

*Commentary by Jesse Gatlin*

*The Atomic Times: My H-Bomb  
Year at the Pacific Proving Ground*

Michael Harris. New York: Random  
House, 2005. 288 pp. \$24.96, hardcover

As I began reading *The Atomic Times*, I thought it was intended to be a kind of “Beetle Bailey” caricature of the Army’s freakish soldiers and bumbling incompetence during the 1956 H-bomb tests on Eniwetok atoll. By the time I finished the book, it had morphed into a serious indictment of the Army’s mismanagement, lax safety standards, and totally incompetent leadership during those tests. The book remains for me a badly flawed, bifurcated, but finally sobering treatment of a very serious matter: the callous mismanagement of those enlisted troops who were assigned to support the H-bomb tests, together with the almost universally neurotic reactions of the enlistees themselves.

Mr. Harris’s depiction of his fellow soldiers on Eniwetok exhibits a collection of freaks who from the moment they arrive on the island react with negative attitudes and aberrant acts possibly intended to evoke echoes of the characters in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. Not one is shown to maintain his mental balance when confronted with the isolation, the fear of unseen radiation, and the total lack of any competent supervision which prevail on the island. Absurdity reigns among them, and the tone of the narration exaggerates the absurdity. If intended as a factual account of his fellow soldiers, Mr. Harris’s treatment of them in most of the book is a harsh indictment of their personalities and of their abrasive relationships with each other.

He depicts them as a collection of neurotic incompetents whose freakish behavior begins as soon as they arrive on the island. That is a major weakness of the book. Had their behavior been depicted as a gradually developing result of the dangers and isolation they experienced as their one-year tour proceeded, the

negative effects of that tour would be more credible. But from the outset Harris shapes them as flat caricatures, not rounded characters.

This treatment of his fellow enlistees seriously undercuts the very serious, and presumably very accurate, description of the genuine radiation hazards to which the men were exposed during their stay on Eniwetok. Safety standards, lax to begin with, were routinely ignored by those officers charged with supervising the enlistees. "Capt. Weiss" and "Major Vanish," Harris's immediate superiors, are shown to be both callous and incompetent, true descendents of Heller's "Major Major" in *Catch-22*.

The account of how the enlistees were exposed to the H-bombs during the actual explosion rings true. From my personal involvement as a radiological monitor at the A-bomb tests at Camp Mercury, Nevada in the 1950s, I can attest to the unforgettable memory of experiencing at close range the brilliantly blinding light flash, searing heat wave, and thunderous shock wave produced by nearby nuclear explosions. Too, the post-shot radiation levels to which troops were often exposed were by today's standards exceedingly high and potentially life-threatening. Mr. Harris's latter-day indignation at the callous exposure of himself and his fellow enlistees is understandable, and it is a valid condemnation of the lack of concern for the effects of radiation on those exposed to it. At one point late in the book, he offers statistics to prove the often-delayed effects on those exposed to excessive radiation.

I understand his indignation, but I do not share it. Why? Because in my own experience as a radiological monitor I did not encounter what I interpreted then or consider now as conscious neglect nor incompetence in regard to safety measures. Rather I attribute the apparent laxity to a lack of knowledge and experience in dealing with the effects of nuclear explosions, coupled with at the highest levels of supervision a sense of urgency and crisis precipitated by the Cold War competition with the USSR during the 1950s. At that time to me the tests and the hazards of conducting them were necessary risks, a part of being near the cutting edge of nuclear technology in support of our national security.

Mr. Harris's attitude as an enlisted draftee serving as an office clerk was and is understandably different from mine, and *The Atomic Times* in every way reflects that difference. From his perspective and his experience, indignation is an appropriate response. But his memoir (admittedly fictionalized in part) would have been a more powerful indictment had he treated his fellow soldiers more respectfully. They shared his hazards and doubtless suffered from them both during and after the tests. His often crude humor, unintentionally perhaps, detracts from their dignity and partially undercuts his serious indictment of the conditions under which they served.

In a narrative such as this, humor can be leavening—but too much humorous yeast can cause an otherwise well-baked loaf to sag. *The Atomic Times* remains an edible literary loaf, but its absurd humor often blends uneasily with its seriously bitter condemnation of the Army's treatment of its troops—and often of their treatment of each other.

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