

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge, Job Well Done, Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 20, 2025)

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 for the production of plutonium 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 activities. He was also responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

In this twenty-second installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Maj General Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his close working relationship, high regard, and friendship with Lt General Leslie R. Groves during and after the war.

When working with individual people, Nichols was at his best. He learned early in his career each person requires "special handling" (see 2nd article). Nichols perfected special handling with Groves beginning in Nicaragua (see 2nd article) and had an extremely close working relationship during and after the war.

During the Manhattan Project they saw each other at least once a week, but operated in different orbits, each having separate roles, Groves as Commander of the Manhattan Project and Nichols as District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District. Groves was never part of the MED (see 8th article).

Nichols, as the MED's District Engineer, was never an "aide" or "personal aide" to General Groves before, during or after the war. (That would be on par with calling Dr. Oppenheimer a "lab assistant" to General Groves!) They shared a common mission, cut red tape to avoid delays and verbally communicated with each other whenever possible; they trusted each other.

Nichols recalled, "Working with Groves was not always easy. At times, I became extremely irritated with him. However, this never lasted very long because I came to realize that his leadership and distinctive characteristics would achieve our goal in the shortest possible time."

Nichols described Groves as "difficult and demanding," "extremely capable," "abrasive and often very critical," and "a strong project leader." He also said Groves, "was at his best or worst, depending on one's point of view, in pinning down the cause of the trouble." And he "never used profanity or foul language, nor did he ever raise his voice in anger. And his personal ethics were beyond reproach." Nichols said his contacts with Groves "were generally pleasant."

Nichols and Groves differed on leadership style and on one occasion, Nichols responded to Groves' criticism by sharing, "After I had succeeded [Colonel James C.] Marshall, one particular incident irritated me, and as soon as we were alone, I told Groves that I felt he had been unnecessarily harsh in his comments to the individual. I then told him that if he ever criticized me in public in that manner, I would immediately respond in such terms that he would have no recourse except to fire me. I added that I didn't mind his being critical when we were alone because I could take it. I also told him that at any time he didn't like my performance, he could have me reassigned overseas. Thereafter, both Groves and I endeavored to avoid any public confrontations, and I must admit that he treated me with more tact and consideration than I ever expected."

A good example of deftly dealing with Groves is shared by Nichols, "I could predict what Groves' reaction would be under most circumstances. In cases when I knew he would disagree on a course of action I felt

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necessary; I would wait until just a few minutes before I had to catch a train or plane; then I would bring up the matter. I would tell him what I was doing or going to do and explain why. As he started to respond, I would say the if he wanted me to do it differently, or wanted to discuss it further, he would have to phone me because I had to leave. The procedure usually worked, since Groves seldom would phone me.”

It should be noted that Nichols respected and admired Groves in many ways. He always provided a balanced description of him during interviews and when writing. Others redact, partially quote, and/or fabricate Nichols' comments about Groves, including a post-war lecture given by Major General (not Colonel) Nichols at The National War College on September 9, 1948. Nichols' lecture followed Groves' lecture to the same group. General Nichols avoided giving a personal opinion about General Groves on many occasions but agreed to do so following the lecture during the Q&A session. His full, unredacted remarks are included in his book (*The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made*, 1987, at page 108) and in numerous interviews follows:

“First, General Groves is the biggest S.O.B. I have ever worked for. He is most demanding. He is the most critical. He is always a driver, never a praiser. He is abrasive and sarcastic. He disregards all normal organizational channels. He is extremely intelligent. He has the guts to make timely, difficult decisions. He is the most egotistical man I know. He knows he is right and so sticks by his decision.

“He abounds with energy and expects everyone to work as hard or even harder than he does. Although he gave me great responsibility and adequate authority to carry out his mission-type orders, he constantly meddled with my subordinates. However, to compensate for that, he had an extremely small staff, which meant that we were not subject to the usual staff-type interferences and heckling. He ruthlessly protected the overall project from other government agency interference, which made my task easier. He seldom accepted other agency cooperation and then only on his terms. During the war and since, I have had the opportunity to meet many of our most outstanding military leaders in the Army, Navy, and Air Force as well as many of our outstanding scientific, engineering, and industrial leaders. And in summary, if I had to do my part of the atomic bomb project over again and had the privilege of picking my boss I would pick General Groves.”

General Nichols' answer to the young naval officer was not part of Nichols' prepared remarks. In other words, his answer was not drawn from written notes; it was off the cuff, articulate, and balanced. If ever there was a time to give an unguarded, blunt remark about Groves, this was the opportune moment. But, as always, Nichols' remarks were measured and respectful. Had he not candidly shared them in his book and in interviews, the quote would be lost to history.

Groves was told of Nichols' remarks by his neighbor Gene Vidal of the Army Air Corps. Nichols directly told Gene Vidal (classmate of Groves), who in turn told Groves. Groves repeatedly asked, “Did Nichols say that?” with shock and astonishment as the story proceeded. But after hearing the punch line, Groves, “broke out into a big grin and beamed with pleasure.”

Groves and Nichols communicated frequently after the war until Groves' death with no evidence of Nichols changing his professional, courteous approach or manner with Groves. Nichols reviewed certain parts of Lt General Groves' book, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project*. Nichols was interviewed multiple times after the war, many times after Groves died in 1970, through the 1980s, and never deviated from transparent, balanced remarks concerning Groves.

When he retired from the Army on February 29, 1948, Groves wrote a heartfelt letter to Nichols stating, in part, “You brought to what was considered by many an impossible task a sound management, engineering, and scientific background. Your vigilant and efficient direction of the Nationwide work under your charge helped to save tens of thousands of American lives and hundreds of millions of dollars. Of all

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the people who were engaged on the Manhattan Project you were by far the one who was the most important to me in achieving our goal. ... I experienced the deepest feeling of satisfaction when I learned that you were to succeed me as Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project and as a member of the Military Liaison Committee. This was not so much because of your magnificent performance in the Manhattan Project, but because you are far and away the best qualified officer in fact the only officer qualified to bear the responsibility of these offices."

Nichols said, "I most likely got along with Groves as well as I did because we shared the single, overriding goal of producing atomic weapons in time to help end the war."

Next up: Job Well Done, Part 3

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Thanks for this Historically Speaking column and series goes to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols.



Maj Gen Leslie R. Groves looks on as Col Kenneth D. Nichols gives his acceptance speech after receiving the Distinguished Service Medal from Sec. of War Patterson at the "E" Award Banquet, Knoxville, TN, September 29, 1945. Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of Emily and Don Hunnicutt)

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Lt General Leslie R. Groves (Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

<https://www.usace.army.mil/About/History/Exhibits/Nuclear-Power-Program/Origins-of-ANPP/>

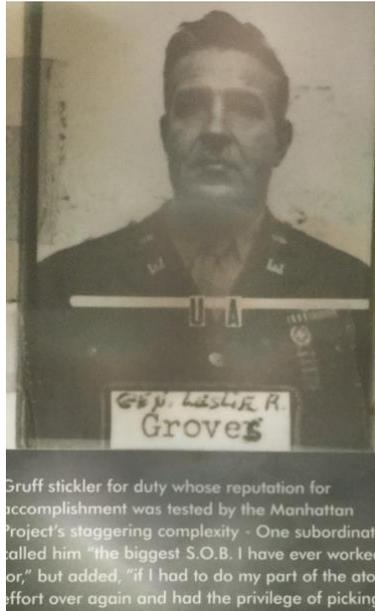


Mrs. Eugenie O'Leary and Maj General Groves, July 18, 1945. Mrs. O'Leary handled communications with Nichols if Groves disagreed with Nichols; Groves listened in & frequently broke in on phone conversations. Nichols recalled, "Mrs. O'Leary and I were on the best of terms." Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of DOE)

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General Leslie R. Groves' photo and General Kenneth Nichols quoted as his "subordinate." Los Alamos Historical Museum, Los Álamos, NM. Photo by Barbara Rogers Scollin (Courtesy of Barbara Scollin)