

Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands Revisited: "Crossroads, Plus 60 Years"

Walter B. Kropf recently revisited the Marshall Islands, where he had served in 1946 with the 53rd Seabees for Operation Crossroads, the first US-conducted atomic tests at Bikini Atoll. In the following report and photos, he shares his experience:

On October 12, 2005, my son and I made a five hour flight from Honolulu to Majuro (capital of the Marshall Islands). The next day was a two hour flight to Bikini Atoll with a brief stop at Kwajalein. We landed on a coral and grass runway on Enyu Island, where we were met by Bikini Divers and transferred to Bikini Island by boat. Bikini Divers is a semi-permanent group catering primarily to scuba divers and consists of three dive masters and five or six Marshallese. In addition to Bikini Divers, there is a small U.S. Department of Energy group living on the island still testing mainly things grown on the island as well as the water. Their claim is that Bikini is the most tested island in the world. There are ten or twelve buildings on Bikini housing the Bikini Divers, DOE personnel, Marshallese workers, and visiting guests. Our quarters for the week were Spartan, but clean and comfortable with air-conditioning and hot showers. Power is supplied to all of the facilities by two good sized generators in a separate building away from the housing.

A supply ship delivers food, fuel, and other necessities three or four times a year. This ship arrived during our stay (3 months late) with many goodies, including fresh eggs. The three meals per day were quite good even before the supply ship arrived, thanks to a large walk-in freezer. There was also no shortage of fresh water supplied by a desalinization plant.

Bikini island looked much like it did 59 years ago, but has more breadfruit and pandanus trees. As you may recall, Able and Baker tests did little damage to the islands. The Bravo test in 1954, which was 1000 times the power of Able and Baker, however, leveled just about all of the trees on the atoll. Bikini Island was then bulldozed and cleared of all vegetation.

Coconut palm trees were planted in the 1970's and are now full grown. Most of these were planted in straight lines in grids over the island but are very appealing to the eye. There is no sign of the camera towers erected in 1946 by the 53rd Seabees, but there are several large concrete bunkers built probably for Bravo, one of which we viewed inside. The smaller islands in the atoll were not re-planted and have very few palm trees. They are thickly covered with breadfruit, pandanus, and other trees and shrubs.

Eddie, a very personable Marshallese whose grandfather was one of the Bikinian moved off the island, took my son and me on a boat trip to the outer islands and we went ashore on Eman island (Eneman), where I lived for about three months in 1946 with a weather station contingent of eight people (two Air Force officers, three AF enlisted men, one Coxswain, and two Seabees including myself. The station made daily weather reports to Kwajalein for the B-29's making practice runs on an Erik island target. That brought back many memories of swimming, fishing for sharks, beachcombing, and tent living.

The scuba divers went out twice a day to dive on, around, and in the Saratoga CV3, Japanese battleship Nagato, battleship USS Arkansas, and other ships and submarines at the bottom of the lagoon. My son and I did not dive as it is no place for a novice diver. They were down 150-180 feet most days. We did, however, snorkel above the Saratoga and could see the outline of her superstructure.

The Bikinians evacuated in 1946 to Rongerik, or their descendants, are now living mostly on Kili Atoll. The Marshallese now working on Bikini are mostly from Majuro and return there once or twice a year.

All in all it was a thoroughly enjoyable trip, although my son was a little bit antsy because of the isolation and remoteness of Bikini. No telephones, TV, Internet or other contact with the outside world. There was a satellite telephone available for emergency use and a TV for showing of videos and DVD's.

--by Walter B. Kropf (Phm2/c 53rd Seabees, 1946), November 21, 2005