

# Behind the Blue Line: Protecting Our Nuclear Weapons Complex

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 14, 2015)

Steve Gibbs has written a book detailing his 34 year career in nuclear security. But this book is much more than the story of Steve's career. It gives insight into the inner workings of security at the nation's nuclear weapons production plant where "secondaries" (those parts of the nuclear weapon that produces the tremendous blast potential) are the primary product and storage of the nation's highly enriched uranium is also a primary mission. It is Steve's story of his involvement with nuclear security in Oak Ridge and a lot of that story took place at the Y-12 National Security Complex.

Steve takes the reader from the earliest years of a "guard force" that was minimally staffed and not well equipped through each step in its evolution to a modern, well equipped, tactical response team that excelled for years, winning competitions, achieving recognition as the best of the best. That is until that fateful day, July 28, 2012, when three elderly nuclear weapons protestors embarrassed this elite protective force and all others associated with Y-12 by defeating the highly developed protective security system without any observable technical skills. Steve retired soon after along with many others caught in the aftermath of that single day.

This is Steve's story sub-titled, *My History in Oak Ridge from Guard to Senior Management*. It is told in the first person as he observed it, engaged in it and became the subject of much of it. The story is rich in humor, much of which comes from being inside the jokes and understanding the mentality of military style security organizations such as Wackenhut and what became WSI-Oak Ridge, a company that for many years was at the heart of community service in Oak Ridge and rightly took great pride in accomplishments in the field of nuclear security.

WSI-Oak Ridge was a family, a tight-knit group of people, who enjoyed the excellence produced by successful job accomplishment in a tough environment and doing it well. I know most all of the people Steve writes about and what a great joy it was to read about them from his unique inside perspective.

He writes of Jim Rackstraw, as example, a Vietnam veteran who was the last soldier removed by helicopter from the bloody battle of the Ia Drang Valley by Medal of Honor recipient, Bruce Crandall. When Bruce visited Oak Ridge in 2013, I was able to arrange for them to lunch together and reminisce. What a great joy to see the looks on each of their faces as they returned to that fateful day in conversation. Jim was but one of many former military personnel about whom Steve writes.

Steve, himself is a Vietnam veteran, as I am. I must admit in addition to a working relationship for years that has developed into friendship, I share some affinity with him simply because of our shared experience in Vietnam. He speaks, in the book, of his return to the states and how rocks were thrown at the bus on which he rode from the airport. I did not experience that, but my wife, Fanny, still has trouble because of the way American soldiers were treated who served in Vietnam.

In *Behind the Blue Line*, Steve brings us the story of the people, mostly from a military background, who seek the type of work nuclear security brings. He gives us insight in to the thinking of the working security police officers, the supervisors and management of what has become over time a paramilitary organization and serves to protect what is arguably the nation's most valuable resource and for sure the material we must keep out of reach of terrorists the world over.

In the midst of writing about his career moves, Steve tells of coming into contact with people who helped him in many ways. He writes of those who influenced him, mentored him, provided him numerous growth opportunities, promotions and gave him access to significant interactions with a wide range of levels of management, union leadership and government officials.

Steve takes us from his first job in Oak Ridge as a "guard" where he experienced boredom and almost quit before advancing into supervision and later management. He obviously enjoyed the final stages of his career where he found himself dealing with labor management interactions, contracts, and bids for high-dollar company contracts. Throughout the book, Steve maintains his down-to-earth approach to life and conveys his zest for living.

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His book, is both exciting for the people who know about nuclear security and also is written for the general public allowing all to gain insight into the normally quite closed community of nuclear security. Steve lets the reader experience some of the more unusual examples of interactions within the company. One example is when he almost started a fight by calling one Security Police Officer using his ability to sound much like another Security Police Officer and said things that caused a heated argument which only stopped when Steve again spoke exactly like the person in the presence of them both.

Steve sets forth a pleasing writing style that conveys his perspective without jargon and too many technical details. He readily credits his wife, June, for the excellent editing that surely makes for an easy read. She does that without losing Steve's personal storytelling approach, but assures that proper grammar and professionalism remains a constant throughout the book. Well done, June!

Steve also gives the reader insight into otherwise unknown elements of a tragedy when two top managers of his company died as a result of a freak vehicle accident. A trailer came loose from a passing vehicle and rammed the vehicle in which they were passengers. Steve tells us that he was first asked to attend that meeting but because he had already arranged to take a co-worker to a work anniversary lunch, he was replaced by one of the passengers who died in the wreck.

And finally, Steve closes his book and his career with a clarifying description of the infamous July 28, 2012, breach of security that radically impacted security at the Y-12 National Security Complex. Steve was right in the midst of the meetings resulting from the incident, he took the heat for the company in numerous fact gathering meetings where very pointed questions were directed at him.

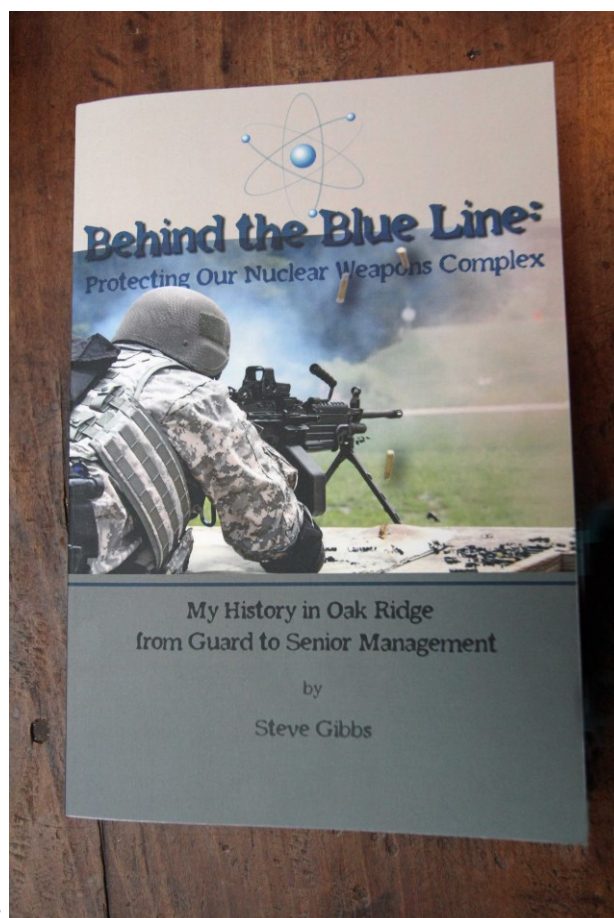
The impact on Steve and his close associates is spelled out from his perspective and his decision to retire earlier than he would have otherwise directly resulted from the July 28, 2012, incident. Even with this dramatic and disappointing ending to Steve's career where he admits that he "lost his heart for the job," the story of nuclear security he details in his book is one of tremendous importance and needs to be understood and appreciated. The book is a well written story of both a fine career and the growth of nuclear security in the nuclear weapons complex.

Steve will hold a book signing at the American Museum of Science and Energy on September 20, 2015, from 1 PM to 5 PM. I plan to schedule him for a monthly public meeting of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association on November 12, 2015 at 7 PM in the Midtown Community Center. So, plan to attend one of these events or look for upcoming opportunities to learn more about Steve and get a copy of his book, *Behind the Blue Line*.

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*Behind the Blue Line* by Steve Gibbs



Steve Gibbs with a photo of the Highly Enriched Uranium Materials Facility in the Y-12 History Center