



The Atomic Times: My H-Bomb Year at the Pacific Proving Ground

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Catch-22 with radiation.

Area 51 meets Dr. Strangelove.

Except it really happened.

Operation Redwing, the biggest and baddest of America's atmospheric nuclear weapons test regimes, mixed saber rattling with mad science, while overlooking the cataclysmic human, geopolitical and ecological effects. But mostly, it just messed with guys' heads.

Major Maxwell, who put Safety First, Second and Third. Except when he didn't.

Berko, the wise-cracking Brooklyn Dodgers fan forced to cope with the H-bomb and his mother's cookies.

Tony, who thought military spit and polish plus uncompromising willpower made him an exception.

Carl Duncan, who clung to his girlfriend's photos and a dangerous secret.

Major Vanish, who did just that.

In THE ATOMIC TIMES, Michael Harris welcomes readers into the U.S. Army's nuclear family where the F-words were Fallout and Fireball. In a distinctive narrative voice, Harris describes his H-bomb year with unforgettable imagery and insight into the ways isolation and isotopes change men for better--and for worse.

The Atomic Times: My H-Bomb Year at the Pacific Proving Ground Details

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From Reader Review The Atomic Times: My H-Bomb Year at the Pacific Proving Ground for online ebook

Richard Buro says

The short version first . . .

Just about anyone in this day and age can relate to discussions about atomic energy. The closest reactors to my hometown are about a hundred miles to our north, northwest outside the small town of Glen Rose, Texas, at a location known as Comanche Peak. The twin reactors provide a substantial amount of the electrical generating capacity for the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex as well as other locations in Central Texas.

Similar elements which power these peaceful power generation reactors can also be used, with some chemical and physical manipulations, to create two of the worst type of weapons of mass destruction, atomic and thermonuclear devices. So far in history, only the towns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, both in the country of Japan, have seen the horrors associated with the use of these weapons in acts of war in the closing days of World War II, horrors which continue to cause problems to this day. Atomic power plants are not without their problems as well as was demonstrated in the Chernobyl disaster of the 1980s in the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and in the country of Japan again just a few years ago at the Fukushima plant following damage by a large earthquake. In both of these cases, reactor cores were breached and resulted in catastrophic releases of radioactive elements via both explosive events and breached containment structures as well as radioactive contamination of either air or water in, around, and downwind from the plants in question. It is clear that even forty years after World War II in the case of Chernobyl, and almost seventy years in the case of Fukushima, there are still ways that atomic energy can cause problems in our world. Imagine that with our current level of peaceful use of these energy sources for now a full seven decades since the public became aware of its existence, we still can experience serious problems related to the use of these toxic and deadly substances. Now imagine how much less we knew in the mid 1950s, the time frame for this review of by Michael Harris.

For Mr. Harris, the year starting in August, 1955 was his “H-Bomb” year. He had already graduated from Brown University in 1954. He had served a year of his two-year hitch in the Army from August, 1954 until now. But he was chosen to participate in a “support” role for Joint Task Force 7 (JTF-7), assigned to the Pacific Proving Grounds on Eniwetok, one of two atolls forming a part of the Marshall Islands in the South Central Pacific Ocean. The other atoll that was relatively close to Eniwetok was Bikini. In the history of nuclear testing, two of the more “exposed” testing sites other than in Nevada and Utah for the United States atmospheric testing series. The continental testing locations experience fewer large detonations and the vast majority of the underground testing series. In all, Mr. Harris was front and center for 12 of the 17 tests that formed the series of Operation Redwing. The remaining 5 “shots” of the series were conducted after he left the area having served his tour. In fact of the remaining 5, 2 of the shots were the largest of the Redwing series as far as actual yield, both registering more megatonage than his largest experienced of 3.8 MT. In fact the two larger tests were responsible for heavier fallout lasting for days at a time, something that had not happened in Harris’ H-Bomb year.

It is clear as one reads Mr. Harris’ account that there were things other than exceptionally large explosions only miles away, large exposures to radiation, and constant reinforcement that there was “absolutely no danger” associated with these events. There was the mind-numbing routines, the men only group assigned to JTF-7, the complete isolation from everything including trees (most of them were

destroyed in the tests), recreation – swimming was discouraged either by large sharks, rip currents, or hundreds of feet deep water almost immediately off shore of the islands only a few feet above the surface of the ocean. The almost laughable situations involved the “precautions” that had to be followed in the case of fallout – the precipitative dust, grains, and sometimes rain that occurred in the debris cloud of a “shot.” According to Mr. Harris, one could always tell when the fallout was occurring as you could hear the “clicking” of the radiation counters mounted outside all of the buildings where they worked and lived. The louder and longer the clicking lasted the heavier and more contaminated the “fallout” was. The personnel were advised not to go out during periods of fallout, and they were also encouraged to close all of the windows and doors in their buildings. Of course, the windows were aluminum and had corroded in the sea air so that they couldn’t be closed. They were almost “welded” open, and despite repeated efforts to break things loose or grease them for operation, nothing worked to make the windows close.

The window issue was only one of the things that slowly drove individuals into various states of depression, anxiety, irritability, and other forms of mental distress. Some would become belligerent and would be incarcerated when they were not being witnesses to the “shots” or engaged in their assigned work details, most of which required unloading boxes, taking inventory, writing and filing reports, making and filing orders for supplies, and assisting with maintenance of diverse equipment and machinery. JTF-7 was a true multi-service operation including U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel and equipment including several ships, a variety of various aircraft types from bombers to transports and just about everything else in-between that were large enough to make the trip from other bases in either the continental United States or the various large bases in the Pacific and surrounding territories.

A typical test would begin early in the day usually before dawn with a wakeup, fallout to formation, and marching single file to a designated area with the troops being ordered to face in a direction which was supposed to face them away from the point of detonation for the “shot” since they did not have any protective goggles for the enlisted troops. They closed and then covered their eyes with their forearms as a general rule. They would be allowed to stand at ease until a brief time before the “shot” occurred, and they would stand at attention with “proper eye precautions” during and shortly after the shot occurred. Most of the time the “shots” proceeded with little or no problems, despite the fact that they were subjected to the heat flash; the ionizing effects of X-, Gamma, and neutron radiation; and the ameliorated blast and overpressure effects which were lessened by their physical distance from the point of detonation. Some of the shots were air-dropped from bombers, some were shots from towers similar to the original Trinity (first atomic) shot. In all events and cases, the men were told they were in no danger. In the event that something was obviously “dangerous,” everyone would be warned by the “DV” (disembodied voice) of the public address system, as in the cases of the occurrences of “fallout.”

Mr. Harris has a very engaging style of writing in which the reader is propelled into the “heart” of whatever is going on in his account. He started writing the information during his time on “The Rock” as they termed the island. He recounts the stories and characters in amazing detail, and the reader simply cannot put the book down. Mr. Harris is funny, poignant, devastating, ironic, and informative over the span of just about each page of the work – the story is that complex and that human. There are clear human dynamics here that the “authorities” did not have a clue would even occur. They dealt with them the best they could, and in some cases, the individuals in the situations dealt with them the best that they could. In some cases, it was not necessarily the best of circumstances, and in some cases the worst of circumstances could not be faced with resorting to strange ideas of humor and dogged determination to make it “through this one.” The story in the final analysis is one of a very dangerous set of circumstances, poorly understood at the best, woefully underplayed at the worst, and perfectly wrong in the worst possible ways. The findings at the end of the day were that most of the participants in JTF-7 had significantly higher than expected rates of specific forms of cancer and other medical conditions which could be attributed to the effects of overexposure to the effects of

ionizing radiation. Many of these men died in their middle age (35-55) who probably would have lived 10-20 years or more had they not been exposed to the multiple exposures to atomic and thermonuclear explosions. The effects of these weapons of mass destruction were in all cases poorly understood, if at all, during these tests. The men were told they were in “no danger” when in light of the current amount of knowledge (albeit not much greater than then in many cases) would have opted for use of dark eye protection, placement in shelters or at least indoors, and similar logically reasonable precautions from the simple effects of an explosion of a known material like TNT. It is abundantly clear that the level of ignorance about the nature of these explosions, their effects both near- and long-term were not fully appreciated or even realized. Many men suffered from the ignorance of those in charge, and thus they were not just subjects of the test, they were truly reduced to being guinea-pigs in one of the worst possible cases of scientific testing gone totally awry with very little in the way of sound planning or knowledge applied to the subjects of the testing. Those who were the subjects of the testing paid the price dearly with illness, suffering, and in some cases lingering death.

Caveats for who should read and probably should not read this book follow. There is a good deal of explicit language richly profuse throughout, although it is to be expected of men in the military being men and using crude verbiage to describe situations, their feelings about the situations, and their feelings about each other in some cases. There are references to adults being adults, and in some cases of adult men being adult with other adult men. There are also gruesome cases of death graphically rendered, as well as injuries inflicted on selves and others, besides the obvious issues of seeing bones in the X-ray events from the thermonuclear explosions in particular. I would strongly recommend parental guidance even at high school levels for this work, just from the fact that things are graphic and the nature of the graphic events is in many cases difficult to handle. Remember the nature of the topic at hand – human beings thrust into relatively close proximity to known weapons of mass destruction based on splitting and fusing atoms apart or together depending on how the WMD is constructed to function. These are clearly among the most heinous of devices we have ever conceived. They truly deserve to be called weapons of mass destruction. For all this, Mr. Harris, needs to be roundly commended for taking a truly tragic set of circumstances and bringing out the humanity and the inhumanity in a topic that we may not fully realize the extent of its impact now, and we may never know all that we should know about the subject at hand or the subjects of those experimental exposures. Truly tragic, and those involved truly heroic for bearing up against the unbearable – even unbelievably heroic.

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Review of *The Atomic Times: My H-Bomb Year at the Pacific Proving Grounds* by Michael Harris by Richard Buro is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Based on a work at Goodreads

Tracy says

Have you ever been glad that nuclear war was averted? Nevermind, because it wasn't. In the 1950s we detonated nuclear weapons willy nilly and made people hang out in the fallout.

The Atomic Times: My H-Bomb Year at the Pacific Proving Ground by Michael Harris is a gripping memoir. His narrative about his year in Eniwetok drags the reader through an experience that is surreal, malicious, and as dark as a thermonuclear explosion is unbearably bright.

I was immediately attracted to this book because the Cold War and nuclear testing have always fascinated me. As a little girl I used to lay awake at night and worry about nuclear war. The fact is it happened before I was even born. My review of Trinity: The Atomic Bomb Movie explains my thoughts on this era pretty well. In Trinity I noticed the servicemen in the Pacific. There are films of them working, at the beach, and witnessing detonations. I always wondered what their experience was like. How many had died of cancer before their time?

In The Atomic Times, Michael Harris provides the answers to all my questions and more. His horrific account of twelve months in a realm where "censorship is self imposed" locks the reader in the concrete hell of faggot-hunting MPs, insane commanding officers, and mutated fish.

Oh, and the enlisted men didn't get goggles when they had to stand in formation and await the megaton dawn. They got to duck and cover.

Michael Harris is a skilled writer who delivered a read I couldn't put down. I look forward to reading more of his work.

George says

INFORMATIVE.

"The first time the United States dropped an H-bomb from a plane, we hit the wrong target."—page 282

"Comedian Bob Hope had another perspective on this Operation: 'As soon as the war ended, we located the one spot on earth that hadn't been touched by the war and blew it to hell.' "—page 184

I was hoping to learn more about the tests conducted at Eniwetok and Bikini Atolls in the 1950s, and to catch a glimpse of what it was like for the military men who were part of the experience. Michael Harris's book THE ATOMIC TIMES: My H-Bomb Year at the Pacific Proving Ground—a Memoir, offers a satisfactory peek at both.

Unfortunately, the first half of his 'memoir' offers up far too much information on his personal life before, 'Wetok. The second half of the book is much better than the first.

Recommendation: Probably of interest more to those involved, in someway or another, with the Pacific Proving Grounds, nuclear testing, and/or life on an isolated Pacific atoll.

"His wife had written him that the pieces of shell and coral he sent looked beautiful when she put them in the clay pots filled with their plants and flowers... A week later she wrote that all the plants and flowers were dead."—page 349

NOOKbook editions, 562 pages

William Beldham says

Really good story well told. Great experiences.

Erik Graff says

I picked this book up at the Hayward, Wisconsin Public Library booksale room--a place worth visiting if you find yourself vacationing up there.

Although I found this memoir a quick and entertaining read, and although I might recommend it to anyone ignorant or desperate enough to consider military enlistment, I cannot generally advise that it be purchased. It's mixture of absurd humor and deadly implication didn't quite work. Mostly it's funny, but the humor is almost entirely dark. The characters, for the most part, are pathetic creatures. Not just the young enlistees either. If anything, their adult officers are presented as being even worse. One fears for a country supposedly 'defended' by such idiots. Then, and this, while mentioned, deserves more mention than it got, there are the really big idiots--the ones behind the development and testing of thermonuclear devices. They are hardly mentioned, but the deaths of some tens of thousands of Americans as one the results of these tests receives passing mention.

A better book might have interwoven the objective history of the H-bomb tests the author witnessed with his personal reminiscences.

Terry Collins says

An excellent insider's look at being a "grunt on the ground" during the atomic tests in the Pacific. What is revealed is at times hilarious, and other times scary as all get out (I won't forget the sailor who proudly showed off his glowing radioactive toes anytime soon). Harris writes in a direct and engaging manner, showing himself to be as flawed as his fellows as they deal with a full year of being trapped on a tiny island with no women, and no outside contact except for letters from home. The storytelling is episodic, making this a great book to read when you have only a short time to devote to the page (and explains why I read it off and on for several months). Available for less than \$2 via Kindle, I can highly recommend to anyone who enjoyed M.A.S.H. or CATCH-22. The same compartmentalized insanity is on full display here, and resonates even more since the stories are all true and not filtered via fiction.

Pamela Pickering says

Things that make you go, "YYYYIKES!" With all the information we know today in regards to radiation exposure it does seem ludicrous that such reckless testing was done with the H bomb. Harris' interesting memoir chronicles his days spent on the Pacific Proving Ground in 1955 and depicts the stress of those who were stationed on a small island in the Atolls. Like the author, I would've been horrified to hear that a co-workers toenails were glowing in the dark, to swim with three eyed fish, or to stand outside in view of a

mushroom cloud. Although I found the "guy" talk a little too coarse for my taste, the story kept me riveted.

Mallory McClenathen says

Such an interesting read. I had no idea we tested nuclear bombs in the Pacific in the 50s.. and enlisted soldiers to stand around in the fallout! Harris gives us a firsthand account of what it was like for the men stationed at Eniwetok Atoll. I was blown away by more than a few stories he shared. Unbelievable, but true.

John says

While not a comprehensive account, it came off as an honest telling of one man's life during the H-bomb tests in the Pacific.

Brian Manville says

The Atomic Times is a most curious book. It is definitely a first-person historical account, but it also mixes in elements of Catch-22, Lord of the Flies and quite possibly One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. It is Michael Harris' account of his nearly year-long experience at Eniwetok in the South Pacific during Operation Redwing. This was where hydrogen bombs were tested in the early stages of the Cold War.

While reading, one could be forgiven for not knowing exactly what type of book they're reading. There are stories of sexual self-gratification, military *ahem* "intelligence", a little science and some locker room antics. It takes awhile, but Harris brings us into the true nature of the story: the efforts to perfect the hydrogen bomb as a means of preserving the Mutually Assured Destruction doctrine that would come to be every bit a part of the Cold War as proxy wars - both with guns and on fields of athletic competition.

The book's release - in 2005 - seems curious. This would have been a book that you would think would be prime for release during the discussion of nuclear weapons in the 1980s. It would have been a perfect compliment to Laura Dern crying on the Phil Donahue show about the possibility of being nuked with The Fixx playing the soundtrack. (In fact, the book's reviews come from congressmen, scientists, and noted ~~swimsuit model~~ activist Christie Brinkley.)

Indeed, even though Pershing II missiles no longer reside in the former West Germany, the book does serve a purpose. I would tend to look at this account in the same way I look at the tragic saga of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments; a tragic event in our nation's history that should not have happened as well as a reminder that our government often serves its own aims first and its citizens second...maybe.

PARENTAL GUIDE: There are accounts of homosexual behavior/acts that may not be appropriate for readers of a minority age. There is also an account of bullying that may be hard to read for young people.

BOTTOM LINE: A first-hand account of being on the front lines during the Cold War.

Alex Long says

This book is near and dear to me because of my education and fascination with the cold war and nuclear testing specifically. Beyond that, this book serves as a real life Catch-22 with most of the bureaucratic trappings that make the military a hilarious nightmare. I am amazed at how people cope with reality in the face of ridiculous, dangerous circumstances and this book is an interesting, very real look at that issue.

Kamas Kirian says

I quite enjoyed this book. It's a quick read. I had read the free excerpt before regarding one of the first tests and was expecting it to center more on the tests than his overall experiences on the island. At first I was slightly disappointed, but it was simply a matter of my expectations being off comparing the excerpt with the full work.

The descriptions of how the people acted while stuck out there, the utterly ridiculous and sheer stupidity of the military's decisions were quite startling. Not that the military doing something with its head stuck up its posterior is anything new, just that they intentionally exposed so many of their soldiers and sailors to unnecessary risks and damaged not only their physical health but their mental health as well. I fervently hope whomever was in charge of Operation Redwing and made the decisions to endanger so many lives ended up with a very long, painful and debilitating disease (and yes, I realize I'm not being very Christian right now, it's something I struggle with). I sincerely hope those who suffered through those tests were able to find a way to cope with what they went through.

It really shouldn't surprise me that the military would expose their men unnecessarily like they did. Our government has a tradition nearly as long as our country is old of not living up to its stated promises. Just in the 20th century we saw our men abandoned in Russia without support near the end of WWI, US POWs abandoned to the Soviet Union in WWII, to North Korea at the end of the Korean conflict, and to the Vietnamese when we withdrew from Vietnam. We exposed infectious diseases to multitudes of population centers around the country without informing the civilians so that we could study the spread of disease and the available treatments. Our government really has no shame when it comes to treating its citizens and soldiers poorly. Not that we're alone in that, we appear to be just like everyone else.

The eBook was formatted well with no obvious spelling or grammatical errors.

Siva Srinivas R says

Great book!

Living in India, we almost never hear such true stories! Scientific progress takes its toll on those who get to reap the benefits. A sad story where you feel sorry for the atomic veterans and by the time you reach the end, feel happy for the author! Having to live through such incidents is a true shame! May there be no such times where countries have to be prepared for atomic attacks, ever! Let there be peace! Wishful thinking!

Laura Seitz says

Revealing and disturbing

This is a well-written and engrossing read about a dark chapter in US history. The denial of reality involved make it a fascinating look at how the unbearable becomes routine.

Jonathan says

Interesting look at the h bomb testing after world war two from the perspective of an enlisted soldier. If you are interested in history from unique view points, this book is for you.
