

Section CURRENT HISTORY

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1947-1977:

A-Test Atoll Being Resettled

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New York Times News Service

ENEWETAK, Marshall Islands — The people of Enewetak were shipped away 30 years ago, made homeless by American flat so that nuclear weapons could be tested on their atoll in the Western Pacific.

Now some of them, 75 of a total of 330, have returned to Japtan, one of the 40 tiny islands in the Enewetak Atoll, to make a start toward resettling their homeland on a place that had not been a test site.

"Yokwe Kom," meaning "Welcome All" in Marshallese, proclaimed the sign at the Japtan pier as the old chief, Johannes Peter, led his people home last month. Their return, long planned and even longer sought, is an experiment in the rehabilitation of islands that suffered the ravages of nuclear testing. Only time and the people can determine how soon and to what extent life on Enewetak — that is the preferred spelling now for what was known as Eniwetok — will ever be the same again.

Some of the people are old and have memories of the palm and pandanus, the delicious coconut crab

and the good fishing in the lagoon. They also remember World War II, when they had to flee to outlying islands and when some were killed — whether by Japanese or Americans. It did not matter. To the old, just returning home may be enough.

MANY MORE ARE young, but since birth the idea of their homeland has been instilled in them on an alien island.

Many of the teen-agers are believed to be restless for a more "modern" life on the bigger islands. Even so, all joined in the experience of homecoming.

They sang the hymns of a refugee people, hymns of longing and faith and thanksgiving. They cast a practical eye over the broad lagoon and dense growth of the small island's interior, finding suspect well water, only a few coconut palm and arrowroot and no breadfruit or pandanus.

"Very sad what has happened to the islands," the chief said in an interview after inspecting Japtan. "They cut down most of the trees. It does not look like when we lived here before."

On their first evening here, on March 15, the people gathered in a grove of palm by the coral shore and feasted on roast pig, coconut crab, taro, coconut pudding and Coca-Cola. Their host was the American government, which had summarily ousted them in 1947 and was now welcoming them home, paying the way with money and promises of a general cleanup of the entire atoll, except for at least one island that remains so scarred and contaminated that it will be used as an off-limit dumping ground for radioactive wastes.

Chief Peter, wearing a white shirt

and tie, for it was an important occasion, expressed his gratitude.

EACH AMERICAN at the feast was festooned with cowrie-shell necklaces, gifts of the Enewetakese. The people who had spent an unhappy, sometime hungry 30 years in exile on Ujelang, 125 miles to the southwest, were offering gifts to the people who had caused it all.

Chief Peter, now more than 80 years old — he is not sure of his age — said that he had no feeling of hate for the Americans. "At one time they took our island," he said. "We were not told why. The Americans came and said, 'We're going to use your islands.' But now they have returned the islands to us. We are here and we are happy."

On Japtan the islanders have five long, low buildings of noncorrosive corrugated steel, with concrete floors. One building is the community center, part school and part church; the rest are partitioned into living quarters.

On the second day the people were already settling in. Old women were frying fish over open fires. Men were casting nets into the surf and hauling in mullet.

Earlier in the day some of the people were taken by boat to the main island, where 100 Americans operate an airfield, a radio navigation station and a marine sciences laboratory.

Enewetak, lying 2,400 miles southwest of Honolulu, and about halfway to the Philippines, is one of the many island groups, called atolls, that form the Marshall Islands and are administered by the United States as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

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BETWEEN 1948 AND 1958 the northern islands of Enewetak were rocked by 43 nuclear tests, including the first explosion of the hydrogen bomb. Through much of the 1940s, after the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to a prohibition on atmospheric nuclear testing, the lagoon continued to be used as a "catcher's mitt," as an American official put it, for test missiles fired from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

The Enewetak isles were a frail habitat to begin with. Two of the smaller ones were obliterated by the explosions. Deep craters pock others. The rusting wreckage of war and nuclear testing lies on the sand.

In all, the 40 remaining islands amount to less than three square miles of dry land.

Bikini, another atoll, was also used for nuclear testing until an accident there in 1954 rained radioactive fallout on a Japanese fishing vessel and the people of a neighboring island, Rongelap. Enewetak, being more remote and having a huge airstrip, bore the brunt of the American test program.

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Japtan was spared. It was never used as a test site or a place for housing those who ran the tests, most of whom lived on the main island of Enewetak. A survey in 1973 by American scientists found the radiation levels of Japtan to be the same as for Seattle and less than for Denver. Fish in the lagoon were found safe to eat.

As a result Japtan was selected as the point of first return. The people are expected to live there for at least the next three years, while the other islands are cleared of structural debris and radiation hazards and replanted with food-bearing trees.

THE CLEANUP program, scheduled to begin next month, is under the direction of the Defense Nuclear Agency and will be carried out by American troops at a cost of \$20 million. The Energy Research and Development Administration has responsibility for technical supervision and for radiological monitoring and surveying.

Life was hard on Ujelang, which has only a quarter the land area of Enewetak.

Not until 1968 did the people get so desperate that they mounted a protest.

THE ISLANDERS' actions set in motion congressional legislation in 1969 to pay \$1.02 million to the people, the money being placed in a trust fund and the income divided among the families, enabling them to buy food and other necessities.

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