Atomic Veterans

Albert Bates, Director of PLENTY's Natural Rights Center, writes about the plight of America's own Atomic Veterans.

The era of atomic tests began with Operation Crossroads in 1946. The War in the Pacific had concluded with the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by bombs of terrifying dimensions. For the human species the world would never be the same.

The American Navy, believing that seapower had won the war, wanted to find out if ships at sea could survive The Bomb. For four years Micronesia had been a battleground between empires. Five thousand islanders had lost their lives, as first the Japanese and then the Americans marched across their Pacific Paradise. When Crossroads was announced, the Bikinians were told the testing was necessary 'for the good of mankind and to end all world wars'. The helpless islanders were whisked away to a lifeless ocean outpost, given two weeks worth of food, and then forgotten. The lagoon ecosystem that had supported them for millenia was to be ruined essentially forever.

The first test at Crossroads was a 15 kiloton airdrop called Able. Just one day later, repair teams went aboard the target ships. Among the young naval engineers was Mike Stanco. He would remain aboard his radioactive target ship, the USS Nevada, for 24 days, clearing debris, restoring power, repairing and operating the water distilling apparatus, eating, sleeping and working as usual in the radioactive environment. Stanco and others visualized the radiation as little particles they called 'geigers.' To men who had seen combat aboard battleships from one end of the Pacific to the other, 'geigers' were much less frightening than bombs, torpedoes, and Kamikazi pilots.

Shot Baker was the first underwater explosion of a nuclear device. When Baker went up, a million tons of radioactive lagoon water rained down on the atoll and everything in it. Aboard the destroyer USS Sumner, 18-year-old Johnny Smitherman was pelted with coral debris and washed with sea mist from the cloud. A few days later, and for the following month, Smitherman would be back in the lagoon, boarding target ships to put out fires, visiting the radioactive beaches, and swimming in the surf. Another Baker participant was pilot-photographer Jim Dugan. Dugan took the original film footage that is often seen today in documentaries about nuclear tests. Between shots, he landed his seaplane in the lagoon and relaxed on the beaches.

Meanwhile, the scientists brought in to monitor the tests began to be disturbed by what they were seeing. They found that 'contamination of personnel, clothing, hands and even food (could) be demonstrated readily in every ship...in increasing amounts every day.' Still, it was more than a month before they were able to persuade Admiral Blandy to cancel shot Charlie and pull the 42,000-man fleet back to the United States.

Making calculations of plutonium concentrations aboard ships, Crossroads scientist Herbert Scoville warned the Navy to be cautious when undertaking stateside repairs and maintenance. Scoville calculated that even aboard those observer ships given early radiological clearance, radiation levels were high enough to cause health problems.

By 1980, Mike Stanco had become very sick. He was weakened and bedridden by a blood disease similar to leukemia. He had lung cancer and colon cancer. His first child developed cancer. His second child had debilitating birth defects. The Defense Nuclear Agency (DNA) informed the Veterans Adminstration that there was no connection between his medical problems and radiation, so he was denied veterans benefits.

A few weeks after leaving Bikini, John Smitherman noticed black burns on his lower legs. For years after, he was plagued by swelling in his feet, ankles, and calves. In 1976, Smitherman's legs became so swollen that they were amputated. The disease moved up to his arms. His left hand eventually grew to six times normal size, and although it was extremely painful, he still used it to operate his wheelchair and to steer his van in his many drives around the country organizing atomic veterans. Doctors advised him to have it removed, but he steadfastly refused. In 1983, Smitherman was diagnosed as having terminal colon cancer. It was later learned that he had lung cancer as well. Repeatedly the DNA underestimated Smitherman's likely radiation dose, and repeatedly he was denied veterans benefits.

Pilot Jim Dugan became a successful artist and managed a large business. Then he started having falls. He lost control of his balance. His speech slurred. Eventually, he became paralyzed and had to be spoon fed. The DNA said that the strange degenerative disorder bore no possible relationship to radiation, so Dugan was denied VA benefits. More than 4,000 atomic veterans have applied for medical benefits. Ninety nine percent have been denied.

John Smitherman died of colon cancer on September 11, 1983. Herbert Scoville died of colon cancer in 1985. Jim Dugan recently married his sweetheart, Grace Stoneman, and still survives with her help. Mike Stanco died of colon cancer on October 26, 1985.

Widows Dorothy Stanco and Rose Smitherman and pilot Jim Dugan are among those who are being assisted by the Natural Rights Center. We have brought litigation, fought for legislation, and pursued administrative appeals. This work is at the forefront of an important human rights struggle. Radiation is a silent killer. It enters the body, does its damage, and leaves without a trace. Its victims die years or decades later of cancer, birth defects, or a host of untraceable diseases. By making public what small doses have done to atomic veterans, we hope to prevent even greater doses from being routinely administered to future people from irradiated food, from nuclear waste dumps, from nuclear power plants, and from the ultimate horror of nuclear battlefields.