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American Era Is Ending At Enewetak Atoll Marsh

(Editor's note: James V. Hall, Trust Territory High Commissioner's press officer, accompanied the first group of Enewetakese to their home islands after 30 years of absence. Following is his story)

ENIWETAK (MNS) -- When the MS Militobi arrived at Japtan Island on the morning of March 15, with 56 Marshallese from Ujelang, it marked the beginning of the end of the American era on Enewetak Atoll.

Enewetak, known to most Americans as a symbol of the war in the Pacific during the forties, and the cold war and atomic testing of the fifties, is being turned back to the people who left here on December 20, 1947, in a Naval LST for Ujelang Atoll, 124 miles to the southwest.

On December 2, 1947, the United States government had notified the Security Council of the United Nations that Enewetak Atoll was to be closed to the world for security reasons in order that "necessary experiments relating to nuclear fission" be conducted at the 30-square-mile atoll.

The people of Enewetak moved to Ujelang based on an agreement which was to give them full land rights to the uninhabited atoll.

But the 136 Enewetakese became 450 by 1976, and Ujelang was no longer adequate. The U.S. had ended its atomic testing program in 1958, and its other scientific and technical programs were slowly being phased out. There was a growing sentiment among the Enewetak people to return to their ancestral home.

On September 16, 1976, Acting High Commissioner of the Trust Territory, Peter T. Coleman signed a series of agreements which would begin the return process and allow for a \$20 million clean-up program to get underway.

The 56 who are now arriving will not only be returning, but will also participate in the clean-up and rehabilitation program which may last as long as three years.

What are the people of Enewetak finding upon their return? The main island of Enewetak is dominated by a mighty 8,100-foot concrete runway which handled 75 bombers during World War II. The other half of the island is crowded with anodized aluminum Butler buildings of every shape and size; warehouses, living quarters, messhalls and clubs. Fuel tanks, water towers, a huge hangar, saltwater conversion units, and concrete bunkers also dot the two and a half mile strip which lies between the deep blue Pacific and the aqua blue lagoon.

The island of Japtan, where the first returnees will live, has numerous Butler buildings, bunkers, communications sites, animal pens and other reminders of the nuclear testing program. It is presently undergoing an intensive clean-up and rehabilitation for the first arrivals. A Hawaiian luau is scheduled upon the arrival of the Militobi.

To those returning for the first time, they will probably feel like science fiction space voyagers who passed through a time warp. Their old world will have aged several hundred years during their 29-year absence.

There are other changes too that they are well aware of. Traditionally the northern islands of the atoll were occupied by the Enjebi people and the southern islands by the Enewetak people. Only the southern islands are considered inhabitable. Two northern islands were vaporized during the tests: one during the explosion of the world's first hydrogen bomb in 1952, and the second six years later. Enjebi, the main northern island, was inundated by a hundred-foot wall of water generated by the hydrogen blast and is not considered habitable for another thirty years.

The island of Runit, near the line dividing the north and south, is contaminated by radio-active plutonium and is off limits for the indefinite future.

This poses a serious political question: Despite frequent intermarriages, will the Enjebi people wish to live on the islands which traditionally belong to the Enewetak people, or will they choose to remain on Ujelang?

And another question: What will become of the massive scientific, technological complex on Enewetak Island, which once housed over 5,000 technicians, but is now a 21st Century ghost town situated amidst a timeless environment where the lazy tradewinds swirl coral dust around the coconut palms?

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