



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Belvedere author Bill McGee, now 90, was a 20-year-old sailor aboard the USS Fall River during the Test Baker atomic bomb explosion on July 25, 1946, at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. Unmanned target-fleet ships can be seen on the water below the massive condensation cloud.

70 years ago, Belvedere man was on front line of atomic bomb history

In new book, Navy vet talks about first post-war tests, 'Operation Crossroads,' at Bikini



DIANE SMITH / FOR THE ARK

U.S. Navy veteran Bill McGee of Belvedere is the author of the new book 'Operation Crossroads: Lest We Forget! An Eyewitness Account, Bikini Atomic Bomb Tests 1946,' with his co-author and wife, Sandra McGee.

By DIANE SMITH

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Most people, when they hear the word "bikini," think of the two-piece swimsuits that Paris engineer Louis Réard used for the name of his scandalous line of beachwear, released just four days after atomic bomb testing began at Bikini Atoll. That was July 1946, 70 years ago this month.

For 90-year-old Bill McGee of Belvedere, the name means something entirely different: a horrendous blast and radiation.

At the time of the tests, Réard said, "Like the bomb, the bikini is small and devastating." McGee says he doesn't think the bomb was all that small, but he does agree that it was devastating.

As a 20-year-old U.S. Navy sailor in July 1946, McGee says he thought it was just another routine assignment when he was sent to the Pacific on board the heavy cruiser USS Fall River.

He soon learned the Fall River would be Vice Admiral William H.P. Blandy's flagship for Joint Task Force One, which was assigned to conduct "Operation Crossroads."

See **CROSSROADS**, PAGE 27

Crossroads, *continued from page 1*

McGee was to be part of the United States' first postwar series of atomic bomb testing, at Bikini, a small atoll in the Marshall Islands centered more than 2,000 miles from Hawaii, Japan and Australia.

A Belvedere resident for the past 13 years, McGee has written his account of what it was like to be one of the 42,000 military, scientific and civilian personnel at the first and second atomic bomb tests: July 1's Test Able, "Gilda," detonated just 520 feet above the target fleet, and July 25's Test Baker, "Helen of Bikini," detonated 90 feet underwater.

Timed for the 70th anniversary of these events, McGee's self-published book, "Operation Crossroads: Lest We Forget! An Eyewitness Account, Bikini Atomic Bomb Tests 1946," came out last month.

The nuclear tests on Bikini Atoll were the first in a series of 23 explosions detonated by the U.S. between 1946 and 1958 — on the reef itself, in the air and underwater.

McGee says that although the residents of the atoll, who were removed to other islands, had been promised they could return after the tests were over, a June article in Science News reported that radiation levels on Bikini still remain higher than the recommended safe levels for habitation.

In his book, McGee explains that the objective of the tests was to determine the effect of the atomic bomb on various types of naval vessels, because there was no reliable information on what it would do to ships, airplanes and military equipment — and there is no defense against it.

He says a variety of animals also were placed on the tar-

get vessels: pigs, guinea pigs, goats, rats, mice and grains with insects.

He quotes Blandy's words: "In the face of this new knowledge ... not only warfare but civilization itself literally stands at the crossroads. Hence the name of this operation."

McGee writes about the anxiety that could be felt throughout the ship the night before Test Able.

"It was scary. No one really knew what would happen," he says. "It turned out that our heavy cruiser rocked like a small boat."

On that day, McGee says all personnel were ordered to observe precise precautions: Face away from Bikini, sit on the deck, close their eyes tightly and cover them with a banded arm against the face.

"We were told to keep our eyes closed, heads down and cradled between our legs during the countdown," he says, "and most of us did just that."

Because he followed these orders, McGee, whose ship was some 12-15 miles from the target fleet, didn't actually see the flash of light from the bomb, but he has experienced reverberations from the blast ever since, with a plethora of skin cancers, including five melanomas.

He also has been legally blind for the past 13 years.

He says his ship was back in the Bikini Lagoon the day after Test Able, and almost all the surviving target ships were boarded for inspection by military personnel within a day or two of the test.

His book is filled with photographs, illustrations, memoirs and interviews collected from fellow seamen who were at the Bikini tests, along with statistics on how the operation was carried out, hour by hour. He gives an eyewitness report on

the buildup, rehearsals and tests, and then tells about the lessons learned.

McGee also injects some humor, such as an anecdote about the boy who wrote home: "Dear Ma, I joined the Navy because I admired the way the ships were kept so clean and tidy. This week I learned who keeps them so clean and tidy. Love, Junior."

McGee says he wrote "Crossroads" as a public service.

"I feel that Western Civilization is at stake," he says. "Dangers are in ISIS and Iran. It's around the corner — within 20 years."

He is also interested in hearing from other atomic veterans who would like to get together and share memories.

McGee has published 22 books, which range in topic from his life as a cowboy on an exclusive Nevada divorce ranch to the critical role of military logistics in World War II, and from a detailed book about his 32 years in the broadcasting field to a history of the revolutionary World War II landing craft and the men who operated them.

Serving as co-author and editor with McGee is Sandra, his wife of 35 years, who has co-authored eight of his books.

"Operation Crossroads," at 132 pages with 59 photos and illustrations, costs \$19.95 and is available online at Amazon.com.

To comment on the book or to share memories, email McGee at mcgeebmc@aol.com or contact him through his website, williammcgeebooks.com.

Diane Smith has been contributing to The Ark since 1980, writing and taking photos on everything from personalities to events.