

Smoky Says: “Only You Can Prevent Us From Losing the Next Nuclear War” Or Testing Soldiers Exposed to Nuclear Blasts

As the Cold War continued into the 1950s and the Soviet Union successfully tested its own atomic weapons, military planners began to examine how conventional forces would operate after nuclear weapons began to be used on the battlefield. During this time, the military conducted a series of exercises over a period of years known as Exercise Desert Rock. One of these, Exercise Desert Rock VII, was conducted in 1957. This included Operation Plumbbob and took place at the Nevada Proving Grounds (later Nevada Test Site (NTS)). Within this large area there were smaller spots such as Test Site Smoky and Test Site Galileo. Operation Plumbbob, which was conducted from May through October 1957, consisted of 29 tests. Six of these were safety tests, and two did not produce any nuclear yield. This series addressed several objectives, including tactical weapon proof tests, safety tests, and component and mockup testing for thermonuclear systems to be detonated in other tests, among other things.



44 kiloton nuclear detonation at Test Site Smoky in the Nevada Training Center in 1957

Image from <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Usa/Tests/Plumbob.html>

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The National Archives at Chicago is located at:

**7358 S. Pulaski Road
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The National Archives at Chicago research rooms are open to the public Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 4:15 PM.



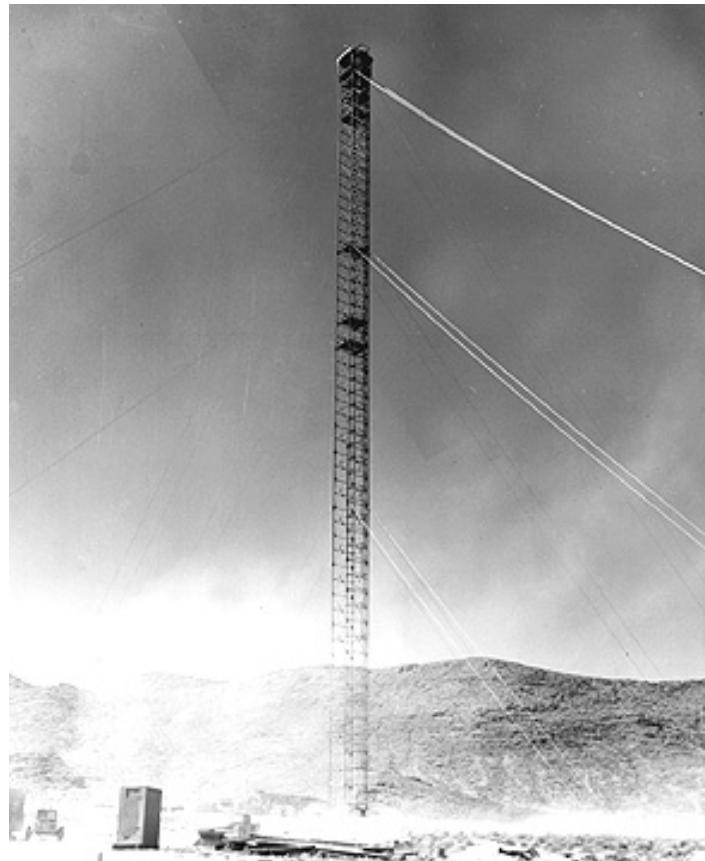
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Some of the tests conducted at NTS, notably Smoky and Galileo, were designed to see if ground troops could continue their combat missions after the shock of a nearby tactical nuclear blast. Would they be totally stunned and ineffective in battle, or could they continue to their mission if some of the problems such flash blindness, heat and blast effects, and radiation could be somewhat mitigated? Paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne division and other military units were assigned to take part in the Operation Desert Rock VII.

Soldiers in the Desert Rock exercises were positioned at different locations from nuclear detonations in various levels of protection. Some were in the open, others in trenches, some with gas masks, some without. After the detonation they would need to conduct various military exercises or other tests of their military skills. All appear to have worn film badges which were checked afterwards for radiation.

Meanwhile, at Argonne National Laboratory, scientists at the Center for Human Radiobiology were trying to better understand the effects of radiation on the human body. The majority of the research being done at this Federal research lab, located southwest of Chicago, was with workers who painted watches with radium paint in the early 20th century. The National Archives at Chicago has more than 1300 cubic feet of records from this center, which is part of Record Group 434, General Records of the Department of Energy. The scientists also gathered information from other sources besides radium dial painters. The Center for Human Radiobiology records include folders containing summaries of interviews conducted in early 1979 with soldiers who participated in the 1957 Plumbbob exercises and were at test sites such as Smoky.

The Center for Human Radiobiology chose at least 16 soldiers to investigate, either because they were in field units that were operating in the dusty areas after the bomb detonations, or they had a high film badge reading after the test. The Argonne scientists made a whole-body-gamma-ray measurement; took measurements of the thorax and pelvis; investigated the possible chest content of low-energy x-ray emitters; and determined the amount of plutonium-239 and Strontium-90 in the urine. The soldiers were then interviewed and summaries created describing their experiences during the 1957 tests along with their general medical background. Copies of these summaries with personal identifying information redacted are available at the National Archives at Chicago.



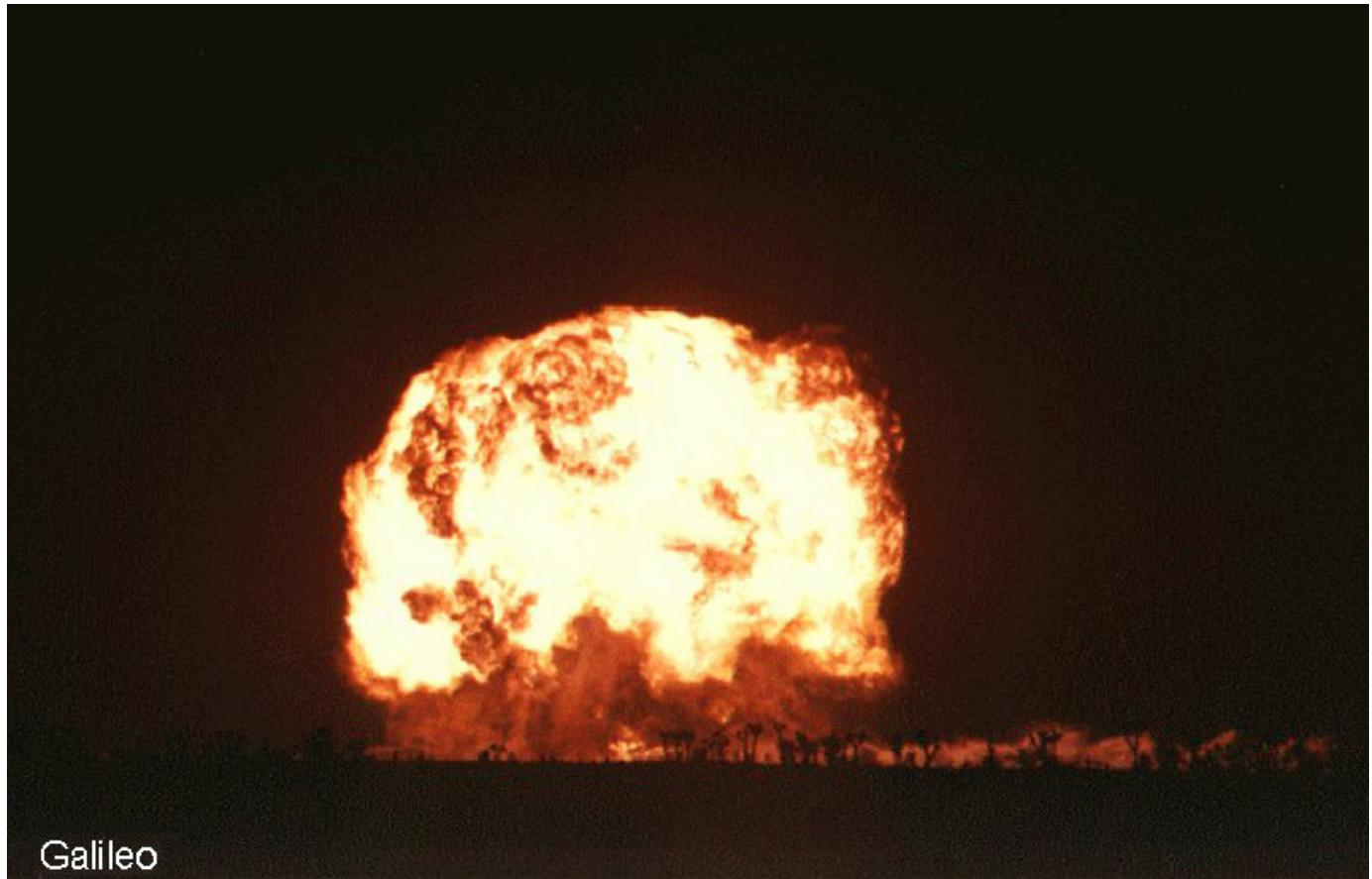
700 foot tower used to detonate a 44 kiloton bomb at Test Site Smoky

Image from
<http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Usa/Tests/Plumbob.html>

One soldier interviewed by the Center was present for at least three tests. In the 11 kiloton Galileo test, “there were no trenches and several people were thrown down at the time of the shock wave...following the blast, he was engaging in timing personnel in doing such procedures as assembling rifles, etc., this was done 200 yards from ground zero, according to his statement.”

Another soldier from the 82nd Airborne Division was located ten miles away from the 44 kiloton explosion at test site Smoky and “almost at once his group was transferred by truck to the region of ground zero, (estimated time 40 minutes) where maneuvers took place. The whole excursion was in a very dusty environment and a respirator was not used. At the moment of detonation, he was facing away from the light and saw the bones of his fingers, which covered his eyes.” Other soldiers had similar stories, although some of them wore gas masks.

Another soldier interviewed in 1979 was present at two of the 1957 tests. He was located halfway up a hillside about ten to twelve miles away from the blast site and could see troops and trenches closer to the blast site. “He remembers turning his back and closing his eyes in accordance with instructions, then noted that dust was being raised as it progressed from the hypocenter towards the periphery. At the time the shock wave reached them it blew off some [steel helmets with chin straps.]”



The smaller 11 kiloton nuclear explosion at Test Site Galileo where some soldiers said they were positioned only 200 yards away from the hypocenter

<http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Usa/Tests/Plumbob.html>

Surprisingly, the summary of the studies done by the Center for Human Radiobiology indicated that the veterans tested did not have higher levels of exposure in the various categories than the general population. A series of studies published in 2000 by the Institute of Medicine of military personnel present at Desert Rock and other similar tests found that the group as a whole did not experience earlier deaths than the general population, although there was a noticeably increased, but not statistically significant, risk of leukemia. However, the authors of that study were frustrated with the data collected on many of the subjects. They found it difficult to gather consistent data on soldiers present at specific tests with specific circumstances, or outside factors that may or may not have also contributed to radiation exposure.

For more information on Operation Plumbbob, see the Nuclear Weapons Archive webpage on the operation at <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Usa/Tests/Plumbob.html>; Richard L. Miller's 1986 book *Under the Cloud: The Decades of Nuclear Testing* - available online at <https://books.google.com/books?id=adI-6jRDipgC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>; and the 2000 book *The Five Series Study: Mortality of Military Participants in U.S. Nuclear Weapons Tests* by Susan Thaul, William F. Page, Harriet Crawford, and Heather O'Maonaigh, available online at <http://www.nap.edu/read/9697/chapter/1>.

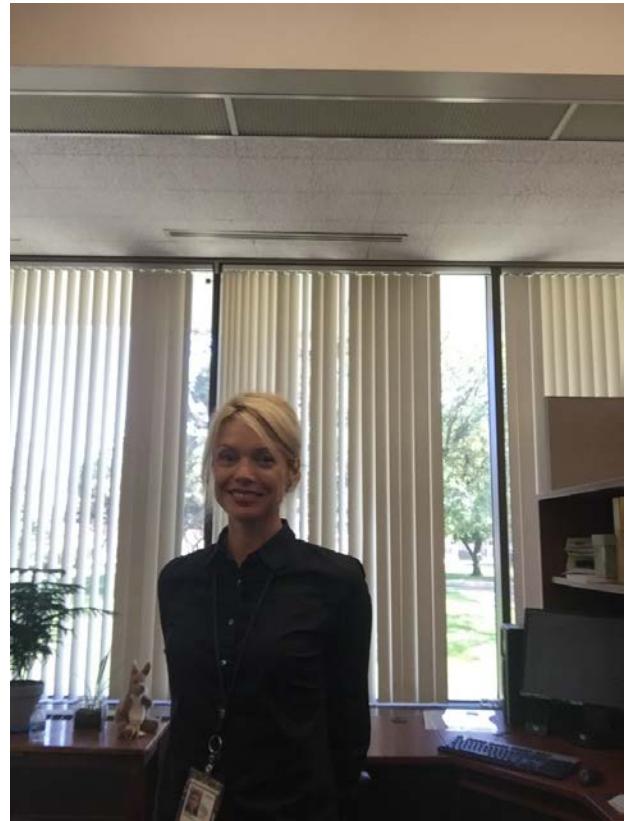
Soldiers from the 11th Airborne Division in Operation Buster-Jangle, which included 11,000 soldiers in the Desert Rock I Exercise in 1951.

Image By Cpl. McCaughey, Las Vegas, Nevada, November 1, 1951 from National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer (111-SC-389297). Available online at: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/picturing_the_century/galleries/postwar.html



Farewell to Archives Technician Stephanie Phillips

Stephanie Phillips, Archives Technician at the National Archives at Chicago, departs this month to accept a records management position with the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB). Stephanie is a six year NARA veteran. Her first exposure to the National Archives was as an intern in 2009, from which she worked her way up to a student employee, and then to an archives technician. Stephanie rapidly became an integral team member involved in all aspects of archival work including, reference; arrangement and description; holdings maintenance; preservation and conservation; electronic description; accessioning; and public programs. We wish Stephanie the best in her new position!



October is Archives Month! Chicago Open Archives: Collecting and Connecting

Connect with Chicagoland institutions that collect, preserve, and make accessible the historical materials that tell our collective story.

More than 20 local archives, research centers, and cultural institutions in the Chicago area will offer special events open to members of the public on Thursday–Saturday, October 8–10, 2015.

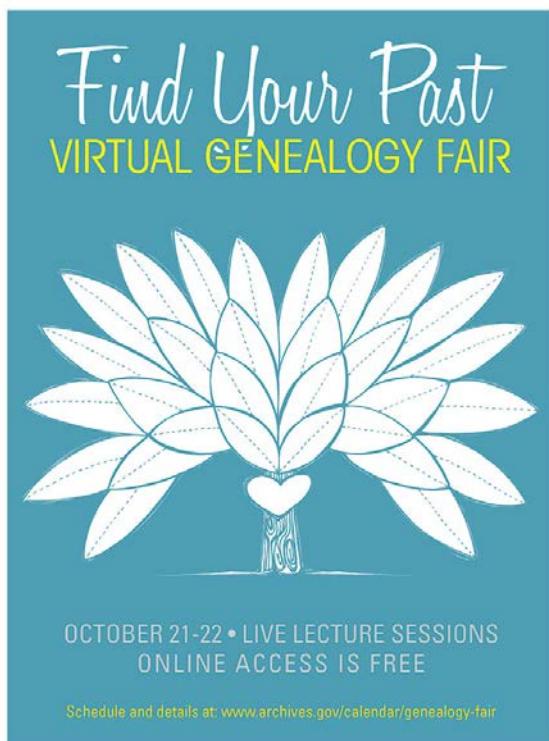
Chicago Open Archives: Collecting and Connecting is an opportunity to discover unique historical materials and engage with archivists, librarians, and museum curators.

Visitors will enjoy activities such as behind-the-scenes tours, film screenings, or exhibit talks designed to showcase each site's collections, programs, and services.

For more information or to register for events see the Chicago Area Archivists website:
<http://www.chicagoarchivists.org/Chicago-Open-Archives>



National Archives Virtual Genealogy Fair Coming in October



Please join the National Archives for the 2015 Virtual Genealogy Fair on October 21 and 22. This will be a live broadcast via YouTube so you can ask our genealogy experts questions at the end of their talks.

Presenters

Speakers will include genealogy experts from National Archives locations across the nation.

Live Lecture Sessions

Lectures will feature tips and techniques for using Federal records at the National Archives for genealogy research. Lectures are designed for experienced genealogists as well as novices. Recorded sessions will remain available online after the event.

Schedule and Handouts

We are currently in the planning stages to select a wide variety of topics for different skill levels for beginners to advanced. Please check this site later, <http://www.archives.gov/calendar/genealogy-fair/>.

Online Viewing and Chatting

Online viewing and chatting will be available on the U.S. National Archives YouTube channel. The YouTube logo is located to the right of the text "Online viewing and chatting will be available on the U.S. National Archives YouTube channel." The logo consists of the word "YouTube" in its signature red and white font inside a red rounded rectangle.

You can watch our programming live on [YouTube](#). Click on the YouTube logo to watch the sessions live or catch up later.

Captioning

Live captioning will be available online. If you require an alternative or additional accommodation for an event (such as a downloadable transcript), please send an email to KYR@nara.gov or call 202-357-5225 in advance.

Bankruptcy Case Files Are No Longer at Chicago

The first week of September saw the last shipment of accessioned bankruptcy case files leave our facility. All accessioned bankruptcy case files held by the National Archives and Records Administration are now centralized at the National Archives at Kansas City. The National Archives at Chicago still has the indexes, dockets, journals and other records that can provide researchers with an overview of individual and company bankruptcies that took place in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The Federal Records Center in Chicago will also continue to hold more recent bankruptcy case files that are still owned by the U.S. Courts in our region. However, if you are searching for an older accessioned case file and have the case number, please contact the National Archives at Kansas City at kansascity.archives@nara.gov or 816-268-8000. Bankruptcy case files can no longer be shipped back to the National Archives at Chicago.

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