

## UK NUCLEAR TEST VETERANS MEETING

### **Background**

The fight for recognition by nuclear test veterans has lasted 72 years, making it the longest scandal in British history.

Between 1952 and 1991, an estimated 22,000 men were involved in 45 nuclear weapons tests, and 593 radioactive experiments, in America, Australia, and the South Pacific. Around 10% were on National Service. Thousands of Commonwealth troops and indigenous people were also present.

They all report high rates of cancer, blood disease, birth defects, miscarriage, and infant mortality. Despite claims from the UK government that science does not support these claims, the latest official study found veterans WERE more likely to die, and to die from cancer, than other service personnel. No studies have ever been done on the children of nuclear veterans.

### **Undisputed facts:**

Their stories began to appear in the 1980s. Veterans of every nuclear power reported the same patterns of illness, and the governments of the US, Australia, New Zealand, France, China and Russia all offered some form of contrition. The UK stands alone as the only nuclear-armed nation to still deny its weapons programme caused harm.

The first atomic test was Op Hurricane in 1952, the last Operation Julin/Bristol in 1991. Over the course of the testing, troops were ordered to sail, fly, and crawl through fallout to test the effects on ships and men. The largest weapon Britain ever fired, a 3-megaton hydrogen bomb codenamed Operation Grapple Y, was 112 times more powerful than Hiroshima.

At each test, UK personnel prepared and maintained bomb sites, airfields, docks, laboratories and base camps, and took part in sampling missions, decontamination, collection and disposal of radioactive materials. They slept under canvas between 23 and 5 miles from blast zones, entered Ground Zero without protection, and ate and drank from local sources for up to a year. For the most part, they wore only shorts and boots.

The only protection afforded them was a film badge to measure radiation doses, which were known at the time to be grossly inaccurate. At the first test, 92% of men had a badge. At Grapple, it was just 2%. About two thirds of all badges show a 'nil' dose. About 80% of all nuclear veterans had no badge at all. Without a recorded dose, they cannot claim a pension.

### **The science:**

Science established in 1946 that there is no 'safe' amount of radiation. Any amount can cause harm, and some individuals are genetically more or less susceptible. There is a concept of 'genomic instability' in which a single cell can appear unaffected by radiation, but can go on to produce malformed daughter cells. It is harder to be definitive in a multi-celled organism, but the problems reported by veteran families would fit such a pattern.

In 1985 the UK government was forced by the growing scandal to order a mortality study. It did not look at the health problems reported by veterans, just the causes of death and cancer incidence,

compared to a similar group of veterans. A 7-page report published in the BMJ in 1988 found a slight increase in leukemia, and war pensions were awarded. A second study in 1993 found the increase had disappeared, so pensions were blocked. A third study in 1998 found no change, but a fourth in 2018 found for the first time an increase in deaths and cancers compared to other servicemen.

It found statistically-significant, large increases in deaths linked to radiogenic illness - cerebrovascular disease, cancers of the brain, nervous system, liver, stomach, bladder, and leukaemias. The risk of suicide was elevated for this cohort in every decade since the tests. All these studies were partial, as they did not include cancers pre-1974, deaths of emigrants, and could trace only 84% of participants.

Each study was able to compare the limited dose badge records with cancer outcomes, and said that, IF the records were correct, it did not explain the pattern of observed deaths.

In 2022 it was discovered that 140 pages of background data from 1988 had never been published. It also noted that the dose badge records were falsified in the 1960s, when hundreds were written as a 'nil dose' when they showed below a certain level. Those 'low' levels were enough to cause cancer.

In 2007 a New Zealand study found test veterans 3x the normal rate of genetic damage, similar to clean-up workers at Chernobyl. The same year a survey of veterans found 10x the expected rate of birth defects, 5x the normal infant mortality, and triple the usual number of miscarriages. These studies have been accepted by the scientific community and peer-reviewed. The MoD still briefs its ministers that no science exists to support the veterans' claims.

### **The Mirror campaign:**

The Mirror has campaigned for justice for the nuclear veterans since 1984. It is the longest campaign in newspaper history. As a result, it won a medal for the veterans announced by Rishi Sunak in 2022, and a year later uncovered the Nuked Blood Scandal which has established that orders for blood and urine testing of thousands of troops were made repeatedly during the weapons programme. Such samples would be the only definitive way to be sure if radiation had entered the men's bodies.

Dozens of veterans have come forward to say their medical records are missing the results of these tests. Sunak refused to meet the veterans when asked to see their evidence, and Johnny Mercer told campaigners they would have to sue the MoD if they wanted answers. Despite always denying it held information about blood testing, the Atomic Weapons Establishment was forced by Andrew Murrison to declassify a top secret database in 2024 which contained 3,500 pages of information about the programme. It included medical record forms, thousands of service personnel identified by name and number as subject to the tests, and hundreds of tests discussed in the past tense as having been completed. It also showed MoD officials agreeing to tell ministers and the public that they were never conducted.

Legal papers were served on the MoD in March. It has refused to engage with the case, an offer of a special tribunal, or to answer the central question: where are the medical records? Failure to provide them would, in itself, constitute negligence and a potential criminal offence under the Care Act 2014.

## **Labour's promises:**

The 2019 Labour manifesto pledge £50,000-a-head compensation. There was no mention of the veterans in the 2024 manifesto.

Keir Starmer, June 2021: 'The country owes you a huge debt of honour. Your campaign is our campaign. It starts now.'

Starmer, August 2022: 'Britain's nuclear test veterans are national heroes. It's appalling that they've still not had justice after years of maltreatment.'

Andy Burnham, November 2022: 'If the state was conducting medical tests upon servicemen and not informing them when they found serious irregularity, that is at least misconduct in public office, and more serious, perhaps, gross negligence manslaughter, in respect of people who died as a result.'

Emily Thornberry, November 2022: 'If those records have instead been concealed, altered or falsified in any way and at any time, that is not just a scandal. It is almost certainly a crime.'

John Healey, July 2023: 'There is no good reason, no good moral reason, no good military reason, for withholding recognition and compensation that other countries have had.'

Angela Rayner, October 2023 when asked for a public inquiry, the missing records, a Hillsborough Law and compensation: 'I'm going to push really hard to meet your four asks and to do everything I can to make sure that in your lifetime I'm able to give you that... with government comes responsibility and it's about time people accepted that responsibility. The medal means nothing without it.'

Labour frontbench source, June 2024: 'The nuclear veterans have our backing and we'll have their backs, if we win.'

Rebecca Long-Bailey, July 2024: 'This government has a moral duty to recognise, support and compensate our nuclear test veterans and their families.'

They have also promised to broaden the medal criteria to include those who served at non-UK tests.

## **Our asks:**

1. **Immediate:** apology, automatic war pensions for conditions identified in government studies (inc suicide), broadened medal criteria and a Royal reception
2. **Medium term:** Commemoration by public memorial, US-style compensation scheme, release of all blood and other diagnostic tests, publication of all and files withheld at National Archives (some locked until 2092).
3. **Long term:** UKHSA to rerun govt study with blood testing data; scientific research into genomic instability of descendants; getting the testing programme on the National Curriculum so future generations never forget
4. A **public inquiry** is the only way to ensure it never happens again.