

## Vieques 10 Years After the Bombing Stopped

Escrito por Helen Jaccard and David Swanson  
Miércoles, 17 de Abril de 2013 00:23 -

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Ten years ago May 1, the people of Vieques, Puerto Rico and their supporters from around the world defeated the most powerful military machine ever, through mass civil disobedience and without firing a single shot.

On May 1, 2003 the bombing stopped and the bases were officially closed. People from all over the world supported the struggle on Vieques, and the activists and residents have an incredible victory to celebrate.

There were decades of resistance, civil disobedience and arrests. But those hoping and laying the groundwork for greater resistance were given an opportunity on May 19, 1999, when a U.S. Marines pilot missed his target and killed civilian security guard David Sanes Rodriguez. That spark lit a fire of nonviolent resistance that brought together Viequenses, Puerto Ricans, and supporters from the United States and around the world. A campaign of non-violent civil resistance that began in 1999 lasted four years, including a year-long occupation of the bombing range, and saw over 1,500 people arrested. The Navy was forced to close the bombing range on May 1, 2003. Peace loving people had won most of the first of their demands for the island: demilitarization.

A huge commemoration is planned in Vieques for the anniversary from May 1 -- 4, 2013.

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Beautiful Vieques island is only 21 miles across and 5 miles wide, and 7 miles from the main island of Puerto Rico. It is home to about 9,300 people, as well as endangered turtle species, rare Caribbean plants and animals, bio-luminescent bays, and miles of what look like unspoiled beaches.

But crabs with three claws, grossly deformed fish laden with heavy metals, once-beautiful coral reefs, and beaches and seas that have been decimated by military activity tell a story of environmental disaster with huge health impacts on people, plants, and animals.

An incredible three-quarters of the island was appropriated in the 1940s and used by the U.S. Navy for bombing practice, war games, and dumping or burning old munitions. This was a terrible attack on an island municipality, one the United States was not at war with.

Now, Vieques Island, a paradise in trouble, is one of the largest superfund sites in the United States, together with its little sister island of Culebra, which took the brunt of the bombing until 1973, when the Culebra bombing range closed (also due to protests) and the bombing practice was transferred to Vieques.

In 2003, the Navy did not return the land to the people, but transferred its Vieques land to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which operates beaches that were never used for military activities.

Viequenses fear that keeping the U.S. Government in control of their lands could result in future re-militarization of the island. Residents aren't happy that their land has not been returned to them and that they are fined for staying on their land past sunset or collecting crabs -- a mainstay of their historic diet. There are also two military occupations of lands -- a ROTHF radar system and a communications area, and the people want these closed as well. You can add your name to Viequenses' demand for peace here.

For over 2,000 years people known as Taino inhabited Vieques, which they called Bieque. The Taino found and left behind them a paradise of fertile soil, fresh water, and trees. In 1493, the conquistadors arrived. In 1524, the Spanish killed every remaining resident. Vieques was then left uninhabited by humanity for 300 years, interrupted by a few British, French, and Spanish attempts to set up forts or destroy each other's efforts.

From 1823 into the 1900s, Vieques was used by the Spanish and French to grow sugar. English-speaking people of African origin, from nearby islands, were kept in slavery or the nearest thing to it, and forced to grow the sugar cane. They revolted in 1864 and 1874, and in the 1915 Sugar Strike. The United States took Puerto Rico from the Spanish in 1898 and made residents U.S. citizens in 1917. The depression of the 1930s, together with two hurricanes in 1932, brought on harder times than ever.

In 1939 the United States bought 26,000 of the 30,000 acres of land on Vieques from big sugar plantation owners. Living on that land were 10,000 to 12,000 workers who also raised crops to feed themselves. The U.S. Navy gave families \$30 and one day's notice before bulldozing houses. Most people were left without means of subsistence, but many stubbornly refused to

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leave the island.

Carlos Prieta Ventura, a 51-year-old Viequense fisherman, says his father was 8-years-old in 1941 when the Navy told his family their house would be bulldozed whether or not they accepted the \$30. Ventura says he has always resisted the Navy's efforts to force people off the island.

From 1941 to 2003, the U.S. military flew planes from aircraft carriers based on the main island of Puerto Rico dropping bombs over Vieques. Bombs "rained down," and you could feel the ground shake within the base, as one U.S. veteran told CNN. Bombs fell at all hours, all day, all week, all year, amounting to approximately a trillion tons of ordnance, much of which (some 100,000 items) lies unexploded on land and in the sea. Vieques was systematically poisoned by heavy metals, napalm, Agent Orange, depleted uranium, and who knows what all else that the Navy has not announced publicly -- having falsely denied using depleted uranium before finally admitting to it, and having dumped barrels of unknown toxic substances into the clear blue Caribbean.

The arsenic, lead, mercury, cadmium, and aluminum in the bombs are also found in hair samples of 80% of the people living on Vieques, who suffer at far higher rates than on the main island (and possibly anywhere else on earth) from cancer (30% higher than Puerto Rico), cirrhosis of the liver, kidney failure, hypertension (381%), diabetes (41%), birth defects, stillbirths, and miscarriages.

The impact of the U.S. occupation that began in 1941 was felt far more swiftly than cancer. According to Ventura, some 15,000 troops were routinely set loose on Vieques looking for booze and women. Women were dragged out of their homes and gang raped. A boy was killed by gang rape. Ventura says people had only a machete and a hole in the wall by the door where they could try to stab the Marines who would come to take women. A dozen people were killed over the years directly by the U.S. weapons testing. And the Navy banned fishermen from various areas, advising them to try food stamps instead. Fishermen attempted civil resistance actions, and many were arrested during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

Lydia Ortiz, a Viequense who grew up in the small town of Esperanza, recalls the bombing: "A lot of houses had their roofs falling in and everything as a result of the vibrations from the bombs for many years. It was pretty nerve wracking because you never knew what was going to crash down in your house. We lived quite close to where the bombing was happening. When I was a child they were dropping bombs near me. In the school, you could hear the bombing. You couldn't even hear the teacher because of the noise. People were afraid to go anywhere near the base or the beach so it was very difficult for many years. It seems like just yesterday or only 5 or 6 years ago that the bombing stopped, even though it is really almost 10 years ago."

A celebration of the 10-year anniversary is indeed in order. We must remember victories as they have remarkable power to motivate others around the world.

But the Navy's presence and the environmental disaster it created continue to afflict Vieques

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today. The U.S. government has not cleaned up the poisons and bombs and continues to use practices that further endanger the people. There is no bomb explosion chamber on the island. The United States has disposed of what unexploded bombs it has disposed of by blowing them up, further spreading the contaminants that are killing the people of the island.

There is also no hospital on the island, few ferries to the island, few and overpriced airplanes, a handful of taxis and public vans, and very limited tourist facilities. There is no college or university, and very few jobs of any kind. Business licenses are issued in San Juan and require bribes. Viequenses' families are ravaged by cancer, but also by illiteracy, unemployment, violent crime, and teen pregnancy. All of the water -- like all electricity -- comes in a pipe from the main island. Two of the residents said that the one resort on Vieques sometimes uses all the water. Seven thousand Viequenses sued the U.S. government over their health problems, but the U.S. Supreme court refused to hear the case.

With very little land available for farming, Vieques, like all of Puerto Rico, imports almost all of its food. Some people have become so desperate that they gather old munitions to sell for a little money to someone who will melt the metal for aluminum cans. But heavy metals and depleted uranium endanger the metal gatherers and whoever later drinks from the cans.

Presidential candidate Obama wrote to the Governor of Puerto Rico in 2008: "We will closely monitor the health of the people of Vieques and promote appropriate remedies to health conditions caused by military activities conducted by the U.S. Navy on Vieques." But that promise remains unfulfilled.

Robert Rabin Siegal of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques writes in a letter to President Barack Obama,

"Although I cannot claim the Navy and military toxics caused my cancer, you don't have to be a quantum physicist to understand how decades of exposure to heavy metals in the food chain, air, water and land, combined with the socio-economic pressures from the loss of two thirds of the island's lands, would clearly contribute to high cancer rates. The Navy dropped radioactive uranium projectiles here, we believe, in large quantities, in preparation for military actions in the Balkans and the Middle East. The list of dangerous chemical components from munitions dropped on Vieques is extensive, as is the number of illnesses they cause.

"Mr. President: you received the Nobel Peace Prize; we demand peace for Vieques. An island and people used to protect U.S. interests since WWII, forced to sacrifice its land, economic prosperity, tranquility and health, deserves at least the hope of peace for this and future generations."

". . . A handful of powerful US based corporations have pocketed most of the more than 200 million dollars spent on clean-up over the past decade. We urge you to order technology transference to promote the creation of Puerto Rican and Viequense companies to carry out the clean-up of Vieques, thereby transforming that process into part of the economic reconstruction of the island as well as assuring community confidence in this crucial element in the healing of Vieques."

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"Demilitarization and Return of the Land -- Close the remaining military installations still occupying 200 acres of Vieques. Return to the people of Vieques all land still under the control of the U.S. Navy and the federal government."

For extensive documentation, see the attachments below and others at this link.

Helen Jaccard is Chair of the Veterans For Peace -- Environmental Cost of War and Militarism Working Group. She spent October, 2012 in Vieques doing research about the environmental and health effects of the military activities. Her previous article about Sardinia, Italy can be found at <http://www.warisacrime.org/sardinia> .

David Swanson's books include "War Is A Lie." He blogs at <http://davidswanson.org> and <http://warisacrime.org> and works for <http://rootsaction.org>. He hosts Talk Nation Radio.

People



anywhere in the world can [take one minute to sign a petition to the Pentagon, Congress, and the White House](#) in support of justice, at long last, for Vieques:

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Helen Jaccard and David Swanson, <http://warisacrime.org/vieques>

<http://davidswanson.org>

David Swanson is the author of "When the World Outlawed War," "War Is A Lie" and "Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union."