

PROUD MOMENTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Caring for the Natives

by Hamlet J. Barry

In early February, 1942, just two months after Pearl Harbor, American forces attacked the Japanese for the first time. Carrier planes struck Japanese bases in the Marshall Islands, 2,000 miles southwest of Hawaii. The fighters attacked airfields at Milli, Kwajalein, Maloelap, and Wotje atolls, and the Japanese Navy and seaplane base at Jaluit atoll, and then retreated to the carriers. The Marshall Islands did not see American bombers again for 22 months, when, in preparation for an invasion, the bombing began on a daily basis.

In late 1941, 26-year-old Ukukot Libokmeto sailed from his home atoll of Ebon, to Jaluit atoll, about 75

miles to the north, to sell a boat and replenish supplies for his general store. Unknown to Ukukot, the war was approaching, and the Japanese at Jaluit refused to let him return to Ebon, forcing him to work on the military installations at Jabor, Jaluit. On the morning of February 2, 1942, Ukukot, his wife, and son awoke to the sound of attacking airplanes. American pilots, unaided by intelligence reports and probably ignorant of the presence of Marshallese at Jabor, were apparently unable to distinguish military targets from other buildings. Ukukot Libokmeto was killed by an American bomb dropped on the Marshallese housing area at the northern end of Jabor Island.

From an American point of view, the February 2 incident is of minor significance in the history of World

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War II. For the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands, however, it marked the beginning of 30 years of contact with the American military. Since then the Marshallese have often found themselves on the receiving end of military actions which were designed for the benefit of someone else, and which completely disregarded not only their legal rights, but their personal lives as well.

The morning of March 1, 1954, was different from all other mornings for the 82 residents of Rongelap atoll in the northern Marshalls. One hundred miles to the west of Rongelap, Joint Task Force Seven detonated "Bravo," American's second hydrogen device and the most powerful bomb yet tested, later estimated to equal 15 million tons of TNT.

"Bravo" consisted of 200 pounds of uranium 235, 200 pounds of lithium deuteride, and more than a ton of uranium 238. When it exploded it created a fireball three to five miles in diameter and produced a sun-like glow on the horizon at Rongelap. In two separate pulses, "Bravo" expended a third of its energy in x-ray and thermal radiation, and half its force went into a high pressure shock wave which sped outward from the Bikini site at more than 2,000 miles per hour. In the initial explosion "Bravo" riddled the surrounding area with a small percentage of its energy in the form of neutron and gamma rays. The force of the explosion pulverized several hundred million tons of the Bikini reef and lagoon, lifting it in the form of water vapor and calcium oxide into a giant mushroom cloud that towered 21 miles into the sky within ten minutes of detonation. The remaining energy of "Bravo" was deposited as residual radiation in the uplifted water and coral. The results of this last ten per cent of Bravo's energy would hound the U.S. military and the people of Rongelap for the next 20 years.

Before the detonation, Bikini atoll was evacuated. The ships of Joint Task Force Seven lay 30 miles to the

east of the atoll. Shipboard observers knew immediately that something was terribly wrong. Bravo was considerably larger and more forceful than anticipated, and, more significantly, the wind began to carry the mushroom cloud to the east—toward the ships and Rongelap—rather than to the west as predicted. Not only was Bravo a blast of monumental size, it was the first to utilize a fission-fusion-fission process, creating an exceptionally "dirty" bomb. The harmless looking clouds which the wind pushed eastward contained water vapor and calcium oxide saturated with millions of rads (a "rad" is a measure per unit mass of radioactivity) of gamma and beta activity. The ships of Task Force Seven turned south to escape the radiation.

Prior to the detonation of Bravo, the military placed 28 RadSafe (Radiation Safety) monitors on uninhabited Rongerik atoll, about 30 miles east of Rongelap. Shortly after the blast those men received word by radio that the radioactive cloud was heading east, and that they should put on extra clothing and remain inside their prefabricated metal building. Soon the decision was made to evacuate the 28 Americans, and 34 hours after the blast, the RadSafe crew was aboard ship, heading away from the area. To reach Rongerik, the ships of Task Force Seven had to sail past Rongelap. The populace at Rongelap was not evacuated, in spite of the fact that the atoll was closer to Bravo than Rongerik.

At Rongelap the people saw the strange orange glow on the western horizon and heard the sound of Bravo, and wondered if another war had begun. Several hours later a strange white ash began to fall on the atoll, and within several hours two inches of "snow" blanketed Rongelap. The next day some RadSafe monitors visited Rongelap by plane and told the people not to drink the water. Twenty-four hours later ships appeared in the lagoon, and the people were told that they must leave

Rongelap or they would die. Sixty hours after the Bravo blast all the people were evacuated by air or ship to Kwajalein. So powerful had been the explosion and the "snow" so filled with poison that the Rongelap people were not allowed to return home for three years, and even then the Rongelap environment was still radioactive and dangerous.

Since there was no RadSafe monitor on Rongelap in March 1954 we will never know exactly how much exposure to radioactivity the people there received. Based on later estimates, samples from the fallout at Rongerik, and recalculations from earlier data, the probable whole body gamma dose at Rongelap was 175 rads, plus or minus 25 rads. The minimum lethal dose for man is probably about 225 rads. At 500 rads half the exposed populace will die. On Rongelap several effects were immediately evident. Many people lost all their hair and some skin, and everyone received beta burns to a greater or lesser degree. Some radio-nuclides were ingested or inhaled by the Rongelapese, particularly nuclides of iodine and strontium. The children's thyroid glands, which control growth, received from 700 to 1400 rads, while adult thyroids received 160 rads.

The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) has been following the exposed populace of Rongelap since 1954. Each year the AEC—through the Brookhaven National Laboratory—sponsors a medical survey of the island. During the tenth annual survey small thyroid nodules were discovered on three young girls. Despite the fact that earlier surveys noted that some exposed children were slow to grow, no thyroid medication for the exposed populace was administered until after the discovery of the nodules. Since 1964, similar problems have occurred among 19 inhabitants of Rongelap. All have been operated upon to remove the thyroid nodules, and in four cases the nodules were found to be malignant. There is no question that Bravo is the cause of the

thyroid nodules. Treatment and removal of the nodules has been generously paid for by the AEC, and the whole exposed populace now receives thyroxine to retard the development of nodules. In spite of the belated administration of thyroxine, nodules continue to occur. Three more Rongelapese were operated on in June 1974.

In September 1972 19-year-old Lekoj Anjain was examined on Rongelap and found to have a low white blood cell count. He was taken to Honolulu, and then to Brookhaven, where the diagnosis was acute myelogenous leukemia. Lekoj was admitted to the National Cancer Institute where he shared a room with columnist Stewart Alsop, who was also undergoing treatment for leukemia. Ironically, Alsop had originally reported on the Bravo detonation of 1954. Alsop wrote a graceful and poignant column for *Newsweek* (October 30, 1972) devoted to Lekoj. Lekoj died on November 15, 1972. Later, in a chapter in his book, *Stay of Execution*, Alsop wrote:

"There was... the depressing feeling, hard to shake off, that I had been responsible for Lekoj's death. There was the further feeling, as hard to shake off, that we Americans were responsible for his death—that we had killed him with our bomb. His was the first death from a hydrogen bomb, and the bomb was ours. And finally, there was the feeling of the desperate, irrational unfairness of the death of this gentle, oddly innocent young man."

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Dossier: The Secret Files They Keep on You. Aryeh Neier. Stein & Day, \$7.95. The executive director of the ACLU offers a chilling presentation on the abuses of record-keeping by government and private institutions. Although marred by a rather one-dimensional outlook and by overheated rhetoric—“The dossier-mongers never rest”—the book contains enough details about damage done by slanderous data to scare almost anyone. One example: A Vietnam vet with an injured eye was refused treatment because he once went home for Christmas a day early. Among the worst offenders, Neier says, are those who brand children for life as “troublemaker” with the stroke of a pen. Some solutions: Destroy all arrest records that do not result in conviction, and allow citizens to correct dossiers.

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