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Bikini Trip, 1968

Tommy F McCraw

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Lt Col Gomes, DMA, and I arrived in Honolulu Friday night, Aug 23. At breakfast the next morning we met with Mr. William Bonnet of the Honolulu Area Office to discuss the trip. We also met Mr. Al Carter of the H & N Staff who was to assist us. We met Commissioner Norwood and other representatives of the Trust Territory Government and of the press at Majuro on Sunday, August 25. On Majuro we were briefed by Mr. Norwood on the proposed itinerary and there was opportunity to meet the rest of members of his party. At this time Mr. Norwood indicated we would probably visit only the islands of Bikini and Eneu which meant there would be no opportunity for the engineering types to see the contaminated scrap areas first hand.

We left Majuro Sunday afternoon on board the James M. Cook bound for Kili. On the way to Kili there was opportunity to talk with Hill Williams, Seattle Times, about the 1964 AEC survey of which he was a member. He had good recollection of what he had seen in the Atoll although not as much time was spent in the area in 1964 as we had spent in 1967. Prior to reaching Kili I was called aside by Mr. Norwood to talk about the meeting we would have with the Bikini people the next day. He said he anticipated questions on the safety aspects of returning the people to Bikini and asked if I would be prepared to answer them. He stated that it was important that such questions be answered forthrightly since any evasiveness on our part would be quickly detected. I agreed to help and stated that so far as possible I intended to use material developed by staff of BM and the recommendations of the AD Hoc Committee to answer such questions.

During the night we crossed the international date line so that the next day was Tuesday rather than Monday. At Kili we were given a warm welcome and were greeted with flowers and singing. The reception line must have contained every man, woman, and child on the island. The meeting, initially indoors, was moved outdoors so more people could see and hear and better photographs could be taken. There were talks by the High Commissioner, by Mr. Heine the District Administrator, and by several members of the Bikini Council.

Next there were questions on whether the islands were safe and whether the food was safe to eat. I told them the problem had been studied and that a group of experts meeting in Washington had concluded the islands were safe for their return provided certain measures were taken. I summarized the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee report telling them that for the present, only the Bikini-Eneu complex is to be rehabilitated and that while they may go anywhere in the Atoll for such purposes as fishing and food collection, villages are to be built only on Bikini and Eneu. I emphasized that the food from the lagoon would be safe to eat. Chutaru, the interpreter for Norwood's party told me later that the natives have some fear for returning

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to Bikini but are reluctant to make an issue of it since this could effect the decision to let them go back.

We departed Kili the afternoon of the day of arrival. Nine of the Bikini people plus one Peace Corp worker on Kili came with us. Jibas, one of the Bikini Council representatives, who came on the trip was very unhappy because his son plus three more were not allowed to come also. Whether this was the reason I do not know, but his attitude was sullen and he was disgruntled throughout the trip.

Prior to arrival at Kwajalein, Mr. Jack Tobin of the Trust Territory Staff told me that Mr. Byron Baker, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, had the Bikini representatives "stirred up" with questions and discussion on possible damage payments.

The James M. Cook docked Wednesday at Kwajalein for supplies and left the same day. Col. D. B. Millar, Commander Kwajalein Test Range, expressed an interest in the trip and came with us. His help with travel and other arrangements was most appreciated.

Wednesday night a briefing was held on plans for the landing on Bikini the next day. The press were to go ashore first so that they could photograph the natives and Mr. Norwood coming ashore on Bikini. Flags, the U. S. and Trust Territory, are to be raised and coconut seedlings planted.

Eneu tower was sighted about 10:00 Thursday morning and the party was ashore on Bikini in the early afternoon. The ceremonies went as planned. The natives found the grave sites on the lagoon shore almost immediately upon landing. The area had been fenced during Task Force days. There was heavy vegetation but otherwise the sites were undisturbed. Following this I located our old 1967 tent site and the entrance to the "O" transect. The trail was easily passable and the old orange spray-paint markings were quite visible. I remarked the trail with red spray-paint for about 1/4 mile.

The natives caught a coconut crab on Bikini and the question was raised as to whether it could be eaten. I replied that the recommendation had been made that it would be better if they were not eaten. The problem was solved when the crab was given to Col. Millar to be mounted for his office.

I monitored several of the rusting remnants of barges along the Bikini

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lagoon shore. There was little if any indication of a radiation level above the beach background which was about 10-15 μ R/hr on the instrument.

The party went ashore on Eneu Friday. I led the visitors through the brush to the assembly building which was still in good condition. The large scrap dump on the southern tip of Eneu was monitored with levels of about 4 to 5 μ R/hr which is background on Eneu. Other scrap near the piers also showed background. The only reservation I have for Eneu concerns the decon area just inshore from the piers on the lagoon shore. The area is densely overgrown and the fence and radiation warning signs are still in place. This area should be cleared of vegetation and checked for radioactivity prior to unrestricted use.

Two coconut crabs were taken by the natives on Eneu and the question raised as to whether they could be eaten and if so, what about crabs from the other islands. I was reminded that I had reported at Kili there were to be no radiological precautions on Eneu. I replied that this is true, and in order not to create doubt about the AEC recommendations, I agreed that the two crabs taken on Eneu could be eaten. I stated further that upon return home, I would check to see if any additional guidance should be given on eating crabs from various islands in the atoll. I do not know if the two crabs from Eneu were actually eaten but we made a point of eating the coconuts and langusta to show the natives we had no concern for their use.

In discussions with Mr. Norwood I had suggested that if time permitted it would be desirable to make a quick swing around the Atoll in order to give the engineers a look at the concrete bunkers, towers, and contaminated scrap that is to be seen only on other islands. The natives also were desirous of visiting other islands. Friday afternoon the decision was made that we would stay one additional day to make a trip around the Atoll. That night Mr. Norwood asked if I would plan such a trip so as to visit as many points of interest to the engineers as practicable in one day. The maps we had developed following the 1967 visit showing bunker and tower location and areas containing contaminated scrap were used to plan a number of landings and departures estimated to take a day of travel. Representatives of the press were anxious to obtain photos of bunkers, contaminated scrap, etc. Mr. Norwood agreed to their coming along but cautioned we would be moving quickly from place to place and would not take kindly to being held up. Press representatives agreed to cooperate and they did.

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Islands visited on Saturday were Aomen, Iroij, Nam, and the Sand Island along the northern rim, and Endrik, Eneman, and Aerokojlol along the southern rim. Bunkers, towers, and numerous items of contaminated scrap (as determined by the gamma survey instrument) were photographed for the engineers. A large number of photographs of these installations and activities were made by press representatives.

There was considerable press interest in the Bravo Crater area including the sand island and a heavily damaged bunker that sits in shallow water near the sand island. The landings and pick ups went smoothly. We were ashore at Aomen at first light in the morning and cleared the Eneu channel departing Bikini Atoll for Kwajalein a few minutes after dark.

Saturday night Mr. Norwood decided that it would be desirable for the party to visit Rongelap to allow the Bikini Council representatives opportunity to see the village that had been built for the return of these natives to their home islands in 1957. We went ashore Sunday morning and received a warm welcome. However, it rained heavily for most of that day.

The houses built on Rongelap, which were of plywood construction, are in need of repair and paint. We were told by a Peace Corp worker who lives on Rongelap that the houses have not been painted in the eleven years since they were built and that he has been unable to get the natives to paint them even though paint supplied by the Navy is available. Carl Mydans of Life Magazine told me he took no pictures on Rongelap because the place looked so drab in the rain. We departed Rongelap for Kwajalein about noon.

At the dock in Kwajalein we had a final talk with the Bikini Council representatives. Lorie summarized the Bikinian's feelings about the present condition of the islands in the Atoll. He said that much land is gone and that they are very sad to see that the trees and food plants are gone. He said all his people will be sad when told of conditions in the Atoll. However, they want to reach an agreement on the planning for their return and want to cooperate in this effort. Mr. Norwood responded by saying that we share their loss but cannot restore the islands to the way they once were nor promise to pay for loss. We will do whatever we can to restore the islands. This will take time and patience. We will do what we can.

Mr. Norwood asked if I would again summarize the conditions under which the resettlement is to be made. I stated that experts have been studying the possibility for their return for the last one and one-half years and that the determination has been made that it would now be safe provided certain things were done. This will include restricting rehabilitation

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for the present to the Bikini-Eneu Complex. The first village and immediate food crops are to be placed on Eneu. No precautions are required on Eneu because of the very low levels of radioactivity there, even lower than in the U. S. The radioactive scrap metal near former test sites should not be used for any purpose and is to be removed. The people may go anywhere in the Atoll but homes are to be built only on Eneu and Bikini. The fish and other foods from the lagoon are safe to eat as well as the birds, turtles, and their eggs. Further studies are to be conducted to insure that what has been predicted is in fact happening and that the precautions to be taken are sufficient.

Lt. Col. Gomes, Mr. Al Carter, and I left Kwajalein Tuesday morning arriving in Honolulu that afternoon. In Honolulu we discussed the trip with Mr. Bonnet and briefed him and his staff on results of the trip. Representatives of H & N staff were also present. Mr. Bonnet agreed to act on a verbal request for estimates of cost for removing contaminated debris and for cleanup of deteriorated test materials and facilities left on the islands, such estimates to be sent to Headquarters AEC for transmittal to Department of Interior. He also agreed to provide estimates of cost of the total job of rehabilitating the Atoll for AEC use.

While this completes the story for this report, there are several items worthy of note that occurred during or after the trip:

1. Missing land - This is a subject certain to be raised in future discussions with Interior since it appeared to be a sore point with the natives, i.e. they agreed to allow the U. S. use of their lands but some of it is not being returned and will never be returned. We will need to know just how much is missing. Information is possibly available from the laboratories and H & N to make a before and after comparison. This should be done now.
2. Press coverage - So far there has been little public knowledge or interest in this project. This could change. It is my understanding from Mr. Mydans that next weeks issue of Life Magazine (the week of October 14) will contain his story and pictures of the trip. He has called this week for information on the two missing islands that were West of Nam and near Bravo test. Information sufficient to answer his questions was obtained from Mr. Bob Newman at LASL. There have been other news items in various newspapers and a series of articles in both the Honolulu Star-Bulletin and Seattle Times.

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3. Other requests for information - The St. Louis Committee has recently requested copies of the B&M reports by Gustafson containing the calculations of exposures for the returning Bikini population. There was also a call from FHS staff indicating they were trying to determine if that agency has any responsibilities for the health of the Bikini natives.
4. Cost of a bomb - Col. Gomes and I were approached by Mr. Baker of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin with the question of how much a nuclear bomb costs. We answered that we didn't have such figures and would not make a guess although if Mr. Norwood needed such information it could possibly be obtained. We heard later (from Mr. Tobin) that in his talks with the natives, Mr. Baker was discussing payments for damage and one idea was an amount equal to the cost of all the devices tested at Bikini. This would explain Mr. Baker's question.
5. Native attitudes - There seemed to be at least two factions within the group of nine natives. One subgroup, primarily the older natives although Jibas was an exception, seemed earnestly intent on returning the Bikini people to the atoll and reestablishing their homes. The remaining natives seemed more interested in the possibility that there may be payments for damages.

Scrap disposal - I have suggested that in the conduct of the contaminated scrap removal program for near test islands there should be radiological safety and monitoring support. The question of proper disposal of the scrap will come up. It is my feeling that disposal in deep water on the ocean side of the reef will suffice and make the scrap unavailable to native scrap collectors. I suspect that removal of the scrap will make little difference in the radiation levels of the cleared islands. I have further suggested that all metal debris should be removed from these islands while the job of cleanup of contaminated scrap is being done. This will avoid much decision making on whether this or that item requires disposal.

In conclusion there is one problem for which I have concern but no suggested solution. In talking with the Trust Territory Agriculturalist I learned some things about the Copra business in the Northern Marshalls. The Bikini people have a copra based economy. The natives get about \$5.00 a bag or about \$240.00 to \$250.00 per ton for the sun-dried coconut.

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Typhoon damage to coconut groves in the Philippines has brought copra into short supply. This is expected to continue for many years, i. e. the market looks good. Coconut oil is used in products such as foods and soap and that part remaining after oil extraction is used for animal feed and fertilizer. The sun-dried copra such as made by the Bikini people on Kili is superior to the oven dried variety and brings a premium price. The market for Copra from this area of the Pacific is Japan. This is due to availability of transportation. The large processing facilities are in the Philippines and in Japan. It was reported that there are also processing plants in Oregon in the U. S. and in California but no transportation is now available in that direction. My worry is the fact that one can expect to find detectable levels of radioactivity in the copra, particularly that grown on Bikini Island, and the fact that the market for this product is Japan. It would be disconcerting, to say the least, to reestablish a copra production capability for Bikini Atoll only to have a problem with the low but detectable levels of radioactivity showing up in the marketable product.

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