

The sun rose in the west

Dave Webb

It was 60 years ago, on 1 March 1954, that a Japanese boat, the *Lucky Dragon No. 5*, was fishing a hundred miles or so from the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean's Marshall Islands, unaware that it was soon to become the focus of international attention, political intrigue, and a world wide protest movement. Suddenly, at 6.45am, some of the crew saw a flash and glow spread across the western sky. One of them, Oishi Matashichi, was in his bunk at the time and was astonished by the yellow flash that poured through the porthole. He ran out on deck. Someone in the engine room described it as the sun rising in the west, but the origin of the light was actually from something that shone 'brighter than a thousand suns' – it was the testing of a US hydrogen bomb over Bikini.

Eight and a half years after a uranium bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, instantly killing 80,000 people and condemning tens of thousands more to death, the US military had detonated their first hydrogen bomb – code name 'Castle Bravo' and equivalent to 1,000 Hiroshima bombs or 15 million tons of TNT. The roar of the explosion followed several minutes after the flash, causing unease and alarm among the crew. Fall-out from the blast came much later still, and, spreading far from the explosion, showered *Lucky Dragon No. 5* and its crew with a layer of white ash. Crew members had no idea that this was fall-out from a hydrogen bomb test and, soon after being exposed to it, their skin began to itch and they experienced nausea and vomiting. After a difficult journey back home to Yaizu, Japan, all 23 crew were hospitalised. One man, their radio operator Aikichi Kuboyama,

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died within a few months, and 10 others were eventually to follow; the others would suffer severe ill-health for the rest of their lives.

Oishi Matashichi's story is an astonishing account of that fateful voyage, the effects on him and his shipmates, and the misjudgements, cover-ups and denials that followed – many of which resonate with more recent and current events. As Richard Falk says in his foreword to Mr Matashichi's book, it also depicts

‘the struggle of this one man to let the people of Japan know that a dark nuclear shadow was cast across their lives. To tell this story required the greatest fortitude and a willingness to endure an endless series of hostile encounters with the powers that be.’

Lucky Dragon No. 5 was, in fact, far from lucky. The author relates in detail how they set sail from Yaizu, Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan on 22 January 1954, heading for the tuna grounds of the South Pacific. Beleaguered by bad weather and poor catches, the small boat ventured into the calm seas around the Marshall Islands. The captain was aware that one particular area had been declared off-limits, but this restricted zone was clearly marked on their maps, and they were well outside of that. However, the force of the bomb was more than twice what was originally expected, and for some time after the incident the fishermen were accused of purposely ignoring the restrictions and even of spying for the Soviets.

There are many reasons why we should remember what happened to the *Lucky Dragon* 60 years ago. The incident introduced the world to widespread nuclear fall-out. Radiation doses were received both inside and outside the body. Even so, the US refused to tell the Japanese what the fall-out consisted of, stating reasons of ‘national security’, and they dismissed the severity of the fall-out and denied responsibility. When Aikichi Kuboyama died he became the first hydrogen bomb casualty and the first known victim of nuclear fall-out. The response from Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb and of the tests in the Pacific, was clear:

‘it's unreasonable to make such a big deal over the death of a fisherman.’

But this incident, and what followed from it, was a great concern to the growing global anti-nuclear campaign.

On this particular voyage, Matashichi was in charge of refrigeration and responsible for putting the catch in the storage tank, along with a great deal of ash which also went into the tank – ‘blowing in like snow’. The nine tons of contaminated fish they took home was sold in markets in four major Japanese cities and eaten by at least 100 people before anyone

realized that they were contaminated. The discovery sparked a national crisis, a ‘tuna panic’. People stopped eating marine products, usually their major source of protein. The price of fish plummeted, devastating the fishing industry. Fishermen, already living close to the poverty line, were particularly hard hit. Over ten months, 457 tons of fish were confiscated and destroyed. In December 1954, the Japanese government suddenly ‘raised the radiation level for designating fish not fit for consumption to 500 counts from 100’. This rings a bell; major concerns about contaminated fish also arose following the recent disaster at Fukushima nuclear plant, and there are other parallels between these two events. For example, the issuing of many misleading or erroneous official statements, such as ‘the 23 fishermen will recover in a few weeks, a month at most,’ and an inability to properly assess the severity of the situation or to get the facts straight.

Oishi Matashichi is from a humble background – he was born in 1934 and, at the end of the war, following the death of his father from an accident at work, aged 11, he became responsible for his mother, three brothers and two sisters. He quit school and at 14, ‘out of harsh necessity’, became a fisherman where he ‘was plunged into a world full of veterans back from the war and all kinds of rough fellows’. Following the atomic test, continually troubled by illness, frequently hospitalised and ostracised as a nuclear outcast (like the *Hibakusha* – the survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs), with his first child stillborn and deformed, Oishi moved to Tokyo and opened a laundry. He never had any intentions of being an activist, but became one when a junior high school invited him to speak in 1985, and he has continued to tell his story, usually to schoolchildren and often at the museum in Tokyo built around the salvaged hull of the *Lucky Dragon*.

The Day the Sun Rose in the West is a powerful statement about the Cold War. The author captures the tension of the US-Japanese relationship over the incident, the beginning of the anti-nuclear testing campaign, and the arrogant insistence of a nuclear power on continuing nuclear tests even while asserting limited responsibility for damages (the Japanese government controversially accepted a \$2 million one-off compensation payment from the United States). It is indeed a timely reminder of the dangers we face while we choose to remain in a nuclear age. The increasing interest in a new expansion of the nuclear power industry and an apparent stalemate in moves to bring about global nuclear disarmament are, unfortunately, signs that we have learnt very little in the last 60 years.

The publication of *The Day the Sun Rose in the West* also presents an

opportunity to address once again the appalling misuse, primarily by the US, of the Pacific Ocean and its peoples for nuclear testing. The crew of the little fishing boat were not the only ones to suffer directly from the Bravo test. Later studies showed that at least 856 Japanese fishing ships and nearly 20,000 crewmembers had been exposed. Many contracted cancer and died. None of them were examined at the time, although the Japanese government did carefully inspect all the tuna. But there's even more. Some five hours after the detonation, a change in the direction of the winds took the radioactive fallout towards the inhabited Rongelap atoll. Within hours, it was covered with a fine, white powder. Nobody knew it was radioactive fall-out. Children played with it, played in it, even tasted it. Over the following 20 or 30 years, most of the Rongelap children, and many adults, developed thyroid nodules, a number of which proved malignant.

Yet this is only a small part of the story of the nuclear Pacific, and to do justice to it would require several volumes. Of the 1,032 nuclear weapons tests carried out by the US between 1946 and 1958, 67 of them were in the Pacific Ocean. Adding up the total tonnage exploded, it is equivalent to dropping one Hiroshima-size bomb every day for 19 years. A number of the islands were left uninhabitable for generations and cancer rates remain high. The people of Bikini were asked to leave their atoll temporarily, in February 1946, by Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshall Islands. He told them that it was needed for a project that would be for 'the good of mankind and to end all world wars'. After long and difficult discussions, the 167 Bikini Islanders agreed to leave, their leader announcing that 'we will go believing that everything is in the hands of God'. Following their exodus, some 242 US naval ships, 156 aircraft, 25,000 radiation recording devices, and 5,400 experimental rats, goats and pigs began to arrive for the tests. More than 42,000 US military and civilian personnel were involved in the testing programme at Bikini.

In 1972, the US Atomic Energy Commission went so far as to declare that the islands had seen a 'remarkable recovery', and more than 100 people moved back to Bikini. However, in 1978, unacceptably high levels of radiation were recorded on the atoll and Bikini was evacuated once again. In 1997, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concluded that Bikini 'should not be permanently resettled under the present radiological conditions'.

There is much more to tell and the story continues. In 1964, the US government appropriated funds to compensate the Marshallese people who were exposed to fall-out from its testing programme. In 1988, the Marshall

Islands Nuclear Claims Tribunal was established, but Bikini Islanders have declared the compensation schemes to be inadequate and started legal action. In 2010, the US Supreme Court declined to hear any new cases in pursuit of more compensation ... and so it goes on. I find myself agreeing with Richard Falk that

‘if the curse of nuclearism is ever to be removed from human destiny, it will be the result of a popular movement from below, not an illuminating flash of moral and political insight from the commanding heights of power.’

Oishi Matashichi took it upon himself to learn about the history of Bikini Atoll and its people, and he incorporates this knowledge in the talks he gives to schoolchildren and students. We should have learnt so much from this 60-year-old story and its modest teller. As the current Japanese government’s intentions to change the pacifist Constitution gain some ground, it is worth considering the way Oishi always ends his talks:

‘No matter what the issue, we must never start another war. Fortunately, Japan has a Peace Constitution, and it protects us. Japan’s Self-Defence Forces should never engage in killing human beings. In accordance with our Peace Constitution, they should become Disaster Relief Teams, both in name and in reality. This is the way, I think, that Japan will become a peaceful country, trusted and loved by every other country in the world. It will also help get rid of nuclear weapons and war. I hope you, the rising generation, will choose to take this road. I hope you develop a broad vision, learn to look at things from many different angles, not only from the front, but also from the sides, the back, and above.’

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Oishi Matashichi, *The Day the Sun Rose in the West: Bikini, the Lucky Dragon, and I*, University of Hawai’i Press, 2011, 184 pages, paperback ISBN 978-0824835576, £15.50, translated from Japanese by Richard H Minear.