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The Rongerik

Incident MAR-APR 1954 HEADQUARTERS
TASK GROUP 7.4, PROVISIONAL
APO 187, c/o Postmaster
San Francisco, California

TGDC 370

14 April 1954

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Evacuation of Rongerik After Shot BRAVO, Operation CASTLE

1. Twenty-four (24) airmen and one (1) Warrant Officer of the Weather Reporting Element (Provisional), Task Group 7.4 were assigned to operate a weather station for JTF SEVEN on Rongerik Atoll, Marshall Islands. In addition this detachment operated a recording radiation rate meter for the New York Operations Office, AEC. The purpose of the device was to measure and record any radioactive fall-out which might occur after an atomic detonation on either Eniwetok or Bikini Atolls during Operation CASTLE. This radiac station was one of several situated in the Pacific Ocean area as part of a general fall-out study. The instrument was capable of detecting a maximum activity of 100 mr/hr. Above that figure the instrument was inoperable. Mr M. R. Breslin, JTF SEVEN was the local representative of the New York Operations Office, AEC.

2. Three (3) Army enlisted men assigned to Task Group 7.1 were stationed on Rongerik to operate an Ionosphere measurement station for Project 6.6. These personnel shared messing and housing facilities with the Task Group 7.4 detachment.

3. Shot BRAVO was fired on 1 March 1954 at approximately 0640 local time on CHARLIE Island located in the northwest corner of Bikini Atoll. The ZERO point was approximately 130 nautical miles from Rongerik Atoll.

4. The following is a chronological sequence of messages and decisions leading up to and through the evacuation of the personnel on Rongerik Atoll on 2 March 1954:

a. Message No. 1: From Weather Detachment at Rongerik to JTF SEVEN, 1500, 1 March 1954 - "Attention Mr Breslin, Info Commander, Weather Reporting Element, Provisional. GR 12 MIKE over 100 CHARLIE - Over 100."

Above message received AACS Communications Center, Eniwetok at 1543, 1 March, and delivered to US Army Communications Center, Eniwetok at 1547 (local time) for transmission to JTF SEVEN. Because the "Info Commander WREP GR 12" was in the body of the message, the Weather Element Test Services Unit, TG 7.4, was not informed.

CLASSIFICATION CANCELLED
BY AUTHORITY OF DOE/OG
REVIEWED BY JDA 8/6/86
DATE 15 SEP 7/10/85
Per DNA LTR (1507)

Carlson

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b. Message No. 2: From Weather Detachment, Rongerik, to JTF SEVEN, 2015, 1 March - "For JTF SEVEN Eniwetok. Pass to Mr Breslin. Auto monitor present reading is 100 plus repeat present reading is 100 plus, pen off chart and has been in this position since 0250Z. Request acknowledgement of receipt from Breslin. Signed Commander."

Above message was received 2040 (local time) by AACS, Eniwetok and delivered to Army Communications Center, Eniwetok for further transmission to JTF SEVEN at 2050. Major Fellie F. Robinson, Weather Reporting Element, Task Group 7.4 was read the message by the AACS at 2049 (local time). The message was discussed with Colonel M. B. Hammond, Commander Test Services Unit, TG 7.4. It was decided to obtain more information before any action should be taken. An attempt was made to locate Mr Breslin of the NYOO, AEC, on Parry Island to determine the meaning of "100 plus". He was not on the island but Colonel Dave Miller TG 7.1 stated that the top range of the instrument was 100 mm/hr. It was then decided to call on other Task Group personnel to assist in evaluating the problem and determine the correct course of action. However, it was considered advisable to send message No. 3 to Rongerik as a precautionary measure - "From Weather Reporting Element, to Rongerik, 0015 2 March 1954: 'Cease all operations immediately and all personnel remain inside metal buildings until further notice. Maintain rotating shift radio communications with one DR for further instructions. Robinson sends.'"

c. At approximately 2300 Colonel K. H. Houghton, Technical Advisor, TG 7.4, was called by Lt Colonel Watkins and requested that he attend a meeting to consider the radiation conditions at Rongerik. At approximately 2330 a meeting was held at Lt Colonel Hammond's quarters. In attendance were Lt Colonel Hammond, Colonel Houghton, Lt Colonel James Watkins (Commander, Test Aircraft Unit), Major Robinson and Captain Chrestensen, Rad-Safe Officer, Test Support Unit, TG 7.4. Responsibilities for the down cloud area monitoring and the Rad-Safe instrumentation available at Rongerik was discussed. It was determined that Task Group 7.4 should take steps to determine for themselves what the true radiological situation was at Rongerik and not wait for JTF SEVEN notification. It was deemed undesirable to attempt to get a water landing aircraft into Rongerik before daylight (approximately 0700M, 2 March 1954). If a PBM or SA-16 aircraft were sent direct to Rongerik from Eniwetok an advantage of only 1½ hours would be gained over utilizing the regular Kwajalein-Rongerik resupply run that was scheduled for 0800 M on the morning of 2 March. A MATS aircraft was leaving at 0300M on 2 March for Kwajalein from Eniwetok and it was decided to send Captain Chrestenson as a rad-monitor on that aircraft and have him pick up the regular Rongerik run at that station.

d. Captain Chrestensen departed Kwajalein by Navy SA-16 at 0830, 2 March and arrived over Rongerik at 0945. The aircraft did not land immediately but made passes over the island at 500 ft altitude. The

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average reading on the 4E-1B radiac instruments were 200 mr/hr. Another pass at 250 ft altitude was 340 mr/hr. The aircraft climbed to 5000 ft to attempt direct radio communication with the USS Estes or Eniwetok. Transmissions were garbled and intermittent. The following message (message #4), however, was received by the AOC, Eniwetok, at 1043, 2 March from Navy aircraft #1902 "Should Rongerik Island be evacuated at once. Request immediate answer". The message as received did not make much sense but Lt Colonel Crosby, TG 7.4 Operations, queried Lt Colonel Richard House, Rad-Safe Officer, JTF SEVEN. House's information based on shipboard contamination (USS Estes-USS Bairoke) in the target area and fall-out prediction indicated that Rongerik should be in the same contamination level as the ship or approximately 300 mr/hr. The effect should be transient and disappear in a few hours. He counseled no evacuation. Crosby then sent a message to Navy aircraft 1902 informing them not to evacuate Rongerik. This message was sent to Navy aircraft 1902 at 1117M on 2 March 1954 (Message #5).

e. The request from Crosby was received by Navy 1902 and Chrestensen sent back that his only radiological reading was "340 mr/hr at 250 ft altitude." This message was received at TG 7.4 as "340 mr/hr at 250 ft. This was discussed by Crosby and Houghton and Chrestensen was informed at 1126, D/1, to disregard message to not evacuate and again requested the radiological situation in more detail (Message #6).

f. Chrestensen finally landed at 1130, 2 March, and made a quick rad survey of the island and work spaces. It was as follows:

Inside buildings	0.6 r/hr
Outside buildings	1.8 r/hr (waist height)
Outside buildings	2.4 r/hr (sand surface)
Surface of one bed in tent	1.2 r/hr
One inch from ground surface	3/2 r/hr

g. Eight (8) men was loaded on the Navy aircraft and started for Kwajalein. As the aircraft departed Chrestensen was informed by the pilot that additional information on the rad situation was requested by TG 7.4. A reading of 3.2 r/hr at one inch was sent (not received). At 1125 Crosby received a TWX stating that the Navy aircraft had taken off eight (8) personnel. (Message #7 & 8).

h. At 1439 a classified message was received from JTF SEVEN LNO at Kwajalein stating "Upon advise of Captain Chrestensen, Adm Clark is returning same aircraft to Rongerik to evacuate remaining personnel - Hughes sends." At 1440 a confidential message was received from JTF SEVEN LNO Kwajalein addressed to JTF SEVEN Eniwetok and TG 7.4 Eniwetok: "Per Crosby's request following submitted. Captain Hughes was requested to assist by Adm Clarke. Following is summary. Navy 1902 UF-1 with Chrestensen

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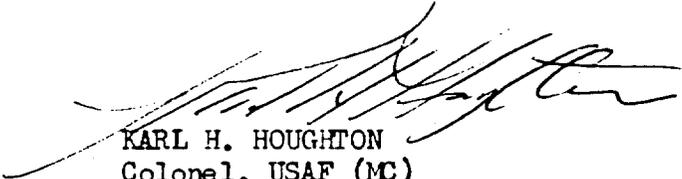


on board requested imperative they have frequencies of USS Estes. They were unable to contact on 126.18. Navy 1902 queried should Rongerik be evacuated at once. Navy 1902 then requested PBM for evacuation and stated they were going in to pick up eight (8) persons. Chrestenson advised that readings at one inch 3.2 r. Navy 1902 landed 1349M, 8 people have been evacuated. Twenty people still to be evacuated. Chrestenson insists remaining personnel must be evacuated immediately. Hughes sends."

i. On the basis of the above TWX Crosby and Houghton ordered immediate evacuation and a TWX was sent to Commander, Naval Air Station, Kwajalein at 1445, D/1, requesting their assistance in the removal of personnel from Rongerik as soon as possible.

j. Chrestensen arrived at Kwajalein with the eight (8) evacuees at about 1400 and the last 20 evacuees arrived about 1900, 2 March. Shortly after arrival, Chrestenson sent via JTF SEVEN LNO, Kwajalein, to CTG 7.4, info to JTF SEVEN, the following message: "Suggest immediate survey of inhabited islands of Rongelap. High possibility exists that immediate steps must be taken to evacuate natives. Signed Chrestenson."

k. Upon their arrival to Kwajalein, the evacuees were decontaminated and placed under care of the Station Medical Officer.


 KARL H. HOUGHTON
 Colonel, USAF (MC)
 Technical Advisor to the
 Commander

1 Incl:
 Msg list.

cc: Col Houghton
 cc: Col Crosby

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Msg #1 010315Z
FM LDR4
TO: LDR-CJTF-7

ATTN MR A BRESLIN INFO COMDR WREP CRL2
MIKE OVER ONE ZERO ZERO EASY-OVER ONE ZERO ZERO CHARLIE-OVER ONE ZERO ZERO
REC 0343Z

Msg #2 EM LDR4
FOR CJTF SEVEN ENIWETOK SMCIN PASS TO MR BRESLIN X AN TO MONITOR PRESENT
READING IS ONE ZERO PLUS REPEAT PRESENT READING IS ONE ZERO PLUS CMA PEN OFF
CHART AND HAS BEEN IN THIS POSITION SINCE 0250 ZEPHA X REQ ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
OF RECEIPT FROM BRESLING SIGNED COMDR REC 0853Z

Msg #3 011210Z
FM LDR
TO LDR4
CEASE ALL OPR IM ED AND ALL PERS REMAIN INSIDE METAL BLGS UNTIL FURTHER
NOTICE PD MAINTAIN ROTATING SHIFT RADIO COM1 WITH 1 DR FOR FURTHER INSTR
PD ROBINSON SENDS 1220Z

Msg #4 012243Z
FM AF1902
TO: DIRTY FACE
SHOULD RONGERIK ISLAND BE EVACUATED AT ONCE X REQ IMMED ANS REC 2248Z

Msg #5 012317Z
FM AGD20
TO AF1902
IN REGARDS TO YOUR MESSAGE NEG EVAC 2317Z

Msg #6 YY 012326Z
FM AGC20
TO AF1902
INFOR LDR4
DISREGARD MY MSG TO NOT EVACUATE X REQ RADIOLOGICAL SITUATION IMMEDIATELY X
COL CROSBY REC 2332Z

Msg #7 012322Z
FROM AGC2
TO AGD20
N 1902 UF1 WITH CHRISTENSEN ABOARD RECOMMENDS EVACUATION ARE YOU IN
CONTACT WITH N1902 SIGNED HUGHES REC 2330Z

Msg #8 012325Z
FM AGC2
TO AGD20
CHRISTENSEN ABOARD UF1 N1902 NOW EVACUATING 8 SIGNED HUGHES REC 2331Z

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