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# The remote island near Hawaii with a dark past

The island served as a secluded place for activities too dangerous to do elsewhere



An aerial view of Johnstone Atoll in the background, Sand Island in the foreground, Nov. 1, 1990. SSGT Val Gempis/National Archives

By **Christine Hitt**, *Hawaii Contributing Editor*

Dec 6, 2025





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It came as a horrifying surprise early one morning in [Hawaii](#): A bright flash lit up the dark sky over Honolulu, and on the horizon, a central cloud climbed higher and higher.

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“I thought at once it must be a nuclear explosion,” a [Diamond Head](#) resident told the Honolulu Star-Bulletin in 1958. “I stepped out on the lanai [or porch] and saw what must have been the reflection of the fireball. It turned from light yellow to dark yellow and from orange to red.”

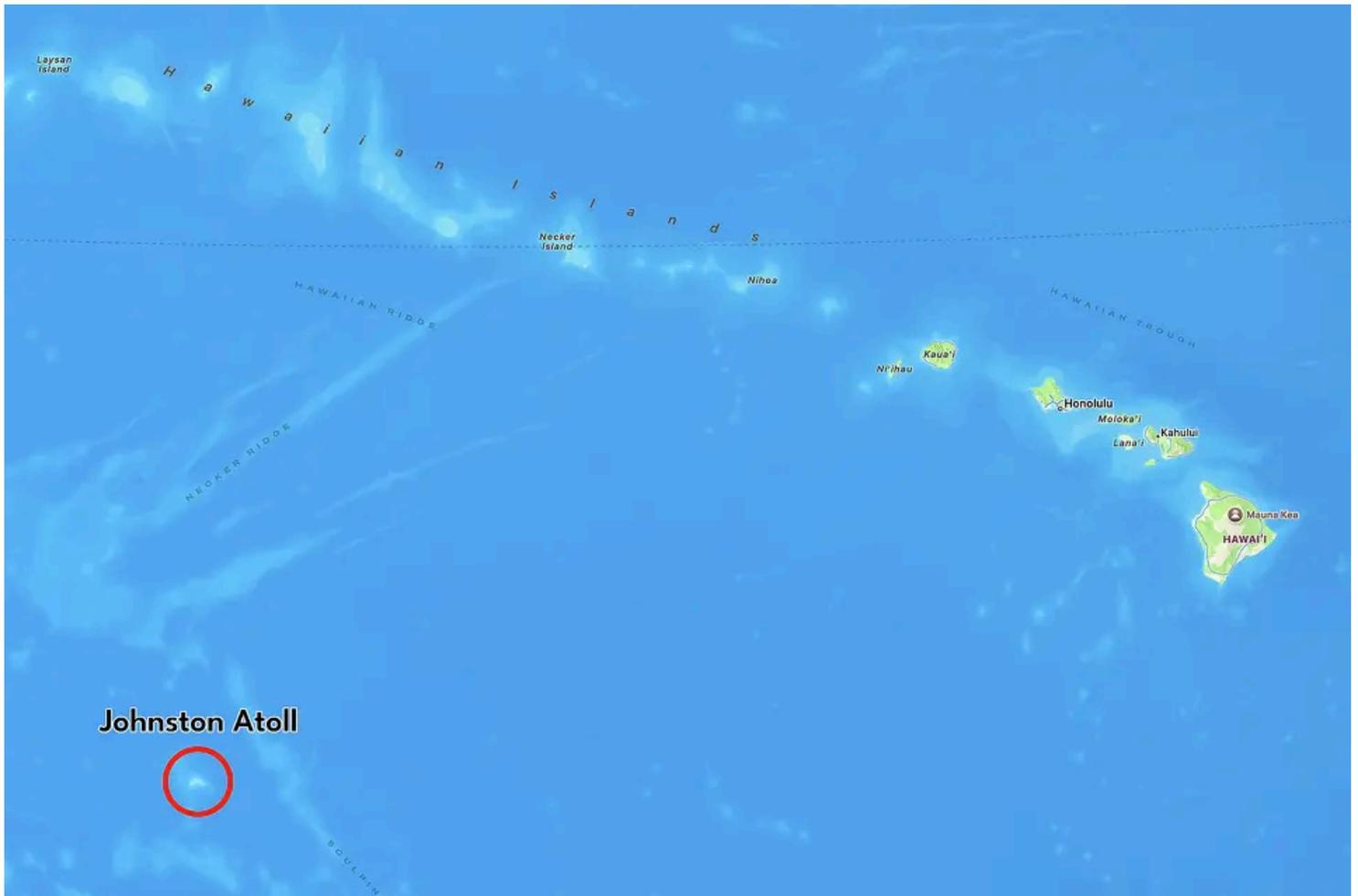
The blast overwhelmed the police switchboard with over a thousand calls. Some people thought it was another attack on Pearl Harbor. One California visitor in Waikiki phoned the newspaper to ask, “Would you advise me to leave?”

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Although seemingly close, the explosion occurred some 800 miles away and several miles above Johnston Atoll, a remote group of tiny islands in the central Pacific. The atoll, designated a bird refuge in 1926, was being used by the U.S. military for atmospheric nuclear tests, and the military failed to warn Hawaii ahead of time, angering local politicians.



Johnston Atoll is around 800 miles southwest of Honolulu.  
Apple Maps/Illustration by SFGATE

The Honolulu flash was one of the only publicly visible signs of what Johnston Atoll had become: a remote site for military activities too dangerous or too controversial to be carried out in the continental United States or an inhabited island.



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“You’ve got this atoll that, because of its relative isolation, was used as a repository for nerve gas. Agent Orange was stored there. They had some nuclear tests that went awry, and so it really is a very serious point source for toxicants,” Robert Richmond, research professor and director of Kewalo Marine Laboratory at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, tells SFGATE.

He visited Johnston Atoll in the 1980s for an underwater research project when the main island, also called Johnston, was stockpiling chemical weapons. He wore a gas mask and was told to inject himself in the leg with atropine if exposed to a toxic chemical.

“I’ve been to some nasty places in the Pacific, and that’s right up near the top,” Richmond says.



Johnston Island, part of Johnston Atoll, 825 miles southwest of Oahu, is shown in this aerial photo, May 21, 1998.

## Hawaiians' ancestor island

Part of the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument, Johnston Atoll is a ring-shaped remnant of a sinking volcanic island and has one of the world's most isolated coral reefs. It surrounds a lagoon and originally was home to only two islands, Johnston and Sand islands.

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Despite the dangers, Richmond describes the atoll as "mind blowing," with amazing table corals that are 9 feet across, with sharks, fish and birds.

Over 300 species of fish and 14 species of birds, such as frigatebirds, terns and shearwaters, live there. The atoll is also the only one in the national monument that the endangered Hawaiian monk seal visits, due to its close proximity to the main Hawaiian Islands, Jonee Peters, the executive director of environmental nonprofit Conservation Council for Hawaii, tells SFGATE.



In this photo provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, sooty terns gather near the only building left standing on the Johnston Atoll National Wildlife Refuge on March 24, 2019.

Eric Baker/AP

Peters describes the ocean as a “living entity” and Johnston as “our ancestor island.” Pacific Islanders, including Hawaiians, regularly voyaged across the ocean visiting different areas of the Pacific. She believes Hawaiians knew about the atoll. “Ancient Hawaiians always knew that we had a connection to different areas in the Pacific and cared for resources accordingly,” she says.

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The atoll is called Kalama by Native Hawaiians, named after the ship that claimed it for the Kingdom of Hawaii. In 1858, when Americans were taking possession of the island for guano, Kamehameha IV issued a royal proclamation adding the island to the Hawaiian Kingdom. The kingdom still maintained the atoll was under Hawaii rule when the government was overthrown in 1893.

When the U.S. Congress submitted a bill for Hawaii's statehood in the 1950s, the Defense and Interior departments intentionally excluded Johnston as a Hawaiian island.



Dressed in full protective gear, soldiers from the 71st Chemical Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, line up to be sprayed with a decontamination solution near the conclusion of an exercise designed to test the unit's ability to detect and mitigate a chemical leak at Johnston Atoll, July 10, 1990.

SPEC Charmagne McGillivray/National Archives

## The island's desecration

The U.S. military's presence on Johnston increased in the 1930s, when tensions grew in the Pacific prior to World War II, and continued for decades.

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In the 1960s, the U.S. military dramatically expanded the atoll, dredging coral to add more land. Johnston grew from 46 to 596 acres, and Sand grew from 10 to 22 acres. The military also created two new human-made islands, the 25-acre North Island and 18-acre East Island.

From the air, Johnston looks like an oversized aircraft carrier, its runway stretching the length of the island. The military conducted multiple atmospheric nuclear tests above the island in the '50s and '60s. Beginning in 1971, the atoll became a place to store chemical agents and munitions. Then in 1985, Congress ordered the destruction of the stockpile of weapons, building the first-of-its-kind incinerator to burn rockets, mines, bombs and chemical weapons, like Agent Orange, mustard gas and nerve agents, on the island. The military started operating the incinerator in 1990 but not without accidents. One chemical agent, nerve gas, leaked in 1994.



Two trucks carrying containers of chemical munitions are escorted by a pair of military police vehicles as they drive away from the pier area during Operation Steel Box at Johnston Atoll, Nov. 1, 1990.

When the disposal was complete, the military had destroyed over 400,000 chemical weapons on Johnston Island. Then the military base closed in 2003, removing buildings and shutting down the runway, returning the island to the birds and animals that live there.

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Richmond says that legacy contaminants, or persistent pollutants, are still there and penetrating the atoll. “The big problem is the toxicant load. Even though they got rid of the nerve gas, they did kind of a superficial cleanup. You can never really clean up the mess that went on from decades of testing and storage out there,” he says.

## Current threats

The Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument was established in 2009, including Johnston Atoll among Howland, Baker and Jarvis islands and Wake and Palmyra atolls. It created a boundary of 50 nautical miles outside Johnston’s shoreline, and President Barack Obama expanded that boundary to 200 nautical miles in 2014.

Johnston Atoll is managed as a national wildlife refuge by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; however, the U.S. Air Force “retains administrative jurisdiction” over its emergent lands — and still considers it for future projects.

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In March, the Air Force announced plans to land rockets on the atoll, a partnership between the U.S. Space Force and Elon Musk's SpaceX. A few months later, the Air Force suspended plans to look at alternative options, after drawing criticism and a lawsuit from environmental groups. An Air Force spokesperson told Stars and Stripes that a notification will be published once it's decided whether to restart or completely cancel the Johnston Atoll plans. SFGATE reached out to the Air Force for an update but did not receive a response before publication.



A view of the signs near the island's airfield on Johnston Atoll, Nov. 1, 1990.  
SSGT Val Gempis/National Archives

In April, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to roll back the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument's protections, allowing commercial fishing between 50 and 200 miles from shore. However, a U.S. district court blocked the move.

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“These really are precious areas of incredible biodiversity in a world of climate change,” Richmond says. He believes it is extremely important to leave these remote areas brimming with biodiversity alone, setting them aside to be protected, “if we’re going to leave any kind of viable legacy for the future.”

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*Editor's note: SFGATE recognizes the importance of diacritical marks in the Hawaiian language. We are unable to use them due to the limitations of our publishing platform.*

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**Christine Hitt**

HAWAII CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



Christine Hitt is the Hawaii contributing editor for SFGATE. She is part-Native Hawaiian from the island of Oahu, and a Kamehameha Schools and University of Hawaii graduate. She's the former editor-in-chief of Hawaii and Mana magazines.

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