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The Forgotten Marshallese of Wotho, Rongelap and Utirik Atolls

Roger A. Meade



The Marshall Islands: The Ralik (Sunset) and Ratak (Sunrise) chains.

Two of the Laboratory's major roads are named for Bikini and Enewetak Atolls, where sixty-six nuclear tests were conducted between 1946 and 1958. These signs honor the sacrifices made by the natives of both atolls, who left their ancestral islands to make room for Operations Crossroads, Sandstone, Greenhouse, Ivy, Castle, Redwing, and Hardtack I. Lost in the mist of time, however, are similar sacrifices made by the islanders of Wotho, Rongelap, and Utirik Atolls.

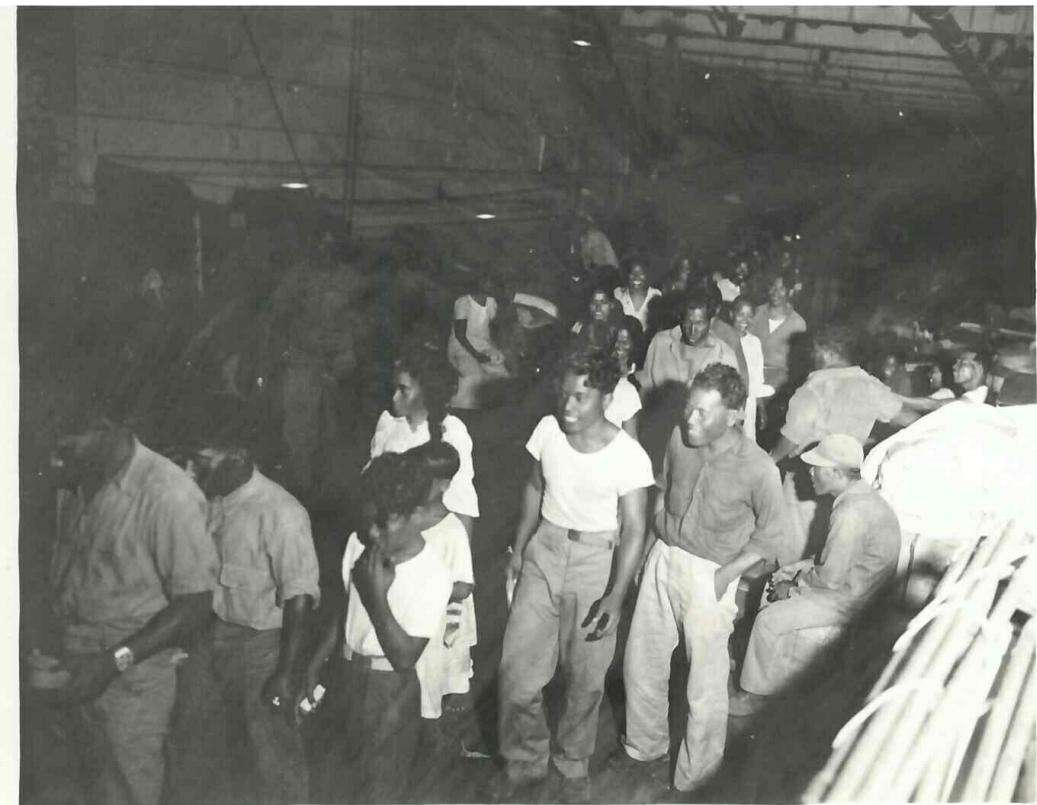
Wotho and Rongelap, whose 1946 population numbers are not known, were temporarily evacuated just prior to Operation Crossroads as a precaution against possible radioactive fallout from test Able. Allowed little more than what they could carry on their shoulders, the islanders were moved to Lae Atoll by the United States Navy, where they lived in separate enclaves for the duration of Crossroads. The photographs shown show the conditions of their evacuations.



Wotho Atoll (author's collection)



Loading native supplies (author's collection)

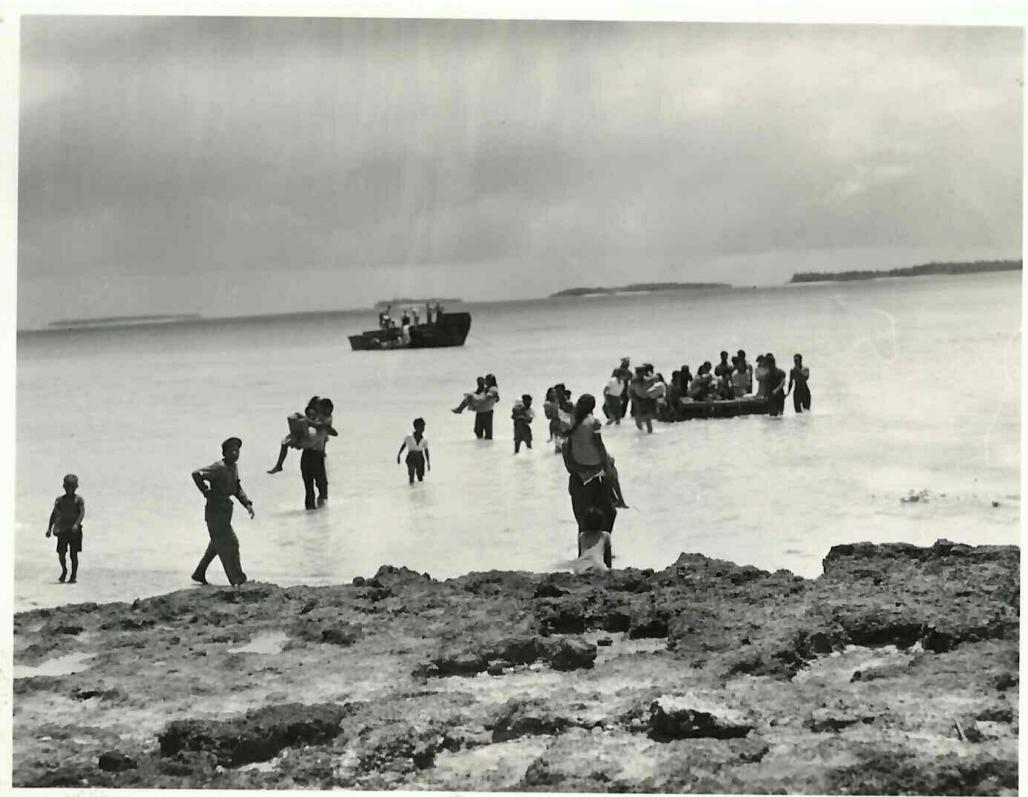


Aboard Navy LST in transit to Lae (author's collection)

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Open deck of transport ship (author's collection)



Arrival at Lae Atoll (author's collection)



Evacuated children (author's collection)



U.S. Navy welcome ceremony at Lae Atoll (author's collection)



Gathering of evacuees on Lae (author's collection)

In 1954, unexpected fallout from the multi-megaton thermonuclear explosion of the Castle-Bravo event, the highest yield United States nuclear test, forced the emergency evacuations of Rongelap and Utirik Atolls.

The Rongelapese were taken to Kwajalein Atoll in two groups. Sixteen of the eighty-two islanders by seaplane and the remaining sixty-six by the USS Philips, a Navy destroyer escort. The Philips's crew donated their personal clothing as replacements for garments that could not be decontaminated. Immediately after undergoing decontamination, the children were given milk. A bit later, the Marshallese went through the ship's mess line. As the commander of the Philips reported, "The meat course was the least popular. The majority asked for more soup, bread, and vegetables. Ice cream was the natural favorite of the children."

The evacuation of Utirik did not happen as quickly or easily as that of Rongelap. Because the entrance to Utirik's lagoon was too shallow for the destroyer escort, the USS Renshaw, the evacuation had to take place over the open sea. The 154 natives, beginning with the women and children, were loaded on rafts, floated over a reef, and then transferred to whale boats capable of reaching the Renshaw's anchorage. Wind and waves hampered the evacuation nearly capsizing two rafts. It took over two hours before all the islanders were aboard the Renshaw.



USS Renshaw

The commander of the Renshaw wrote of his passengers as they disembarked at Kwajalein, "As they went over the side one could not help but observe and admire the innate dignity of these simple human beings and their naïve but forthright and optimistic attitude toward life." When asked what he thought of his situation, the Utirik Iroj (chief) replied, "The world, we think she start over again."



Rongelap Natives on Kwajalein (LANL Archives)



Rongelap Children on Kwajalein posing with the Commander of Operation Castle, Major General Percy Clarkson.

In the fall of 1954, the people of Utirik were returned to their homes. Not so the people of Rongelap, who had to wait until 1957. However, persistent fear of radioactivity led to their departure again in 1985. They have yet to return home.



Utirik Atoll, October 2000 (author's collection)

The sacrifices made by the peoples of the Marshall Islands for the nation's nuclear test program extend beyond those of Bikini and Enewetak and may never be fully appreciated. Thankfully, the Bikini and Enewetak street signs provide a daily reminder of the permanent connection between Los Alamos and the Marshall Islands.