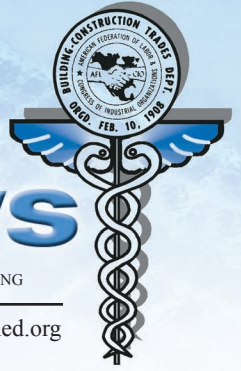


BTMED news



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Special Online Issue

Spring 2016

www.btmed.org

Life on the Amchitka Island Test Site

Bob Balick was never a construction worker. He wasn't part of a building trade on a DOE Site, like the vast majority of men and women who have gone through the BTMed program. Yet, because of how much dangerous radiation he was exposed to during his work placement on the Amchitka test site, BTMed's medical screenings are available to him and everyone he worked with there.

Amchitka, a small island in the Aleutian Island Chain off the coast of Alaska, was the site of three underground nuclear explosion tests in 1965, 1969, and 1971. Bob worked on radio communications prior to and after the third and largest test, codenamed Cannikin. He was temporarily evacuated to Anchorage as "Detonation Non-essential". After the explosion, he returned to the island for a few days to help dismantle and transport the radio equipment back to Oklahoma City, OK.

"Obviously nuclear radiation has thousands of years of half-life," Bob remarks. "It takes thousands of



Air Force Communications Team with Tropospheric Scatter Radio Equipment.
Photo courtesy of Bob Balick

years for it to decompose to half its size, so the nuclear radiation from all three tests will be around for a while."

Despite the official assurances that the test would be harmless and there would be no radioactive leakage, Bob still found himself classified as "nuclear-exposed"

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from his work on the site post-nuclear test. "I like to say I glow in the dark," he mentions, reflecting on his exposed status. "That's kind of humorous but I have the chance of developing cancer from nuclear exposure.

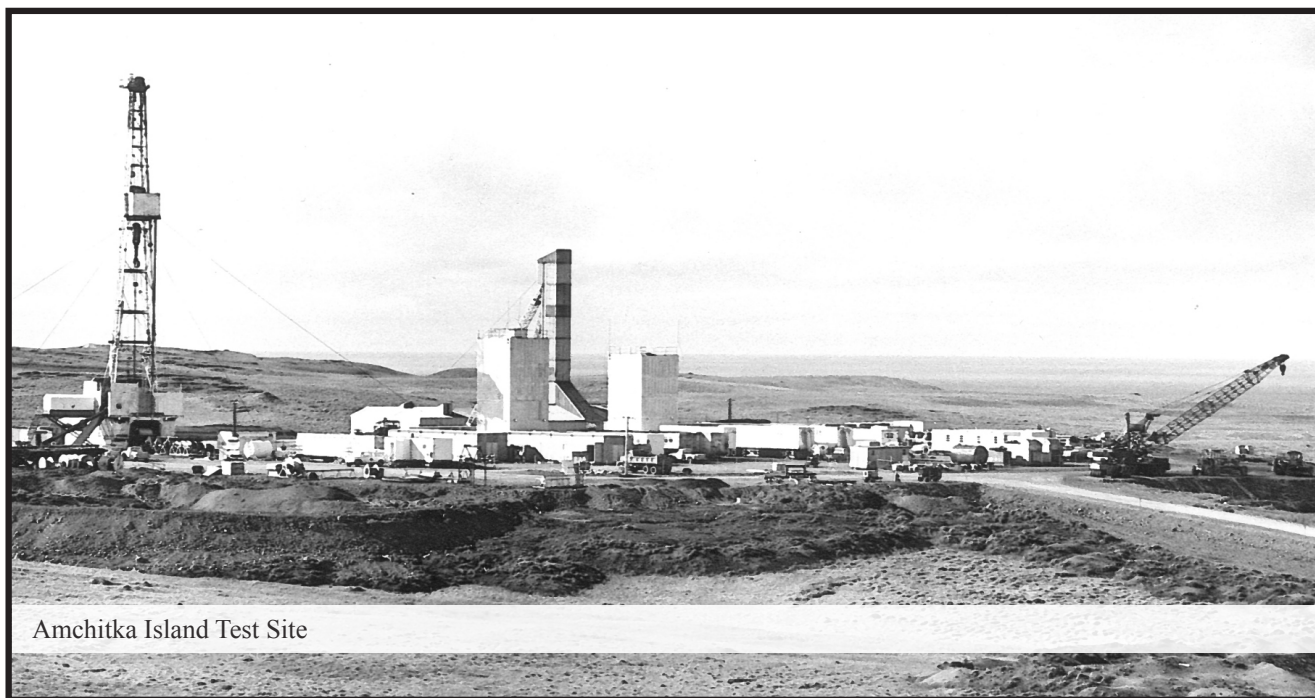
And that's how I got into the program that BTMed offers." He participated in his first screening three years ago.

Leading up to the Cannikin detonation, there were around 900 people working on the island of Amchitka, as contractors, government employees, and military personnel. During the test, that number was whittled down to 200 essential employees, in case of a nuclear accident. “As a matter of fact,” Bob remembers, “to reassure the public, the then-chairman of the AEC, James Schlesinger, brought his wife and two daughters to the island the day before the test and they were there during the detonation.” Schlesinger and his family then spent the duration of the test in an underground bunker with the rest of the essential island staff.

Despite fears from environmental groups that the explosion would trigger earthquakes and tsunamis, or wipe out the Aleutian Islands, the test continued as planned after the US Supreme Court rejected a challenge backed by Greenpeace on the morning of the test. Setting foot on the irradiated island,

however, was far from safe. “The first two nuclear tests, Long Shot and Milrow, both had radiation leakages afterwards. As well as they could prevent it, it just happens,” Bob reveals. “Cannikin being the largest of the three devices, over five megatons, had the largest leakage. And as I returned two or three days after the test, anybody still on the island was nuclear exposed.” In fact, because of the radiation already on the island from the first two tests, even those who didn’t return to the island after Cannikin are eligible to participate in BTMed as well.

BTMed is available to all workers from the Amchitka site. If you’re interested in screening please contact BTMed at 1-800-866-9663. Information in this article was provided by Mr. Robert Balick, who worked on the Amchitka site for four months in 1971.■



Amchitka Island Test Site



Amchitka Test Site
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