

WORDS BY TANIA KETTERINGHAM.  
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# MARALINGA

## AUSTRALIA'S FIELD OF THUNDER

***As thunder rumbled over the saltbush plain of Maralinga, a cloud covered the land. It was 27 September 1956 and the start of one of the darkest chapters in Australian history.***

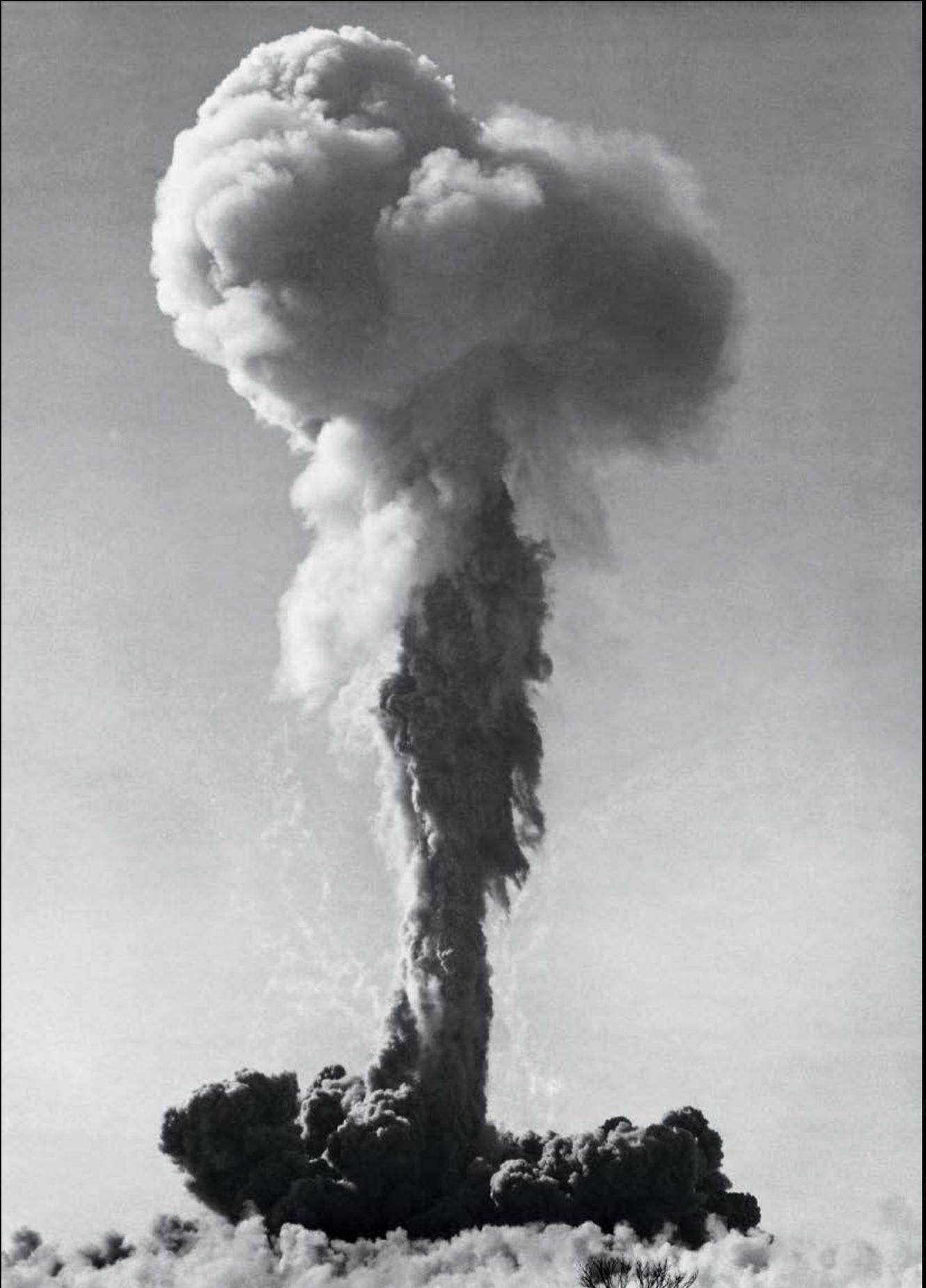
Growing up in the '80s, I first became aware of the existence of Maralinga through the words of iconic rock band Midnight Oil: "In the wind the ashes fly, the poison crown, the charcoal ground." But it wasn't until recently that I realised the aftermath of this dark period in Australian history. Recently the site that has been so often sung about (but rarely seen) has been opened to the public.

In the 1950s, in a time when the cold war was on the back of everyone's minds, the British were looking for a place to test their long-range missiles and atomic weapons. Rather than test them in their own backyard, the British government approached Australia. The then Prime Minister, Menzies, granted permission with wide-open arms. He had aspirations of becoming a prominent British political figure.

With military testing sites already operating at Emu Fields and Woomera, Outback surveyor Len Beadell was given the task of finding a suitable location closer to the railway. On reaching South Australia's large expanse of sparsely inhabited red desert on the edge of the Nullarbor, he wrote: "*We all knew immediately that this was going to be the place; the saltbush undulations rolled away as far as we could see, even through our binoculars.*"



Maralinga aerial view. The desolate earth of Maralinga.



Atomic blast at the Maralinga site in 1957.



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**1** Radiation checks after working in radioactive areas, 1977.

**4** Atomic blast, Maralinga 1956.

**7** Roads into Maralinga map. Access can also be granted through the Lake Dey-Dey private road.

**5** Anne's Corner, Anne Beadell Highway, marker.

**8** Workshops in the Maralinga village, 1955.

**2** Swimming pool in the Maralinga village, 1955.

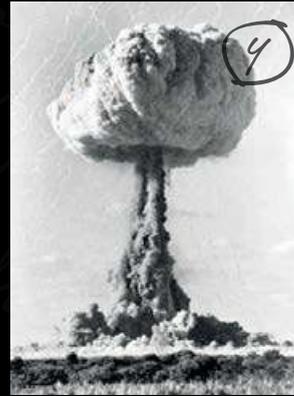
**6** Maralinga Nuclear Test Site sign.

**9** Protective clothing worn to minimise the risk of exposure to radiation after blasts.

**3** Sign warning of radioactive material buried on the site.



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Within days Beadell's men set to work, their Land Rovers dragging lengths of railway to scrape a temporary runway. Roads were forged and, within a week, supplies started arriving from the United Kingdom. The village of Maralinga was designed to house 2,000 servicemen and an area the size of England was securely fenced off. Aptly named after the Yolngu Indigenous people's word for thunder, the notorious history of Maralinga was about to begin.

On 27 September 1956 at the dusty site called One Tree, the wind had died down and the countdown began for the start of Operation Buffalo. Five, four, three, two, one, BOOM. Maralinga's first mushroom cloud swelled over the saltbush country of South Australia.

Over the next 13 months explosions at Marcoo, Kite, Breakaway, Tadge, Biak and Taranaki took place – seven major nuclear tests in total. Perhaps the worst contamination of the

area was a result of the countless minor tests in the early 1960s which left behind radioactive and toxic chemicals including plutonium, uranium and beryllium.

Until 1978, for the most part, the Australian public was unaware of the testing program taking place at Maralinga, with elements of the program shrouded in secrecy. And today, many young Australians have never heard of Maralinga ... few know the history of the blasts that shattered the local Indigenous community and forced aboriginal people away from their traditional lands. Reports claim that aboriginal people were injured and killed by the testing and that generations of children thereafter

have suffered birth defects.

The testing program at Maralinga sparked one of the most shameful episodes in Australian history when, under a cloak of secrecy and without the knowledge of family, the bones of more than 21,000 bodies (many babies and children) were harvested for testing of the radioactive substance Strontium-90. The tests were conducted to determine the effects of the atomic fallout, particularly the effects on the food chain; cows feeding in fallout areas were believed to contain the dangerous substance in the milk they produced. The experiments continued for over 20 years and only recently has some of that information reached the public.

Decades later the true and full extent of the damage to service personnel and local communities, caused by the testing program at Maralinga, is unknown. In 1967 the British abandoned Maralinga – leaving behind a contaminated landscape. After many years, numerous clean-ups and millions of dollars, the area was finally deemed safe to visit.

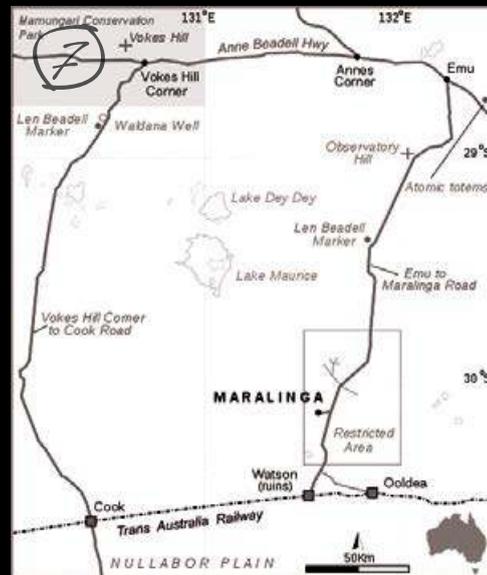
Much of the Maralinga village has been demolished and streets now wind past concrete slabs where houses once stood. Built with the intention of operating for 30 years, the village had all the facilities to accommodate the long-term occupation including a post office, chapel, cinema, barber shop, football fields and (for some relief from the intense summer heat) a swimming pool. Only six original buildings remain, including the former hospital.

The bitumen airstrip is long enough to land an Airbus and the now-retired Space Shuttle. The centrepiece is Ground Zero – the site where atomic bombs as powerful as that used on Hiroshima were exploded; and where, over the eerie barren ground, life still struggles to regenerate.

In 2014, almost 60 years after the first atomic test at Maralinga, rehabilitation work was completed. The final parcel of the land was handed back to the traditional owners, the Maralinga Tjarutia people.

With the permission of the Maralinga Tjarutia people, guided tours of the site commenced in April 2015. The site has been developed for visitors with a camping ground, amenities and a museum. Hundreds of kilometres of secure perimeter fencing surround the site. Visitors are greeted at a locked gate by the tour guide and caretaker Robin Matthews.

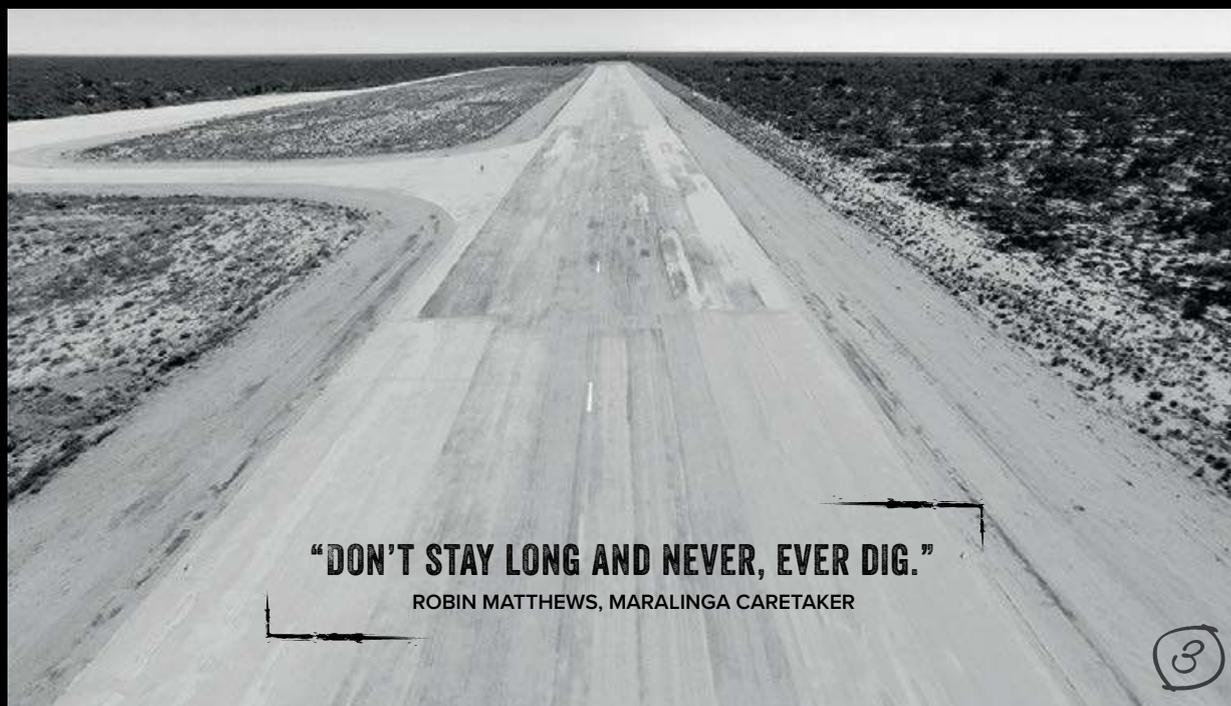
'Not Kazakhstan, not Nevada ... but South Australia's Maralinga' reads the tourism slogan of Maralinga Tours. Like the infamous nuclear testing sites of the United States and the Soviet Union, Maralinga too has a story to tell. Buried under the dust is a forgotten chapter in Australian history ... and for those ready, the secrets are waiting to be uncovered.



## DESTINATION DETAILS

Getting there: Access to the site is only available through Maralinga Tours. The tours must be pre-booked. From Nundroo to Maralinga: About 27 kilometres west of Nundroo a sealed road heads north; there are no signs advertising the destination. As you continue along, the road turns to dust (as expected in this remote location). Across the Trans-Australian Railway near Ooldea you once again hit sealed road – an unusual presence in this remote area and a testament to the program that took place here. Some 225 kilometres from Nundroo you will reach Maralinga village.

Access to Maralinga is not permitted via Emu Road, but if you're looking for a bit more dust and adventure you can travel between Maralinga and the Anne Beadell Highway (with permission). If approaching from Vokes Hill on the Anne Beadell Highway, follow Cook Road and turn off towards Oak Valley via the private Lake Dey-Dey Road to Maralinga. Permits are required and the fee is generally waived if the Maralinga tour is booked. 



**1** Aerial view of Maralinga village after regeneration of the site.

**2** Maralinga village sign.

**3** Maralinga airstrip after site regeneration.

**4** Taranaki site marker; location of atomic weapon test in 1957.

**5** Maralinga Prohibited Area sign on NawaDingo Flat Gate Road.

