

Spare a thought for radar operators atop isles' mountains

By Sal Miwa

Most of us will never set foot on the remote mountaintops of Kokee on Kauai, Kaala above Waianae, or Kaena Point on Oahu. Yet almost every one of us depends on them.

These remote ridges house some of the most important communications and radar infrastructure in the Pacific. They help guide aircraft safely to and from our islands, support emergency communications during disasters, enable weather monitoring, and keep critical networks operating across the Pacific.

While these important facilities are largely out of sight, they quietly work around the clock. If any one of these systems suddenly stopped functioning, many of us would notice the effects almost immediately.

ISLAND VOICES



Sal Miwa chairs the Pacific Air Forces Civilian Advisory Council, a volunteer group that provides community perspectives and advice to Air Force leaders.

At Mount Kaala, radar systems work alongside the Federal Aviation Administration to help track aircraft approaching and departing Hawaii. Every day, thousands of residents and visitors travel safely because of systems like these operating in the background.

At Kaena Point, satellite communications capabilities help maintain connections that support everything from navigation and emergency communications to scientific research and national security missions.

And on Kauai, Kokee has played an important role in monitoring Hawaii's airspace for more than 60 years. While technology and missions have changed over time, the site remains an important part of the broader network that helps keep our islands connected and secure.

What many people may not realize is that these facilities are



TECH. SGT. BRANDON SHAPIRO / U.S. AIR FORCE

Senior Airman Ellard Morales and Airman 1st Class Kevin Plunkett look out across Oahu while atop the Hawaii Air National Guard's main radar tower at Kaala Air Force Station on Aug. 12, 2016.

maintained by people who are also members of our communities. They are engineers, technicians, public servants, military members, and local residents who call Hawaii home. Their work often goes unnoticed because when these systems are functioning properly, they simply become part of the background of

everyday life.

These sites also exist in places that hold deep cultural and environmental significance. That reality carries an ongoing responsibility to care for these lands thoughtfully, to listen to community concerns, and to ensure that operations are conducted with respect for cultural practices,

natural resources and future generations.

People can have different views about military activities in Hawaii. Those conversations are important and should continue. At the same time, it is worth recognizing that some facilities serve practical purposes that extend well beyond military missions. They contribute to aviation safety, emergency preparedness, communications resilience, and many of the services that residents depend upon every day.

As we prepare for El Nino season and reflect on lessons learned from recent Kona-low storms, it's worth remembering that living on islands in the middle of the Pacific requires reliable systems that help keep us informed, connected and prepared when emergencies arise.

The next time a weather alert reaches your phone, your flight lands safely, or critical information moves quickly across the islands during an emergency, remember that somewhere high above, a small team on a remote ridge is helping keep Hawaii connected, resilient and safe.