

After Operation Crossroads – Kili Island

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The history of the Underwater Demolition Teams during Operation Crossroads would not be complete without UDT's involvement in the relocation of the people of Bikini Atoll.

In March 1946, during the initial planning stages of Operation Crossroads, the United States first underwater tests of an atomic bomb, it was determined that the Bikinians must be relocated, preferably somewhere within the Marshall group. They were embarked on an LST and their destination was Rongerik Atoll, approximately 125 miles east of Bikini. The Bikinians soon discovered there was not a sufficient water or food supply on Rongerik, and conditions became intolerable, with starvation imminent. At this point the Navy began providing food, water, and medical attention.

In 1948 the Navy relocated the Bikinians to Kwajalen. They were in another strange environment, living in tents alongside the runway. After their idyllic life style on Bikini this new relocation resulted in another deplorable situation. They then requested the Trust Territories of the Marshall Islands, who administered control of the area, to remove them from all Navy activities on Kwajalen.

In November of 1948 the Bikinians were relocated to the uninhabited Island of Kili, which had been planted with coconut trees many years before by German settlers. A major problem with Kili was that food sources were few and far between, and the sandy soil would not support agriculture, so, again, the Bikinians soon found themselves in dire straights. The main source of their food supply on Bikini had been from the sea.

Another problem with Kili was that it had no lagoon; it was a island surrounded by a coral reef, while Bikini, with its lagoon and abundant sea life was an atoll. Kili also differed from Bikini in that it was a single island of approximately 1/3 of a square mile compared to Bikini with a land area of approximately three miles including 25 islands and atolls.

The reef surrounding Kili, and the high seas, made it extremely difficult for any craft to beach. Thus, it soon became apparent that another obstacle on the island was to get boats to shore to load the copra. With copra export the Bikinians were assured of some financial independence. For most of the year Kili has 10 to 20 foot waves which made the use of canoes or small boats impractical to transport the copra through the high surf. Trust Territory soon discovered that landing craft could not unload foodstuffs and medical supplies, without extreme difficulties.

In the spring of 1949, Governor, Trust Territories, Marshall Group requested Navy to blast a channel through the reef to permit landing craft a dry ramp so the copra could be loaded onto waiting ships.

The request filtered down through channels to Kwajalin who maintains logistical support for Kili. The demolition project was assigned to the Sea Bee detachment on Kwajalin. Their commanding officer determined the task to be beyond their capabilities due to high surf and underwater working conditions. CINPACFLT then requested COMPHIBPAC make UDT available for the project.

I was the oldest and most senior platoon officer in UDT 3 and had previously spent time in the area, therefore, CMDR McKinney CO UDT3 assigned me Officer In Charge of the Kili operation.

My orders were to report to Governor, Trust Territories, Marshall Group and to Commander, Naval Base Kwajalin who would provide logistical support. Commanding Officer, Kwajalin assured me there was an ample supply of demolition material, most of which was of WWII vintage.

I flew to Kwajalin to set up the base camp and to coordinate an assembly of demolition, rations, and transportation to Kili. My platoon followed by ship with IBS, (inflatable boat small) diving and operational equipment. I was given access to munitions storage where I found an unlimited supply of shape charges, C3, C4, explosive hoses, primer cord, safety fuse, and fuse lighters. Commander, Kwajalin, made an LCI (Landing Ship Infantry) available to the UDT platoon for the operation. The LCI Commanding Officer had orders to stay with us as long as we needed him. A Chief Hospital Corpsman from the base was assigned to the LCI.

A conference was held with representatives of Marshall Island Trust Territory in which I was given a free pass as to where to locate the channel on Kili. Specifications for width, depth and length were specified for the channel. Japanese forces had previously occupied many of the islands and atolls in the Marshall Group and fortified them. They attempted to dig a channel through the reef on Kili with pick and shovel which proved to be a dismal failure. However, Trust Territory suggested that I might want to use the same location as it was centrally located to the village.

I was informed that there may be a problem with the reception we might receive from the Bikinians. After they had been forced off the Bikini Atoll and moved about, frequently, suffering many hardships they were wary of our presence. The situation was also politically sensitive with world countries considering the treatment the Bikinians had received.



(Photo: Bikinians with outrigger on Kili Island)

We would be living in close proximity to the natives so I was advised to contact the Chief and go into great detail explaining our operation. It was imperative that we make every effort to gain the respect of the Bikinians. The problem of what to do with the Bikinians who were living in close proximity to our blasting was left to my discretion.

We arrived on Kili in due course and immediately started to off load our equipment. It would be a problem getting the crates of "C" rations, diving equipment, and explosives, especially the long explosive hoses through the ten foot surf in the

rubber boats. We soon discovered that we could ride the "long rollers" which broke on the reef where we could off load the rubber boats at low tide.



(Photo: Bikinians at Kili Island - Mack front left)

During WWII the long, wide surfboards with cargo compartments were developed for landing demolition packs. We still had these boards in the old UDT area down by the bowling alleys on the Strand. They were developed for occasions such as this for landings on Pacific Islands. We had brought several of them with us and they proved invaluable for off loading equipment through the surf from the LCI to the beach.

(Photo below: Kili woman and children)

After surveying the beach area I selected the best location for the channel, and the best demolition plan. I briefed the platoon and worked commenced at once. At low tide we placed shape charges over



the reef in the designated channel area, rigged firing devices and fired the shot at high tide. This proved to have a great tamping effect and all ensuing shots were fired in this manner. At next low tide, we filled the holes created by the shape charges with C3 and C4 and, again, fired the shot at high tide. We repeated this procedure a number of times and it was proven successful. After we had the channel about 3/4 of the desired depth we placed the explosive hoses in a criss-cross pattern over the new channel and fired at high tide. After each shot, and as the tide went out, it carried all the debris, seaward, so we had a nice, smooth channel. One of the problems we encountered

was after each shot, sharks swarmed into the area after the fish kill. We respected their presence.

(Photo: Blasting the channel at Kili Island)

We found the Bikinnians to be very friendly and hospitable. I established a good relationship with King Juda. I carefully briefed my platoon on the sensitive situation we were in, with Governor, Marshall Islands looking over our shoulders and that our conduct must be beyond reproach.

After each shot we allowed the natives to enter the channel area to recover fish stunned by the blast. We had procured an ample supply of rice from the LCI and along with our C-rations we donated, our meals with the natives proved to be a festive affair.

The night before our departure, King Juda invited us to a celebration of the completion of the channel. I was given a ceremonial headdress and a seat of honor beside the King. We feasted and danced and enjoyed a potent coconut beverage that the natives brewed. It was a night long remembered by the platoon. In the morning all the natives gathered on

the beach to sing their farewell as we manned the IBS and departed. I was very careful with my final muster, as the ideal conditions on a South Pacific island is very inviting to a young sailor.



(Photos above: Mack with friend)

Upon completion of the channel we received unexpected orders from CINCPACFLT to proceed to twelve other atolls and islands in the South Pacific area to clear unexploded ordinance, primarily 500 pound aerial bombs. No one had been to most of the islands since the Japanese were evacuated at the end of the war. We found conditions exactly as they had left them. From the amount of empty Saki bottles at their camps, it was obvious that they were well supplied. Missionaries were moving back to these atolls and islands and had the ordinance well marked. Most of the sites were atolls that the Japanese had occupied, but were bypassed by US forces during WWII.



(Photo: Church on Kili Island 1949)

After the detachment returned to Kwajalin, the CO furnished a PBY to fly to Kili and get aerial photos of the channel. Photos showed a beautiful, blue channel through the reef. The platoon received an outstanding citation from Governor, Marshall Trust Territory and another from CINCPACFLT.

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