

The Forgotten Detachment

(As published in *The Oak Ridge's Historically Speaking* column on January 4, 2011)

My good friend Bill Sergeant called with another good story. I am always delighted when that happens. His memory is awesome! As you know if you have heard him speak publically his storytelling abilities are grand.

Bill was a Captain in the United States Army when he was transferred to serve as the Executive Officer for Major Lloyd Robert Block in the Army Corps of Engineers, head of Security for the Clinton Engineer Works. Bill arrived in Oak Ridge in March of 1944.

After the end of World War II and a few short years of more mundane work helping with the transition from military to civilian control of Oak Ridge, Bill later took what was likely the largest contingent of men from one city to support the Korean War. In 1950, he led close to 300 members of the 194th Engineer Battalion of the National Guard as a Lieutenant Colonel. They were part of the first wave to head for Korea. The men were given only three weeks to settle their affairs.

Bill returned from Korea in 1952 to a job as the deputy head of security in Oak Ridge for the Atomic Energy Commission. He was soon promoted to head of Security, a position he held until his retirement in 1979.

This story is about the Military Police who were assigned to provide security for the Clinton Engineer Works during the Manhattan Project. Their assignment included the security for the city of Oak Ridge and all the federal property on the reservation except for the immediate plant sites which were secured by local guard forces hired by the contractor of each site.

A side note is in order here. The Tennessee Eastman Company that operated the Y-12 Electromagnetic Separation Plant is known to have hired young women right out of high school to work as what we know today as "Calutron Girls" but they were known then as "Cubicle Operators." What you may not realize is that Tennessee Eastman also hired some women to work as guards.

Bill recalled seeing the women guards, locally known as "Guardette's," when he would go to Y-12 on security related matters. He said the other sites did not use women for guards, only Y-12. He thought Tennessee Eastman was quite progressive in the way they made opportunities for women. It was most unusual for the time.

As history tells us, the Special Engineer Detachment was a large contingent of technical and scientific personnel who had been drafted in the Army. They were collected into this special category and assigned to the Manhattan Project to do the technical work needed. There were 1,800 assigned to Los Alamos and 1,257 in Oak Ridge as well as several in Hanford and the many other locations of the project.

The Manhattan District office at Oak Ridge was where Colonel Nichols ran the day to day activities of the entire Manhattan Project. Oak Ridge also served as the Women's Army Corps Headquarters for enlisted women stationed at Hanford, Los Alamos and all other locations. There were 422 enlisted women who served to provide administrative and other support work, I am not sure of how many were assigned to Oak Ridge.

But history does not report nearly as much on the "Forgotten Detachment" that Bill remembers. While doing research for this article, I did come upon mention of it in a recently purchased copy of *Manhattan*,

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The Army and the Atomic Bomb, by Vincent Jones, where he says, "The CEW Branch administered the local civilian guard force and the military police contingent that protected the Tennessee reservation."

Here are Bill's recollections of that "military police contingent" or by his term, "The Forgotten Detachment." Enjoy the story.

Bill said, "In New Orleans, already set to deploy overseas, was an Army Military Police Company. Their orders were changed at the very last moment before departure and they were sent to Oak Ridge. Major Lloyd Robert Block and I met the train bringing them to Oak Ridge." Block was responsible for the Oak Ridge operations of the Intelligence and Security Division headed by Lt. Col. William B. Parsons, who reported to Colonel Nichols but kept General Groves informed directly of all intelligence and security matters.

This was in June of 1944, less than three months after Bill's arrival at Oak Ridge. Yet things were happening in rapid succession. It was only a few weeks before the July 6, 1944 Troop Train Wreck at Highcliff, TN, near Jellico. Bill would take a platoon of these newly arrived Military Police with him to take charge of that accident scene. Can't you just see the fast-paced chain of events that were just routine daily activities for Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project...exciting times, for sure!

Bill indicated that the newly arrived personnel, some 150 of them, were taken to dormitory and barracks quarters that had quickly been arranged for them to occupy. The next morning, they were awakened by the sound of a voice telling them to get up so the "maids can make the beds." This was a welcome surprise to them. Remember, just a matter of hours ago, they were on a path toward deployment overseas, in the middle of a war.

Now they found themselves in a situation where "maids" were going to make their beds and clean their rooms. They weren't in a war zone, they weren't in danger of being shot, they weren't even going to be required to do KP or any of those routine military things. They must have pinched themselves to be sure they weren't dreaming!

Bill said they even had a small Post Exchange (store where they could purchase items at a military discount). This Military Police Company was now reassigned to the Corps of Engineers and was a part of the Intelligence and Security Division, something quite different than anything they had ever seen before. They were learning things they never knew existed before coming to Oak Ridge.

They were assigned the duty to secure the "lower gates," as Bill calls them. Those gates were the Gallaher, White Wing and Poplar Creek Gates. Civilian guards were kept on the Elza, Edgemoor, Solway and Oliver Springs Gates.

Bill also spoke about what might be the first "rapid response force" in Oak Ridge. He and Major Block determined to use one platoon of the Military Police as an always ready force that Colonel Nichols or Lt. Col. Parsons could call on in an emergency. They were organized to have a team on ready standby at all times and were subject to being called into action at a moment's notice.

Another unusual thing about this "Forgotten Detachment" was that Major Block was a very athletic individual, being tall and muscular. He might have played football before becoming a military officer.

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He formed a football team of members of the Military Police in Oak Ridge. They traveled to other military posts and played football games, winning every single game.

They felt they were good enough to play the best in the nation and even talked about being capable of beating the University of Tennessee's football team. Bill reminded me that this was 1944, when UT went to the Rose Bowl. He readily admitted that the UT team would have likely mopped up the field with the Military Police team, but that did not keep them from telling themselves they were a very good team that never lost a game!

When World War II ended and the Manhattan Project was transferred from military to civilian control, Bill was tasked to close out the Military Police Detachment. Many of them went back to their homes if they had jobs to return to.

Others transitioned to the civilian police force known as the Atomic Energy Commission Patrol for the city of Oak Ridge and continued their role much the same as when they were military police, manning the seven gates to Oak Ridge. Still others were able to get skilled craft work on the government sites.

On March 19, 1949, when the gates were opened to Oak Ridge, the three white guard stations were put into service that isolated the three government sites and these civilian AEC Patrol officers manned those gates as well as the lower gates that were still in operation.

This arrangement lasted until 1953, when the gates were moved back to the three sites and all the main roads were opened to the public. Even then, the AEC Patrol monitored the back roads to assure that no one travelled them as any unauthorized access there was a security risk. Members of the public were only allowed on the main roads.

Bill returned to Oak Ridge in 1952 when his assignment to Korea was completed. He later had the job of the Deputy Director of Physical Security under Frank Callahan, for whom the Callahan Towers at 115 Fairbanks Road is named. Callahan had come to Oak Ridge after being assigned to the Mound Facility in Miamisburg, OH.

Later, Bill became Director of AEC Physical Security until retirement. Of course, he has had another great career after retirement as "Mr. Rotary" and for many years helped lead the international effort to rid the world of Polio. He is one of my heroes.

Thanks Bill, for yet another great story from our past.

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Bill Sergeant, retired head of security, “Mr. Rotary” and my friend