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Author(s): Judd, D.L.
Meade, Roger Allen

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A SAILOR IN THE LOS ALAMOS NAVY

D. L. Judd
R.A. Meade, ed.

Editor's Note

As part of the War Department's Manhattan Engineer District (MED), Los Alamos was an Army installation during World War II, complete with a base commander and a brace of MPs. But it was a unique Army installation, having more civilian than military personnel. Even more unique was the work performed by the civilian population, work that required highly educated scientists and engineers. As the breadth, scope, and complexity of the Laboratory's work increased, more and more technically educated and trained personnel were needed. But, the manpower needs of the nation's war economy had created a shortage of such people. To meet its manpower needs, the MED scoured the ranks of the Army for anyone who had technical training and reassigned these men to its laboratories, including Los Alamos, as part of its Special Engineer Detachment (SED). Among the SEDs assigned to Los Alamos was Val Fitch, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1980. Another was Al Van Vessem, who helped stack the TNT for the 100 ton test, bolted together the Trinity device, and rode shotgun with the bomb as it was driven from Los Alamos to ground zero.

Less well known is the fact that the Navy also had a significant presence at Los Alamos. Fifty naval officers, most junior in rank, served throughout the Laboratory in various scientific capacities. The most senior officer was Navy Captain William S. "Deke" Parsons, who led the Lab's Ordnance Division. In August 1945, Parsons flew the Hiroshima strike mission on August 6, 1945, arming Little Boy in flight. Parsons also made one of the most significant hiring decisions in Lab history. In 1944, he brought Navy Lieutenant Commander Norris Bradbury to Los Alamos. Bradbury, as most everyone knows, succeeded J. Robert Oppenheimer as Laboratory Director in October 1945 and served in that capacity until 1970.

One of the junior naval officers assigned to the Laboratory was a newly minted Lieutenant, David L. Judd. A recent graduate of Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, Judd had joined the Navy hoping for sea duty. However, with a Bachelors degree in Science, he was assigned to Los Alamos. Judd served at Los Alamos from the spring of 1945 until his discharge from the Navy in 1946. After his discharge, Judd attended the California Institute of Technology, receiving a doctorate in theoretical physics and mathematics in 1950. In 1951, Ernest O. Lawrence hired Judd to work for the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Judd remained at the laboratory for the remainder of his career, serving as the head of the Physics Division and ultimately becoming the laboratory's associate director. Judd died at age 75 in 1998.

In 1983, in anticipation of the fortieth anniversary of Los Alamos, Judd wrote three small vignettes about life at wartime Los Alamos. Below is the first of these short histories about being part of the Naval contingent assigned to duty at Los Alamos. His paper has been slightly edited to enhance readability.

While at Los Alamos during and after World War II, I was a member of the small and unique “Navy Contingent.” There were never more than about fifty of us, floating on an earthbound pool of about 300 U.S. Army men and officers. All of us were officers, assigned individual duties scattered throughout the Laboratory. We rarely wore proper Navy uniforms, never stood watch or assembled in formation, and hardly ever saluted anyone. Like most other technically trained persons on the hill, our lives were those of hard-working, but often fun-loving civilians. We did not even have a commanding officer, but made with a SNOP, which is Navy jargon for “Senior Naval Officer Present.” Captain William S. “Deke” Parsons admirably filled this role until he went overseas with the bombs. His almost non-existent duties of the SNOP were taken over by Commander Norris Bradbury.¹

During its heyday, the Navy contingent enjoyed high morale. Some of us had volunteered for commissions with the expectation of duty at sea, so we did our best to create a fictitious nautical ambience. The fire pond, partially enclosed by the Tech Area buildings, was christened “Lake Los Alamos.”² Those of higher rank or importance were deemed to be assigned to duty on a LMD (large mahogany desk), while more junior ones, like myself, served on SSDs (small steel desks). We had a lot to learn about the realities of military life, such as how to obtain essentials not officially provided. One of our barracks lacked one of these essentials – a Ping-Pong table. One day, however, a table appeared as if by magic. When one of our more experienced officers told us he had acquired it, we asked “How?” “I just requisitioned it,” he said. “But what did you write on the form?” “Folding table, five by nine feet,” he replied. The table arrived in natural wood, but in a few days we found it resplendent in dark green paint with regulation white lines. “How,” we asked again. “Just requisitioned it,” he said. “But what did you write?” “Paint for folding table, of course.”

After the war ended, our contingent faded away, one man at a time, as the Navy’s point system for returning reserve officers to civilian life took its gradual course. Rather late in this process we acquired a new SNOP, Captain Ralph Larkin. Captain Larkin must have been one of the most bewildered officers in the Regular Navy when the Bureau of Navigation relieved him from sea duty, where he

¹ In April 1945, general Groves wrote to Parsons about the “laxness in appearance.” In the margin of Groves’ letter, Parsons wrote, “action taken at meeting of all naval officers.”

² Ashley Pond.

commanded destroyers to the highest and driest shore duty possible.³ It was a nominal command with ten, then nine, then eight decidedly unmilitary personnel without even a yeoman to type his letters. Those of us left in his command stood in awe of his military bearing and understood his initial gruff response to his new command, and tried to salute with more vigor in imitation of his snappy response to our sloppy morning gestures. Finally, came the day when I was the only officer left in his command. Having been commissioned single and rather late in the war, I was the last to go.⁴ Then came a surprise. Captain Larkin spent a couple of hours with me in a relaxed conversation. I found him engaging, witty, and a gracious raconteur.

Although, based on size alone, our group's efforts would justify, at most, a footnote in the wartime history of Los Alamos. We felt then, as I still do now, that the great distinction of two of our SNOPs, Parsons and Bradbury, was in and of itself reason enough for recording and registering that the United States Navy played a significant part in the Laboratory's success. I did not know then, and only understood later, that Captain Parsons had taken a great gamble with his professional future, forgoing sea duty to work at Los Alamos. Had he failed, his chances for advancement after the war would have been nearly zero.⁵

³ Despite the implication of its name, The Bureau of Navigation was the Navy's personnel bureau.

⁴ Judd met his future wife, Martha Leah Brown, while serving at Los Alamos.

⁵ Parsons was awarded a Silver Star for the Hiroshima mission, a lesser award than the one given to the pilot of the Enola Gay, Colonel Paul Tibbets. Also, because he did not have a sea command during the war, Parsons was promoted to the seldom used rank of Commodore rather than Rear Admiral. After the war, Parsons was eventually promoted to Rear Admiral and was the Navy's senior officer on Operations Crossroads and Sandstone. Parsons died unexpected of a heart attack in 1953.