

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge The Manhattan Project Underway, Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 25, 2024)

Barbara Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols continues her series on his life.

Ample reasons, most notably leadership skills, personality traits and qualifications, led to choosing General (then Colonel) Kenneth D. Nichols as Deputy District Engineer and subsequently as District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED). In this capacity he had supervision of the research and development connected with, and the design, construction and operation of all plants required to produce plutonium-239 and uranium-235, including the construction of the towns of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Richland, Washington.

The responsibility of his position was massive as he oversaw a workforce of both military and civilian personnel of approximately 125,000; his Oak Ridge office became the center of the wartime atomic energy's activities. He also was responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

In this eighth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of command restructuring in the Manhattan Project.

Early in September 1942, General Styer requested Lt Colonel Nichols meet with him and bring Colonel Groves. Styer relayed certain concerns of Dr. Vannevar Bush, informed them of President Roosevelt's approval for a new Manhattan Project setup (including changing Colonel Groves' duties), and ordered completion of a higher priority rating for the project from AA-3 to AA-1 (aka AAA).

Groves, when informed he would be the Officer in Charge of the entire Manhattan Project, was not pleased, but Nichols recalls, "Despite his initial unhappiness with the assignment, once Groves fully took over the reins of the project, on September 23, 1942, I never again heard him voice a single word of regret. Once in charge, he quickly moved to assume de facto control not only of construction but also control of all research and development, operation of the plants, development of the bomb and the military aspects of the projection."

Marshall said, "I was told by Styer that Groves would handle the end down... [in Washington D.C.] and do whatever is necessary. ... I had written orders designating me District Engineer of the Manhattan District to report directly to the Chief of Engineers. That was the written orders, and the secret orders or verbal orders, was to do whatever this S-1 committee [wanted] – get the money for them, and see where we are going to build these plants and so forth... "

For the next 10 months Nichols worked for two bosses – Marshall (in New York) and Groves (in Washington D.C.). His time was stretched thin. Marshall recalls, "Immediately, I got Nichols... to accompany me practically every time I went over to these S-1 committees or went over to deal with Bush. "So gradually, Nichols and I together got the word across to Vannevar Bush and Conant and all the Nobel Prize people over there on these committees that this was a big engineering job ...

"I left more and more of the Washington work to Nichols, who being a PhD and a very bright fellow and more personable than I ever was, got along with the scientists."

Nichols and Marshall recall their secret journal,

Nichols: "We [Groves & Nichols] coordinated our efforts by telephone, short meetings and by entries in the project diary that Marshall had started the day Styer appointed him district engineer."

Marshall: "I started a secret journal ... and the only ones that had access to that time... was Colonel [Robert] Blair, the Chief Engineer, ... Nichols who was my Deputy District Engineer, and my secretary Ms. [Virginia] Olsson."

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Eventually Marshall strategically decided to simplify the chain of command. Marshall recalls, "... after four or five months, I proposed to Groves that they didn't need me – that Nichols could relieve me... Nichols could take over this thing tomorrow and let me go off to war."

Marshall, anxious to be "off to war" had fulfilled his mission with the MED after one year. Nichols recalls, "I have always felt that he [Marshall] did one of the biggest jobs in the Manhattan District of lining [up] of people. All the original organization was under him..., he knew the people and brought them and did an excellent job of it. He left after a year ... it was Marshall that got... the bulk of the people for the Manhattan Project."

By July 20, 1943, Dr. Vannevar Bush had initiated Marshall's reassignment. Nichols recalled that Bush's main objections to Marshall were: he hadn't stayed in Washington D.C.; he was not high-ranking enough; and, he had not purchased the Oak Ridge site soon enough. Marshall was promoted to Brigadier General and eventually designated Assistant Chief of Staff of the US Army Services of Supply in the Southwest Pacific area. Marshall's Manhattan Project duties and Manhattan Engineer District duties were split between Groves and Nichols.

Nichols was tasked by General Styers to inform Groves of his promotion to Brigadier General. With his first star, Brig General Groves was put in charge of the Manhattan Project as Commanding General. Groves acted as an Assistant Chief of Engineers reporting directly to Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, to the Military Policy Committee and to the Secretary of War, Mr. Henry Stimson. (Groves never was part of the Manhattan Engineer District.)

Nichols explains, "Initially... we didn't know what authority we had. We didn't worry. ... '43 or '44 [when] actually signing the DuPont contract ... was the first time that we formalized ... the authority [Brig] General Groves had and the authority [I had as] the District Engineer ... General Groves' authorities were quite extensive. In fact, I believe that in certain aspects they were greater than the Chief of Engineers' [Lt Gen Eugene Reybold]. [General Groves' authority] derived directly from Mr. Stimson, Secretary of War...in effect, the Secretary of War delegated practically all of his war powers to General Groves in so far as it pertained to the Manhattan Project. ... Much of that authority was in turn delegated to me as District Engineer."

Marshall and Groves ensured Nichols was promoted to full Colonel; Nichols was designated District Engineer, entirely responsible for the Manhattan Engineer District. Nichols reported directly to Groves on all matters instead of to the Chief of Engineers. Nichols never served as Groves' assistant, deputy or personal aide during the war.

Nichols explains the segregation of duties: "The way it finally was settled after Marshall left was that I was the District Engineer and would have full responsibility, considering the way Groves operated, for the design, construction and operation of all the plants and for all the project except for Intelligence, overseas work, the training for the bomb delivery, and Los Alamos. I had administrative responsibility for Los Alamos, but not technical."

It was now clear to Nichols that he would not be going into combat duty. He said, "My own advancement, while indeed welcomed, ended for all practical purposes my hopes for an overseas assignment as a combat engineer. By this time, however, I realized the importance, urgency, and challenge of my work, so I did not mind giving up my dream of commanding engineers in combat."

Colonel Nichols recalls the routing of reports to inform those further up the chain of command including the President, "The [MED] District made a narrative report once a month... addressed to [Brig] General Groves, but before delivering it to General Groves, I would visit either General [Thomas M.] Reybold [Chief of Engineers] or General [Eugene] Robins, let them read the report and explain what we were doing. In ... no case I recall did General Robins or General Reybold ever try to revoke a procedure that

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we were following. Occasionally, they would give us good advice on some particular problem that we had, but they considered that General Groves was running this project and that they would not interfere.

"However, we got on many occasions good advice and offers of assistance through some part of the Chief's office... we recognized that the Chief's office had a vast wealth of knowledge and experience that could help us.

"... every six months, I would assist Groves in writing a report... to the President, and [Groves] would have frequent meetings with the Policy Committee for various other authorities that he needed. Then [he would] pass to me [what] was done verbally at a meeting... Because of secrecy, we had nothing between Oak Ridge and Washington flowing in the line of letters.

"I did not see how it would be possible to cover in writing all the informal decisions that were made at the numerous meetings involved. Formal procedures would be time-consuming for both of us and definitely would slow the work.

"Between General Groves and [I], there was never any written directive except in one case. You see, I always helped him prepare the letters to the President and I would keep a copy of them in my safe. I knew what authority he had, what had been approved. The understanding was as long as I was working within those limits, why, he was aware of what was going on, that was it.

"I had the same relationship with my Area Engineers and subordinates that they would give the necessary approval that would be required of a contractor— like approving a drawing. ... We figured that we would get on the job the best man and therefore you would not be approving his work. The only thing you were doing was coordinating it with some other activity."

In summary: Leadership on full display.

Next up: The Manhattan Project Underway, Part 3

Grateful acknowledgements to K. David Nichols, Jr.; Ray Smith; Sandy Fye; Dr. Bianka J. Adams, Alisa Whitley, Douglas J. Wilson and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Office of History; Emily (Westcott) and Don Hunnicutt; Diane Gulley; Gerald A. Potts; and Bruce W. Scollin for their assistance with this article.

Thanks, Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols, for continuing to provide insights into the life of your uncle, Major General Kenneth D. Nichols. Your excellent research is shedding light on aspects of his life that have not been as well recognized as they should be. Keep up the good work!

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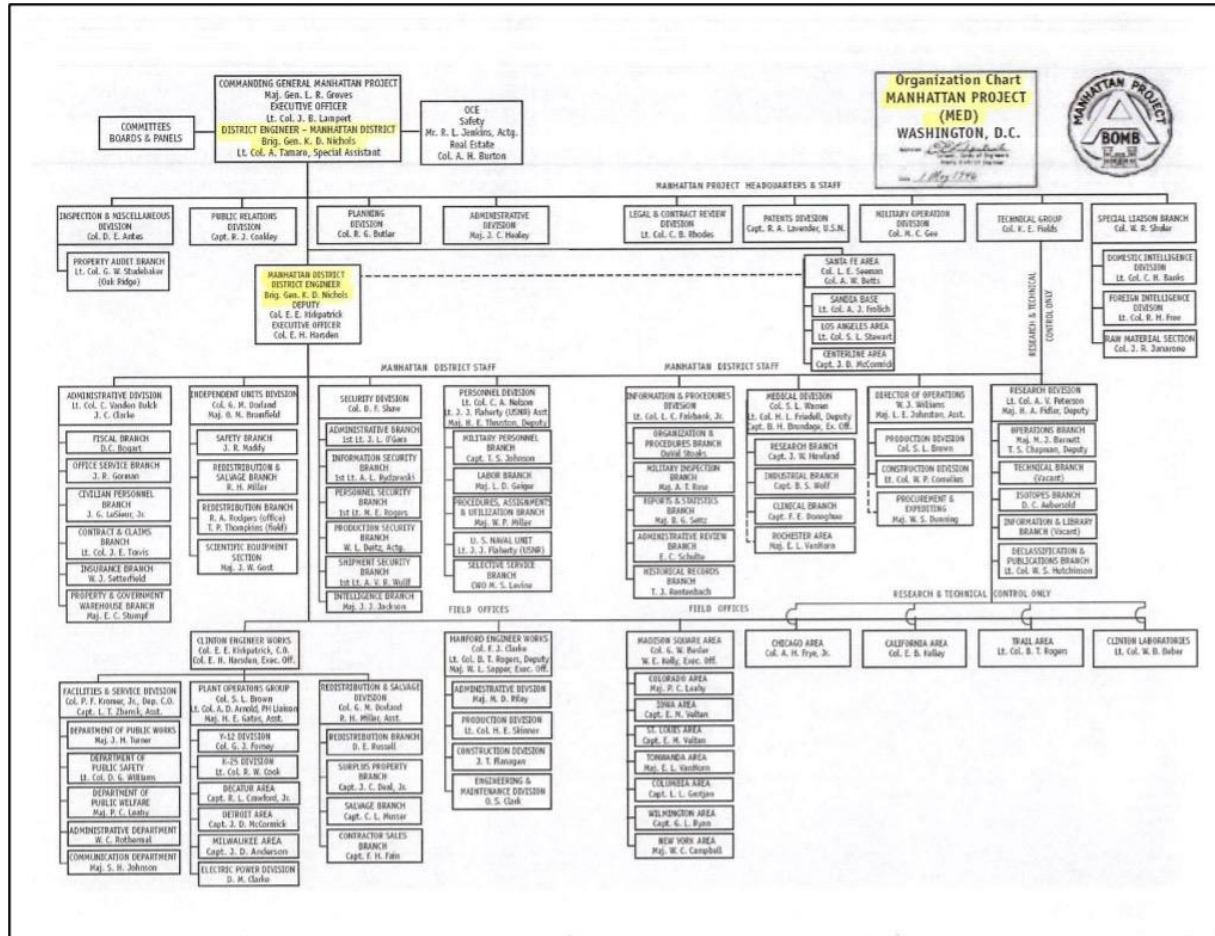
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Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, District Engineer, Manhattan Engineer District
Oak Ridge Administration Office, "The Castle on the Hill" (Photo by Ed Westcott. Courtesy Emily
(Westcott) and Don Hunnicutt)

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Manhattan Project & Manhattan Engineer District Organization Chart, Effective May 5, 1946, showing Brig General Kenneth D. Nichols as District Engineer of the MED. Link to online photo: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=16178842> (Courtesy US Army – Defense & Nuclear Agency)