Memories of Johnston Atoll

My first trip to Johnston Atoll (JA) was in 1987, shortly after I was hired as a Physical Scientist at the US Department of Energy’s Nevada Operations Office (DOE/NV – now the NNSA Nevada Field Office). I was tasked with establishing a comprehensive radiological assessment program for NV which included our programs at the NTS as well as off-site. JA was one of those several off-site locations with historical contamination and ongoing radiation programs.

I flew to Honolulu, HI where I in-briefed Joe Dryden, the DOE Pacific Area Support Office (PASO) Director, as to my tasking and received a tour of Hickam Air Force Base (AFB) where PASO was located. The next day, I caught an Air Micronesia flight from Honolulu airport that took off only after loading several crates of live chickens. Air Micronesia was well known to DOE passengers for boarding livestock and fowl in the front of the plane, and later, passengers like me through the rear hatch door. The smells and clucking sounds were a little disturbing, but the 717-mile trip to JA was otherwise uneventful. After the plane landed at JA, it then continued on its scheduled route to the Marshall Islands with the local passengers - their cargo brood still on board!

Upon arriving, I was met by Dr. Edward Bramlitt (Field Command Defense Nuclear Agency [FC/DNA]), a health physicist visiting the island from Albuquerque, NM and Bob Reynolds (Holmes & Narver, Inc. [H&N] Radiation Technician). After a mandatory gas mask fitting and being issued an Atropine kit that I had to have within reach 24 hours a day, I was given a tour of the installation. Everything went smoothly until the next morning when we were told that two subcontractor employees working on the Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System (JACADS) Facility had been found drunk on swing shift and were performing radiographic welds without appropriate barricades and signage, using uncalibrated dosimetry and monitoring instruments and using a source that had not been inventoried by H&N Health & Safety personnel when it first arrived on island. Bramlitt and I simultaneously responded “shut it down immediately”, and then looked at each other as if to say “we don’t know which of us has the stop work authority but we’ll sort that out later”.

Since the work had actually been stopped the evening before and the radiation source secured in an ammunition bunker, no immediate action was required and a full investigation was initiated. It would take several years to iron out the paperwork and get the source off JA and properly disposed, but DOE/NV Health Physics Division personnel got the job done.

During my brief stay on JA, I spent a lot of time talking to various people to better understand the workings of the island command and control processes, the history of these controls and the wide variety of cultural values present there. I learned that there were 200-plus employees on-island at any given time. Previously, no women had been permanently employed on the Atoll but, shortly before I had been sent to JA, a very few had been hired to start working there full time. Women’s housing was restricted and, if a man was caught in a woman’s room (or vice versa) both would be fired immediately and were required to depart on the next flight out.

My return flight to Hickam AFB was on a MAC C-141 (military aircraft). I was told that my flight was scheduled to arrive from Hickam AFB at 1pm. By 1 p.m., the flight hadn’t even left Honolulu. Our departure time was actually 5 p.m.! I was told that the MAC flights were affectionately called “Maybe Aircraft Come” flights and that no one began packing, let alone left for the airport, until they heard that the plane had departed Hickam AFB.

My last visit to JA was in 1993 when I was detailed to serve there as the DOE/PASO JA Site Manager and Deputy to the [military] Commander. The Atoll now had over 1,000 personnel, including a large number of U.S. Army personnel and a substantial increase in female population. As we were taxiing up to the terminal, I saw an armored Hummer vehicle that was strategically positioned to observe people getting off the plane. The US Army JACADS facility was now operating 24/7, incinerating chemical weapons that had originally been deployed in

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Europe. While we were still required to go through the gas mask fitting, we no longer had to keep the mask within reach 24 hours a day but needed to carry it when we were downwind of the plant. The next thing that I observed was a crop duster sitting on the tarmac. When I asked about the plane, I was told that the pilot had flown it from Australia but didn’t have enough fuel to make it to his next stop in Hawaii. Since the type of fuel that the plane used was unavailable on-island, the pilot had taken the next flight to Honolulu to purchase fuel and arrange to have it transported to JA on the next supply barge. Once it arrived, he would complete the flight to Hawaii with the Commander’s permission.

On one occasion, a commercial flight brought in a USO band that was scheduled to put on a show that evening. One of the members had a full beard. Since anyone coming onto JA had to be clean shaven in order to get a good seal on their gas mask, the plane was held until the shaving requirement could be made known and the band member agreed to shaving in the restroom before departing the terminal. Once he had shaved, the plane was released to continue down range. Had he not agreed, he would have had to depart on the flight and await the arrival of the rest of the band at their next scheduled performance location.

While everyone thought that the band was to be the performance of the evening, a small group of ladies thought otherwise. They were having a wedding shower for one of their friends and got a crazy idea of how to make it memorable for the entire island population. In the middle of the band’s performance, a side door of the room flew open and in they came dancing to the music. The only problem was that they had their underwear on the outside of their clothing. The band members busted up laughing and had to start the song they had been playing all over again.

On another occasion, we received a radio distress call from a pilot who had aircraft control problems and was low on fuel. None of the command staff recognized the model designation it was reported to be and speculation was that it could be a US Navy aircraft. As it came into view, ideas ran wild as to what it was until it had landed and we got a side view of the plane. It was another single engine crop duster out of Australia. Once the pilot taxied up to the airport, he shut the engine off and we approached the plane with security. The pilot was unable to get out of the plane for several minutes until he regained feeling in his legs but refused medical assistance. Once out, he had to lean on the aircraft wing to tell us what had happened.

As the pilot was taking off from his prior refueling stop somewhere in the South Pacific, someone had accidentally damaged the trim tab settings. With the plane fully loaded with fuel, he couldn’t return to the landing strip to have the problem corrected so he had flown for hours with both feet pushing on one of the rudder pedals in order to fly in a straight line. This effort had cost him more fuel than he had expected. Colonel Steven Cornish, JA Commander, and several of his staff and I took the pilot to lunch and got him into a room for the night. That evening over dinner, he regaled us with stories of his ferry pilot flights all over the world. At that time, ferry pilots had a very short lifespan if they routinely did international flights. The next morning, after he fixed the tabs and his plane was refueled, he paid the bill and took off for the island of Hawaii.

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After work, I would spend some time with one of the social groups that were prevalent on JA. This gave me an unfiltered insight to what was going on that never made it up the communication chain to the Commander’s office. One such group was the Pacific Islanders Club, a two-room structure with a lanai and tables outside. One room was a fully equipped kitchen and the other was a living room with a karaoke machine. One time, Carl Song, a Reynolds Electrical & Engineering Company Industrial Hygienist of Chinese Hawaiian ancestry, had come over to work a specific problem for FC/DNA. I had worked with Carl before being employed by DOE/NV so I took him with me on my evening rounds. We ended up at the club where we spent a long time visiting with the individuals that were there that evening. One thing led to another and the next thing we knew we were inside singing “I Got You Babe”. I will not divulge which of us did Sonny’s lines and which of us covered Cher’s but the audience loved it.

I made it a point to attend the DOE contractor managers’ meeting each Monday morning where I would frequently be presented with problems that were out of their control. One such problem originated from their housekeeping department. A JA Command staff officer was at Hickam AFB temporarily but his room was being used by a couple of young ladies that had been given a key. Housekeeping thought that it was unreasonable to be required to clean an “unused” room in the occupant’s absence. There was no longer a prohibition on women or men being in one another’s rooms as had been the case in 1987, except that their presence had to be with the permission of the individual that had the room. After a moment’s thought, I directed that they stop cleaning the room and putting in fresh towels until the morning of his scheduled return. They were happy with the decision and, when the room was no longer clean and no new towels were available, the ladies stopped using it.

When things were quiet on the Atoll, I would go out with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife people to assist with their bird banding and bird counts on other islands. Seeing flying fish jump out of the water and glide for some distance was always a great experience as we went across the lagoon in their Boston Whalers. Another memorable experience was seeing newly hatched chicks once we got to one of the islands. On one occasion, I was looking at the ship channel and saw a manta ray jump out of the water, do a back flip and crash back into the water like a kid at play.

The last evening that I was on JA, I made it a point to stop by the various clubs to say goodbye. When I got to the Pacific Islanders Club, they indicated that they knew I was going out on the next day’s plane and presented me with a “going away” gift. One of the Club members then walked out of the kitchen carrying a cold bottle of Dom Perignon. As I looked at it, I thought of the Federal prohibition on acceptance of gifts. I then thought of how my refusal to accept it might not be well received. After thinking for a moment, I announced that I could not accept it. I could, however, share it with them. This way, no one was insulted and everyone had a shot glass of champagne to toast my departure.

I couldn’t have asked for a better way to end my stay!

About the Author
Robert Friedrichs, a Southern Nevada native and University of Nevada, Las Vegas graduate, is most recently co-founder of the Nevada Aerospace Hall of Fame. However, Bob spent most of his career at the Nevada Test Site in progressively responsible technical management roles both as a contractor and Federal employee. As a senior scientific adviser with DOE’s Nevada Operations Office, he had diverse roles, including one as Deputy to the Commander of Johnston Atoll in the Pacific. He also served on the U.S. Delegation to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (Group B) meetings in Vienna Austria; and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center’s Bilateral Negotiations. Bob was also responsible for Federal oversight of the construction of Desert Research Institute’s Frank Rogers Building, which now houses both DRI and the National Atomic Testing Museum. He is part of the founding group who created the NATM.