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REARVIEW MIRROR

Recollections of nuke tests at Johnston still burn bright

In 1958 the skies of Hawaii were lit up on several occasions by nuclear tests at Johnston Island, 700 miles away. The first explosion, on Aug. 1, 1958, was clearly visible around 1 a.m. in the territory of Hawaii. The Star-Bulletin reported that "islanders who were up at that time saw a bright flash of light to the southwest, followed by a reddish fireball."

Even though Gov. William Quinn and military officials had warned us in advance of the test, the public greeted it with "a mild wave of panic," the paper reported.

Gov. Neil Abercrombie said he was driving down Punahou Street when it went off.

"The whole sky lit up a bright green," he recalls. It became one of his motivations for politics. "I dedicated myself, back then, to work for the ending of atmospheric atomic testing."

A viewer 2,500 miles away

in Fiji reported seeing it, too. He described long streaks of lightning that seemed to flash downward from high in the sky. "Then a huge, round, reddish cloud appeared which burst after about 20 minutes into assorted colors which slowly spread outward."

WHEN THE SECOND nuclear test occurred, islanders were better prepared, holding "Atomic Parties," with snacks and blankets at prime viewing locations.

Manoa resident Jim Harwood had a closer look at the blast. He was directly underneath several of them in 1962.

Harwood was aboard the USAS American Mariner, tasked with monitoring the test.

"The folks in Hawaii got a much better view of the aftereffects of the atomic test than I did, stationed right under the explosion 250 miles up. The sky was fully

overcast and it was pouring rain.

"When the all-clear sounded I came out from under a black protective cloth and saw, to my astonishment, the entire overcast sky from horizon to horizon was a brilliant green as bright as daylight, fading minute by minute through yellow to orange and then red, as if the end of the world was happening."

How could we see an atomic explosion 700 miles away? The nuclear explosions took place 80 to 250 miles above the island. The top of the fireball was even higher than that. From 700 miles away the curvature of the earth would prevent us from seeing anything at ground level. But we could see anything bright enough above 60 miles in height.

These were the first rocket-launched nuclear tests by the U.S. The purpose was to measure the effects of high-altitude nuclear explosions to be used in anti-ballistic missiles.

The nuclear warheads were 100 to 250 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima at the end of World War II.

On July 9, 1962, a 1.45-megaton bomb exploded at an altitude of 250 miles. An artificial aurora lasted seven minutes. The unforeseen electromagnetic pulse

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Hawaii residents held "atomic parties" with snacks and blankets at prime viewing locations to watch nuclear tests high above Johnston Island.

caused power surges on Oahu, knocked out a few streetlights, blew fuses and circuit breakers, and triggered burglar alarms. The explosion supercharged the

Van Allen radiation belts, resulting in several satellites malfunctioning.

Bob Sigall, author of the "Companies We Keep"

books, looks through his collection of old photos to tell stories each Friday of Hawaii people, places and companies. Email him at Sigall@Yahoo.com.