

Starting From Scratch at Ground Zero

By Joseph C Dovala

July 1, 1946 – “One man feared gravity would be destroyed and everything would fall up. Another prophesied that when the atomic bomb wet off at Bikini, all the water in all the oceans would be turned to gas, automatically dropping ships to the bottom. Another thought the Operation Crossroads bomb would blow a hole in the bottom of the Bikini lagoon and let all the water in the sea run out...”

Such were just a few of the predictions published in Newsweek Magazine immediately prior to the atomic testing that took place in the Marshall Islands in 1946. To be sure, our ignorance of “controlled” nuclear fission was staggering. The unknowns outweighed any meager knowledge we had at the time. Even today Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and very recently, Fukushima, are evidence we still have a lot to learn. There is much speculation as to why we further needed to test the new terrifying weapons so soon after the devastation of the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Perhaps

as the new dominant power that emerged out of WWII, we needed to flex some muscle; especially to the Soviet Union. Despite Nagasaki and Hiroshima, many nations did not believe we had such devices; even some people in Japan still doubted they could exist.

To prove the point, 73 obsolete and captured warships were prepared with full battle readiness for the tests. On July 3, and again on July 25, two nuclear bombs known as Able and Baker, about the size of those dropped over Japan, were detonated on and in the lagoon. “Operation Crossroads” was hailed as a mighty experiment for “the good of mankind and to end all world wars.” Perhaps this forecast has proven true; we haven’t had a world war since (although we came real close during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962). Maybe between all the hundreds of tests, which caused more than a few human casualties, and the horrifying results of the only two atomic bombs used on a population, this often used rhetoric through out history has finally indeed come true.



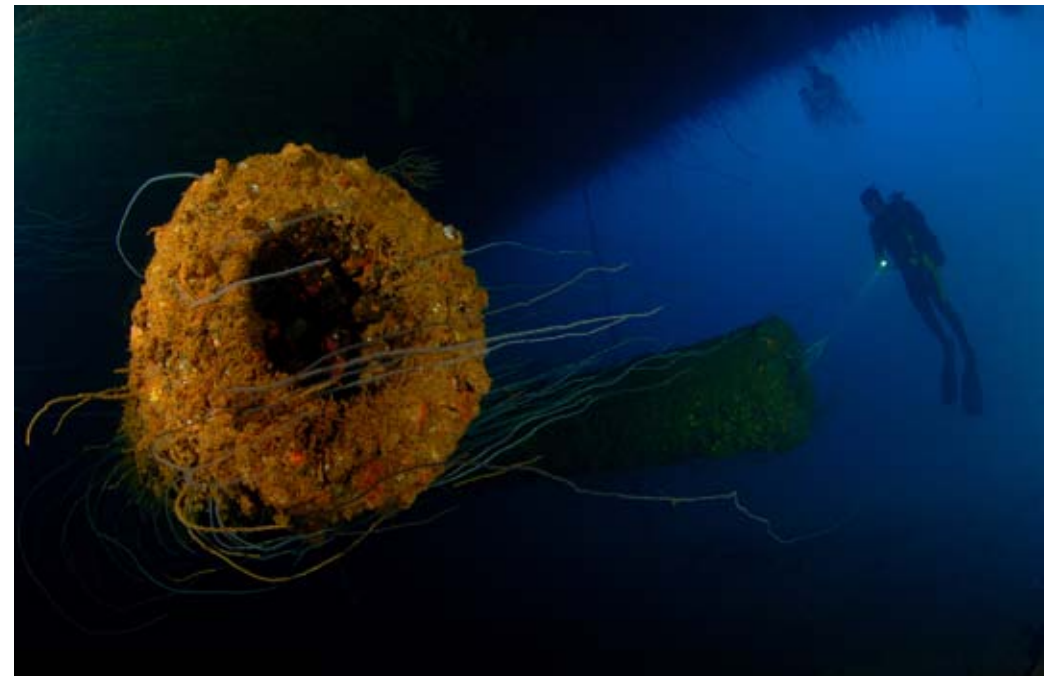


We'll see.

After spending time diving the sunken ships of Bikini atoll and the Marshall Islands, one would be hard pressed to find a more beautiful South Seas island. Bikini is covered in rusting carcasses of construction equipment from over the years. The jungle is also reclaiming a dump on the southeast end of the island complete with a cache of C-4 explosives. Nearby is a large hill of radioactive sand.....Whoa, STOP! Didn't I just say you'd be hard pressed to find a more beautiful "South Seas" island? Besides the trash and explosives, there is also

over 6 miles of white and pink sand beaches without a single human footprint. With the exception of the diving compound the coconut palm tree line is unbroken from one end of the island to the other. You would never know the malevolent history here unless you were told. Nature took pretty much all the nastiness we could dish out and after 50 years, a blink of an eye in Earth time, she has nearly erased the lingering radiation to less than what you'd receive from a single transcontinental flight across the U.S.

In a few more "blinks" of time, she will have reduced the cesium 137 half-life contamination currently





concentrated in the plant life to insignificant levels. The concrete rubble and rusting steel will be deconstructed to sand and ferrous compounds. The fabulous ships in the lagoon will become part of the seabed.

As divers we get a chance to travel to offbeat regions of the world. We can time travel by visiting shipwrecks, like those in Bikini, and soak up culture quite different from our own. We also visit the unseen (for most people) ocean realm and view first hand the early warning signs of a troubled environment. Diving can be far more than a “sport” if one’s mind is open to the possibilities. It’s also about trying to understand

our place and responsibilities in this world. Bikini’s history teaches that despite our arrogance as a species we will not be able to destroy the earth. In spite of making an unforgivable mess of things, Mother Earth will continue on. We do not need a plethora of draconian directives to live in harmony on this planet, we just need to be conscious of our action and their effect on the world - kind of like what most of us were told somewhere around kindergarten.

Joseph Dovala
www.jcdovola.com

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Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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