ADVENTURES AT JOHNSTON ISLAND
1961 - 1964

We had Johnston Island for breakfast on the air freight midnight shift so I learned about it my first day at work in July, 1961. Every morning, 7 days per week at 8 a.m., a C-124 left for JON, its airport code, with a full load of cargo - mostly food and support equipment. It was floor loaded and stacked as high as possible, then covered with tie-down nets and straps. It usually was about 50,000 pounds and took several hours to load. It was backbreaking physical labor taking it off the freight carts, loading it onto the aircraft elevator, taking it up into the aircraft, the stacking it as high as safety permitted, then tying and strapping it down. The loadmaster coordinated our efforts and computed the weight and balance of the aircraft. If we were lucky, we got done in time to make it to breakfast at the chowhall which closed promptly at 9 am and did not recognize the 24 hour operation of MATS.

We had been handling nuclear components from the time I started in July 1961. However, my official exposure to nuclear weapons began on April 5, 1962 when I was assigned to the Hickam AFB Nuclear/Missile Loading Team. We were an elite group of 15 to 20 airmen who periodically received specialized training in the loading, offloading and handling of nuclear components and missiles. I would be on the team for the rest of my enlistment. The title of the team changed to Hazardous Cargo/Missile Loading Team in 1963. At first our work was mostly with the U. S. Army at Schofield Barracks about 20 miles north Hickam. The 25th Infantry Division was headquartered there and they had nuclear weapons such as the Davy Crockett weapons system with a nuclear warhead. The M-28 or M-29 Davy Crockett Weapon System(s) was a tactical nuclear recoilless gun for firing the M388 nuclear projectile that was deployed by the United States during the Cold War. Named after American soldier, congressman, and folk hero Davy Crockett, it was one of the smallest nuclear weapon systems ever built. My friend Bob Owen also had them in his army unit in Gelnhausen, Germany when I visited him in April, 1966.

The Army made a really big deal out of it when they received nuclear components. They would surround the aircraft with MPs carrying submachine guns who stood at attention in a huge circle around the aircraft. Their weapons would be held upright in the right hand ready for use. Then the brass would go through the motions of signing off the manifest and accepting the cargo. Meanwhile my crew would offload the components and forklift them onto a trailer which would leave with MP escorts in front and back along with a large sedan carrying the brass. I have to admit it was impressive.

There came the day when I had already put in twelve hours on the ramp wrestling cargo on and off aircraft and I got a call to report for Nuclear Loading Team duty. It was a single large very heavy crate on a C-121 aircraft which the civilians called a Connie. The C-121 sits very high off the ground and we were unloading the cargo from the rear cargo door. That necessitated extending the forklift boom to it's maximum to reach the door.

In a mischevious mood brought on by fatigue and being full of the Army's pretentiousness, I told my crew to leave me about a foot of slack on the chains with which we secured the cargo to the forklift boom. I slipped the forklift prongs under the crate and my crew chained it up as I had asked. Then I slowly lifted the crate and backed clear of the aircraft preparatory to lowering the boom. Before lowering it I tilted the cargo slightly forward so that the crate slide about a foot before the slack in the chains ran out and stopped it. There was a huge audible gasp from the MPs and brass! I'm sure they thought they were goners. So I nonchalantly tiled the boom back, lowered the boom and loaded the cargo on the trailer. Off they went and nobody besides my crew knew that what happened was deliberate. It did my heart good to scare the living shit outa the Army brass.

Once the last U. S. atmospheric nuclear tests started up in early 1962 we didn't see that much of the Schofield bunch. This was Operation Dominic and consisted of 36 tests conducted at Christmas Island and Johnston Island. We were busier than ever and got no help with increased manpower or upgrade of equipment. We were on duty 12 hours on 12 hours off a great deal of the time past the last tests in November 1962. The purpose of the tests were to pressure Soviet Russia into agreeing to President Kennedy's Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty which he signed October 7, 1963. The last U. S. atmospheric test was conducted on November 4, 1962 at Johnston Island. It's code name was Tightrope.

Johnston Island, also know as JI, Johnston Atoll and JON (the airport code), is about 800 miles southwest of Hawaii. The United States got control of it in 1898 when Hawaii was annexed. It was APO 105 for mailing purposes. In reality it was an atoll aircraft carrier and the dredging barges never stopped tearing out the coral to add to the island while I was there.

By 1964 it was 2 miles long and a half mile wide, about 625 acres - slightly less than one square mile. The runway at 9000 feet took up nearly the entire length of the island. Large parts of it were off-limits. The big government contractor was Holmes & Narver and most of the civilians worked for them. There were a lot of burly “beach boy” type Polynesians who were very clannish and resented the “haoles”, their term for whites. MATS personnel worked NW Orient DC-7 contract flights in addition to our own flights which hauled both freight and passengers to and from Hickam. There were no women or dependents stationed on the island so the stewardesses on Northwest were a big treat. We usually had a gang of lollygaggers around when Northwest came in. I was at Johnston twice - one month each time - October/November 1963 and January/February 1964 and worked 12 hours on 12 hours off - no days off.

The MATS operation was on the north side of the island which actually faced more northwesterly. The ramp was at the top of the triangle formed by the runway and the taxiways. The single runway, 23/5, took up the length of the island. By 1964 it was about 9000 feet long. To the east of the ramp were air freight and base ops, each in a quonset hut. Between them, in a square blockish looking building, was the air terminal. West of the ramp were the two launch pads for the nuclear test rockets.

Originally an atoll, the U.S. Navy had a continuing program of dredging up coral to extend and enlarge the facility. The runway took up the length of the island and our barracks was about midway down the runway - just about where the aircraft reversed their props when landing. It made for noisy living and sleeping.

JI was the site of the last U.S. atmospheric nuclear tests and there had been some accidents so we figured the island was “hot”. The folks in charge pooh-poohed that and would not even issue dosimeters. Years later the facility was converted to destroy chemical weapons via an atomic furnace. Then, after that they decided to make a wildlife refuge out of it. That’s when they “discovered” it was contaminated and the island had to be de-contaminated before it could be used as a refuge. It cost $millions to do it.

Operation Dominic included 36 tests. The majority of the tests (29 airdrops) were weapons development tests, intended to evaluate advanced designs that the labs had been cooking up during the years of the moratorium and before. Five rocket-launched tests were conducted to gather further weapons effects data on high-altitude phenomena. Two tests of operational weapon systems were conducted - the Polaris submarine launched ballistic missile and the ASROC anti-submarine rocket.

The most dramatic of the tests took place on July 8, 1962 at 11:00 pm, Honolulu time. It was the Starfish Prime nuclear test using a Thor missle launched from Johnston Island. The 1.45 megaton bomb exploded at an altitude of 240 miles. The explosion was visible 1500 miles away at Kwajalein Atoll; an artificial aurora lasted seven minutes. I was never able to visit "Kwaj" because it was a high security area. But I sure loaded a lod of cargo with KWA as the destination. The unforeseen and most militarily significant effect of the blast was the electromagnetic pulse (EMP) generated by the test. This caused power mains surges in Oahu, knocking out street lights, blowing fuses and circuit breakers, and triggering burglar alarms (and this in the days before microelectronics). The explosion supercharged the Van Allen radiation belts, resulting in several satellites malfunctioning and disrupting radio transmission traffic across wide areas of the Pacific Ocean.

The planned test was widely publicized in Hawaii and we eagerly anticipated it. We were 800 miles away from where the event took place. A large number of us got on the roof of the three story Hale Makai barracks at Hickam to view the explosion. I clearly remember the way the nearly midnight Hawaiian sky way lit up bright as noontime upon ignition then the atmosphere went thru the spectrum, slowly darkening, until it became a dense purple color then back to darkness. It was the most dramatic and memorable experience of my life until I saw the horrible spectacles of 9/11 nearly 40 years later. The Hawaiian newspapers published several photographs and articles about the test and the problems it caused in Hawaii. Not many folks knew about EMPs back then.

Conducted as part of Operation Dominic was a series of ten high altitude tests at Johnston Island from June 1962 until November 1962 known as Operation Fishbowl. These tests were Thor missile launched warheads detonated at very high altitudes (30-248 miles) to evaluate the destructive mechanisms and effects of high yield explosions against ballistic missile RVs.

The first test scheduled for June 1, 1962, Urraca, was cancelled. Bluegill, June 3, 1962, failed and was destroyed at +15 minutes after launch. Four test failures occurred with missiles being destroyed in flight by range safety officers when electronics failed (Bluegill - June 3), when rocket motors malfunctioned (Starfish - June 20 and Bluegill Prime July 26), or when the missile veered out of control (Bluegill Double Prime* - October 16). The Bluegill Prime test was particularly disastrous since

the missile was blown up while still on the launch pad, requiring complete reconstruction of the demolished and plutonium contaminated Thor launch facility.

*The third attempt (Bluegill Double Prime) was made at 21:14 on 15 October 1962. The missile was launched on a true bearing of 150 degrees. Between 86 and 90 seconds in to the flight booster failure occurred and the missile began tumbling, the missile was destroyed by remote control 156 seconds after launch. Some radioactive debris fell back on to Johnston Island. The accident received little or no publicity. The Cuban Missle Crisis was underway. I would be sent to Travis AFB, California on October 27, 1962 to provide MATS support for supplying any invasion of Cuba.

Of the five successful launches in Operation Fishbowl, three of the explosions were seen 800 miles away in Hawaii. The most spectacular was Starfish Prime described above. The other two were 400 kiloton blasts named Bluegill Triple Prime on October 26 and Kingfish on November 1.

I was deployed to Johnston Island on October 24, 1963 for one month of temporary duty. I returned to Hickam on Saturday, November 23, 1963, leaving JON at 1:30 p.m. on a C-118 and arriving at 4:30 p. m. I was sent again January 4, 1964 for another 30 days. Neither time was I offered a dosimeter or checked for radiation exposure. As a matter of fact, I was never checked during my entire Air Force career. It was safe and I was not to worry, the brass said. Decades later the U. S. Government spend millions of dollars decontaminating Johnston Island so that it could be converted into a wildlife refuge!

My first temporary duty to Johnston Islaned was a result of a captain deciding I had a bad attitude because I didn't smile enough, as he told me. He was right; I did have a bad attitude.

Anyway, his solution to my attitude problem was to ship me off to Johnston Island for 30 days. I flew down on a C-118 on Thursday, October 24, 1963 at 7 a.m. We got down there three hours later at 10 a.m. I spent the day familiarizing myself with the island - all one square mile of it. That night I started my first 12 hour shift of a schedule that had no days off. It was just as well as there was hardly anything to do.

Shortly before my second tour of duty at JON, a Hill AFB based C-124 disappeared on Thursday, January 2, 1964 while enroute from Wake Island to Hickam. Search aircraft were immediately sent to search a huge area of the Pacific Ocean west of Hawaii. Next day, Friday, the 3rd, I volunteered to go out on one of the search aircraft, a C-124 with about 30 people on it - all looking out the windows and jump doors for signs of the sircraft. We flew quadrants for hours but saw nothing. The other search aircraft saw nothing either. The following day, Saturday, January 4th, at 10 a.m., I flew to JON on a C-118 for my month of temporary duty. My first shift of work, Sunday morning, I had a radio call from a search aircraft alerting me that they had spotted wreckage and possibly a raft north of JON and to alert search HQs at Hickam. The aircraft added they would hold in the area as long as their fuel allowed. I immediately radioed Hickam and they scrambled search aircraft using the coordinates I relayed from the search aircraft. Later, the search aircraft who spotted the wreckage radioed their fuel was low and they had to leave the area. 30 minutes later the Hickam aircraft arrived in the area but were never able to find the wreckage. Some days later the search was called off and the 8 or 9 member crew were presumed dead. One of them was a master sergeant named Herbert O'Malley. It was his last flight before retirement.

Vodka was $.85 in the post exchange. Jessie was there once while I was there. He was a friend and passenger service specialist at Hickam. Jessie was from Oklahoma and would fight at the drop of a hat if someone called him Shit Hook. He got so drunk one night that when he climbed into his upper bunk to sleep, he peed during the night and got the sergeant sleeping under him very wet. Lots of hell raised over that. This sergeant had made a big fuss about having the bottom bunk. He was a big gruff tech sergeant and a real blowhard. "By god, I'm not climbing up there to get in my bunk." Happily, I was on duty and missed the fireworks. There were two doubledecker bunks in our room - the so-called MATS room since we were the only MATS personnel on JON. I don't recall there even being an officer in charge. I had the 8 pm to 8 am shift and the other two had the 8 am to 8 pm shift.

I left JON for the last time on Thursday, February 6, 1964 at 5:45 p. m., again on a C-118 which made for a three hour flight to HIK, good ol' Hickam AFB.

In March 3, 2010 I found out from an internet search that I was considered an "atomic veteran" due to my exposure and I became a member of the National Association of Atomic Veterans. Three years later I became a lifetime member. I was appointed Arkansas State Commander on November 20, 2013.