

Operation FLINTLOCK 80th Anniversary Commemoration

Remarks by COL Andrew “Drew” Morgan, USAG-KA Commander

[Thank you – Acknowledgement: distinguished guests, members of diplomatic corps, and honored representatives the Government of the RMI. Kwajalein Junior-Senior High School band, beautiful renditions of all three national anthems]

A primary objective of this week’s commemoration is “telling Kwaj’s story.” There’s one distinguished guest we haven’t recognized yet. SSG Effie Mahugh, would you please stand. SSG Mahugh is a Public Affairs Specialist from the 7th Infantry Division, the Army unit that was a primary invasion force in FLINTLOCK and fought its way through this coral island we’re standing on. The 7th ID sent SSG Mahugh to represent the Division at this event for an important reason—Effie is one of hundreds of American Soldiers of Marshallese descent serving in the US military. Effie’s mother and all of her older siblings were born on Ebeye, and Effie was the first of her family to be born in the US, and grew up in Washington state before she joined the Army and has served both in the 25th Infantry Division and now the 7th ID. There is no better Soldier to represent “Kwaj’s story” today than SSG Mahugh. We are honored to have you with us today. [PAUSE]

Kwajalein Atoll is important to our Nation *and* this is our home—truths originating 80 years ago this week that have endured the test of time.

The missions that defined this place for decades—space and missile defense testing—underscore the one-of-a-kind capabilities and geographical position that make this point on the globe so unique. This week’s commemoration is a reminder that 1944 was the genesis of Kwajalein and Roi Namur’s importance to America.

This is the 80th anniversary of a momentous military operation that not only shaped the course of history but also set the Marshall Islands on the path to liberation and eventual statehood as an independent Republic. It laid the foundation for a future where freedom and resilience became defining characteristics of both this remarkable community and a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Eight decades ago, brave Americans, several hundred of whom made the ultimate sacrifice, embarked on a journey that changed the destiny of these islands forever. Today, as we look back with reverence and gratitude for those sacrifices, our hearts are heavy with a new responsibility. Two weeks ago a half-dozen terrifying waves flooded most of Roi-Namur. They not only tested the

mettle of our people, but also touched the very core of our shared commitment to one another—that community bond we call TEAM KWAJ.

As we commemorate this historic day, let us renew our commitment to the ideals of freedom and the enduring, resilient spirit of Americans like you, serving their Nation abroad. Our theater Army Commander, General Charlie Flynn, Commanding General of US Army Pacific routinely cites that in war “land is the prize”—that’s why we fight for it. I’m paraphrasing from conversations that he and I recently discussed over the importance of Kwajalein in context of our natural disaster: In this vast Pacific region, land is a commodity—there is precious little. America and its allies paid a dear price in blood for this key Pacific terrain. It became a launch pad for follow-on operations that changed the shape of this hemisphere and the free world forever and now it’s a launch pad for rockets and missiles with strategic effect. We owe to our Nations and everyone who calls this place home, the very best. [correspondence with GEN Flynn, JAN 2024]

In times of hardship, it’s our unity of purpose and the strength of our community that brings us together on our beloved Pacific-island home. Our community faces a degree of uncertainty and our Roi-Namur workforce the emotional toll of displacement. Your strength in the face of adversity and the heroism demonstrated over the last two weeks exemplify the spirit of TEAM KWAJ—the same spirit that fueled American Soldiers, Marines, Sailors and Airmen to victory in Operation FLINTLOCK. Our duty as Team Kwaj-mates, forward-stationed on this small island fortress, is not only to commemorate the past but also to stand in solidarity in the face of present day challenges.

We cannot lose sight of the shared responsibility with our allies and partners in the region, most notably our Marshallese sisters and brothers, who are so robustly represented here today. We extend a hand of support and comfort to Roi-Namur and Third Island, reminding them that, by necessity, we face all trials and tribulations in this remote place, **together**.

Confronted with these challenges, the human spirit prevails, just as it did 80 years ago during Operation FLINTLOCK. Today, as we remember the past and stand with those affected by the waves and floods, let us also look forward with hope, resilience, and a shared determination to build a future that honors the sacrifices of the past and reminds us of our duty to the free world, to make this special place strong for OUR Nations and safe and secure as OUR home.