

Victim of Bikini Bomb Tests, Radioactive Waste

Lewiston Vet Gripped in Fallout of Atomic Age

By BOB DEARING

Fifteen miles was all that separated Duke L. Williams from a blast of atomic energy so awesome it literally lifted a 33,000-ton battleship out of the water and into its blossoming mushroom cloud.

Mr. Williams, then a Gunner's Mate 3rd Class for the U.S. Navy, was aboard a salvage tug commissioned to assist in the country's first atomic bomb testing conducted in 1946 in a lagoon off Bikini Island in the South Pacific.

Less than two miles is all that separates Mr. Williams today from the Niagara Falls Storage Site in the Town of Lewiston. It's there where some of the radioactive garbage left over from the process that produced those first bombs is stored and where more may be on its way.

The atomic age has come full circle for Mr. Williams, who is finding his past and present laden with the physical and emotional fallout from the nation's weapons program.

Ill health has plagued Mr. Williams, 55, for several years. His thyroid gland was removed surgically in 1981 after its malfunction caused him to bloat and gain an unwanted 30 to 40 pounds.

Doctors at Buffalo's Veterans Hospital attributed the thyroid problem to radiation exposure. His thyroid condition also caused him to contract hepatitis and though he has recovered from that, Mr. Williams, now a foreman on the Somerset Power Plant project, is finding his overall health is not what it used to be.

STILL THE patriot, Mr. Williams said he doesn't regret serving his country at Bikini. What he does regret, though, and what makes him livid, is what he says was the government's callous failure to check on the health of the men involved in an operation that by the government's own admission was not always conducted with the full knowledge of what radiation can do to people.

"Not once in 36 years did they try to get hold of me, to get us physicals, to see how we were doing," he said.

His story began aboard the USS Achomawi, a salvage tug with a crew of 54 men assigned to assess



—News Staff Photographer Bill Dyciniak

BITTER IRONY — Duke L. Williams of Lewiston traces a history of health problems to his Navy days when he assisted in the nation's first atomic bomb testing, of which he holds pictures. Now, Mr. Williams is concerned about plans to store additional radioactive waste at the Niagara Falls Storage Site, about two miles from his home.

and scrub up the damage from the first blasts.

Mr. Williams remembers those days, those hot July days when swimming trunks were the standard attire for cleaning up radioactive residue.

"Our main object was to go into the blast area and extinguish any fires and clean up the radiation," he said.

At least 77 ships had been placed in the area to see what effects the

days in the very waters where the blast had occurred, Mr. Williams remembers how they cleaned the contamination.

"First it was with Ivory Soap," he said. "We finally made a paste of salt water and soap, all the while scrubbing away in our swimming trunks."

THE CREW'S water supply was contaminated salt water from the lagoon, its only purification coming from the steam evaporator used to extract the salt.

By that time, Mr. Williams said, some of the men had begun to lose their hair and a reading of his own exposure level showed a dosage of 90 rems. The National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements has established a threshold of 25 rems as the maximum dosage during one-time, planned exposures in emergency conditions. Recommended exposure under normal conditions is only 5 rems per year.

"They took us into the washroom and showered us with this ultraviolet paint and told us we were cured," he said.

When the Achomawi returned to San Francisco after three months in the blast area, Mr. Williams said he began getting suspicious.

"They wouldn't even let us use the regular toilets on the docks," he said. "They built us toilets over the manholes on the dock and wouldn't let us use the dock washrooms."

The Defense Department, through the Defense Nuclear Agency, launched a program in 1977 designed to track down and check all the participants of atmospheric nuclear testing. Called the Nuclear Test Personnel Review, the still-ongoing study was begun after the federal Center for Disease Control had discovered a possible high incidence of leukemia victims among the participants in a 1957 Nevada atomic blast.

MR. WILLIAMS said he wasn't contacted about the program until 1980 and by the time he went for his scheduled checkup, the thyroid condition had already developed. He said the dangers should have been recognized years earlier along with the monitoring of participants' health.

He said his own checking has revealed that only 12 of the 54 origi-

nal crew members of the Achomawi are still alive. How many deaths he can attribute to those days at sea he doesn't know, but he said he does know something.

"From 1946 to 1980, they never tried contactig one of us," he said. "They knew enough about all this stuff years ago, enough to have brought us in at least every two years for a checkup. They didn't want to admit that they were wrong or that they did you wrong."

Mr. Williams is also facing a threat he can see from his Langdon Road home in the Town of Lewiston, a problem linked to his post-war days in the Pacific.

The Niagara Falls Storage Site on Pletcher Road, formerly the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, has been targeted as a possible regional low-level radioactive waste site where waste from outside the area would be brought in for permanent storage.

Bechtel International Inc., a worldwide development corporation that now manages the site for the U.S. Department of Energy, has proposed the idea.

THE DOE still has not made a decision but previously had planned to decontaminate the low-level waste already there, waste left during the 1940s when Western New York's industries worked with the federal government in the Manhattan Project that produced the first atomic bombs.

Mr. Williams purchased four properties on Langdon Road in 1967, including his present home.

"Now they're telling me my property isn't worth anything because of this dump," he said.

Unlike many of his neighbors, though, Mr. Williams thinks the waste already at the storage site should stay there. He wants it decontaminated but doesn't think it's fair to cart it off somewhere where another community would have to deal with it. That's why he so strongly opposes the Bechtel plan.

He said he doesn't want more waste and he doesn't want more headaches. He also wondered aloud about the irony of it all.

"I guess I'm just completing a vicious circle on this. It all started in my front yard and now it's ending up in my back yard."