

## Nuclear Trials

### The last war of the sacrificed.

In Sahara and Polynesia, hundreds of civilians and soldiers were involved in the nuclear trials. Very often exposed to the radiations without any protection, the nuclear bomb's « guinea pigs » are finally starting to be acknowledged. Sophie des Déserts tell their long fight against the « Top Secret » and the State's Reason.

*«It's over there, in Mururoa, that someone cast a spell on me»* he used to say. Since his stay on the island between 1976 and 1977, Yannik Floc'h was a shadow of his former self. *“The secret island”*, as the Polynesians used to call it, had taken his youth away. At only 20 years old, his teeth were breaking, his lungs were damaged, and his spine was weak and extremely sore. Marie-Josée, his wife, saw him getting worse and worse, while the doctors stood, helpless. The former sailor (ou “navy soldier”) was sure of the origins of his disease and used to always refer to his missions at “Muru”, his daily swims in the lagoon, the days he spent collecting scrap metal around the contaminated zone. Yannik fought hard, until his body became paralyzed. He was then diagnosed with lung cancer that had spread along his spine. *“Witchcraft”*, he used to say over and over again, without hope, yet without hatred. Yannick spent his best years in Polynesia. Before saying goodbye to her husband in July 2004, Marie-Josée promised him that one day, she will « *blow the truth wide open* »

#### A secret clause

This Saturday of Mars 2009, Marie-Josée Floc'h is having lunch on a small boat on the Vilaine that was chartered by the AVENS (“Association des Vétérans des Essais nucléaires”), an association dedicated to the veterans involved in the nuclear trials. Sitting around her are a few gentlemen, most of them quite old, and some of them frail and sick, but all full of a renewed optimism. After almost half a century, the French State is opening the file regarding its nuclear trials. « *It is about time that our country makes peace with itself* », said the minister of Defense Hervé Morin, before announcing his intention to pass a new indemnity law. He speaks to the 1500000 civilians and soldiers who took part between 1960 and 1996 to the nuclear trials in Sahara and then in Polynesia. In Papeete, where the first trial of 8 former workers of Mururoa versus their employers is opening on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, people are hesitating between joy and doubt. The plaintiffs and all the other nuclear trials' veterans are asking themselves the same question: who will really be indemnified? Will proof of contamination be asked for? What if the State, who for so long has shielded itself behind the “top secret” motto, try to evade the issue once more? *“Lets wait for the passing of this law”*, says Marie-Josée, before brightly admitting; *“I would have never imagined that I would see such progress on the matter in my life time”*.

It all started with a man who has been dedicating 20 years of his life to the study of the nuclear trials' consequences. Bruno Barrillot, a peace loving and realistic man, first dedicated his life to the Church before leaving it at 45 years of age, disappointed by the Church pro-military position in the midst of the European missiles debate. The former priest then became a freelance journalist for “Libération” and created the CDRPC (Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur la Paix et les Conflits). In 1990, Greenpeace contacted him. They ask him to go and investigate stories of imprisonment, disturbing testimonies and suspicious deaths happening in the islands around Mururoa. Bruno Baillet left for Papeete, where he was welcomed by Bengt Danielsson. This Swedish ethnologist and his wife were, along with the Evangelist Church, strongly opposed to the French nuclear trials in the Pacific. They saw scientists that had previously only directed the men of the CEP (Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique) come to their little piece of paradise and destroy it. They saw them arriving in 1965 with all their big bucks. The apprentice-sorcerers had first started off in the Algerian Sahara. When the first nuclear bomb, called “La Gerboise Bleue” exploded in Reggane on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1960 General De Gaulle shouted “*Hurray!*” Neighbors of Algeria were on the other hand already worried about the radioactive

risk. A secret clause was added in the Evian agreement and authorized underground nuclear trials until 1968; however France was supposed to find another place to test aerial nuclear shoots. The government first thought of doing the aerial trials in the Calvi region “*outside of the tourist season of course*”, added one of the chiefs of the AEA, before thinking of the French Polynesia. “*Do not be afraid, you will not be at risk*» they said to the Polynesians. Not everyone was fooled. The Americans and English had already destroyed the Pacific with their own trials. In September 1966, the Polynesian deputy, John Teariki, even begged De Gaulle: « *Take away your soldiers, your bombs and your planes. That way, the people that will one day suffer from cancers and leukemia will not be able to accuse you for it.*” But for De Gaulle, without the nuclear Bomb, France could not exist. .

In 1990, despite the growing opposition, the trials went on. Barrillot arrived to the occupied island closest to Mururoa, Mangareva, home to 350 civilians and 800 soldiers. The civilians were afraid, but some of them dared to speak up: “since the beginning of the trials, we cannot eat the lagoon’s fishes anymore, and there is an increase of diseases and deaths, especially among the children”. At first, in this isolated part of the world, people were happy to see the French arrive. They brought money. During the nuclear shoots, people used to party. The whole island used to meet in a hall where the soldiers showed movies, served alcohol before going back to their own radiation-proof barracks.

Back in France, shocked, Bruno Baillet started a book about the trials (1). A few years later, Vincent Jauvert, journalist at the “Nouvel Observateur”, discovered in the archives of the Dircen (Direction des Centres d'Expérimentations nucléaires) some incredible documents proving that the army and the AEA knew that the nuclear shoots had radioactive consequences for the local population (2). After the explosion of a nuclear bomb on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1966, a rapport of the AEA detailed how the soil and food had been contaminated before comforting the staff by saying that « the population was blissfully unaware ». There were other guinea pigs, like the 195 chosen soldiers, sent to 650m of the point of explosion in the Sahara on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1961 in order to train soldiers for possible nuclear wars. But Jauvert was ordered by the socialist Army Minister Alain Richard Motif to stop his investigation. The reason given left, right and center is always the same: Top Secret. While the United States of America is starting to compensate the victims of its own trials and is opening its archives, France is on the other hand closing it down; hoping perhaps that time will help: the veterans will not live forever.

### **"Close your eyes"**

The end of the nuclear trials in 1996, will on the contrary mark the beginning of the veterans’ awakening. After the publishing of his first book, Bruno Baillot received hundreds of letters. From veterans of the Algerian war, from Polynesia, from women who, like Marie-Josée, have lost their husbands or fathers to sickness. Blood cancer, bone cancer, lung cancer...Far from the official version, a new History is being drawn, One that tells of thousands of young men that were thrown under the nuclear shoots, victims of the nuclear madness and of the errors and trials that always happened when a State is discovering the nuclear weapon. All of the victims, especially those that were based in the Sahara declared that “*the army did not tell us where we were going*”. Once we knew, “*they said that we were not at risk*”. Florence, an AEA secretary based in Mururoa in 1982 says this: “*We were all very young, we had the sun, the sea and received very good salaries. When your chief tells you that there is no danger, you believe him*”. Twenty years later, Florence, suffering from thyroid cancer, wants to understand.

What to do, what to tell to all the veterans? Bruno Barrillot is telling them to get organized. In 2001, the Aven is created, and a few weeks later, two other similar organizations are created in Polynesia: Moruroa and Tatou. A former officer from Reggane is also planning to create an organization for the Algerians veterans. This officer is Mohammed Bendjebbar, and he was charged to demolish the Saharans nuclear sites in 1968. He was officially declared “victim of the irradiations” by the Algerian army after spending months breaking up contaminated trucks, buildings and planes left behind by the French. He was given a pension by the French government, was treated in France and was even invited to Hiroshima to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bomb. But he is thinking about all the others, the workers who were without protection, the local tribes who used to live in oasis situated close to the nuclear sites. He thinks of all the poor souls that were simply told by the French to “*close their eyes*” before setting off the bombs. There is a rumor that says that, just like in Polynesia,

there are also handicapped children and victims of cancer in the desert....To his brothers from Aven, Bendjebbar says this: "*We were all guinea pigs*".

The veterans have turned to Jean-Paul Teissonière, the talented lawyer best known for helping out the amiante's victims. But in Court, the fight is difficult: the Army's Health Department is not willing to give up their files, very often there is no files at all. Yannik Floc'h's file for example does not mention any radioactive data, despite the fact that he was always wearing a "dosimeter", an apparatus that was used to measure the level of radioactivity that the human body was exposed to. The spokespersons of the Ministry of the Defense keeps on reminding the veterans that one in five citizen will develop a cancer during the course of his/her life. They still insist that the trials were conducted in a safe and clean way. Marie-Josée does not believe it: after her husband's death, she came across the research conducted on the Americans and English veterans that were based on the Marshall Island and in the Nevada. The research clearly concluded to a stronger occurrence of leukemia, and of certain types of cancers such as thyroid, brain and lung cancers in people that were exposed to radiations.

### **Chromosomal disturbance**

In June 2006 the young widow gathered all her savings and left to attend a symposium on the nuclear trials in Papeete. She met there two professors, Claude Parmentier, from the Gustave-Roussy Institute, and Al Rowland, a geneticist from New-Zealand. . The two professors, who had both been working on the radioactive effects, had been starting to notice strong chromosomal mutations in the contaminated veterans, which are very often the starting point for the development of a cancer. Marie-Josée Floc'h finally felt like somebody was listening. And while the trial is going nowhere slowly, the press is taking up an interest on the veterans' fight. Politicians are also following: 20 projects of indemnity's laws are being put together. "We underestimated the media consequences of this story", commented one of the Minister of the Defense's spokesperson. And it seems that they also underestimated the diplomatic consequences. The countries where the trials took place are asking a lot of questions. And they all turn to Bruno Barrillot, who has become the top expert in nuclear trials.

The Algerian government invited him to come and visit the former military base of In Ekker, situated in the Sahara. Barrillot came across the derelict underground nuclear sites. His Geiger meter was crackling. “How do you decontaminate?” asked one of the Algerian officer. In 2007, the Minister of the Former Soldiers organized another symposium about the trials. President Bouteflika pulled out of it at the last minute. He leaves it to the Media to denounce this crime of the Past, another one, committed yet again by the colonial France. The TV channel Al Jazeera affirms that FLN’s prisoners used to be attached to the foot of the bomb, a fact that was already reported by the German legionnaires in 1962 in a documentary by Karl Gass called «Allons enfants... pour l’Algérie» (Come on children... For Algeria). Fatima Ben Braham, a lawyer, wants to accuse France of crime against Humanity. Bouteflika’s government refuses to comment, but is acting nonetheless. Last autumn, Djamel Ouahab, an Algerian film director was invited to present his movie « La Gerboise Bleue » in Alger. Him and another veteran that was based in Reggane in 1960 were welcomed by the Algerian government with open arms, and all their costs were covered, which is still a surprise for the veteran: *“Because of all the junk we left behind, I was expecting to be welcomed with a bullet in the head, not as an hero!”*

Larbi Benchids, a journalist for France 3, has also seen her own documentary called «Vent de sable» (Sand Storm), being praised by her country of origin. *“Algeria authorized the trials and we will never know what compensations she received in exchange. Its probably not in the country’s best interest to shed too much light on this matter; he adds. Alger is putting pressure on France whenever it suits her. »*

In Polynesia, tension is also rising. As soon as he was elected president, Oscar Temaru ordered an investigation to be conducted on the trials. The chief of this investigation team is none other than Bruno Barrillot. This time, because Polynesia is still a French territory, France made the effort of sending his nuclear safety’s delegate. The delegate, Marcel Jurien is not giving much explanation: *“the trials were not completely clean”*, some had **retombées radioactives**, *«but except in the case of accidental contamination, we cannot talk of harmful quantities”*. The AEA’s engineer went to spread the good news to all the islands, displaying his studies and his numbers to a very skeptic population. How could one expect them not to be after decades of silence? How could they believe that the Army, who has never conducted a strong research on the subject, is this time, telling the truth? *“We are struggling to get heard”*, is complaining Marcel Jurien.

His incomprehension is a good reflection of how the nuclear community thought that they were working towards a greater good for France. The men of the AEA nonetheless knew that an indemnity law was bound to be drawn. They got the communist senator Helene Luc to propose a law in autumn. Hervé Morin, who has always been concerned by the veterans’ cause, could not let the Parliament overtake him. On the 27th of November 2008, he promised that he will try to present his proposition of Law as quickly as possible. But for the AEA, the minister went too far: *“Every single man that was in the Sahara or in the Polynesia at the time will start asking for money”*, one of the chief is saying, shaking with rage. He can be comforted in the thought that the indemnity commission will ask for proofs of radiation. Marie-Josée Floc’h, who cannot produce any proofs of her husband’s contamination, will most probably receive nothing.

She hopes that one day, the History books will remember her husband and the thousands of other innocents that were sacrificed in the name of the State.

(1) «*Les Essais nucléaires français 1960-1996*» (*The French Nuclear Trials from 1960 to 1996*) (Editions CDRPC).

(2) "*Le Nouvel Observateur*", 5<sup>th</sup> of February 1998.

## General De Gaulle

It was the general De Gaulle (seen here with Alain Peyrefitte et Pierre Messmer, off Mururoa) who decided to include France into the race for the atomic bomb. 210 nuclear trials will be conducted, first in the Sahara, as early as 1960, then in Polynesia, from 1966, before being abandoned in 1996.

## Mururoa

The Court of Papeete will examine on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April the demand for retribution from 8 former workers of Mururoa (only 3 have survived) against their former employers, the AEA and the French State. They ask that their diseases (leukemia and cancers) be acknowledged as work related.

## Lucien Parfait

Lucien Parfait, who is suffering from skin and jaw cancer ever since his return from In Ekker. Until now, it was up to the veterans to prove the link between their diseases and the trials. To this date, of the 300 cases that were started, only 15 have had a positive outcome for the veterans. But from now on, it will be up to the Minister of Defense to prove that the veterans' diseases are not linked to their presence on nuclear sites.

## Protection

Not all the veterans were provided with proper protective equipment. The DNA of the ones that came in contact with radiations has been greatly modified, which could result in the development of cancers. This is the definitive conclusion from the geneticist Al Rowland and cancer specialist Claude Parmentier. This professor from the Gustave-Roussy Institute started to worry in the 90's about the increasing number of Polynesians that were suffering from thyroid cancer. Both of their work is used in the current trial started by a group of English veterans.

## Hervé Morin

Hervé Morin's law proposition is aiming to help "anyone suffering from a disease caused by radioactivity as a result from exposure to radioactivity during the trials" The Aven, Moruroa and Tatou organizations, which regroup more than 8000 veterans, fear that the indemnity commission will ask for proof of direct exposure, which very often does not exist. Of the 150000 civilians and soldiers who were involved in the trials, only 80000 wore a dosimeter.

## Sophie des Deserts

Le Nouvel Observateur