

OPERATION CROSSROADS

BIKINI ATOLL - JULY 1st, 1946

Operation Crossroads - the 1946 nuclear testing programme at Bikini Atoll took place 50 years ago. The first Atom Bomb of the programme was detonated on July 1st, 1946. On this page some covers and associated correspondence from participants are shown. Full details of the cancellations used during the operation may be found on Pages 82 and 83 of "A Postal History/Cancellation Study of the U.S. Pacific Islands" by Robert T. Murphy.

The Journalist

James Cameron, a British newspaper reporter, in a fine piece of descriptive writing, describes the scene on July 1st, 1946.

So we came to Bikini, a typical Pacific coral atoll. Several tiny islands surrounding a lagoon 20 miles long by 10 miles wide. The main island, drawing close on the starboard bow, was so precisely the conventional picture of a South Sea Island that it might have been the jacket of a very old novel. Inside the lagoon as far as one could see were the 73 target vessels disposed in an intricate pattern to achieve every degree of damage. An enormous naval condemned cell. In the centre, standing out amongst the warship grey like a bloodspot on a monks robe, was the Battleship "Nevada", painted from masthead to waterline in a hard hot red. She was dressed in this brutal colour to make her a clear and vivid mark on the lagoon. She was the Bulls-eye. Aboard the "Nevada" it was like some great forlorn house just before moving day. Here, however, as the tenants moved out the luggage moved in. All over the red decks lay the secondary sacrifices. A 30 ton tank, a heavy field gun, rows of the newest and smartest automatic weapons, delicate electrical and photographic gear, an aircraft or two. Down on the boat deck, under tarpauline awnings stretched from an aircraft wing, waited the little company of flesh and blood, standing reflectively in pens for their most abrupt and instructive dissolution. There were a few goats with pale and cynical eyes; one or two brown spotted pigs. A scientist beside me said "I feel a little like apologising to those pigs, they belong to a reasonable and uncomplicated people, not without a certain grace, at least" he said "They ain't crazy". The loudspeaker said "Bomb Gone, Bomb Gone, Bomb Gone!". I had on my goggle mask, so black and deep it was like staring into velvet. Behind that opacity all things vanished. Sea and ships and sunlight. At the bomb aimers words I began to count. When my counting had reached 55 the bomb went off. In that first fine edge of a second it might have been a southern star low down on the horizon. Then it grew and swelled and became brighter and brighter. It pierced the goggles and struck the eye as a crucible does, and in that moment it was beyond every doubt there ever was, an Atom Bomb and nothing else. It was a spheroid, then an uprising wavering thing like a half filled balloon, then a climbing unsteady dome like a mosque in a dream. It looked as though it were throbbing. I tore off my goggles and the globe became a column, still rising, a gentle peach colour against the sky, and from 18 miles I could see a curtain of water settling like rain back into the



The Bombardier

Major H. Wood was the Bombardier of the B-29 "Dave's Dream", the aircraft which dropped the Atom Bomb on the "U.S.S. Nevada". This letter, to a member of his family, was enclosed in the cover shown below (slightly reduced in size). The cancellation is unclear but appears to be Murphy 3.2.1. (The cover and letter originally appeared in "Pacifica" the journal of the Pacific Islands Study Group and is reproduced by courtesy of the Editor Bryan Jones)

Kwajalein Island
 July 1st 1946
 Dear Joe,

I'm just writing this so that I can also take this letter with me when we drop the atom bomb on the U.S.S. Nevada in Bikini Harbor today - before mailing it onto you as a souvenir of this flight. Our B-29 plane "Dave's Dream", aircraft number 44-27354, is in top condition and will not cause use any trouble today. I am not worried about this flight but am somewhat excited over it, as is natural. Our whole crew is hoping that I'll drop the bomb without a hitch and we are fairly confident that nothing serious will happen to us when the bomb explodes.
 Thanks for your letters since father became ill. I am glad he is showing some improvement.

As Ever
 Harold

Harold H. Wood,
 Major, Air Corps,
 Bombardier of "Dave's Dream".

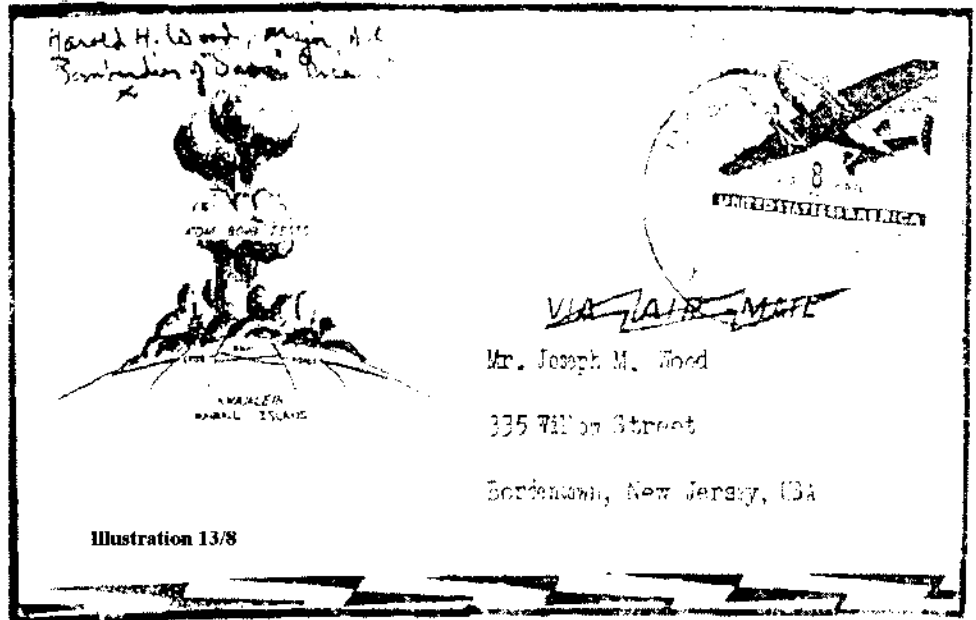


Illustration 13/8

lagoon. Somehow I found it not impossible to believe that the thing produced a hundred million centigrade degrees of heat, ten times that of the surface of the sun. Yet it was beautiful in its monstrous way, a writhing lovely mass. Then just as I remembered the sound of the explosion, it finished its journey and arrived. It was not a bang, it was a rumble, not overloud, but it thudded into all the corners of the morning like a great door slammed in the deepest hollows of the sea. Beside



me a heavy wire stay unexpectedly quivered, like a cello string, for a moment then stopped. Now, standing up unsteadily from the sea, was the famous mushroom. In seven minutes and fifteen seconds our ships trigonometry gave it 23000 feet in height and 11600 feet in diameter. From behind me I heard a frantic ticking of typewriters. Very soon I found I was fumbling with my own. The reportage had begun. Many of us will never live it down. ■■■■

