian victims had a 'legitimate right' to compensation even if it was a long time coming.]

Such was the strength of international hostility and protests and riots in Pape'ete that Paris ended the programme prematurely after just six tests, and just a year after rioting destroyed the heart of the city. France officially ratified the treaty on 10 September 1996.

When Tahitians elected Oscar Temaru as their territorial president in 2004, he had already established the first nuclear-free municipality in the Pacific Islands as mayor of the Pape'ete airport suburb of Faa'a.

Having ousted the conservative incumbent for the previous two decades, Gaston Flosse—the man who gave Mafart and Prieur a hero's welcome to Tahiti—Temaru lost office just four months later.

He was reinstated to power in early 2005 after a byelection confirmed his overwhelming support. But since then Temaru has won and lost office twice more, most recently in 2013, and Flosse is fighting ongoing corruption charges.

Since the Temaru coalition first came to power, demands have increased for a full commission of inquiry to investigate new evidence of radiation exposure in the atmospheric nuclear tests in the Gambiers between 1966 and 1974.

'Contempt' for Polynesia

Altogether France detonated 193 of a total of 210 nuclear tests in the South Pacific, 46 of them dumping more than nine megatons of explosive energy in the atmosphere—42 over Moruroa and four over Fangataufa atolls.

The Green Party leader in Tahiti, Jacky Bryant, accused the French Defence Ministry of having 'contempt' for the people of Polynesia.

Replying to ministry denials in May 2005 claiming stringent safety and health precautions, he said: 'It's necessary to stop saying that the Tahitians don't understand anything about these kinds of questions—they must stop this kind of behaviour from another epoch.'

Bryant compared the French ministry's reaction with the secretive and arrogant approach of China and Russia.

However, Britain and the United States had reluctantly 'recognised the consequences of nuclear tests on the populations' in Australia, Christmas Island, the Marshall Islands and Rongelap.

In 2009, the French National Assembly finally passed nuclear care and compensation legislation, known as the Morin law after Defence Minister Hervé

Morin who initiated it. It has been consistently criticised as far too restrictive and of little real benefit to Polynesians.

In 2013, declassified French defence documents exposed that the nuclear tests were ‘far more toxic’ than had been previously acknowledged. *Le Parisien* reported that the papers ‘lifted the lid on one of the biggest secrets of the French army’.

It said that the documents indicated that on 17 July 1974, a test had exposed the main island of Tahiti, and the nearby tourist resort isle of Bora Bora, to plutonium fallout 500 times greater than the maximum level.

US radiation fallout

This had been echoed almost two decades earlier than the French declassified documents when *The Washington Post* reported that US analysts had admitted that radiation fallout from their nuclear tests of the 1950s was ‘limited’.

In fact, federal documents, according to *The Post* in the February 1994 article, had revealed that ‘the post-explosion cloud of radioactive materials spread hundreds of [kilometres] beyond the limited area earlier described in the vast range of Pacific islands’.

Thousands of Marshall Islanders and ‘some US troops’ had probably been exposed to radiation, the documents suggested.

‘One of the biggest crimes here is that the US government seemed to clearly know the extent of the fallout coming, but made no attempt to protect people from it,’ said Washington-based lawyer Jonathan Weisgall, author of *Operation Crossroads*, a book about the Marshall Islands nuclear tests.

The *Rainbow Warrior* bombing with the death of photographer Fernando Pereira was a callous tragedy. But the greater tragedy remains the horrendous legacy of the Pacific nuclear testing on the people of Rongelap and the Marshall Islands and French Polynesia.

The last voyage of the first *Rainbow Warrior*—right up until the bombing in Auckland three decades ago—left a lasting legacy for New Zealand and the future of activism.

* * *

WHEN the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior* is set in its broader political context in the Pacific, it can be seen that this story was much more than a dramatic, and isolated, episode as most of the New Zealand media portrayed it. The *Eyes of Fire* microsite project by Little Island Press also demonstrates the significance of the continuing interpretation of these events for the future of New Zealand and its citizens—student journalists are looking back at the past but asking questions of relevance to the present from their perspective interrogating my colleagues and I who were involved in the Rongelap voyage. This is really important. In Hayley Becht’s interview with me, I replied to a question about the impact of the bombing on New Zealand:

[As] a nation, this was a coming of age for us. I think we lost our innocence then. The idea that a friendly nation could commit an act of state terrorism against us, a small nation in the Southern Hemisphere and against a peaceful ship and against people who were trying to make a better world and trying to make a better environment—that shock was shared by everybody in the country for a long time. And there was a lot of hostility towards France. (Interview with author by Becht, 2015)

Although that hostility eased, especially after the halt to nuclear testing in 1996, there is still ongoing environmental fallout from both nuclear testing and climate change that makes it imperative that this sort of deeper journalism practice continues (Robie, 2014). As Murrow noted repeatedly during the project, a striking common factor involved in the *Rainbow Warrior* and the Rongelap experience was the lifelong legacy that bound the participants together as activists for the planet, whether it was through direct action such as through Greenpeace, or through journalism. We had all been changed profoundly by the experience.

Notes

1. In an interview with Hayley Becht (2015) in the microsite project, I said: ‘Climate change refugees and nuclear refugees ... there is a connection there ... and it is going to be a major problem for the globe.’ I spoke about parallels between the Marshall Islands evacuations and the forced migration of the Polynesian people from Takuu Atoll in 2010 to Bougainville, described by some as the first ‘climate change refugees’.
2. As a Pacific affairs specialist, I encountered hostility from French officialdom over a number of years in the region, ranging from attacks in publications that carried my articles, personal attacks from some other expatriate journalists with ‘territorial’ vested interest in the region, which eventually spilled over into a spat between two Pacific news magazines, *Islands Business* and *Pacific Islands Monthly*. This saga was covered comprehensively by *The New Zealand Journalist* (Stoner, 1989). It also had an impact on my career as a journalism educator when I was appointed to head the French-funded regional journalism programme at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji in 1998 (Robie, 2004).
3. Reportage in quality media in Australia was much better than in New Zealand. My report on the Hienghène massacre on 5 December 1984 when 10 unarmed Kanak activists were gunned down in cold blood was a major page lead in the World section of *The Australian*, while a similar report filed for Wellington’s *Dominion* was buried as a single column on an inside page.

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