Nuclear Hotseat #798 - Oct. 13, 2025 Marshall Islands Nuclear Waste in Deteriorating Runit Dome: "No Clean-Up Possible" - Radiochemist Paul Griego

[00:00:00]

Libbe HaLevy: Nuclear cleanup? Try Mission Impossible. The Marshall Islands in the Central Pacific area known as Micronesia were subject to 67 atmospheric atomic and hydrogen bomb tests by the United States between 1946 and 1958. It left behind a legacy of highly radioactive contaminated land no longer fit for human habitation.

When the US tried to clean it up, our biggest achievement was Runit Dome, a massive concrete containment structure built in a bomb crater on Runit Island in the Enewetak Atoll. Nicknamed The Tomb or The Nuclear Coffin, it holds over three million cubic feet of contaminated soil and debris from American [00:01:00] nuclear testing, and was meant to contain US Cold War radioactive waste and keep it out of the environment.

But does it? And more importantly, will it? It takes someone who was a young man, worked on the dome in that radioactive soil without protective gear or safety training, someone who has spent the past two decades trying to inform people about the truth of Runit Dome, to point out... During the atomic cleanup, we had three typhoons, and so the great concern is, wow, what will happen over time?

Paul Griego: And it's almost 50 years old now. Important to know it, it's concrete, and there's two types of concrete. There's concrete that's cracked, and then there's concrete that's going to crack. And so we know that after 50 years it's reached its lifespan. Well, when Paul Griego, who was a civilian [00:02:00] participant in that cleanup team for four years and has suffered the consequences, provides this perspective on Runit Dome and so much more, you see how even the best attempts at cleanup and protection from nuclear materials are deeply flawed, giving you yet another glimpse at that awful, deadly, dangerous seat that we all share.

Nuclear Hotseat Theme: Nuclear Hotseat. What are those people thinking? Nuclear Hotseat. What have those boys been drinking? Nuclear Hotseat. The corium is sinking. Our time to act is shrinking, but the activists are linking.

Nuclear Hotseat. It's da bomb

Libbe HaLevy: Welcome to Nuclear Hotseat, the weekly international news magazine [00:03:00] keeping you up to date on all things nuclear from a different perspective. We're a show for people who know nothing about nuclear who wanna know something, and people who know something who would like to know just a little bit more. My name is Libbe HaLevy.

I'm the producer and host, as well as a survivor of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island from just one mile away, so I know what can happen when those nuclear so-called experts get it wrong This week we talk with Paul Griego. He worked on the cleanup, or attempted cleanup, of nuclear materials created by the US nuclear bomb tests on the Marshall Islands and the creation of Runit Dome, our attempt at long-term storage of the radioactive waste that is now at risk from global warming, the rise of the ocean level, and decaying containment materials.

We will also have nuclear news from around the [00:04:00] world, the ICAN report from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons in Geneva, Switzerland, featuring Alistair Burnett, Jack Cohen-Joppa of the Nuke Resistor with another story from our shared history of activist resistance to nuclear reactors and weapons, and lots more honest and verifiable nuclear information.

All of it coming up in just a few moments. Today is Tuesday, October twentieth, twenty twenty-five, and here is this week's nuclear news from a different perspective. Starting out here in the US, where the multi-state push for more nuclear reactors defies comprehension and common sense. On September thirtieth, Connecticut's governor joined with other New England governors in a summit to push for more nuclear power.

Over the last year, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection held four [00:05:00] webinars to encourage building nuclear power plants in Connecticut. Their pitch was that new so-called advanced reactors are much safer, and that smaller ones can be built rapidly, and that nuclear waste is not an immediate problem.

In truth, none has been built, none has been tested. We have no idea if they're safer or not because they're not in operation yet. The fact that they can be built

rapidly should be a warning sign because nothing in nuclear should be done faster and cheaper. And the final thought, which is that nuclear waste is not an immediate problem, perhaps not.

It is a forever problem, as you will hear in other places on this program. The major issue they're not paying attention to is the nuclear power waste, which in eighty years of large reactor operation, we have not yet found a safe way to discard it or store it. In an article in the Connecticut Mirror, [00:06:00] Stanley Heller, administrator of Promoting Enduring Peace, wrote, "We don't need nuclear.

What we do need is to stop rushing towards the climate cliff." In Utah, at the US Department of Energy's Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action Project site outside of Moab, tractor-trailers and heavy equipment are working to remove a giant pile of radioactive uranium tailings left by an abandoned processing plant from the 1980s.

It's on the Colorado River just north of Moab, and contaminants have leached into groundwater and eventually into the river, prompting decades-long cleanup efforts to protect the waterway and its wildlife. Once the cleanup is as complete as it can possibly be, the area will be turned into a wildlife refuge and park, because let's face it, animals don't vote.

In Ukraine, the International Atomic Energy has confirmed reports of a Russian drone [00:07:00] attack on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. It has documented damage to buildings on the site, underscoring the ongoing threats to nuclear safety during the war. As of the time of this recording, no casualties or radiation leaks have yet been reported.

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said, "Attacks on nuclear facilities and their personnel are unacceptable and directly contradict the IAEA's seven indispensable principles for safety in armed conflict and the five specific principles for the protection of the Western nuclear power plant. It is of the utmost importance that IAEA staff have prompt and unimpeded access to the sites of reported attacks in order to be able to independently assess the nature and consequences of any incident."

In Belarus, many living in areas contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 will lose their contaminated area [00:08:00] designation as of the beginning of 2027. This will include one hundred seventy-seven cities, towns, and villages affecting some five hundred sixty-six thousand people. Why the rush?

Perhaps because Belarusians living on contaminated territory today are eligible for significant state benefits, including free meals for students, annual health resort trips for children, and payouts totaling one hundred fifty percent of the standard state childcare allowance for some new parents.

We're going to link to that story because it has a lot more information.

Now here's Alistair Burnett, head of media for the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, or ICAN, reporting from ICAN headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. His report includes an interview with Alicia Sanders-Zacker, who is ICAN's head [00:09:00] of policy.

Alistair Burnett: Hello, this is Alistair Burnett at ICAN in Geneva with the latest from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

I'll start with the exciting news that another country has signed the UN Nuclear Ban Treaty, the TPNW. The West African country of Gabon signed the treaty at a ceremony at the United Nations in New York at the opening of the new session of the General Assembly a couple of weeks ago. That brings the total of countries that have signed or ratified the treaty to 101 out of 197 eligible states.

Not bad for such a relatively young treaty. With every new country that joins, the nuclear-armed countries and their pro-nuclear allies become more isolated and their attachment to nuclear weapons less and less acceptable. During the high-level week of the General Assembly when many world leaders, including President Trump, made speeches from the podium, ICAN representatives, including our Executive Director, Melissa Park, were also there.

They were meeting [00:10:00] ministers from a range of countries to either thank them for their work on the treaty or, if they haven't yet joined, to encourage them to do so. This is the kind of face-to-face advocacy work for the TPNW that's an important part of what ICAN does but doesn't get talked about so much.

The past few weeks have seen more actions by nuclear-armed states around the world that ICAN has condemned. Among them, President Macron of France attended the testing of a submarine-launched ballistic missile in the North Atlantic, which he accompanied with some unsubtle remarks aimed at Russia.

Russia itself had warned NATO countries directly that if they moved against the Russian territory of Kaliningrad, which is between Poland and Lithuania and not directly linked to Russia, it would use all weapons at its disposal, including

nuclear weapons, to defend it. The United States said it had carried out a test in Nevada on technology to detect other countries' nuclear tests, which seems part of its PR campaign to paint China as the bad guy on testing and give an excuse for the United [00:11:00] States to restart its own explosive detonations, as President Trump has said he wants to do.

September the 26th was the International Day Against Nuclear Tests, which was marked by communities harmed by test explosions and at the United Nations. Alicia Sanders-Zachary, ICAN's Head of Policy and Research, is centrally involved in our work with these communities. I asked her what role they play in the campaign to abolish nuclear weapons.

Alicia Sanders-Zakre: Those that have been affected by nuclear weapons play an integral role. These are the real experts on nuclear weapons, uh, on what they do, on the needs for justice following exposure to nuclear effects. Uh, and they've played a leading role in the advocacy to get the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons adopted and subli- subsequently at all, uh, TPNW meetings where they've had a very prominent voice throughout the entire meeting conversation, uh, and, uh, [00:12:00] inputting into the, the substantive outcomes of, of those meetings.

Alistair Burnett: The other meetings that, uh, been taking part in, uh, quite recently in Geneva, the meeting of the UN Human Rights Council, and it was examining the legacy of nuclear test detonations. What exactly happened at the, uh, the council?

Alicia Sanders-Zakre: Well, the Republic of the Marshall Islands here in Geneva has played a really leading role within the Human Rights Council in calling for increased attention to the ongoing legacy of, uh, nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands.

And as a result of this, the Marshall Islands has called for resolutions at the Human Rights Council, mandating several reports by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, where, um, there's been really detailed examination into the ongoing legacy of nuclear impacts and examining the issue as, as really a human rights issue and the need for justice for these communities. [00:13:00]

Uh, so just recently, there was, uh, another session at the Human Rights Council debating the most recent report that came out and calling for another, uh, report to be released in two years.

Alistair Burnett: What kind of impact do these reports have?

Alicia Sanders-Zakre: Well, they help to draw attention to the fact that, uh, nuclear weapons are not just old instruments of the past, but even, uh, detonations that happened decades ago are still harming people to this day.

And there is a need for the international community to recognize that these are not... this is not just a deterrence or security issue, but actually a, a human rights issue, and one that every government has a voice, every person has a voice to speak up against and to push for nuclear abolition.

Alistair Burnett: And the next big meeting that, um, the communities will be involved in, I guess, will be the first review conference of the TPNW, which is taking place in New York very soon, the end of the year.

What would you like to see [00:14:00] coming out of the review conference in regard to survivors and their communities?

Alicia Sanders-Zakre: Well, this will be a very important meeting of the treaty. Uh, as you raise, it's the first review conference, so this is really the opportunity to take stock of how the treaty has been implemented over the past five years.

How have, uh, governments interpreted and taken action on the commitments they made back in, at the first meeting of states parties in 2022 on, uh, many different issues of treaty implementation, including on victim assistance and environmental remediation. Uh, so we hope that, uh, at this meeting there will be strong participation from, uh, nuclear survivors speaking throughout the meeting, uh, convening as, as they have in the past, many side events to educate, uh, diplomats and, and the broader community about their advocacy, their work for justice.

Um, as well as really powerful forward-looking outcome documents adopted by states parties on, uh, how they will take forward their [00:15:00] obligations to provide assistance to nuclear survivors and work to, uh, remediate contaminated environments.

Alistair Burnett: That was Alicia Sanders-Zachary. This is Alistair Burnett ending this news roundup for Nuclear Hotseat.

Libbe HaLevy: Here's this week's featured interview Radioactive waste from all things nuclear remains a problem that will be with us for millennia, literally. Plutonium released by nuclear bomb tests and in the used fuel waste stream of

nuclear reactors remains radiologically dangerous for close to a quarter of a million years.

Our problem in the short term then becomes, what do we do with it now? How do we store it safely so it stays out of our ecosystem and our bodies? And what happens when our best attempts to protect ourselves turn out to be deeply flawed? That's what this week's guest will talk about. [00:16:00] Paul Griego is a radiochemistry and health physics professional, researcher, and advocate.

He was a firsthand participant in the 1977 to 1980 Marshall Islands as part of what we call the atomic cleanup at Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands, conducting radiological surveys and collecting soil samples from the most contaminated islands throughout the atoll. Here, he talks about what that exposure was like, what happened to him and others as a result of this exposure, and the current state of Runit Dome, a large concrete containment structure built to hold contaminated soil, debris, and radioactive waste gathered from the islands across Enewetak and Bikini Atolls in the wake of sixty-seven atomic and hydrogen bomb tests that were conducted there.

If you think the radioactive waste from our [00:17:00] nuclear program is a thing of the past, think again. I spoke with Paul Griego on October 9, 2026. Paul Griego, it's great to have you here with us on Nuclear Hotseat.

Paul Griego: Thank you for having me over. I appreciate that.

Libbe HaLevy: Let's start out with your background.

Paul Griego: I first was a veterinary assistant, and from there I got a job at a health physics laboratory.

And at the health physics laboratory, what we did there was the radium analytical analysis of bioassay and environmental, mostly from the Nevada test site, for example, but also from Rocky Flats, from the Hanford site, and a few others. And so working there, uh, w- the laboratory I was working on got the contract as the radiation laboratory and radiological survey for the atomic cleanup.

Libbe HaLevy: When you [00:18:00] say atomic cleanup, you're referring to the Marshall Islands?

Paul Griego: Yes. From there, being that I was a healthy young man, I was able to go to Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands, and that was for the 1977, 1980

atomic cleanup in which we built also the Runit Dome, the infamous Runit Dome. When I went there, I, I worked there as a civilian, and the atomic cleanup was a joint task force with about 4,000 military personnel and 2,000 civilian personnel.

Libbe HaLevy: Were those civilian personnel primarily moved there from the United States? Were you working with Marshall Islanders? Was it a combination?

Paul Griego: The 2,000 civilians consisted of the Department of Energy, the Department of Defense, the Defense Nuclear Agency, the [00:19:00] University of California, the University of Hawaii, Los Alamos Laboratories, Sandia Laboratories.

So it was quite a group.

Libbe HaLevy: Were there any indigenous people, those of the Marshall Islands, involved in the cleanup of their own lands?

Paul Griego: Oh, yes. And very importantly, the Marshallese, along with some American Samoans, were also working in the atomic cleanup. They had some very important jobs. For example, the Marshallese and a couple Samoans were the ones who set up the Lojoya base camp.

They're the ones who bulldozed it, prepared it, got it ready. And Lojoya base camp was the forward work camp, the labor camp, cer- as you could say, where I also lived and worked. And then after we finished with, or failed at the atomic cleanup, the Marshallese people were put to replant [00:20:00] the island's vegetation and trees and so forth.

So the Marshallese people did work in the contaminated islands. So actually, let me step back. Enewetak Atoll is a group of 38 islands. Now, it used to be 40 islands, but the nuclear testing, we evaporated, vaporized two of the islands completely off the face of the earth. And so it's broken down into the southern islands and the northern islands.

The northern islands is where we did the nuclear testing, 43 atmospheric nuclear weapon tests. These islands were quarantined before we got there, and they're quarantined today. The only inhabitable islands are in the very south where the original military base was, where they staged the nuclear testing.

And so they'd always had planned that during the nuclear [00:21:00] testing, those islands would always be upwind of the nuclear testing. And oftentimes during the larger atomic tests, they completely evacuated the islands and went out 35 miles away from the ship

Libbe HaLevy: So that was the Americans or the ones brought in by DOE, and the rest who were evacuated.

Were the Marshallese evacuated as well?

Paul Griego: Yes, the Marshallese were evacuated from their islands before the nuclear testing ever started. And so the purpose of the atomic cleanup was to be able to allow the Marshallese people to return to the Enewetak Islands, to return to their homeland. It was actually a humanitarian mission.

Libbe HaLevy: And how successful was it in allowing them to return to their homeland?

Paul Griego: The Marshallese people returned, but could only return to the two or three islands that were [00:22:00] on the very southern end where the nuclear testing had not taken place. With that, they have restrictions where they cannot eat the seafood they catch, they can't eat any of the agriculture they grow.

So they're very limited. The Marshallese, when I say we, the US, give the Marshallese a subsidy. So the US today, we continue to supply the Marshallese people living on Enewetak Atoll a food subsidy. Unfortunately, that's mostly canned meat such as Spam, rice, and beans, and this is not what their normal diet was or would be.

And so they have issues with obesity, diabetes, and other issues with those foods. And also intermittent supply. Sometimes because of weather or, or other reasons, the supply ship doesn't arrive, and so they [00:23:00] have very limited source of food. It could be very difficult for the people living on Enewetak today.

Libbe HaLevy: So even until today, their lifestyle, their way of living, their ancestral home has been completely destroyed, and that fabric for the people has been decimated. When you talk about the cleanup, what was it that was left behind that needed to be cleaned up, and how did you go about doing that cleanup?

Paul Griego: During the atomic cleanup, my task was the task force leader of the soil sampling, so we could go ahead and identify what radiation contamination needed to be cleaned up, what contamination needed to be dumped into a nuclear blast crater that later became the Runit Dome, and what we would just actually dump right into the lagoon.

To make it more simply, we just simply picked it up and [00:24:00] moved it around.

Libbe HaLevy: When you talk about the crater and Runit Dome, what was that? I know it still exists, but what was that when it was built, and what was its intention?

Paul Griego: It was originally a nuclear blast crater. And when I was working on Runit, it was still open to the sea.

So we had to reclaim the crater into the island before we could start dumping our highest level radioactive waste and soil into the crater. So it's basically about 30 feet below sea level, and about 30 feet above sea level.

Libbe HaLevy: When it was first built, was it projecting the 30 feet above sea level so that you would see it like a tower coming out of the water?

Paul Griego: No, it really wasn't meant to be seen. It wasn't meant to be heard about. This was built during the Cold War, [00:25:00] and it was built before the Information Age. I didn't even know what was there or really what took place. Sure, I understood there was nuclear testing, but as far as to what extent and what kind of contamination and toxins were there.

When we talk about radiation exposure, it's two things. It's radiation exposure, well, three things, toxic exposure, and unfortunately, what we inhale, what we ingest, what we absorb. For my case, my intestines are fried. I have intestinal enteritis, and that was from obviously ingesting. So it's not just the exposure.

We're living on these islands. We're disturbing the dirt. We're breathing it. And then for me, I was a soil sampler, so I was literally on my hands and knees with a garden shovel collecting soil literally at ground [00:26:00] zero, ground zero being the very site a nuclear weapon took place. And we're talking about 43 nuclear weapons, atmospheric nuclear weapons that had taken place, and so it was highly radioactive, and I didn't know about that.

Libbe HaLevy: What kind of protective gear or safety training did you and the others receive before going into your work?

Paul Griego: That was very limited as far as the training. But what was worse is we didn't know how radioactive, how contaminated it was. That was even scarier. For me, it wasn't until around 2014 that I decided, wow.

I was home, and I had the flu, so I kind of self-quarantined myself, and of course it was so quiet, so I got on the internet. I wanted to find out what had happened to this atomic cleanup that I participated in in my [00:27:00] youth. And it was from that point on I was finding documents, and I was totally shocked as to find out how contaminated, how radioactive it was, and how contaminated and radioactive it is today.

It's a nuclear wasteland even today.

Libbe HaLevy: We'll get into a little bit more about what's happening at Runit Dome currently. When it was being filled with this radioactive material, was there anything that came from other sites that was perhaps shipped into Runit Dome because it was a place to dump radioactive waste?

Paul Griego: No, there wasn't. But what took place was, and I'm the one who discovered it and shared it with the Marshallese, what had taken place was there was 130 tons of soil that was brought in from the test site in Nevada, and it was [00:28:00] held as a contingency in case a bomb would go wrong. And a bomb did go wrong. It was Quince, and it was a nuclear weapon test that...

Well, a hydrogen bomb is three bombs in one. It's, uh, conventional explosives that ignite an atomic weapon that ignites the hydrogen weapon. So in this case, the conventional explosives went off, but it didn't go critical or didn't go nuclear, and so it spread 16 pounds of weapons-grade plutonium over the island, 16 pounds of unspent weapons-grade plutonium, and other contaminants as well.

So because of that, this is during the Cold War, and the Soviet Union was obviously in their submarines watching the testing. They actually were there watching the atomic cleanup when we were there as well, the Soviets. [00:29:00] So the idea was that if a bomb went wrong, which it did, Quince, that they would dump, bring in this, this soil from the Nevada test site, and the Soviets would not be able to reverse engineer to see what the testing involved, what materials were used.

And so it was basically to cloak what was actually taking place.

Libbe HaLevy: So what was shipped in was radioactive soil from the Nevada test site that was going to be used to disguise any kind of radiological release from an unexploded bomb or from this plutonium that was spread?

Paul Griego: There'd be also other contaminants, other ingredients.

The fear was that the Soviets would reverse engineer the ingredients of the nuclear weapon, so they brought in this [00:30:00] soil. So once that was spread, it completely contaminated the contaminated soil so that it wouldn't be able to be reverse engineered by the Soviets. So indirectly, some of that soil did end up in the Runit Dome, but its purpose was not to place it into the Runit Dome.

Its purpose was, in 1958, 20 years earlier, to mask the ingredients of that nuclear weapon test.

Libbe HaLevy: We'll continue this interview with Paul Griego in just a moment, but first- When it comes to nuclear power, nuclear weapons, radioactive waste, uranium mining, and radiation exposure, finding information you can trust can prove difficult.

The nuclear industry has its public relations machine, with millions of dollars dedicated to putting their talking points surgically implanted [00:31:00] in our brains. Government agencies have their talking points, and mainstream media too often gives these stories only a passing glance or misses them altogether.

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Now back to this [00:33:00] week's featured interview with Paul Griego. There have in recent years been pictures of Runit Dome that I have seen where with global warming, with the rise of the sea level, something that may have been above the sea at least a little bit now seems to be lapped at all times on all edges by the rising ocean.

How dangerous is this, and what, if anything, is the US government doing that you know of to improve the condition there when there's so much waste being dumped?

Paul Griego: It's 110,000 cubic yards of radioactive debris and soil. Let's compare that maybe to Yucca Mountain, which right now isn't holding anything. But the statutory limit of Yucca Mountain is 100,000 cubic yards, and that's with 40 miles of tunnels.

We're looking at the Runit Dome with [00:34:00] 110,000 cubic yards, and it's only 370 feet across. So it's a massive amount of nuclear material that's in there.

Libbe HaLevy: How at risk is it from sea level rise and from these alarming pictures where it almost looks like the water is lapping over the top of it?

Paul Griego: During storms, yes, the water would lap over it.

During the atomic cleanup, we had three typhoons, and so the great concern is, wow, what will happen over time? And it's almost 50 years old now. Important to know it, it's concrete. And there's two types of concrete. There's concrete that's cracked, and then there's concrete that's going to crack. And so we know that after 50 years it's reached its lifespan.

Libbe HaLevy: And what does that mean in terms of the future of the dome, the ocean, the materials, [00:35:00] and beyond that, life?

Paul Griego: Well, let's go back to atomic cleanups, nuclear cleanups. There is no such thing. When we went there 50 years ago, we went in there, we did not have some kind of magical soap. We didn't have really any way of cleaning it up.

And today, 50 years later, we're in the same position. There is no technology. There is no magic soap. There is no way of cleaning it up. It would've been better to leave it undisturbed and let nature hold it in place. And let's hope for the long-lived isotopes, 125,000 years for plutonium, which has a half-life of 25,000 years, but it takes five half-lives before it's safe, so 125,000 years.

So it would've been better just to leave it alone. Even today with [00:36:00] other atomic cleanups, we have of course the desire, you know, we have to clean this up. And so we have the public people saying, "Hey, we have to clean it up." And then we have politicians coming in and go, "Hey, vote for me and we'll clean it up."

And then we have profiteers that come in and, "Wow, give us, you know, a few billion dollars. We'll clean it up." It's not true. They're just simply profiteers claiming something that cannot be done for billions of dollars, and then you have politicians who use that to be able to get voted into office. And then you have the desperate public who lives close by who wants it to be cleaned up.

But it's a reality that I don't think is being faced today, is that there is no such thing as an atomic cleanup, and 50 years ago we proved that.

Libbe HaLevy: We'll get back to the [00:37:00] Marshall Islands in a moment, but you also did work at Rocky Flats. What did that consist of?

Paul Griego: That was consisting of analyzing soil samples that were taken from Rocky Flats.

Now, this was in the '70s, late '70s, and so at that time, that's when the, more or less the discovery of these huge 55 gallon tanks were discovered. And apparently, well, not apparently, as the samples proved, it was leaking. One incident in particular that really stands out when we were working with the Rocky Flats samples was that our laboratory was low level and mid-level radioactive material.

But a very, very hot sample came in through the laboratory and cross-contaminated everything. So we had to get acid, an acid scrub. The entire

laboratory was shut down while we did that [00:38:00] because of that extremely hot sample. It was so hot it wasn't analyzed.

Libbe HaLevy: So the dangers continued even after you were offsite from the Marshall Islands.

You have been very involved as a speaker and a consultant on these issues. How did you move into that space, and has there been any pushback from the Marshallese people that you, not being Marshallese, are speaking so publicly on these issues?

Paul Griego: In, starting in 2014, as I read thousands and thousands of documents that were not available to me before.

Well, maybe they had, but I didn't realize until I did the research, and then I also joined a group. And when I was searching on the internet back in 2014 to find out information, all of a sudden I find a survivors group, and the word survivor is quite scary, [00:39:00] as I'm a survivor. And to find out that there's a group of us, and through there we share information.

So it's kinda like dots. You know, you're putting dots onto a canvas, and the more and more dots you have, pretty soon it creates an image. And so we're sharing our individual experiences, what we ran into, what we did and so forth. But an earlier question you had about what type of protective gear we had, well, it was zero.

I worked just simply wearing my shorts and a T-shirt, and I would use my T-shirt occasionally as a dust mask. My job was simply going in, let's say, I was actually the first team to go into some of the islands that had not been anybody had been in there for 40 years. And then I would go into other islands that we were bulldozing, and they would remove, let's say, six inches of soil, and then I would go in there and [00:40:00] test And because it was still hot, remove another six inches.

I'd go back in there, remove six inches. And each time, this is freshly bulldozed soil, the dust. That was totally crazy. I should've been in a hazmat suit, but it was impossible. We had 10-hour workdays in the equatorial sun. It was not possible to wear a hazmat suit. Even though today the government shows photographs of the atomic cleanup with us wearing hazmat suits, that didn't take place.

I'd not even seen a hazmat suit while I was there in 1978. And the first time, my very first day of work, I was very apprehensive what it was gonna be like. And as we're approaching the island, I was, like, relieved because there was nobody in ha- hazmat suits. There wasn't a safety shower. There wasn't eye wash station.

There wasn't anything. [00:41:00] And so I mistakenly believed, "Oh, phew, it's safe. Gee." But that wasn't the case. It wasn't safe at all.

Libbe HaLevy: You've spoken of the impact on your health. Is there any kind of recording or tracking of the exposure rates and then the health impact of the other workers who were there at the same time?

Paul Griego: No, there really hasn't been. We have several different groups that work for different areas. For example, in the military we had the Army, we had the Air Force, we had the, even the Navy that was working there. Now, if you were in the military, there are benefits. You can get disability benefits, you can get healthcare benefits.

But as a civilian, I've never received any benefits at all. I've never received a single penny of any compensation.

Libbe HaLevy: And are you [00:42:00] having ongoing problems with your health?

Paul Griego: Yes, I am. As I mentioned earlier, my intestines were fried, so I'm in treatment on that, and it'll be lifelong treatment with anti-inflammatories, steroids, and antithyreals.

And then also I have thyroid disease, and in addition to that, I have osteoporosis, my bones. These limit my ability to do a lot of things. And also was miscarriages. My wife and I had miscarriages, and we had fertility treatment, and they were kept looking at, well, my wife, the woman. Oh, but that's the cause, right?

Well, most likely it's chromosomal damage, because a lot of the men I worked with had also the same situation where their wives had had miscarriages. Now, I have a daughter, and I had her late in life. She's 19 years old. I was [00:43:00] 49 years old when she was born, and I guess I'm very fortunate to be able to have her.

And my daughter grew up listening to me on the telephone, which I really didn't realize that she was picking all this up in the background, and she was listening

as I spoke to other participants of the atomic cleanup, and we shared health issues, and concerns, and so forth. I remember one time in particular, my daughter is about eight years old, and we're watching Spider-Man.

And if we look at Spider-Man, he gets his powers because he was bitten by a radioactive spider. And after it was all over, my daughter looks at me and says, "Daddy, do they have spiders in Anawitaha?"

Libbe HaLevy: She's looking for your superpowers.

Paul Griego: And also concerned about, well, what does this mean? What does, what does radiation mean?

And I'm proud to say my daughter now is at the University of New Mexico [00:44:00] studying nuclear engineering, and she has a focus on environmental remediation. Because as she knows, the atomic cleanup failed. And so she's now in her second year at UNM, and she's doing quite well. I'm very proud of her, Sophie Griego.

She's gonna be the next generation, and maybe her generation will be the generation to find that magical soap that yet exists

Libbe HaLevy: You have been very active, even given the physical limitations you're dealing with. What is the nature of the work that you do now to bring awareness to these issues, and who do you do this for?

Paul Griego: That's a very good question. Who do I do this for? The nuclear issue, it's a generational issue. It started with the generation before me, and it'll still be with us the next generation, and the next generation. So I'm doing this to bring [00:45:00] awareness for the generations to come, and awareness as to not just the environmental damage and the physical damage, but also the, the social damage.

For example, the Marshallese people, many of them are nuclear refugees. They can't go back to their homeland. There's a, another group of islands, Bikini Atoll, that probably even more famous because it has a sexy name, Bikini, which the bikini is named after Bikini Atoll.

Libbe HaLevy: The bathing suit was a flop, and then they wanted to have something more explosive because it was such a radical thing, and they went, "Oh, there was just an explosion at Bikini Island.

Let's call it a bikini." And that's where the name came from. It's not that the island was named after the bathing suit. The bathing suit was definitely second on the list.

Paul Griego: That's correct. And Enewetak Atoll, where the atomic cleanup took place, Enewetak is obviously not as a sexy name. There were [00:46:00] twice as many nuclear weapon tests on Enewetak than there was on Bikini.

And the, including the very first hydrogen nuclear, you could say, weapon, it was actually a three-story building device, and that took place on Enewetak, and that's where an island named Ujelang was basically vaporized and taken off of the face of the earth, and leaves a massive crater. You can go on Google Earth and look down and see what it was, and this massive crater.

Libbe HaLevy: Have you worked specifically with the Marshall Islanders who are refugees here in the United States? They're primarily in Arkansas, Washington, Oklahoma, and Hawaii, and the executive director of the Marshallese Education Initiative, Benedict Kabua Madison, is one of their leaders, and he's very prominent as well.

Have you worked with Benedict? Have you worked with these community groups? What's the relationship like?

Paul Griego: [00:47:00] The relationship is really good between the Marshallese people and those of us who, who worked on the atomic cleanup. Now, remember, it was a humanitarian mission, so we're not the ones who contaminated the islands.

We were the ones who were given an impossible task, and that was to clean up the islands. And so today I have really good relations with the Marshallese people, and including Benedict. I'm still closely working with them, and I advocate for them. I'm advocating for them right now with the RECA Amendment that would be able to include the Marshallese workers as well.

The other legislation completely left out all civilians, including me, because it was compensation through the Veterans Administration instead of compensation through the Department of Labor

Libbe HaLevy: Is there anything we haven't covered that you feel it's important to add at this time?

Paul Griego: To understand what happened in Anawitak [00:48:00] is, in the comparison, people really know about Chernobyl.

They don't know about Anawitak. And when I compare the two, now Chernobyl, that was an event that took place in one day. Anawitak is an event that took place over a 10-year period. But radioactive-wise, Anawitak was 60,000 petabecquerels. Chernobyl was 1,760. So Anawitak was 35 times that of Chernobyl.

Libbe HaLevy: That is stunning, and outrageous, and horrifying, and morally, ethically, and physically so wrong.

Paul Griego: Yes. 60,000 petabecquerels compared to 1,760 for Chernobyl.

Libbe HaLevy: Any last thought you want to add?

Paul Griego: When we're looking at, at the Atomic Veterans Act that passed a couple years ago, it recognizes [00:49:00] 22 cancers, and the CDC and the World Health Organization recognizes 64 illnesses caused by radiation and toxic exposure.

I have three of those illnesses that are in the CDC and World Health Organization, but they're not recognized by the Veterans Administration. They're not recognized by the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. They're limited to 22 cancers, and unfortunately, that's just about a third of what's known illnesses and cancers caused by the radiation exposure.

Libbe HaLevy: So it sounds like you're continuing the battle to gain acknowledgement, not specifically for yourself, but for all in the category who have not been covered by any kind of compensation, any kind of acknowledgement of the pain and [00:50:00] suffering they've gone through.

Paul Griego: That's correct. There hasn't been really any acknowledgement, especially for civilians like myself.

We didn't receive an Atomic Veterans medal. We don't qualify for that. We haven't received the Humanitarian medal. And so there's a lot more recognition to the military participants than there are to the civilian participants, or the Marshallese people themselves. This is their home, and they too were involved in the atomic cleanup.

So I'm hoping that in the future they will be recognized, and civilians such as myself will be recognized as well.

Libbe HaLevy: Paul Griego, I'm so sorry you went through that, and I'm so glad you are taking a forward position on this to help spread the word, get the information out, and hopefully move the hearts, minds, and pocketbooks in the United States towards providing a more complete [00:51:00] acknowledgement and support for those of you who are still suffering from having participated in this cleanup.

For now, Paul Griego, I want to thank you for having come on and being so generous with your information with the listeners of Nuclear Hotseat.

Paul Griego: Thank you again for having me and allowing me to share my story.

Libbe HaLevy: Paul Griego. If you wish to contact him, we will have links up on our website, nuclearhotseat.com, under this episode, number 798.

Activist Shout-out: Activist. Activist. Activist. Shout out. Shout out. Shout out. Shout out. Shout out. Shout out

Libbe HaLevy: Here with another story from our shared history of resisting nukes is Jack Cohen-Joppa, co-coordinator of the Nuclear Resister.

Jack Cohen-Joppa: In 1980, some Christian activists around the country began discussing how, in the nuclear age, to fully manifest their faith through action. Theirs would not be your usual [00:52:00] protest or picket or political action.

Rather, the intention was to make a prayerful pilgrimage and bring light to a particularly dark place in the Texas Panhandle, a factory outside of Amarillo known as Pantex. Pantex was then and remains today the place where all the components of America's modern thermonuclear weapons, the plutonium from Los Alamos, uranium from Oak Ridge, tritium from the Savannah River Site, and custom circuits and other parts from Kansas City and more are brought together for final assembly, then shipped off to U.S.

missile submarine and bomber bases around the world. Through letters, visits, and phone calls, more than 100 people helped develop a plan. In their final months of discernment, they all joined in fasting and prayer every Tuesday from wherever they were. Their intentions took form days after the new president,

Ronald Reagan, was sworn in, immediately escalating the Cold War as he had promised.

In [00:53:00] early February 1981, about twenty people converged in Amarillo for a few days of prayer and preparation, embraced by spiritual support from many more afar. Six were prepared to risk arrest and the possibly fatal consequences of encountering heavily armed security. They joined in a covenant. They agreed to act without violence.

They would not notify the press ahead of time. They would not cooperate with the judicial process because they are not criminals, so neither would they post bond. They would speak only to their faith and convictions. They wrote letters to friends and family should they not return. At a local ball field, they practiced climbing homemade ladders over the backstop, simulating their plan to mount the twelve-foot chain link and barbed wire fence that surrounded the Pantex plant.

On the morning of February 10th, blowing snow swept the plain. The guards could not see the faithful [00:54:00] crew as they climbed that outer fence, but motion sensors on the other side got their attention, and a second electrified fence halted the pilgrims. They began to pray. Supporters unfurled banners outside the fence, in front of the administration building, and at a nearby crossroads.

The six, Steve Clemens, Vincent Ireney, Kathy Jennings, Larry Rosebaugh, LaDon Sheets, and Mary Sprunger-Fros, were soon in custody. They refused to post bond and were jailed until their trial in March. Mary wrote from jail that we could only conclude that prayers were answered beyond expectation because we'd all been stopped by Pantex security on previous drives through the plant area.

Among the six, Larry Rosebaugh was a Catholic priest fresh back from six years of ministry among the most destitute in Brazil. Learning that a fellow priest was in the local jail, the Catholic [00:55:00] Bishop of Amarillo, Leroy Matheson, made a quiet pastoral visit. That visit was pivotal, moving the bishop to public action on his own growing opposition to the mission at Pantex.

That summer, he wrote in the diocesan newspaper, "We urge individuals involved in the production and stockpiling of nuclear bombs to consider what they are doing, to resign from such activities, and to seek employment in peaceful pursuits." Soon, Bishop Matheson joined forces with Seattle

Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, who had also publicly condemned the nuclear arms race and the nearby nuclear submarine base at Bangor.

Together, the two helped lead the US Conference of Catholic Bishops to publish its milestone 1983 pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response. While they were behind bars, Felice and I learned a thing or two about our focus on prisoner [00:56:00] support, mainly that our foundation must be what the prisoner wants and not what we think they need.

As soon as I learned of their action, I wrote to all six in jail offering to spread the word of their action and help solicit letters of support to them and to local authorities. Despite their separation behind bars, the response was the same from all. Summed up for the newsletter, I wrote, "They ask that the focus be kept on Pantex and the spiritual death it symbolizes.

They do not want attention diverted to whether or not they trespassed on DOE property, nor do they want themselves sidetracked in a legal encounter. They specifically do not want appeals made to legal officials. They ask only our prayers and that concerned persons place their energies in active resistance to the nuclear arms madness."

Representing themselves a few weeks later at trial and forbidden to testify to their intentions, they made brief opening and [00:57:00] closing statements and were quickly convicted by the local jury. They served six to 12 months each in federal prison. Steve later described the witness and his prison time as an act of liberation in that it led me to believe I could act on my convictions despite the threats made by government officials.

And in fact, prison deterred none of the six from continuing to resist nukes and seek peace. This has been Jack Kornjapa with a story about faith and the power of prayer in the nuclear age from the archives of The Nuclear Resister.

Libbe HaLevy: This has been Nuclear Hotseat for Tuesday, October 20th, 2026. You can sign up to get Nuclear Hotseat delivered via email every week as soon as it posts.

Just go to our website, nuclearhotseat.com. In the opt-in box, put in your first name and an email address, and every week you will get one email, just one, that contains the link to the show and a short [00:58:00] description of its content. That way you need never miss a single update on what's happening in the nuclear world.

And if you have a story lead, a hot tip, or a suggestion of someone to interview, send that to me in an email at info@nuclearhotseat.com. And remember always, if you can go to Nuclear Hotseat and donate, thank you. Any amount will help us out, and we really appreciate your support. This episode of Nuclear Hotseat is copyright 2026 Libbe HaLevy and Nuclear Hotseat.

All rights reserved, but fair use allowed as long as you cite the program, website, names of any guests whose comments you use, and me. For now, this is Libbe HaLevy of Nuclear Hotseat reminding you that the problem with dangerously radioactive nuclear waste is that it lasts virtually forever. [00:59:00] So the smart thing to do would be to stop making any more of it and figure out to do with the more than 100,000 metric tons that we've already made.

But then that's the question. Are we smart enough? There you have it, your weekly nuclear wake-up call. So whatever you do, don't go back to sleep, because we are all in the Nuclear Hotseat. Nuclear Hotseat. What are those people thinking? Nuclear Hotseat. What have those boys been drinking? Nuclear Hotseat.

Nuclear Hotseat Theme: The corium is sinking. Our time to act is shrinking, but our activists are linking. Nuclear Hotseat. It's da [01:00:00] bomb.