



Speaker: **Gordon Coggon / Labrats International, UK**

Gordon Frederick Coggon – British Nuclear Test Veteran. Christmas Island 1957-1958  
83 years old. Gordon was born in 1938 near Doncaster, witnessing the UK's only true hydrogen bomb. After a long second career driving buses and HGVs, and having survived cancer and diabetes, Gordon finally retired at the age of 71. In 2020, aged 82, Gordon found himself locked down due to the Covid-19 pandemic and wrote a book – The Life of a Yorkshire Lad. (<https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Life-Yorkshire-Lad-Born-Doncaster/dp/B08P6G6GDX>)

Gordon is a campaigner for LABRATS International and making action for recognition of the British Nuclear Test Veterans.

Videography by Eric Barton. Edited by Brian Cowden.

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Good afternoon, my name is Gordon Frederick Coggon. I'm a British nuclear veteran and I was at Christmas Island in 1957, 1958. Christmas Island is now called Kiritimati. It is now 67 years or more since I was at those tests, H-Bomb tests.

In all the experiences of my life, I have... there haven't been any that came anywhere near the trauma that those two hydrogen bombs had on me and thousands of other guys. There's only a few others (of us) left. I'm 83 now. Many of my veteran friends have died early or suffering from an early age from radiation caused diseases. Many of these diseases have been proven, although the British government do not admit that.

We were only 18 or 20 year olds, not knowing what to expect. A hydrogen bomb is no mean thing to see; it's terrifying. We weren't told when we went to Christmas Island that this was what we was going for, everything was secret. You couldn't even write home about it. You couldn't tell your mum, your dad - anybody, because of a threat of breaking this Official Secrets Act and going to prison for a long long time.

Anyways, the tests came, first Grapple X on November 8, 1957. Prior to the explosion we were seated at the main camp, or near the main camp, in the more or less middle of the island, with our backs to where the explosion would be, which was going to be dropped by a volume (valiant) V Bomber. And it was going to be exploded in the atmosphere about 20 miles from the southeast tip of the island, which was initially I would say around 35 miles to where we were from, where the explosion took place. But remember, it was exploded at altitude so in fact when it exploded it seemed to be coming from right over our heads.

We had already had two dummy runs. So we knew, more or less, what to do. There was tunnels (tannoys). I don't know if you know what Tannoys are. They're loudspeakers strung up all over the island, so we could hear a broadcast from the aircraft that was dropping the bomb directly through air traffic to us. So we could hear everything the pilots were saying. And the controller, he was coming on and telling us what to do, and giving us countdowns, when to do it.

The final day came, the 8th of November. And we sat there with our backs, sat in the sand with just KED tropical clothing, just this normal working clothing. Our berets which we didn't normally wear, we're told to put our berets on. Uh...we were also told to wear aircrew sunglasses which



we'd been issued with. And the controller said just follow the instructions like we're telling you, and do exactly as you did on the dry runs.

The first thing that happens...the Tannoy bursts into life saying...  
"the Valiant is now at Point Charlie and your glasses"  
"Cover your glasses and your eyes with your hands"  
"Tuck your head into your knees like that"  
"and keep them covered 'til I...tell you to move them".

The Tannoy burst into life 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...

Things... things started happening and I didn't know what the heck to do because to be honest, I was absolutely terrified, because I could see bones in my arms. And I thought we had been burnt alive, and I could feel heat travelling through me as if somebody was holding an electric fire or something, and pushing it through you, that's how it felt. I was frightened. I went like that and lifted my glasses and I couldn't see nothing - everything was as white as this paper. You couldn't see the trees that I was leaning against. You couldn't see the men that were all around me. You could see nothing, just white complete whiteness. I thought I'd gone blind. In fact... I thought I was burning up.

And that is exactly how I get my nightmares. Since the bomb I have had frequent nightmares. They're not as many now as what they used to be. I used to have one a month. But when it comes, it's as if I'm in a white fog, and these arms are coming to me, and they're bony arms, and I get that in a dream and I wake up shaking.

Grapple Y (test) was a little different. We had protective clothing for that. White cotton overalls and darked out glasses. The only difference was...I had to go to the sick bay for that, because I was blinded for a week because of the dark glasses and the white anti-flash suit, I never felt the thing and that's the truth. And it was a bigger bomb. So I lifted my glasses and looked, [and was] temporarily blinded for 3 weeks. I couldn't see a thing. And the other thing about it was... was it rained like hell that night. And the only cloud in the sky was a remnant of the H-bomb being let off in the afternoon.

After that... (Grapple X) I had in the afternoon to go and wash a Canberra aircraft. And it had just flown through the cloud taking samples. So it was red hot with gamma radiation and I had to wash it by hand. I had to wash the engine (nacelles) itself, because they weren't allowed to direct the jets of these high pressure hoses onto the engine turbines without any protective equipment. There was a remote breathing apparatus which was broken down. The straps had broken on it. So it wouldn't allow me to use them, so they made me a crude version of a modern-day Martindale mask, which I had to remove because it got soaked in water and I couldn't breathe through it. So...I probably breathed in gamma radiation isotopes, which gives off um... alpha particles, and alpha particles last 24,000 years. That's the half-life of them. Now alpha particles can't get out of your body once they're in. They can't penetrate human skin, so if you breathed them in or took 'em in through swimming or... In my case, some of the water washed, splashed off into my face of this aircraft or even the rain from the bomb cloud or anything - something we've eaten.

And over the ages, it has been proved... They do affect your genes. And they can also give you cancer. And my children have been damaged. I've been damaged. I've had prostate cancer. Many men have died early caused by radiation, and it's been proved that our children now. And this is why I'm so adamant about it. So angry about our government not recognising us, our cause. Our



children are affected and their genes are affected and... their children are going to be affected. And this radiation isn't going to go away. I lost all my teeth not long after. I had a sclerosis of my back which they never found when I joined up, and you have an extensive medical [check] when you join up. I've had cataracts removed. I've got type 2 diabetes. I can't blame it all on the bombs I suppose. It wouldn't surprise me.  
Yeah. That's about it.

#### Disclaimer

This transcript is at the responsibility of Peace Boat and may not be completely the same as the original testimony. The original testimony was presented online at the World Nuclear Survivors Forum 2021 on December 2-3, where over 30 nuclear survivors from five continents around the world shared their voices with more than 1000 people. The Forum was hosted by Peace Boat in partnership with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). The stories and panel discussions are all available for viewing on demand via Youtube or on our website here: <https://nuclearsurvivors.org>