



## **A-Bomb**

### A recollection

In the early 1950's as an Air Force captain, I was a radiological monitor and decontamination officer at three series of atomic bomb tests at Camp Mercury, Nevada. On one occasion I had to retrieve an instrument very near ground zero after a tower burst. In a jeep with a fellow officer, we bogged down in powdery sand near the crater. Our radiac instruments were off-scale on the high side, but I managed to push the jeep while my companion drove and we got the vehicle moving out of the exposure. Covered with radioactive dust, we drove quickly back to the decontamination center where several showers were needed to wash away the radioactive particles, especially in our hair, ears, and nostrils.

On another occasion I flew in the nose of an aerial monitor aircraft, directing the pilot into and out of the edges of the radioactive cloud as we tracked its movement with portable detection instruments. Our task was to follow and report the direction of potential radioactive fallout on the ground below, which was very difficult to do with any degree of precision.

But the most memorable event was crouching in a trench within two miles of ground zero, protected only by the open trench itself, GI coveralls, cotton gloves taped at the wrist where the sleeves joined, and a standard-issue gas mask. The device to be exploded was several times more powerful than the bomb dropped on

Hiroshima. My job was to lead the troops from the trench toward ground zero after the explosion, ostensibly to familiarize them with the after-effects and to dispel their fear of tactical nuclear weapons, which might be used on the battlefield.

I remember how, even though we all were crouched at the very bottom of the trench with our hands pressed tightly over our eyes for protection, the intense flash of light clearly exposed the bones of my hands and fingers at the instant of the blast. Simultaneously came a sudden intense flash of heat all over my body. Seconds later the pressure of the blast wave hit with a great boom and a maelstrom of desert rocks and sand showering down into the trench. I recall looking down along the axis of the linear trench and seeing it wavering like a crawling snake as the earth rocked under the force of the blast.

Once the blast wave passed, I gave the signal for the soldiers to leave the trench to begin our advance toward ground zero. A Joshua tree off the end of the trench had burst into flame from the intensity of the heat wave. As we moved forward toward our pre-determined radiation intensity level, I noticed a large jackrabbit hopping slowly across our route of advance. It looked normal and unharmed on one side, but completely charred—as though roasted—on the side that had been exposed to the heat wave when the bomb exploded.

That experience was only a hint at the potential devastation of a nuclear war. X-rayed hands, a hot flash, a sinuous trench, a burning tree, and a still-alive roasted rabbit—strange images all, persisting over the years as cautionary omens. After all those exposures, I don't glow in the dark, but when I look at our youngest son, born some years later, now a normal and healthy adult, I still keep my fingers crossed. □