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THE BIKINI STORY IN BRIEF

"The natives are actually and literally dying of starvation." Harold L. Ickes used these words to describe the condition of 160 Marshallese natives, former residents of Bikini Atoll. The community to which he referred on September 29, 1947, in his syndicated column "Man to Man," had two years earlier been removed from Bikini to make way for atom bomb experimentation in the interests of United States national defense. The columnist, a former Secretary of the Interior, based his statement on a report concerning the welfare of displaced Bikinians on Rongerik Atoll where they had been resettled. Ickes' charges were directed at the U. S. Navy's administration of the islanders, an interim responsibility which that agency bore for all of the Marshallese and other island peoples residing in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

Regardless of political motivations possibly involved in the charges, and in the subsequent denials by those charged, Ickes' efforts did direct national attention to a people who, on a much smaller scale, were undergoing experiences not unlike those of millions of displaced persons in the postwar world. The American public was forcefully reminded of the decision taken in January, 1946, by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington to conduct atomic weapons testing on the isolated atoll of Bikini in the northern Marshalls, at the expense of the human occupants who had to be resettled on another island.

Evacuation of Bikini Atoll

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Bikinians first learned of this decision on February 10, 1946, when the American governor of the Marshalls paid a visit to Bikini. Through an interpreter he told the islanders of the Washington proposal. He asked for their co-operation. Family heads sitting informally in the local council discussed the matter at length, and their leader answered the governor favorably.

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In the following month, many discussions and conferences were held to consider possible sites for relocation. Most islands and atolls in the Marshalls were already inhabited, and those not occupied offered few inducements for permanent habitation. The administration sought advice from the paramount chief who then lived on Kwajalein Island and according to tradition held title to the atoll of Bikini. For generations Bikinians had used the land and its products in a manner reminiscent of feudal Europe in the Middle Ages. Several atoll sites were investigated; all lay in the northern Marshalls close to Bikini but sufficiently distant to escape danger from the atomic experiments. Alternative possibilities were eliminated for varied reasons. The final selection, agreed to by the Bikinians and approved by the administration, was Rongerik Atoll, about 135 miles east of Bikini in approximately the same latitude.

Rongerik was uninhabited. From time to time small parties from nearby Rongelab Atoll came by canoe to collect coconuts and arrowroot. Rongerik is smaller than Bikini both in its land and lagoon and while its resources were less abundant the administration judged them to be adequate for the Bikinians. Preparations for resettlement began at Bikini with an inventory of properties to be abandoned, i.e. houses, trees, and landholdings. Pandanus leaves were gathered for thatch, canoes were dismantled, and personal belongings were collected, sorted, and packed in boxes or wrapped in pandanus mats.

Twenty-two ^{Bikini} men and some U. S. naval personnel labored for days on Rongerik, building tent frames, latrines, and concrete cisterns for the new village.

A naval landing ship came from Kwajalein to move the Bikinian population. On the afternoon of March 7 the governor and his aides again conferred with the assembled Bikinians and reviewed instructions for passage to Rongerik. Later, at the small cemetery where the villagers had buried their ancestors

for generations a church service solemnized the final farewell. From the shore of the placid lagoon, a constant flow of islanders carrying their possessions went aboard the ship. Outrigger canoes were lashed firmly on the top deck. The migrants, numbering 159, rolled out their sleeping mats in assigned places on the deck of the loaded ship. A movie was the only high light of an uneventful voyage. The next morning the Eikinians arrived at Rongerik.

As they entered Rongerik Lagoon the migrants saw, on the main island, the tent dwellings which had been set up for them. These were immediately allocated by Juda and the atoll council. By that evening the islanders had taken their possessions ashore and moved into their new quarters. The initial reaction of the people was not encouraging. However, conditions improved somewhat as work progressed in laying out a more permanent settlement. The administration provided food for several weeks until the islanders were able to obtain food locally by their customary techniques.

On March 23 when construction at Rongerik was completed, all American personnel returned to Kwajalein and the migrants, as those in any other Marshallese community, were on their own. At Bikini and Kwajalein the following months were filled with hectic activity as the Americans prepared for the atom bomb tests. Rongerik offered welcome relief from the pressures of military duties, and visitors frequently arrived. News photographers, press reporters, and even radio broadcasters traveled to Rongerik on the governor's invitation and the Bikinians soon received a considerable amount of questionable publicity. Unknowing press men, for example, referred to the local head of the atoll council as "King" Juda, much to the annoyance of the paramount chief at Kwajalein. Few Americans really understood what resettlement meant to the community and most of them expressed only passing interest in "just another

curiosity" of the postwar Pacific.

The first atom bomb exploded over the ship-studded lagoon at Bikini on July 1, 1946. The second bomb was detonated underwater twenty-four days later. Life magazine stated that, "if all the ships at Bikini had been manned, the Baker Day bomb would have killed 35,000 crewmen." But when Juda was later invited to view the results he saw coconut palms still producing well. The lagoon still possessed that unruffled serenity he had known before. He did not understand this, and he was not able to inform his people about the radioactivity which had condemned the atoll and its waters for years to come. Homesickness for Bikini mounted on Rongerik. The months passed, and local resources began to prove inadequate for the community's needs.

Crisis on Rongerik

A full year passed before Bikinians again made headlines in the American press. Beginning in early 1947 the administration had become aware of increasing unrest at Rongerik. The field trips made periodically throughout the Marshalls brought back complaints from the Rongerik residents about one thing after another. All of these reports emphasized the strong desire of the migrants to return to Bikini. They did not realize, however, that such a move was now out of the question. The administration considered other possibilities to relieve the stress but came up with no solution. A field medical officer reported in July that the Bikinians had declined physically to an alarming degree. In his opinion the fault lay with the inadequate food resources of the atoll.

The governor appointed a board consisting of several naval officers and a civilian agriculturist employed in the general rehabilitation of the postwar Marshallese economy to investigate the situation. A report submitted in August by the specialist had informed the governor about the insufficient

supply of natural food on Rongerik. The board proposed that the community be moved again. Three relocation sites were evaluated. Ujae Atoll, already investigated in 1946, was rejected a second time because of the many Marshallese families who already lived there. Ujelang Atoll, over 300 miles southwest of Bikini and used by the Japanese before the war as a copra plantation, was uninhabited. The third possibility was Kili, an uninhabited island in the southernmost part of the Marshalls, also exploited formerly by the Japanese for its coconut plantings.

The administration was ready to carry out a second transfer of the people but the problem of selecting a site delayed action for some time. After Ujae had finally been eliminated, the choice remained between Ujelang and Kili. Though Kili held an advantage as a rich and luxuriant island in the rainy southern Marshalls, it lacked a lagoon which made landing from the sea a hazardous operation in any but the calmest weather. The administration finally approved Ujelang as the only practical possibility. There was further delay until the Bikinians themselves were convinced of the desirability of settling on Ujelang since they continued to have fond memories of Bikini. Ickes' caustic comments caught the administration at this point of native indecision.

In mid-October several Rongerik council members were taken to Ujelang to appraise the site firsthand. When they returned to Rongerik and reported their observations, the community agreed to move to Ujelang. The administration immediately proceeded to carry out the plans which had already been developed. In November, a party of young Bikinians and U. S. naval personnel landed on Ujelang from a ship loaded with lumber, building materials, and a cement mixer. Their assignment was to prepare accommodations for a group migration from Rongerik sometime in December. Resettlement of the ex-Bikini D. P.'s held top priority.

Then, on December 1, 1947, newspapers throughout the United States carried an announcement that the Atomic Energy Commission had decided upon Eniwetok Atoll as a new site for atomic weapons experimentation. The 145 inhabitants of Eniwetok in the northern Marshalls were to be moved from their home atoll within three weeks. Their destination: Ujelang. A Washington news release a short time later quoted the Navy Department as "having no present plans for moving the Bikinians from Rongerik." The problem at Rongerik reverted to its pre-Ujelang status with one less possibility for relocation.

At this point the administration decided to review the entire situation. Perhaps there was an outside chance that Bikinians could be persuaded to remain on Rongerik if some program of replanting or other improvement of the atoll's resources could be effected. The high commissioner of the Trust Territory gave the problem his personal attention from headquarters in Hawaii. Because of my previous experience with the Marshallese and past employment with the government on a survey of Marshallese economics, I was invited to conduct an independent investigation on Rongerik, giving special attention to the human resources of the atoll.

For more than a week, from January into February, 1948, I lived with the Bikinians on Rongerik and observed them in action. No doctor or agriculturist was needed to conclude that the islanders were living in an extreme state of impoverishment due to the exhaustion of local food supplies. The people had even organized their economic system on a more communal basis to exploit their dwindling sources of marine and plant food more effectively. There was little that I could suggest to revive interest in continued residence on Rongerik. The inhabitants told me they were ready to go anywhere if they could only leave Rongerik. I seconded the recommendations of the agriculturist who six months earlier had declared that "departure from Rongerik has been too long delayed."

After hearing my preliminary report, the governor of the Marshalls acted immediately by providing food and medical supplies for community relief. He then met with the council at Rongerik and determined the consensus of the community to his own satisfaction. With council agreement the governor began a series of operations which included additional emergency supplies and the removal of the people from Rongerik to Kwajalein. On March 14, the Bikinians boarded a naval vessel for Kwajalein to complete the second stage of their wanderings as a displaced population. There they waited for further investigation and a higher-level authority decision regarding a site for permanent resettlement.

Indecision at Kwajalein

On Kwajalein Island the Bikinians moved into the hastily erected tent camp located between the ocean and the naval facility's air field, and adjacent to a large Marshallese labor settlement. The Bikinians were enabled to preserve their separate identity as a transient community, and maintained their own government, and had a school and a church for their own use. Those who wished it and met the qualifications, obtained employment at the naval air facility in domestic service, as unskilled laborers on road work and garbage detail, and in the laundry or the office. The administration provided food and other necessities for everyone without charge.

The council worked with the administration to find another site. Ujae Atoll was for a third time rejected because of its already large population. The final choice narrowed to two places: Wotho, a small but relatively unpopulated atoll about 150 miles northwest of Kwajalein, and Kili Island earlier considered as an alternative to Ujelang.

In mid-April, the paramount chief accompanied the governor and four council members, including Juda, for an inspection of Wotho where two islands

had been offered for settlement by the chief. During May, Juda and ten other men of Bikini were transported to Kili where they lived for two weeks, exploring the island and evaluating its resources. Following these two surveys, the merits of each site were discussed at length at the Kwajalein camp. In a remarkable plebiscite on June 1, Bikini men and women cast their ballots for either Notho or Kili. The results were in favor of Kili by a vote of fifty-four to twenty-two. The governor reported the decision to the high commissioner and requested authority to settle the people on Kili.

Several months passed while the request was reviewed. The Bikinians became restless on Kwajalein as their alien surroundings lost their novelty. The relief at leaving Rongerik was replaced by an increasing annoyance with the oppressive noise of arriving and departing planes and the constant booming of the ocean surf. Long accustomed to a quiet existence near a sheltered lagoon, the people talked now constantly about Bikini, recalling its beauties and virtues as these became magnified in their dimming memories. Morale fell. Although they had voted for a new home on Kili Island, the people began to doubt the desirability of such a move the longer they pondered its disadvantages.

In September, approval came from the high commissioner to begin the Kili project. By the end of the month, a work party of Bikinians and U. S. naval personnel from Kwajalein had landed on Kili with equipment and orders to prepare a new village site. The men cleared an area near shore on the northwest side of the island and started construction on a council house, dispensary, store, copra warehouse, and cisterns.

Kili, a New Home in a New Land

On November 2, 1948, two naval vessels arrived at Kili from Kwajalein with 184 displaced persons on board. Heavy seas delayed final landing of the islanders and their possessions until November 7. Most of the Americans assigned