

HEADQUARTERS
TASK GROUP 7.4 PROVISIONAL
APO 187, C/O POSTMASTER
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RG 342

SUBJECT: Island Evacuation

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

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Folder The Rongerik

INCIDENT MAR-APR 1954

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During the week of 15 February to 18 February 1954, I was asked by Lt McDaniel, Deputy Commander for WREP, what provisions should be made for Rad Safe services to the people on the various weather islands. I was unable to give him a positive answer, and told him I would have to make further inquiries. Colonel Houghton suggested I call Colonel House who would be able to give me JTF 7's opinion.

During telephone conversation with Colonel House on about 19 February, he said that nothing need be done about any of the islands except Rongerik, and that in his opinion, adequate dosimetry measures would be taken on Rongerik, if half a dozen or so film badges were exposed during each shot and for the day after the shot. He suggested that these badges be exposed in the living and working areas, and on one man in each representative group of individuals. He also suggested that a T-1B or similiar survey instrument be in place on each of the islands as organizational equipment and that individuals in each detachment use the instrument on shot and subsequent days to check for fall out.

I did not comply with the latter suggestion for three (3) reasons:

1. There are not enough survey instruments in our organization that we could spare four on a loan basis for any but urgent needs, and I did not consider this an urgent need.
2. If instruments had been available, my work-load would not have permitted me to make a trip to each of islands to train individuals in the proper use and maintenance of survey instruments.

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DATE 8/6/86

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Per DNA LTR (ISCM) 7/10/85

AFWL/HK



3. I was informed that the New York office (?) already had auto recording instruments in place which would serve the same purpose inasmuch as the weather people had been briefed to notify Mr. ^{Bresler} ~~Beechin~~ or one of his assistants whenever this particular instrument recorded 100 mr/hr which would be nearly off scale.

In accordance with Colonel House's suggestions regarding film badges, I sent 12 badges to Rongerik on 25 February, with instructions for their storage and use. Mr Kapral has assured me that my instructions were followed, in that 6 badges were exposed during and after the first shot, and the other 6 left in storage for the second shot in case resupply of the island were delayed for any reason.

At about 2330, 1 March, Major Robinson, WREP, received an info copy of a message addressed to CJTF 7 from Rongerik to the effect that the auto monitoring instrument was reading "100 plus" and had gone off scale at 0250Z, and was still off scale. Inquiries made here and at Elmer failed to establish the exact nature of the auto monitoring instrument; thus it could not be established what exactly was meant by "100 plus". After conference between Colonel Houghton, Colonel Hammond, Colonel Watkins, Major Robinson and myself it was decided that we should take advantage of a scheduled MATS flight to Kwajalein and send a monitor - myself - on that flight to meet the regular weather island service flight departing Kwajalein on Tuesday (2 Mar) morning at 0830.


Upon arrival over Rongerik at about 0945, I requested the pilot to fly the length of the island at about 500' altitude. During this pass the average reading of 4 T-1B instruments was 200 mr/hr. Another pass across the island and at the same height gave the same reading. We circled the entire Atoll at 500' altitude and instrument readings were the same over each islet.

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Upon return to Rongerik island. We made another pass at 250' during which instruments recorded activity of 340 mr/hr.

Radio reception was poor at this low altitude so we climbed to 5000' in an attempt to establish contact with Fred tower or the USS Estes, direct. Neither attempt was successful, so further radio messages were relayed through Captain Hughes at Kwajalein. I was primarily concerned in getting an additional airplane - either a PBM or an SA-16 - in order to get the people off the island as quickly as possible. After about 30 minutes of intermittent and frequently garbled radio messages, I requested the pilot to return to Rongerik Island and prepare to evacuate as many as possible in our own aircraft, realizing that if other planes were not available, the Navy UF would have to make two trips. Since it was already approaching noon, this entailed getting the first trip over with as quickly as possible in order to avoid an after dark take off from the lagoon with the last load of evacuees.

While making our descent, the pilot received a message requesting information on the radiological situation. I asked him to reply that the only reading I had was 340 mr/hr at 250' altitude over the island. This message was garbled during transmission and was apparently received at TG 7.4 as "340 MR at 250'" which meant little or nothing.

At 1130 I landed on the island, and, after making a few readings at various places within the living areas, I briefed the men on what I knew of the situation and what was being done for them. It is appropriate here to remark that I consider the group to be an extremely well-disciplined one. There was no panic, nor apparent dismay, and all of the men were willing to do whatever was necessary to secure the island before evacuation and to do it in a much more cheerful than I expected. Commendation is due all of the men with special mention of Mr. Kapral and M/Sgt Pletsch for excellent leadership.


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The following is a list of the various readings I obtained and the locations at which they were taken:

Inside building where the men spent most of their time - 0.6R.
(This reading is low because the building was hosed down thoroughly early in the morning)

Outside the same building - waist height - 1.8R.

(This reading taken on the PSP platform in front of the building)

Beside the same building - sand surface - 2.4R.


Surface of a bed in a living tent - 1.2R.


All readings taken - and there were not as many as I should have taken fell along the same values.

Mr Kapral had decided to evacuate his people in alphabetical order - making it as impersonal as possible. As soon as all excess baggage had been cleared from the plane to the shore, the first 8 men were loaded aboard the UF and taken to Kwajalein.

As we departed the pilot informed me that he had received a request for further definition of the radiological situation. Unaware of the fact that my original message had been garbled, I concluded that someone was making the request who was unfamiliar with radiological procedures. Therefore, I instructed the pilot to say that I was getting a reading of 3.2R at 1", since I wished to make it as impressive as possible in order to get action as quickly as possible. This was an error on my part.

However, the evacuation proceeded, unfortunately we heard on the way to Kwajalein that additional planes were not available, which meant that the 20 people remaining on Rongerik would not be moved as soon as I had given them to believe. Actually, the first group arrived at Kwajalein at about 1400, and the last group shortly after 1900. I requested that VP29 be alerted for our arrival with people who would need to be processed through their personnel


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decontamination center. We were met by monitors who handled all the ground procedures quite adequately.

The final message I sent was an urgent recommendation that Rongelap be surveyed as soon as possible with the expectation that any habitants would very likely be subjected to the same degree of fall out that had occurred at Rongerik. This recommendation met with approval by CTG 7.4.


LOUIS B. CHRESTENSEN
Captain, USAF

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The first I knew about the outer perimeter radiological situation was when I received a TWX at 1043 on D/1 from Navy Aircraft #1902, which inquired if Rongerik Island should be evacuated and requesting immediate answer. I queried various sources and discovered that Captain Chrestensen had gone to Rongerik the previous night to investigate reported fall out in this area.

I immediately notified Lt Col Richard House, JTF 7 of the TWX and asked him what action he would like to take. He said that there was no reason to evacuate as far as he was concerned, because he was of the opinion that they should be reading about 300MR of Gamma shine and this would disappear in a couple of hours. On the basis of this conversation I sent a TWX informing N1902 not to evacuate Rongerik.

Almost immediately I received a message saying that the radiation was 340 MR at 250 ft, and I sent a message back at 1126 D/1 telling them to disregard my message to not evacuate and requested the radiological situation, immediately.

At 1200 I received a TWX stating emergency imperative that we furnish PEM to evacuate RAM, and that UF aircraft was evacuating 8 personnel and 20 more still remained to be evacuated. Finally after many attempts to get information, I received a TWX stating that the readings were 3.2R at 1 inch and on this advise I consulted with Colonel Houghton, TG 7.4 as to what action

he thought was required. It was agreed to evacuate immediately and a TWX was sent to COMNAVSTA Kwajalein at 1445 D/1 requesting their assistance in the removal of personnel from Rongerik as soon as possible.

JAMES E. CROSBY, JR.
Lt Colonel, USAF

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