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DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY -- NAVAL HISTORY & HERITAGE COMMAND

Operation Crossroads: Fact Sheet

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Operation Crossroads was an atmospheric nuclear weapon test series conducted in the summer of 1946. The series consisted of two detonations, each with a yield of 23 kilotons:

1. ABLE detonated at an altitude of 520 feet (158 meters) on 1 July
2. BAKER detonated 90 feet (27 meters) underwater on 25 July.

It was the first nuclear test held in the Marshall Islands.

The series was to study the effects of nuclear weapons on ships, equipment, and material. A fleet of more than 90 vessels was assembled in Bikini Lagoon as a target. This target fleet consisted of older U. S. capital ships, three captured German and Japanese ships, surplus U.S. cruisers, destroyers and submarines, and a large number of auxiliary and amphibious vessels. Military equipment was arrayed on some of the ships as well as amphibious craft that were berthed on Bikini Island. Technical experiments were also conducted to study nuclear weapon explosion phenomena. Some experiments included the use of live animals.

The support fleet of more than 150 ships provided quarters, experimental stations, and workshops for most of the 42,000 men (more than 37,000 of whom were Navy personnel) of Joint Task Force 1 (JTF

1), the organization that conducted the tests. Additional personnel were located on nearby atolls such as Eniwetok and Kwajalein. The islands of the Bikini Atoll were used primarily as recreation and instrumentation sites.

Before the first test, all personnel were evacuated from the target fleet and Bikini Atoll. These men were placed on units of the support fleet, which sortied from Bikini Lagoon and took safe positions at least 10 nautical miles (18.5 kilometers) east of the atoll.

In the ABLE test, the weapon was dropped from a B-29 and burst over the target fleet. In BAKER, the weapon was suspended beneath an auxiliary craft anchored in the midst of the target fleet.

ABLE operations went smoothly except that the test weapon was dropped between 1,500 and 2,000 feet (457 and 610 meters) off target. The radioactivity created by the burst had only a transient effect, and within a day nearly all the surviving target ships had been safely reboarded. The ship inspections, instrument recoveries, and remoooring necessary for the BAKER test proceeded on schedule. Five ships were sunk as a result of the test.

The crews of the target ships that had been remanned following ABLE were evacuated before BAKER to the support fleet east of the atoll. Baker sank eight ships and damaged more ships than ABLE. The detonation caused most of the target fleet to be bathed in radioactive water spray and radioactive debris from the lagoon bottom. With the exception of 12 target vessels anchored in the array and the landing craft beached on Bikini Island, the target fleet remained too radiologically contaminated for several weeks for more than brief on-board activities.

The inability to complete inspections on much of the target fleet threatened the success of the operation after BAKER. A program of target vessel decontamination was begun in earnest about 1 August. This involved washing the ships' exteriors using work crews drawn from the target ships' companies under radiological supervision of monitors equipped with radiation detection and measurement devices. Initially, decontamination was slow as the safe time aboard the target ships was measured only in minutes. As time progressed, the support fleet itself had become contaminated by the low-level radioactivity in marine growth on the ships' hulls and seawater piping systems.

By 10 August, a decision was made to stop work in Bikini and tow the surviving target fleet to Kwajalein Atoll where the work could be done in uncontaminated water. The move was accomplished during the remainder of August and September. A major task at Kwajalein was to offload ammunition stored aboard the target ships. this work continued into the fall of 1946. Personnel continued to work on target ships at Kwajalein into 1947.

Eight of the major ships and two submarines were towed back to the United States and Hawaii for radiological inspection. Twelve target ships were so lightly contaminated that they were remanned and sailed back to the United States by their crews. The remaining target ships were destroyed by sinking off Bikini Atoll, off Kwajalein Atoll, or near the Hawaiian Islands during 1946-1948.

The support ships were decontaminated as necessary and received a radiological clearance before they

could return to the fleet. This decontamination and clearance process required a great deal of experimentation and learning at Navy shipyards in the United States, primarily at San Francisco.

Finally, a formal resurvey of Bikini Atoll was conducted in the summer of 1947 to study long-term effects of the CROSSROADS tests.

All CROSSROADS operations were undertaken under radiological supervision intended to keep personnel from being exposed to more than 0.1 roentgen (R) per day. At the time, this was considered to be an amount of radiation that could be tolerated for long periods without any harmful effects on health.

Radiological supervision included predicting areas of possible danger, providing trained personnel equipped with radiation survey instruments to act as guides during operations involving potential exposure, and elaboration of rules and regulations governing conduct in these operations. Personnel were removed for one or more days from areas and activities of possible exposure if their badges showed more than 0.1 R / day exposure.

About 15 percent of the JTF 1 personnel was issued at least one of the 18, 875 film-badge dosimeters during CROSSROADS. Approximately 6, 596 personnel were on the islands or ships that had no potential for radiation exposure. Personnel anticipated to be at the greatest radiological risk were badged, and a percentage of each group working in less contaminated areas was badged. The maximum accumulated exposure recorded was 3.72 R, received by a radiation safety monitor.

Lacking complete radiation exposure data, reconstructions have been made of all personnel exposures for unbadged crewmembers of the ships involved. These calculations have considered the several sources of radiation at work in Bikini, such as the low-level contamination in the lagoon water, living aboard support ships, and boarding the contaminated target ships. The calculations relied upon radiation measurements recorded by radiation safety personnel in 1946. This data was used in a computer model that includes such factors as the radiation-shielding properties of ships' hulls and realistic patterns of daily personnel activity on weather decks and below. The actual movements of each ship were then used to reconstruct a dose for the crew. Calculated exposures range from 0 to 2.5 rem (gamma) for support ships. Exposures for target ship crews that reboarded their ships after BAKER were higher than those for support ship crews. A summary of film badge readings (in roentgens) for July and August, when the largest number of personnel was involved, is listed below:

Actual Film Badge Readings:
(R gamma)

	Total	0	0.001 - 0.1	0.101 - 1.0	1.001 - 10.0
July	3,767	2,843	689	232	3
%	100	75	18	6	<0.1

August	6,664	3,947	2,139	570	8
%	100	59	32	9	0.1

Source: U.S. Defense Nuclear Agency. *Operation Crossroads, 1946*. Washington: Defense Nuclear Agency, 1984.