

Historical Discussion of the Trinity Nuclear Weapons Test (A Two-Part Series)



PRESENTED BY:

Mr. Alan B. Carr

Senior Historian, Los Alamos National Laboratory

MODERATED BY:

Steve Redifer

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Homeland Defense & Security
Information Analysis Center

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info@hdiac.org
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LOS ALAMOS
PROJECT
MAIN GATE
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PROJECT TRINITY

The Myth, The Legend, The Legacy

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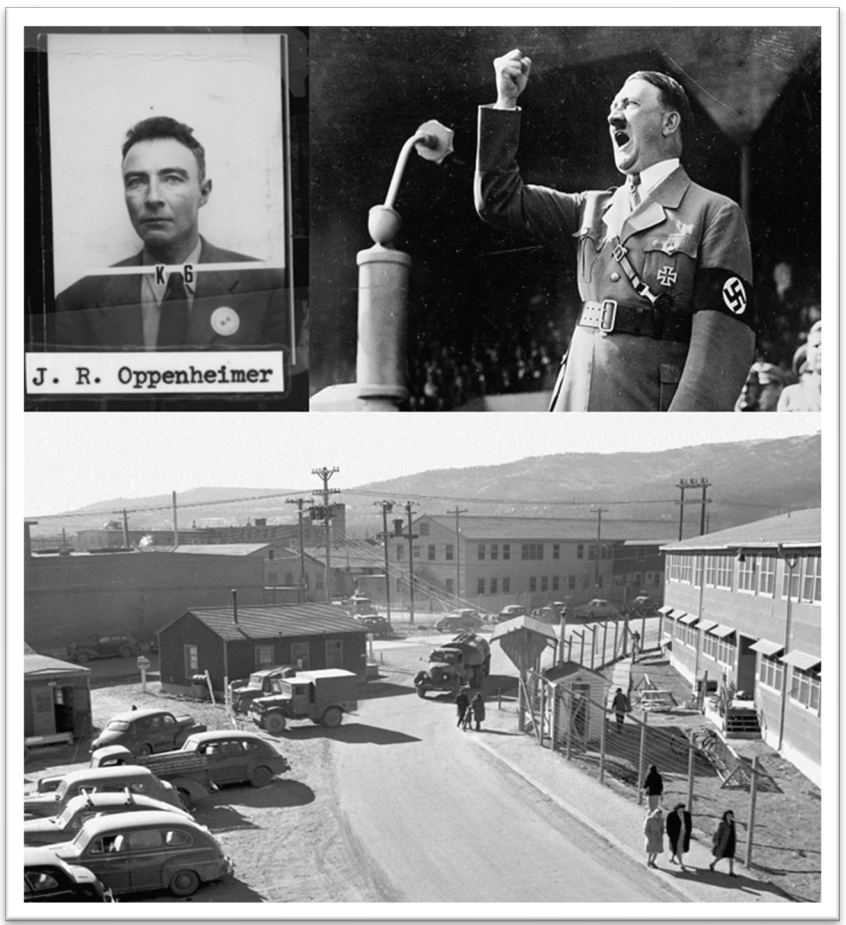


Alan B. Carr
NSRC Senior Historian
WRS-SIS Program Manager

THE ROAD TO TRINITY



- The Manhattan Project was established in August 1942
- Its mission: beat the Nazis to the atomic bomb
- Los Alamos was selected as the site for the weapons design laboratory
- J. Robert Oppenheimer served as the Laboratory's director
- In early summer 1944, Los Alamos scientists discovered plutonium would not work in a gun assembly
- Thus, Oppenheimer reorganized the Laboratory to build an implosion bomb



WHY TEST?



- Scientists were all but certain Little Boy, the uranium gun weapon, would perform in combat
- Initially, however, scientists were skeptical its imploding plutonium counterpart would function
- Eventually, due to improvements in the high explosives (HE), most scientists were confident the implosion bomb would work...
- *...but not confident enough to use it in combat without testing it first!*
- Oppenheimer persuaded General Leslie Groves, Commander of the Manhattan Engineer District, to perform a test

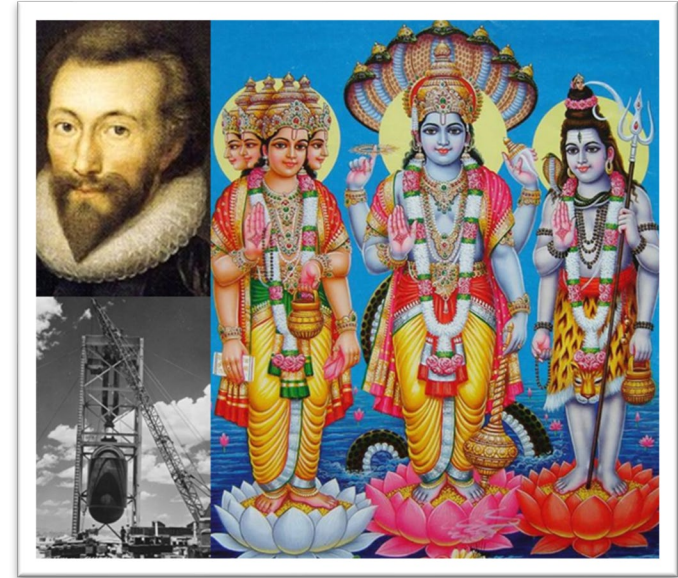


“No one was content that the first trial of a Fat Man (F.M.) gadget should be over enemy territory, where, if the gadget failed, the surprise factor would be lost and the enemy might be presented with a large amount of active material in recoverable form.”

- Kenneth Bainbridge

WHY 'TRINITY'?

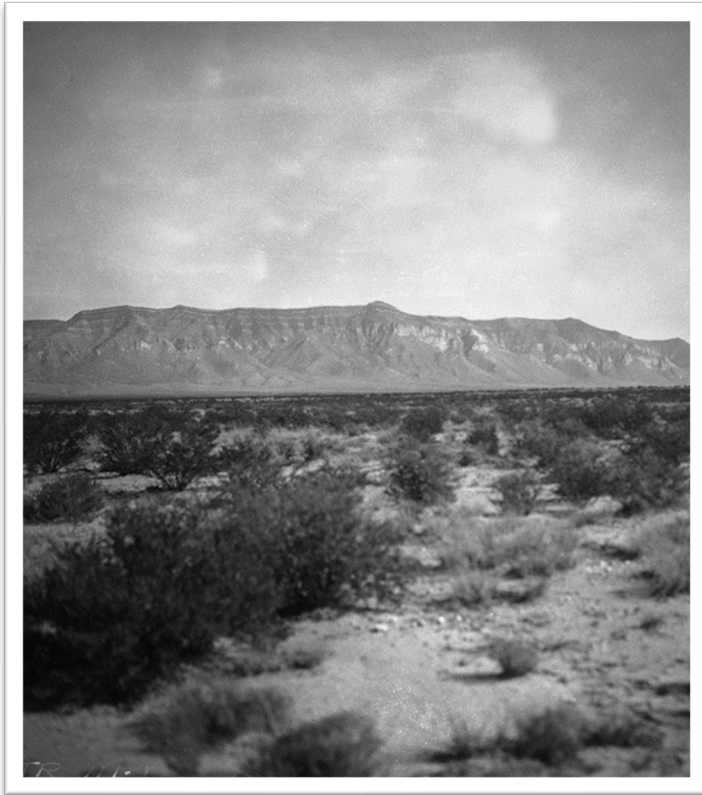
- One account claims an Army Colonel stated the project team would need help from the Holy Trinity to move Jumbo
- Physicist Robert Jungk believes the name was borrowed from a nearby abandoned turquoise mine
- Historians Marjorie Bell Chambers and Ferenc Szasz believe Oppenheimer's understanding of the Hindu Trinity may have helped inspire the name
- The White Sands Public Affairs office has offered an admittedly fictional explanation: Trinity represented the culmination of the work of the Manhattan Project's three main sites (Los Alamos, Oak Ridge and Hanford)
- In actuality, Oppenheimer named the test at a time when he had John Donne's poetry on his mind: "Batter my heart, three person'd God;"



A-1

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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE SITE



- More than a year before Trinity, in spring 1944, Oppenheimer started searching for a test site
- Bainbridge, who was selected to serve as test director, quickly took charge
- The site had to meet the following set of requirements:
 - It had to be flat
 - Its weather had to be favorable
 - For security and safety, it had to be isolated
 - Preferably, it would be close to Los Alamos
 - Preferably, the land would be easy to acquire
 - Native Americans could not be displaced

POSSIBLE LOCATIONS TO TEST



• The following sites were considered:

- Tularosa Valley, New Mexico
- A desert training area near Rice, California
- The lava region south of Grants, New Mexico
- Sand bar islands ten miles off the coast of Texas
- San Nicolas Island off the coast of southern California
- Southwest of Cuba and north of Thoreau in New Mexico
- Jornada del Muerto Valley, New Mexico (Alamogordo Bombing Range)
- San Luis Valley near Great Sand Dunes National Monument in Colorado



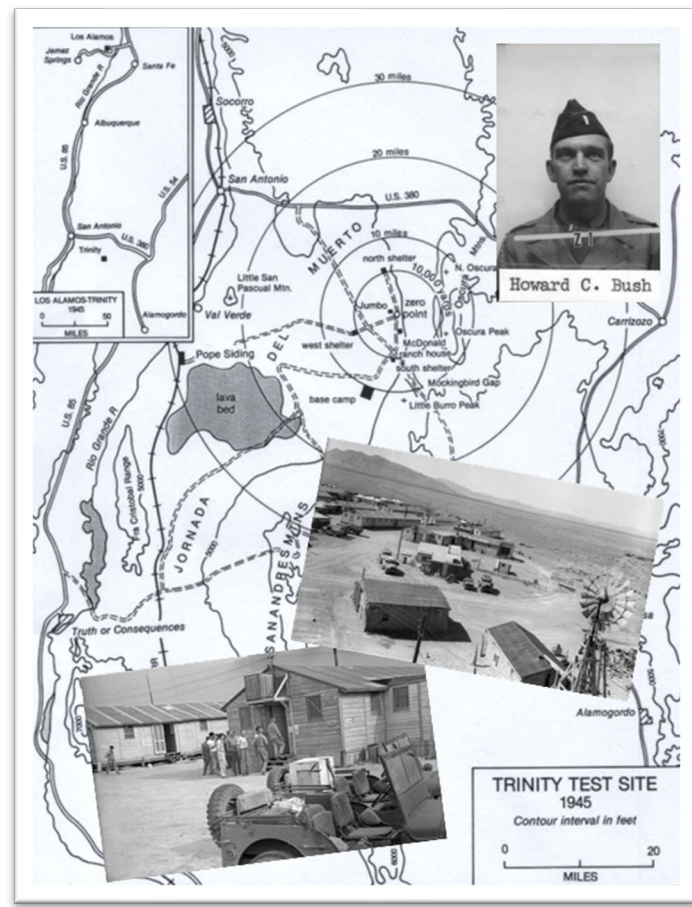
• In September 1944, the Jornada del Muerto was selected

PREPARING THE SITE



A-1

- Plans for the base camp were prepared in October 1944
- The camp was completed in December 1944 and expanded in March 1945
- A dozen soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Howard C. Bush staffed the camp
- In spring 1945, 200 laborers worked seven days a week for thirty days three times with brief breaks between stints
- They built dozens of miles of roads, erected hundreds of poles for wires, built three bunkers and two towers
- The laborers also built a 25-mile road just to get Jumbo to Zero



SECURITY PRECAUTIONS



- The connection between Los Alamos and Trinity was secret
- The site was patrolled by MPs on horseback and in Jeeps
- The soldiers who worked at Trinity were not told the camp's purpose
- There were no phone calls, mail was censored and talk of the camp was prohibited
- Despite security requirements and living conditions, Lieutenant Bush maintained high morale at the camp
- To keep the nature of the test secret, press releases were prepared indicating an ammo dump on the Bombing Range had exploded

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The orders received by the detachment Commander from General Farrell were generally as follows:

1. The two prepared press releases were made known to the detachment Commander. One in case of no evacuation, which stated briefly that an ammunition dump had blown up; and one in case of evacuation, which stated that an ammunition dump had blown up which contained gas shells and the people would be evacuated for 24 hours to protect them from the gas.

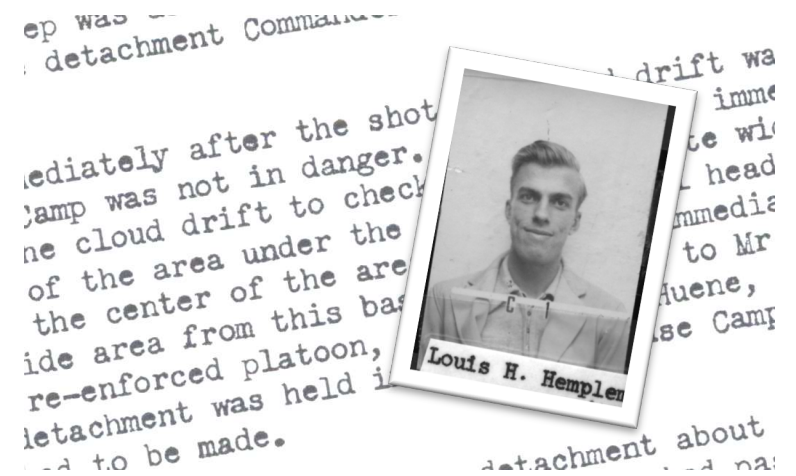


SAFETY PRECAUTIONS



- The scientists were aware of serious potential health hazards, thus safety was an important priority
- Fallout was not treated as a major danger until after the May 7 100-ton test
- A detachment of 144 soldiers was created to evacuate nearby population centers
- A crew of technicians monitoring conditions around the test area would alert the detachment if an evacuation proved necessary
- Significant emphasis was placed on obtaining accurate forecasts: good weather would keep fallout risks to a minimum

“..it is my opinion that no personnel outside of the area controlled by us will in fact be measurably exposed.”
- Oppenheimer to Groves (27.6.45)



“All I could think of was, my God, all that radioactivity up there has got to come down somewhere.”
- Dr. Louis Hempelmann, Health Group Leader

THE STRANGE STORY OF JUMBO



- Early-on, scientists were very concerned the implosion bomb would not work
- If the HE detonated, but the device did not produce a nuclear yield, the plutonium would be dispersed over a wide area
- Jumbo was the most (*in*)famous containment method: a 214-ton containment vessel fabricated by Babcock & Wilcox (Ohio)
- Jumbo sat at the base of a 75' tower 800 yards from Ground Zero, but survived Trinity
- General Groves **supposedly** attempted to have Jumbo destroyed in 1947
- Jumbo was buried, excavated, abandoned and eventually moved near Zero where it continues to rest today



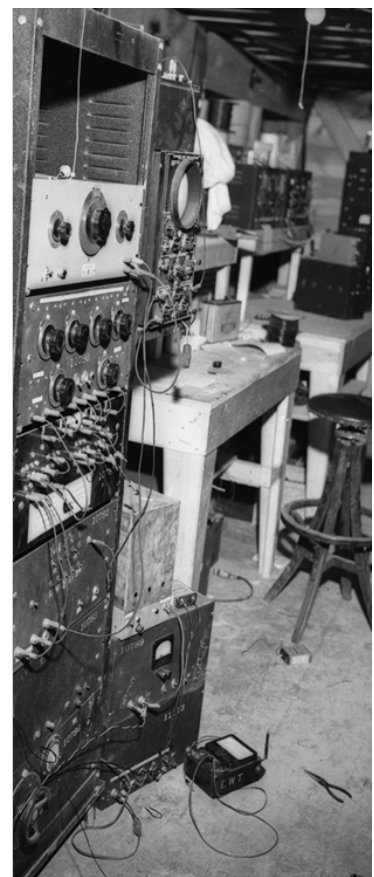
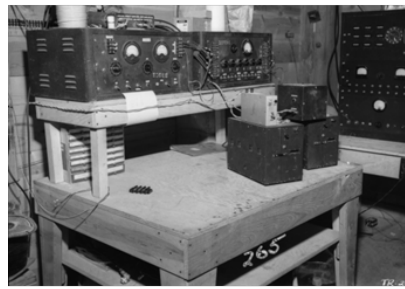
“Jumbo represented to many of us the physical manifestation of the lowest point in the Laboratory's hopes for the success of an implosion bomb. It was a weighty albatross around our necks.”

- Kenneth Bainbridge

THE TRINITY EXPERIMENTS



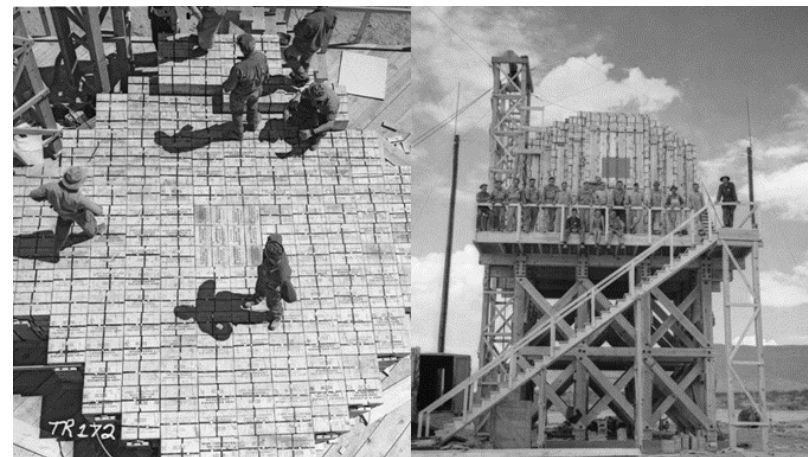
- The primary purpose of the Trinity test was to ensure the gadget worked
- However, many scientific experiments were conducted to:
 - Assess the efficiency of the implosion
 - Measure energy release
 - Measure the blast
 - Record earth shock
 - Observe the behavior of the fireball
 - Interpret radiological phenomena
- Though some experiments failed, most were very successful
- The results are recorded in dozens of Los Alamos reports



THE 100 TON TEST



- Bainbridge proposed a rehearsal test, primarily to study the effects of the blast and calibrate instruments
- 100 tons of TNT was detonated May 7, 1945: it was the largest measured blast to that point in time
- Radioactive material was added to the TNT so the airborne debris could be tracked
- Not everything went according to plan: the TNT detonated a quarter-second early, for instance
- Thus, the test was valuable for gaining experience and making improvements to experiments



DISASTER AVERTED: THE CREUTZ TEST

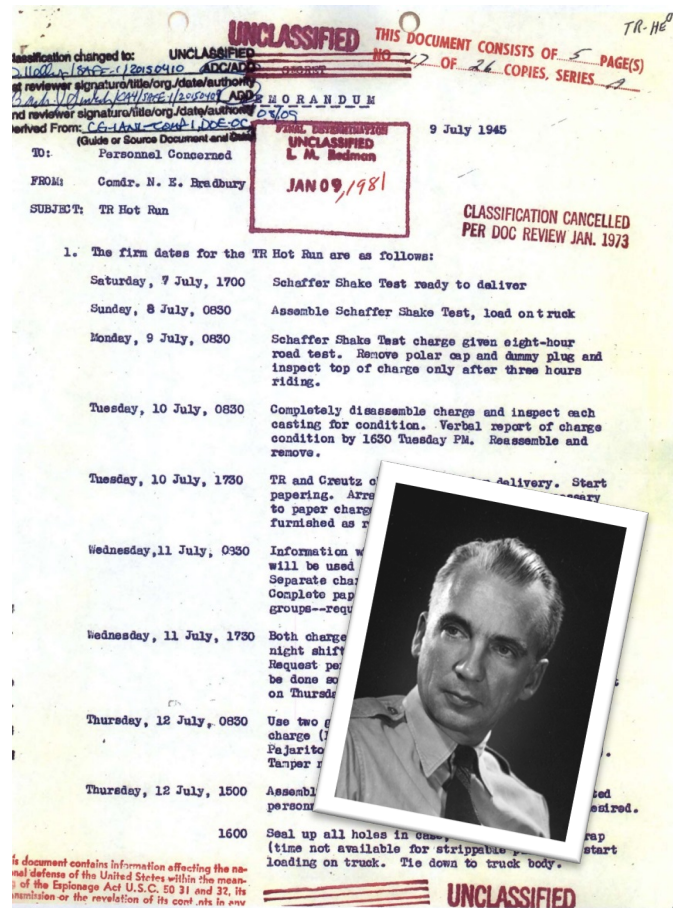


- On July 14, another rehearsal test was conducted at Pajarito Site in Los Alamos
- Edward Creutz was charged with conducting the test, thus it became known as the Creutz test
- In the experiment, a mock pit was imploded with a full-scale HE lens system
- Initially, the results indicated Trinity would be a failure: it appeared the implosion was too slow to make the pit go critical
- Hans Bethe, the Theoretical Division leader and future Nobel Laureate, quickly determined the results were calculated improperly

HOW DO YOU DO A NUCLEAR TEST??



- The test date was chosen based on weather forecasts and politics
- Commander Norris Bradbury, a group leader in the eXplosives Division, wrote the procedure for the Trinity test
- Virtually every aspect of the test was unprecedented:
 - How do you photograph an atomic bomb?
 - How do you transport the gadget?
 - How do you assemble the gadget?
 - How do you detonate the gadget?
 - What if the test is a failure? Then what??
- Bradbury exhibited calmness and levity
- He would succeed Oppenheimer as Director, serving from 1945 until 1970



VISUALLY DOCUMENTING THE TEST



A-1

- More than 50 cameras of different types would record the test
- The primary purpose of Trinity photography was to record scientific phenomena
- Fastax cameras, running at ~10,000 FPS, would record the opening phases of the test in great detail
- Light wavelengths produced by the blast would be recorded by spectrographic cameras
- Gamma rays would be recorded by pinhole cameras
- Many observers were given handheld cameras to record the test

The image shows a large grid of technical data, likely a camera log or film strip record, with several photographs overlaid. The grid contains columns for camera type, film speed, exposure, and other technical details. The photographs include:

- A black and white photograph of a desert landscape with a large, dark, rectangular object in the foreground.
- A black and white photograph of a person in a trench, possibly a soldier or observer, looking towards the camera.
- A black and white photograph of a laboratory interior with various pieces of equipment, including what appears to be a camera or spectrograph.

The grid also contains handwritten notes and a date stamp "TR-86".

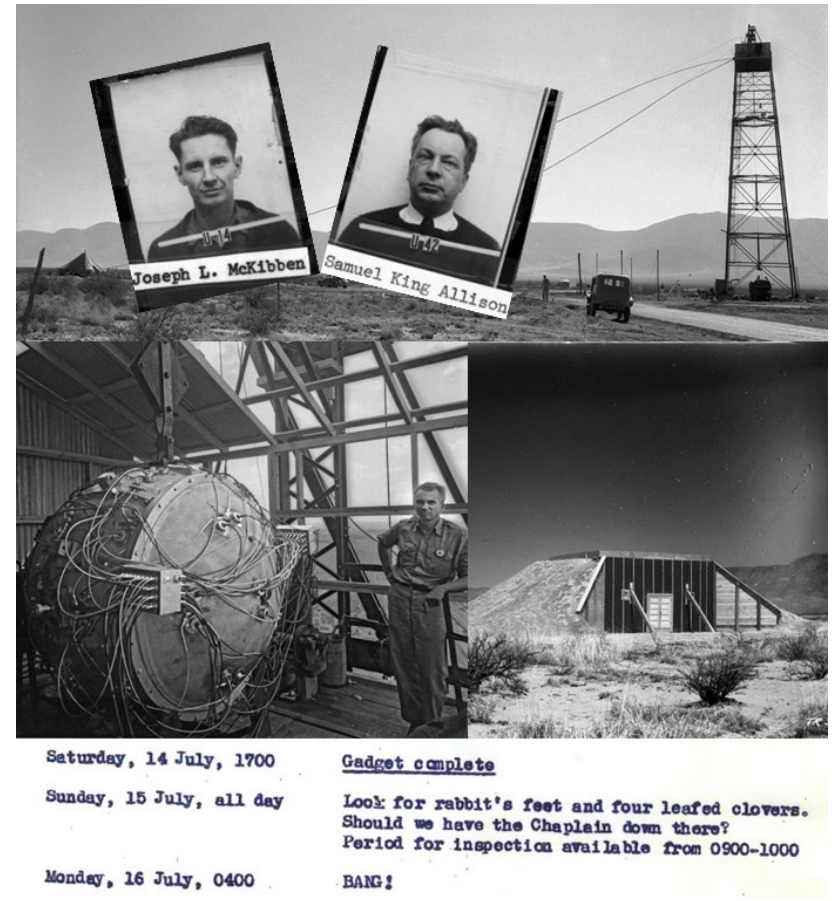


- July 16, the day before the Potsdam Conference opened, was set as the test date
- Bradbury led the assembly of the Gadget, with Oppenheimer supervising, on Friday the 13th
- Engineers attempted to insert the active material into the HE, but it wouldn't fit: the plutonium had expanded slightly in the desert heat
- The team successfully completed installation of the plutonium a few minutes later, after it cooled
- The morning of the 14th, the gadget was hoisted (over mattresses!) to the top of its 100' tower
- It was believed testing the gadget atop a tower would help scientists more accurately measure (photograph) the expansion of the fireball





- As July 15 drew to a close, Bainbridge, Joseph McKibben and George Kistiakowsky set off to arm the device
- It would be detonated from the South 10,000-yard station
- The test, initially scheduled for 4:00 AM, was delayed due to a violent thunderstorm
- A postponement was discussed, but the meteorologist was confident the storm would subside at dawn
- The countdown began at 5:09 AM
- Kistiakowsky bet Oppenheimer a month's wages against \$10 it would work!



“NOW!” THE ATOMIC AGE DAWNS



- At ~5:29:15 the device detonated
- The gadget produced an official yield equivalent to 21,000 tons of TNT
- The fireball instantaneously reached a temperature in the millions of degrees
- The mushroom cloud grew ~1000m wide before it rose in a column of smoke
- It took ~40 seconds for the shockwave to reach General Groves and several others at the 17,000-yard observation point (base camp)
- The sound, similar to the crack of a large gun, arrived seconds later
- The cloud reached an altitude in excess of 50,000 feet then gradually dispersed

By the Associated Press

Following a blast felt over hundreds of miles Monday morning, explosion of "a considerable amount of high explosive and pyrotechnics" in a remote area of the Alamogordo air base reservation was reported by Col. William G. Baresckson, commandant.



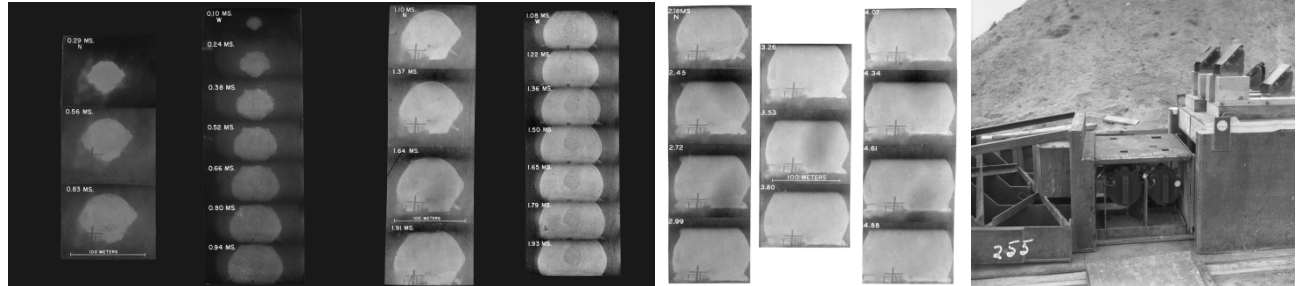
Photo by Jack Aeby

SAMPLES OF TRINITY PHOTOGRAPHY



A-1

Fastax Cameras



Aero Cameras

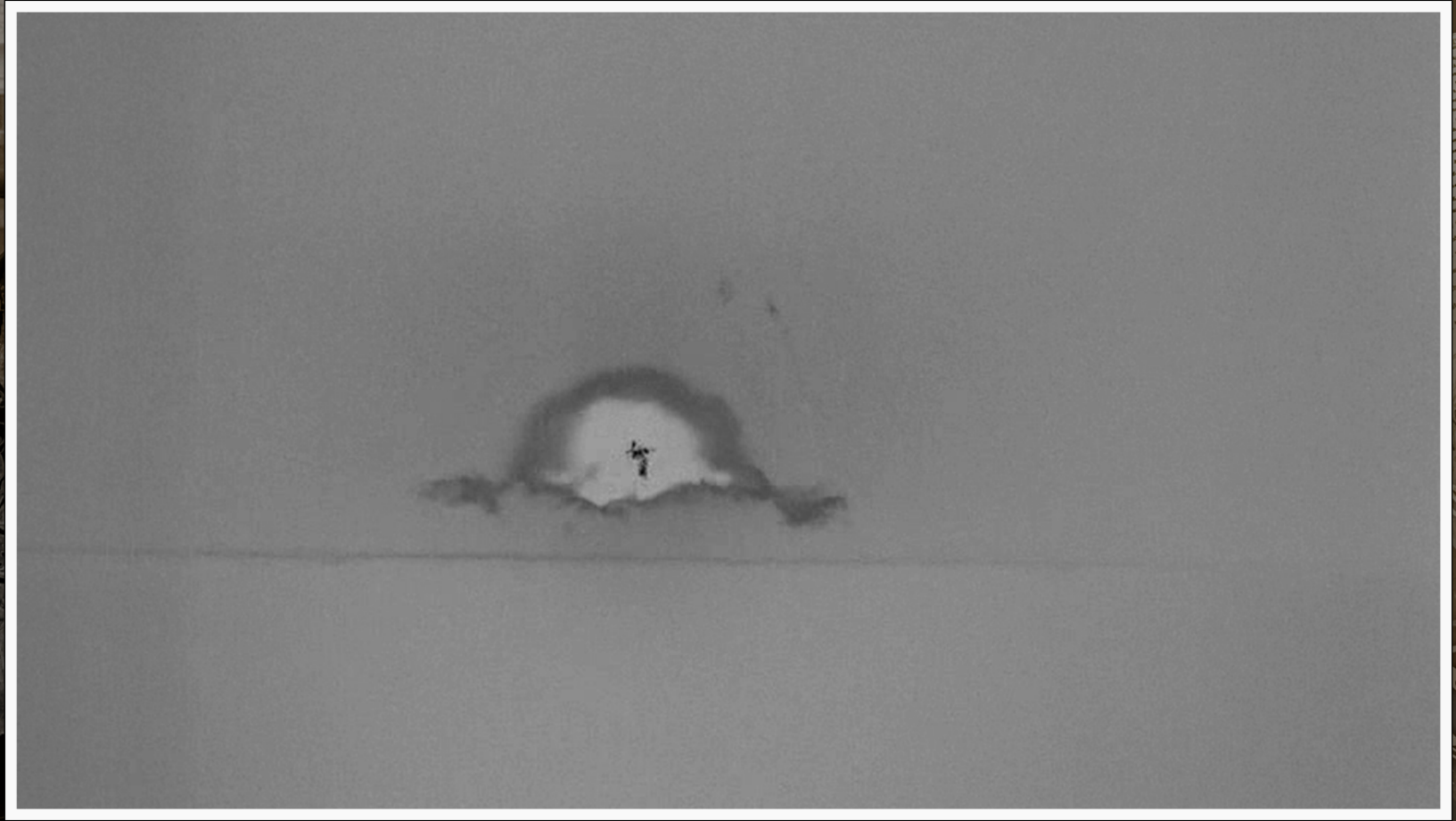


Mitchell Cameras



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A SAMPLING OF TRINITY FOOTAGE

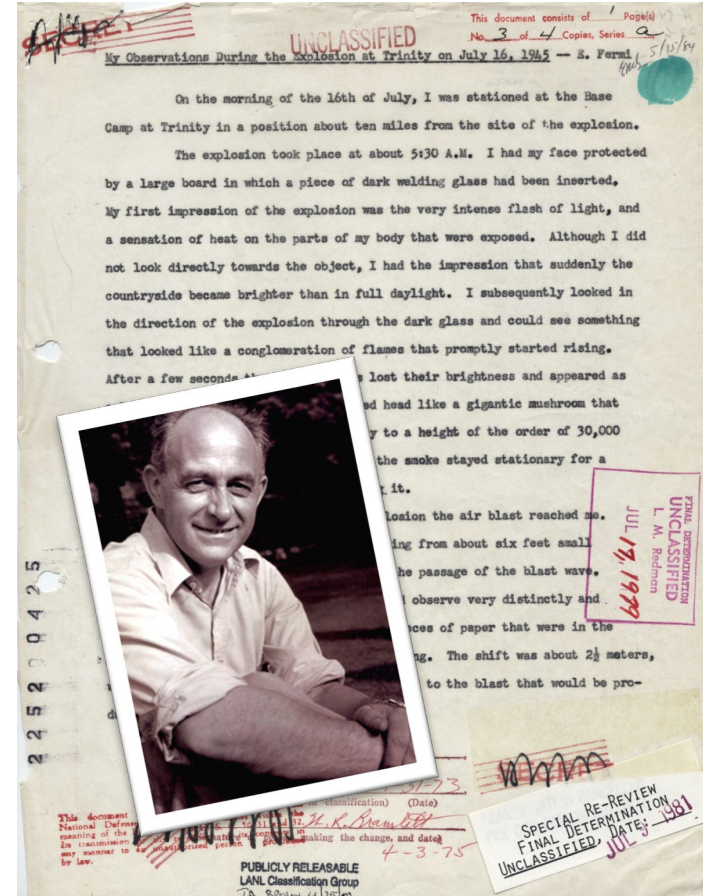


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EYEWITNESS DESCRIPTIONS



- “It blasted; it pounced; it bored its way right through you.” – Isidor Rabi
- “We saw the whole sky flash with unbelievable brightness in spite of the very dark glasses we wore.” – Emilio Segre
- “The thing that got me was not the flash but the blinding heat of a bright day on your face in the cold desert morning.” – Phillip Morrison (from ten miles away at base camp!)
- “It turned yellow, then red, and then beautiful purple.” – Ralph Carlisle Smith
- “It was as though the earth had opened and the skies had split.” – New York Times reporter William L. Laurence



THE EMOTIONAL AFTERMATH



- “Some people claim to have wondered at the time about the future of mankind. I didn’t. We were at war and the damned thing worked.” – Norris Bradbury
- “Well, now we’re all sons of bitches.” – Kenneth Bainbridge
- “Our first feeling was one of elation, then we realized we were tired, and then we were worried.” – Victor Weisskopf
- “The spectacle was tremendous, beautiful, magnificent, terrifying, exciting, humbling, scary.” – Marge Bradner
- “You could see it on their faces. I saw that something very grave and strong had happened to their whole outlook on the future.” – Stan Ulam



“You owe me ten dollars.”
Kistiakowsky to Oppenheimer

THE PHYSICAL AFTERMATH



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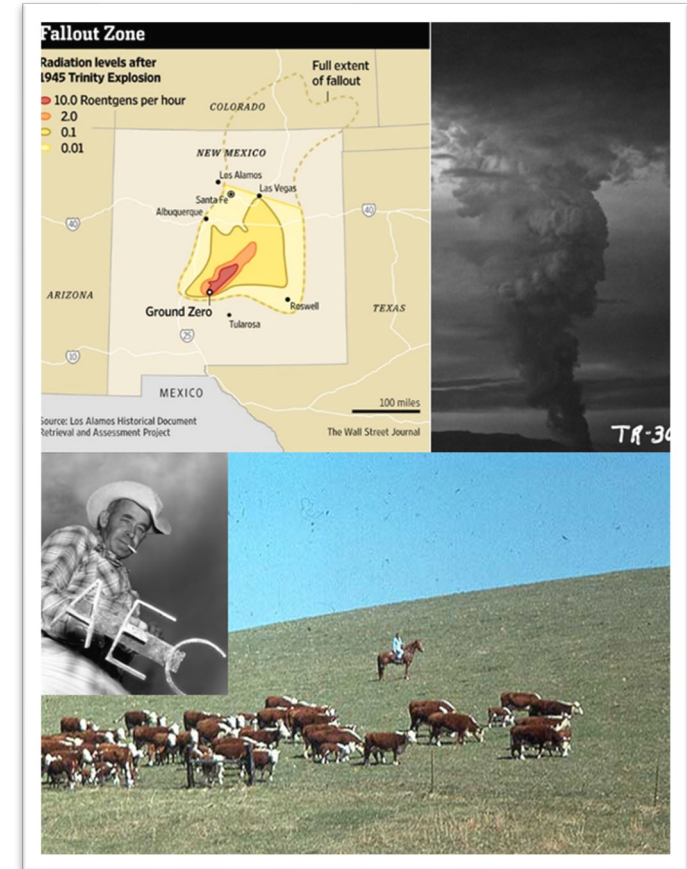
- The blast ejected hundreds of tons of earth into the atmosphere where it was irradiated, melted, fell back to the ground and solidified
- This glassy new material was dubbed Trinitite
- An area ~600m wide centered on Ground Zero was coated with Trinitite
- The force of the explosion created a shallow crater Bainbridge estimated to be 5' deep and ~30' in diameter (some estimate it is up to ~10' deep by ~1200' wide)
- Only a small portion of the tower's reinforced concrete footings survived the test



A NEW DANGER: FALLOUT



- The blast produced a significant amount of radioactive fallout
- On July 14th, Hempelmann and Stafford Warren had set the upper dose limit over a two week period at 75 roentgens (R)
- To put that in perspective, today the permissible dose for a DOE worker is roughly 5 R over the course of a year
- The most significant dose was received by a nearby family: they received as much as 60 R over a four week period
- Animals in the area fared worse
- The Army purchased 75 of the most injured animals: a herd of Trinity cows and their descendants resided at Oak Ridge for decades

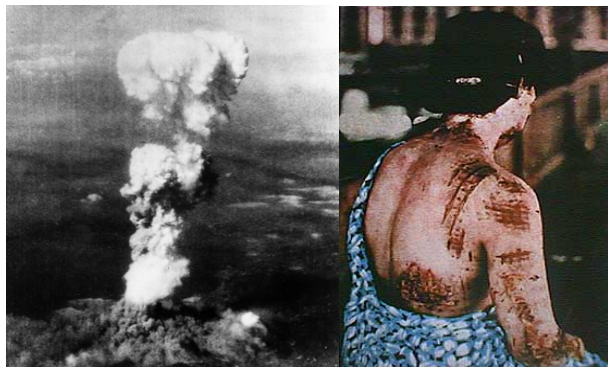


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THE END OF WORLD WAR II



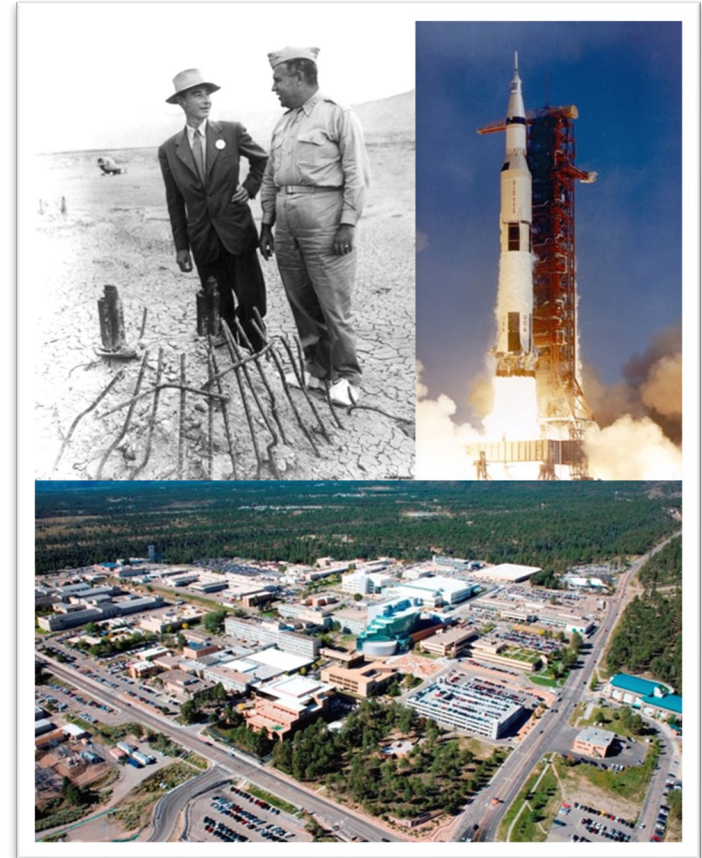
- On August 6, 1945 Hiroshima was attacked
- 64,500 were killed by mid-November (15 kt)
- On August 8, the USSR declared war on Japan
- On August 9 Nagasaki was bombed
- 39,214 were killed by mid-November (21 kt)
- An armistice was declared on August 14
- Los Alamos received the Army-Navy “E” Award on October 16



THE LEGACY OF TRINITY



- Symbolically, Trinity marked the beginning of the final chapter of Imperial Japan's existence
- Trinity opened a new era in human history; an era in which mankind could destroy itself...
- ...but Trinity has also, apparently, helped render global wars obsolete
- Trinity was, arguably, the greatest scientific experiment ever conducted
- It helped usher-in the age of super-science: massive, national, federally-directed research programs
- In that sense Trinity helped set a precedent for the Apollo Program, the Human Genome Project, etc.



A-1

TRINITY SITE: 70 YEARS LATER



SUGGESTED READING



- Kenneth Bainbridge, Trinity (LA-6300-H)
- Alan B. Carr, Thirty Minutes Before the Dawn
- Jim Eckles, Trinity
- Leslie R. Groves, Now It Can Be Told
- Barton Hacker, The Dragon's Tail
- Lillian Hoddeson et. al, Critical Assembly
- James Kunetka, The General and the Genius
- Peter Kuran, Trinity and Beyond (DVD)
- Richard Rhodes, The Making of the Atomic Bomb
- Ferenc Szasz, The Day the Sun Rose Twice





CREDITS

Howard Coe, LANL Videographer

Jim Eckles, White Sands Missile Range (ret.)

Robb Hermes, LANL Scientist (ret.)

James "Jim" Kunetka, Historian/Writer

Peter "Pete" Kuran, Academy Award-Winning Cinematographer

Glen McDuff, LANL Retiree/Consultant

Ellen McGehee, LANL Historian (ret.)

Charles McMillan, LANL Director (ret.)

Steve Obrey, LANL Chemical Diagnostics and Engineering Group

Roger Rasmussen, Trinity Witness (rest in peace, dear friend)

Cary Skidmore, LANL Detonator Technology Group

D. Ray Smith, Y12 Historian

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POST
No. 1

A-1

[Faded document text, likely a report or letter, with some legible words like "I tried to estimate the strength by measuring the air that resulted from the explosion..."]

[Handwritten mathematical notes and diagrams, including numbers like "10,011", "10,012", and symbols like "x", "y", "z", "r", "t", "v", "w", "u", "a", "b", "c", "d", "e", "f", "g", "h", "i", "j", "k", "l", "m", "n", "o", "p", "q", "r", "s", "t", "u", "v", "w", "x", "y", "z", "A", "B", "C", "D", "E", "F", "G", "H", "I", "J", "K", "L", "M", "N", "O", "P", "Q", "R", "S", "T", "U", "V", "W", "X", "Y", "Z", "1", "2", "3", "4", "5", "6", "7", "8", "9", "0", "10", "11", "12", "13", "14", "15", "16", "17", "18", "19", "20", "21", "22", "23", "24", "25", "26", "27", "28", "29", "30", "31", "32", "33", "34", "35", "36", "37", "38", "39", "40", "41", "42", "43", "44", "45", "46", "47", "48", "49", "50", "51", "52", "53", "54", "55", "56", "57", "58", "59", "60", "61", "62", "63", "64", "65", "66", "67", "68", "69", "70", "71", "72", "73", "74", "75", "76", "77", "78", "79", "80", "81", "82", "83", "84", "85", "86", "87", "88", "89", "90", "91", "92", "93", "94", "95", "96", "97", "98", "99", "100"]

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