

An Unsetting Matter

Paul DeMarinis

"In 1957 my family moved to Ely, Nevada about 100 miles downwind from the atomic test site. My father, a geneticist, had taken a job with the United States Public Health Service monitoring the pathways of radioactive fallout through the sparse ecology of the desert. Sometimes we would wake in the early hours of the morning to see a bomb go off. We'd listen to the countdown on his radio, watch as the sky lit up in premature desert sunrise, only to disappear into night and stars again. In the days following a test I remember seeing spectacular sunsets, red walls of fire in the evening. All the dust, I suppose. My father told of the time at the test site that he'd driven to ground zero within an hour after the blast. He described the incredible clouds of dust in the air, the desert winds blowing dust into everything. Afterwards, he said, they were told to shower and change. Years later we learned details of some of the unrecorded tests in which plutonium bombs were destroyed by conventional explosives, I guess to see if they could be vulnerable to terrorist attack. While the bombs didn't go off, kilograms of plutonium was spread across the desert in the form of a fine dust, where I'm sure, it blows around to this day."

A room 4.5 meters x 9 meters or so. A panorama of sunset in the Nevada desert is projected on the walls. There's some white dusty powder on the floor. In the center, a small hut or shelter made of sheet lead (Blei), the size in which one person might stand or crouch for survival. Inside the little lead hut is a radio. From it emanates a high quality synthetic voice. In a calm southern accent, the voice talks about the atomic test site at Yucca Flats. The contamination of humans, herds & crops, ongoing since the 1950's. The voice changes it's synthetic quality from human to machine, sometimes singing or chanting, sometimes whispering. Its message does not change. The texts are drawn from eyewitness accounts by survivors. As you leave the space, you may notice some of the powder has clung to your clothes. It's harmless & pretty – little flakes of dichromic plastic. But the powder is very distinctive in appearance. During the rest of the day you begin to notice it everywhere, as you and other visitors track it around. It's interesting how far and how quickly it travels. Within the week of the installation tiny specks of it will have spread to remote corners of the city.

"The day before the shot I had walked a good portion of the 2500 yard perimeter. There were trenches with dummies, and weapons like M1 rifles and machine-guns. But the strangest thing was this one special bunker and the way it was constructed – the whole structure was above ground. Inside there was a straight wooden bench going all the way across. At the center was a terminal box of unconnected wires. I asked the Fat Man if we were supposed to connect some equipment to it. He just said to stay away. Out in front was a remote control camera mounted on a pole and trained on this bunker and nothing else. What in the hell was going on?

It was around 2 a.m. when I heard the sound of a truck engine from the vicinity of the test bunker, a few hundred yards in front of my position. The moon was full and the desert night air was clear. You could see the outline of 'em putting people into this bunker. All I could think of was what Turley said he'd seen up by the tower: "a bunch of weirdos".

After the shot they sent me in to salvage the test cable. The dust was still swirling everywhere. The heat from the ground burned right through the soles of my feet. Ahead I saw the bunker. There was a guy with a mannequin look who had apparently crawled behind the bunker. Something like wires were attached to his arms, and his face was full of blood gushing from his nose and mouth. He was trying to tear away wires attached to his head. I smelled an odor like burning flesh. I knew this smell all too well. In Korea, we were right next to where the South Koreans burned their dead. The camera I'd seen before was going, zoom, zoom, zoom, and the guy kept trying to get back up. Instead of approaching him, I remember trying to run back the way I came, I fell on one knee and began to vomit. Then things got foggy. I began to feel faint. The next thing I remember was some AEC monitors yelling at me, helping me into the rear of the jeep. They looked like spacemen in their rad-safe suits.

My next recollection was lying on a cot. A guy dressed in civies reached down and ripped off my film badge. He was cursing me for going near their hushhush experiments. A nurse gave me some medication she called "thizine". I'll never forget that. It was a small cap, a red-colored liquid, and it tasted like iodine. The guy left, and about five minutes later the shit hit the fan. I felt so sleepy, I could have slept standing up.

The next morning they gave me some breakfast but I couldn't keep it down. After that things get hazy. I think I was there seven days. There were doctors and psychiatrists asking me about what I'd seen at the test site. Whenever I'd ask about the poor guy I saw behind the bunker, the doctor would say "Let's watch a movie, Jim." What movies! First, there'd be a flash of Disney character like Mickey Mouse, then Tojo, then Donald Duck, then Hitler, then someone's mother, followed by segments of the bombing of Hiroshima."

Jim O'Connor, U. S. Army