

Atom Bomb Test Was A Crossroads For Local Veteran

BY ERIC CARLSON

Last week, veterans told Congress about the health problems they have suffered since the Persian Gulf War and about the Pentagon's refusal to admit that they may have been victims of chemical or biological warfare.

Thousands of troops returned from the deserts of Iraq with mysterious illnesses for which doctors have no other logical explanation. Now the government seems to want those veterans to quietly disappear.

It's a scene that seems all too familiar to Leroy Tibbetts of Holden Beach. He's a World War II veteran who has also been plagued with unusual health problems that don't seem to afflict other men his age.

For the past 15 years, Tibbetts has experienced frequent outbreaks of a strange rash that often gets so bad that his skin bleeds. His legs and ankles sometimes swell to three times their normal size. He has had several heart attacks. Last year doctors found cancer in his left lung, which had to be removed along with a rib and all his lymph nodes. Then in January Tibbetts had a stroke, which slowed his speech and dulled his memory.

But not enough to keep him from asking questions about why a 67-year-old man, who has otherwise led an active, healthy life, should suddenly start falling apart.

"What I want to know is the reason why all this is happening to me and not to other people my age," Tibbetts said recently. "There are guys playing golf in their 90s when I can't walk from my car to the house without stopping to rest."

"I think they're trying to push all this under the rug and hoping that we'll all just die off and go away."

By "they," Tibbetts means veterans affairs officials in Washington, D.C. By "we" he means what are left of the 42,000 American servicemen who were eye witnesses to the most powerful force ever unleashed by humans on earth.

It was called "Operation Crossroads," because even then, officials knew that once mankind ventured down the path of nuclear warfare, we would never be the same.

Conducted in July 1946 on Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific, Operation Crossroads marked the second and third tests of the atomic bomb (if you don't count Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and the first blasts from which significant data would be collected on the effects of nuclear weapons.

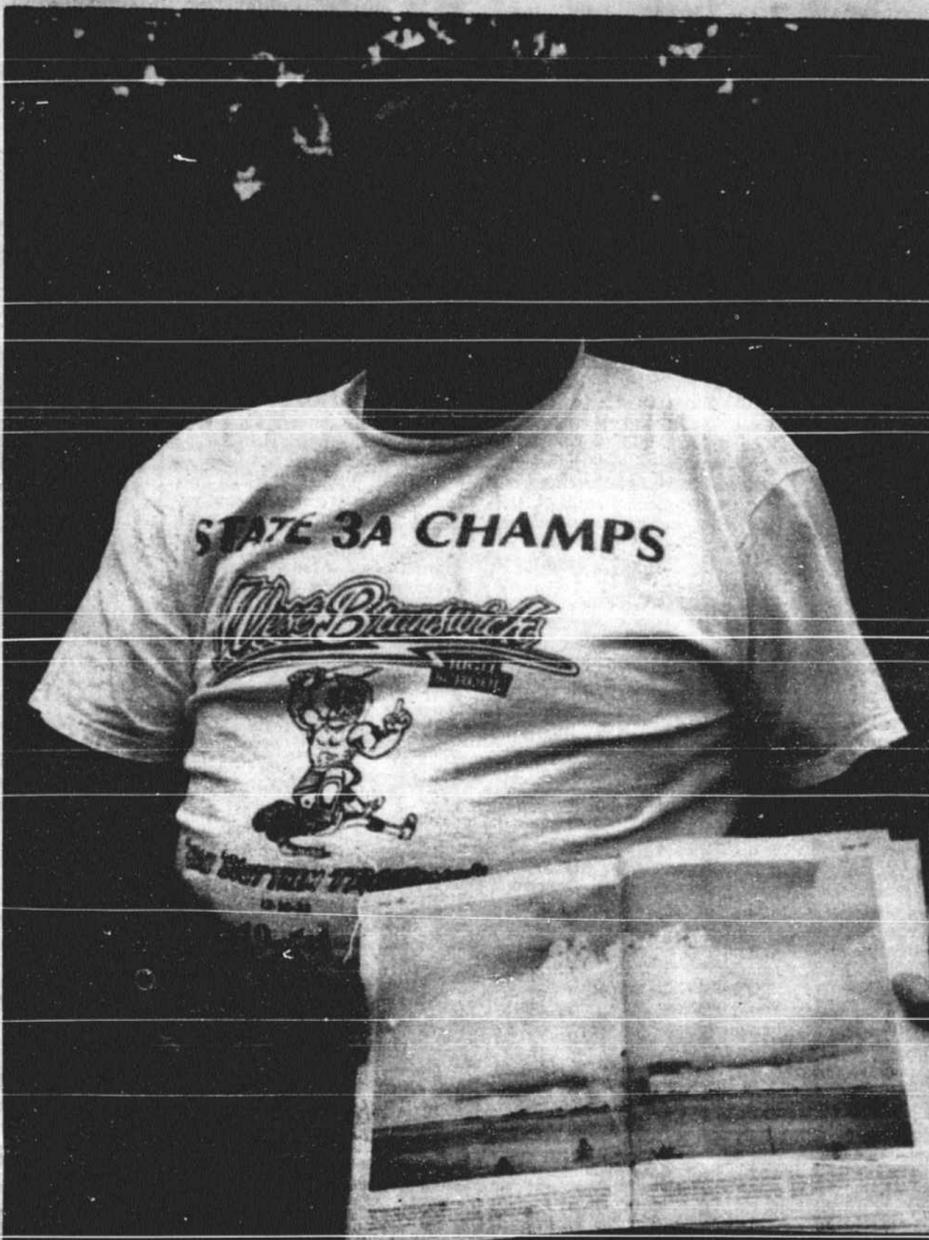
After evacuating the population, a fleet of more than 20 ships was anchored inside the ring of islands. More than 10,000 measuring instruments were installed on nearby shorelines, on observation ships and on the targets themselves. Cameras were set up to take more than 50,000 still photographs and 1.5 million feet of movie film. Drone airplanes were used to collect data from inside the billowing mushroom clouds.

At age 17, Tibbetts was one of the youngest in a contingent of U.S. Marines stationed aboard the USS Mount McKinley, the flag ship of Vice Admiral W.H.P. Blandy, commander of Operation Crossroads. It was there, lying face-down on the deck that Tibbetts watched the first of two atomic bombs—designated "Able" and "Baker"—explode in the air above the target armada.

"You couldn't believe the flash," Tibbetts remembers. Even eight miles away, he recalls feeling the shock wave that ripped away hundreds of tons of steel from the doomed vessels near the center of the blast.

The Baker blast 24 days later created a sight that was even more awesome. This time the bomb was detonated 90 feet under water, so there wasn't any flash. Instead, the explosion instantly propelled a 10-million-ton column of water 2,200 feet in diameter more than a mile into the air.

In high-speed photographs of the Baker explosion, you can clearly see a full-sized battleship standing on its end in the rising water column. Other ships look like tiny toys, dwarfed by the cylinder of rising water that



LEROY TIBBETTS holds a photograph of the second of two atomic bomb blasts he witnessed on Bikini Atoll in 1946.

would send most of them to the bottom a few moments later.

Tibbetts remembers bits of coral from the ocean floor raining down on the observation ship. The shock of the blast immediately killed all sea life for miles around. What was left of the target fleet was drenched with highly radioactive seawater.

The government's official historical record of Operation Crossroads, published in 1946, talks about residual radioactivity as little more than a nuisance, and not the slow, silent killer it has since been found to be.

The report notes that "This innocent-appearing but radioactive water was such a hazard, even after four days, that it was still unsafe for inspection parties to spend any useful length of time at the center of the tar-

get area."

But photographs accompanying the report, one titled "Saturday Night Bath," show servicemen "decontaminating" vessels by hosing them down with that same seawater. The captions note that the ships were "washed down and made free from harmful radioactivity."

"We swam in that water. We bathed in that water. We washed our clothes in that water," Tibbetts said. He believes exposure to the blast itself and the resulting radiation are to blame for his current health problems.

Tibbetts said his efforts to convince the government of that have largely fallen on deaf ears. When he reported his condition to the Veterans Administration, they naturally recommended that he report to a VA hospital for a complete physical examination.

"The doctor never even asked me to get undressed," Tibbetts said. "They just asked me some questions, took my temperature, checked my blood pressure and weighed me. Then they told me all my problems were caused by smoking."

"When I was in the service, it was the government that gave me the free cigarettes that got me smoking!" he said.

Since he began to suspect that his health problems might be associated with his days on Bikini Atoll, Tibbetts said he has read everything he can get his hands on about other veterans with similar experiences. The trouble is, most of them are already dead, he said.

"Late one night I saw a documentary on TV about a guy from Operation Crossroads who went on board the ground-zero ship after the Able blast wearing nothing but a pair of tennis shorts," Tibbetts said. "Twenty-five years later he had to have his left leg amputated, then his right, then his hands. They finally admitted it was radiation just before he died in 1983."

Recently, Tibbetts found a classified advertisement from a veteran in Texas who has filed a class-action lawsuit in connection with health problems he suffered since serving in Operation Crossroads. And Tibbetts said the local Veteran Service Officer Virgil Batten has been "very helpful" in getting him information and entering him in the computer network that keeps track of such cases.

Still, Tibbetts doesn't feel optimistic about getting the government to admit that it might have mishandled a military operation that happened a half century ago and a half a world away.

"There aren't many of us left to remind them," Tibbetts said. "And time is on their side."

Diabetes Class Summer Session Begins June 8

The summer session of diabetes education classes at The Brunswick Hospital will begin Wednesday, June 8, and will take place from 7 until 9 p.m. in the hospital's conference room.

The program educates diabetics about good nutrition, exercise, eye care and foot care associated with the disease. It also will focus on the stress and complications associated with diabetes.

Classes are free and open to all diabetics and family members involved in their care. Registered nurses from The Brunswick Hospital will teach the classes, which will continue for six weeks.

Program participants will be invited to join the hospital's Diabetes Support Group, which meets on the first Monday of each month at 7 p.m. in the hospital conference room. The next scheduled support group meeting is June 6 with guest speaker Igor Westra, M.D., staff physician at Carolina Eye Associates, M.D., staff physician at Carolina Eye Associates.

Westra will speak on eye conditions related to diabetes. He is a specialist in diabetic retinopathy, macular degeneration, retinal detachments, ocular tumors and proliferative vitreoretinopathy, among other eye disease.

For more information or space reservations, call Sherry Hendricksen, R.N., or Pat Nutter, R.N., at The Brunswick Hospital, 754-8121.

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The Feminists Of The Animal World

BY BILL FAVER

If the feminist movement has its counterpart in the animal world it probably is the aphids. Most of the 4,000 or more species of this common garden pest begin life as an egg laid near the bud of a plant like a rose.

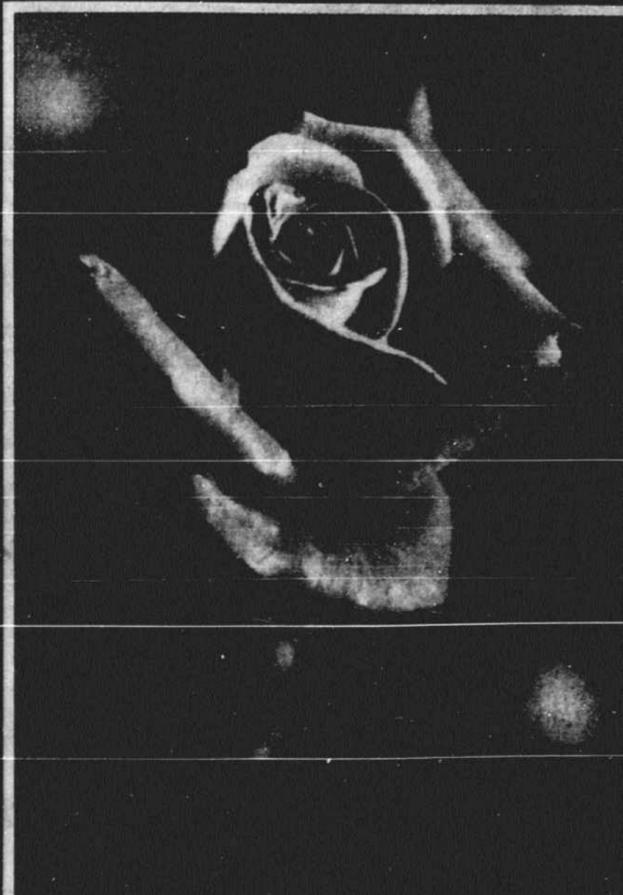
When spring comes and the bud begins to open and the eggs hatch out only wingless females. These females dig their snouts into the bud and begin extracting the sap.

Within several days, these females give birth to live females, and after several days, they will also reproduce, bearing only female aphids. Each aphid may hatch out 25 or more daughters a day until the plant can support no more aphids. Then, according to *Wildlife Preservation*, females are born with wings and they are able to fly away and find fresh, new plants to start their own group of females.

It isn't until the end of summer that males are needed. When plants become scarce and there is danger of the aphids starving, the last generation of females gives birth to a group of males and females and they mate. The females then lay their eggs at prime spots on roses and other plants, and the eggs remain through the winter until the next spring, when the process starts all over again.

This matriarchal society seems to have little use for the males, but they are necessary for continuance of the species. It just seems unfair that all those first females are deprived of a meaningful male relationship as they bring more females into the world.

It would seem that they are too busy reproducing to be bothered with the time it would take for a relationship, even if the males promised to help with the kids. At least the female aphids don't eat the males, and that's more than can be said for some spiders!



A ROSE can be host to a matriarchal society of aphids.



PHOTO BY BILL FAVER