

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge - News Release: *Oak Ridge Attacks Japanese*

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 4, 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'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 twentieth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his great praise for Oak Ridgers, action during critical days August 6th - 14th, 1945, and reflections on the second bomb drop over Japan.

Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols awaited any news indicating Japan had surrendered after the bomb drop on August 6th. He recalls, "We were anxious to obtain the maximum shock effect from the first use of the bomb. If the impact were sufficiently devastating and if the surprise should catch the Japanese completely off balance, chances were that Japan would find it futile to continue their resistance. Further, to achieve even greater shock effect, it was felt necessary to deliver the second bomb as soon as possible after the first and to follow up with additional bombs until the Japanese government surrendered."

The nail-biting story of the second bomb's delivery is detailed in General Nichols' book, *The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made* at pages 203-206. Navy Commander Frederick Ashworth, the B-29 weaponeer on the mission, released "Fat Man" over Nagasaki on August 9th, 1945, almost not returning to base.

As soon as President Truman announced the first atomic bomb drop, Oak Ridge became a focus of the world with Groves and Nichols in particular. Stacks of information were ready to release to newspapers. Nichols was in demand to share as much information as allowable.

The local *Oak Ridge Journal* released long-awaited news of the miraculous secret of the atomic bomb, crediting the workers at Clinton Engineer Works (CEW), Hanford Engineer Works (HEW) and Los Alamos on August 9, 1945. The frontpage banner read "Oak Ridge Attacks Japanese". Feature columns on General Groves, "The Driving Force Behind Project" and Colonel Nichols were included but the frontpage focus was praise, thanks, acknowledgement and encouragement to the many workers, contractors and residents of Oak Ridge from Nichols.

"Teamwork Responsible, Nichols Says" included these words of praise from him, "These people and organizations – scientific, engineering, contracting manufacturing, procuring and others – working in harmony among themselves, and with government agencies, deserve credit for the successful accomplishment of an almost impossible vast and complicated task."

"To Contractors, Workers and Residents of Oak Ridge: CONGRATULATIONS to all workers at the Clinton Engineer Works and to the people of Oak Ridge! You have done the impossible," begins the next column on the front page from K. D. Nichols. He concludes, "May [the energy of the atom] be used not only as an effective war weapon but in the future may it play a major part in humanity's service."

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The feature column on Nichols starting at page 2 included description of the Manhattan Engineer District under his command, stating, "As District Engineer, Colonel Nichols has had supervision of approximately 125,000 persons, directly and under contractors, including construction, operational and supply personnel, twenty-two University contracts also come under his supervision." A thorough CV is published in the column as well as this personal description, "He is modest, friendly and self-effacing, and a champion of man's personal rights who dislikes to see people pushed around. Dynamic and driving in a manner belying his appearance, he sets a fast pace for his subordinates and pursues an objective with a tenacity which does not flag until all resources and avenues have been exhausted. . . . As one officer describes him, one of the secrets of his energy during the day is his ability to forget the job when he leaves it."

Nichols' neighbor June Adamson who shared a home with the *Oak Ridge Journal's* editor Francis Smith Gates recalls that the newspaper did not issue a special edition for the August 6th news. She wrote, "The greatest news break for Oak Ridge – the news of what the city was really all about – the atomic bomb – was also late being printed in the *Oak Ridge Journal*. For though Knoxville papers along with papers throughout the country, printed rare extras on bright colored newsprint and with double banner 72-point and even larger headlines, that Monday in August when Truman revealed that an atomic bomb had been loosed upon Japan, the *Oak Ridge Journal* did not print the news until the following Thursday. Mrs. Gates said, 'No, we didn't think of getting out an extra. I was teased about the whole world scooping us on our own story, but there was enough glory for everyone, enough excitement to keep us buoyed up. Our staff was 'used' to brief the armies of visiting journalists who descended upon Oak Ridge.'"

Internally, Nichols issued a restricted letter August 11, 1945, to all CEW workers outlining the MED's three objectives:

1. First use of the atomic bomb – objective met.
2. Produce as many atomic bombs until Japanese capitulation. "Our fighting men will pay with their lives with delay on our part. We must not let them down. Production must not falter."
3. Continue operations "to make secure the defense of our country."

Japan unconditionally surrendered on August 14th, 1945. Had that not occurred, more atomic bombs would have been dropped, more fighting and deaths endured, and more Purple Heart medals awarded. (There were half a million Purple Heart medals on hand at the end of the war in anticipation of an invasion.) American leaders, especially President Truman who was solely responsible for the decision to drop the bombs, avoided the need to explain to widows and mothers of the people who would have been lost in an invasion why they were willing to sacrifice those people to save the Japanese living in bombed areas.

Nichols recalled, "The most important military effect was that it required only two atomic bombs to end the war. The Planned invasion of Japan was not necessary. The two bombs probably saved many tens of thousands of lives, and ending the war certainly justified the decision to use them."

Typical of Nichols, he would not take credit for his contribution to winning the war, but commended others for their efforts. General Nichols reflected,

"The atomic bomb did not win the war; it ended it."

And,

"I think they consider it could have been as many as a half a million [Allied] deaths and a million Japanese. [The atomic bomb was] a major contribution. But not comparable, say, to winning the war. Something like [General George S.] Patton breaking through at Saint-Lo or ... rescuing [Brigadier General

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Anthony] 'Tony' McAuliffe [Battle of the Bulge] – where you turn the tables on the Germans – why you can't compare the two. They're different fields. The glory is always the leader of men in combat. Winning is all that counts."

And,

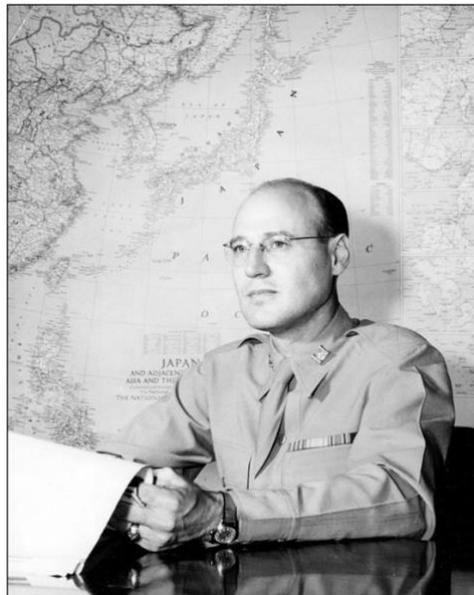
"I had my role, which I fulfilled to the full extent of my abilities. As a Corps of Engineers officer, I found more than enough satisfaction in the ultimate success of the project, the contribution it made to the surrender of Japan, and the saving of so many lives, not only American but Japanese as well. Success was due to teamwork of hundreds of organizations and tens of thousands of individuals. Groves was the strong project leader."

Indeed, Groves was the strong project leader, who with Nichols' and Oppenheimer's leadership, and commitment to the project expectations, made the success of the Manhattan Project what it was.

Next up: Job Well Done, Part 1

Grateful acknowledgements to K. David Nichols, Jr.; Ray Smith; Sandy Fye; Alan Carr; Quinn Argall; 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; Michael Stallo and the staff at the Oak Ridge Public Library; Diane Gulley; Gerald A. Potts; and Bruce W. Scollin for their assistance with this article.

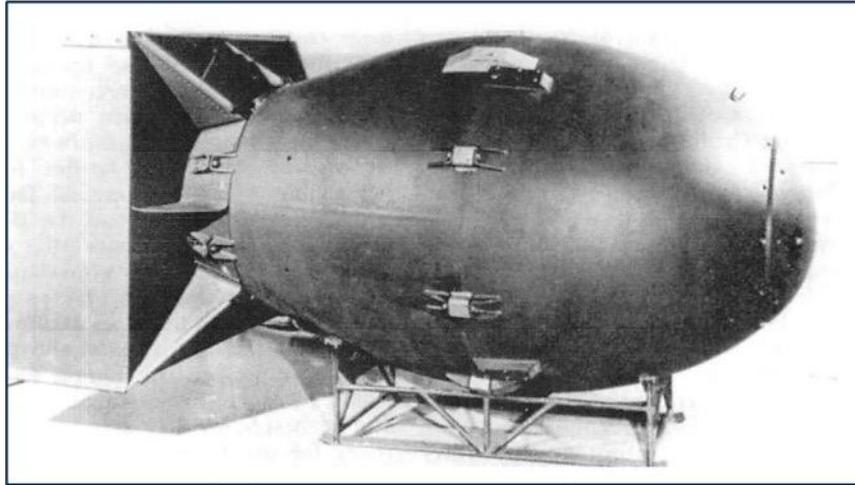
Thanks for this Historically Speaking column and series goes to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols.



MEET COL. KENNETH D. NICHOLS (Official Release) Oak Ridge Journal, August 9, 1945, page 2, 'You're In The News' Column. Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of Emily [Westcott] and Don Hunnicutt)

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“Fat Man” Implosion-type plutonium bomb dropped on Nagasaki, August 9, 1945 Public Domain
(Courtesy of Barbara Scollin)



L>R: Colonel Frank Matthias, Deputy District Engineer (HEW), Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, District Engineer (MED), and Navy Commander Frederick L. Ashworth, Nagasaki bombing. The Manhattan Engineer District emblem is shown on the airplane behind Matthias. (Courtesy of Atomic Heritage Foundation)

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Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, MED District Engineer, holds first radio broadcast. Oak Ridge, TN, August 9, 1945. (Courtesy of American Museum of Science & Energy)

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**STAY ON
THE JOB**

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Workers Thrill As Atomic Bomb Secret Breaks; Press And Radio Stories Describe 'Fantastically Powerful' Weapon; Expected To Save Many Lives

Teamwork Responsible, Nichols Says

Teamwork was the outstanding factor in the accomplishments of CEW, Col. Kenneth D. Nichols stated at a press conference this week. The scientists started their work first, but the laborers who worked on the roads and the thousands of workers who cooperated so amazingly deserve much credit.

Organization was the keynote in accomplishing the job quickly and safely, and the results of the CEW Safety program show an outstanding. The 1944 employe injury rates at the plants were less than half the average rates of all U. S. manufacturing plants.

Everywhere the virtues of experimental research in physics and chemistry prior to the war indicated that utilization of atomic power might have been feasible in fifteen to twenty years, Col. Nichols declared that the combined efforts of the many different people and organizations connected with the project has compressed the time to three years, an accomplishment which will endure as a monument to the ingenuity and vision and determination of all those, from scientists to laborers, who have had a part in the work.

"These people and organizations—scientific, engineering, contracting, manufacturing, procuring and others—working in harmony among themselves, and with government agencies, deserve credit for the successful accomplishment of an almost impossible vast and complicated task," Col. Nichols declared.

In addition, he pointed out that the district staff of specialty-attached officers, WACs, enlisted men and civilians deserves a large measure of credit for the success of the Army's part in the project. Paying tribute to the work they have done, Col. Nichols declared that, "Each scientist has spent long hours of work each day and collectively have made it possible for the Manhattan District to control the large volume of research, construction and production necessary to complete the project."

To Contractors, Workers, And Residents Of Oak Ridge:

CONGRATULATIONS to all workers at the Clinton Engineer Works and to the people of Oak Ridge! You have done the impossible which you shared with me the thrill which came with President Truman's announcement that the results of our hard work and American "stick-to-it-iveness" have been delivered to the Japs with world-shaking crash—the thrill that comes with the knowledge of a tough job well done.

This project has been, from the start, a cooperative enterprise, based on mutual faith—faith of the scientist that engineers could translate his discoveries—yes, and his world stirring dreams—into practical process designs; faith of the engineer that material and construction men could turn those designs into bricks and mortar and process equipment; faith of the Army that all contractors would have the vision, courage, and drive to do the seemingly impossible; faith of the operating contractors that local untechnical workers could be trained to perform new and strange tasks so exacting that they would normally be entrusted only to skilled scientific experimenters; faith of the construction workers and operators that their supervisors knew their business; and faith of all groups—management and employes—scientific and service—that somehow ways and means would be found to house, feed, and transport them. This faith has now been justified by the successful use of your product against the Japs.

The success of the project was made possible only because everyone did his or her part and "stayed on the job," from the Nobel Prize winners whose scientific theories and experiments mushroomed into huge production plants to the sweating construction worker and the cafeteria girl with her tray of dishes. The same spirit is necessary to continue an uninterrupted supply to the fighting man at the front. More and more production is needed and can be realized only by even greater efforts to get maximum output from our plants. Let's not give the Jap a chance to catch his breath between blows.

You now surely realize the wisdom of our security program which was effective only because of your faithful cooperation. No known case sabotage has been committed to slow our work or to endanger your lives. This is a real tribute to all of you.

The complete surprise to the enemy with all the military advantage that attended such unheard-of destruction has made our weapon much more effective. This tremendous weapon must be kept "our weapon" alone, so that the peace of the world can be reestablished and preserved. This can be done only by even greater security precautions with respect to vital information. Do not reveal to anyone information not contained in the official releases. The security policy for information that has not been officially released has not been changed.

A grateful nation's thanks are due all of you for a magnificent performance and history will record the full significance of your fabulous achievement in unlocking the stupendous energy of the atom. May it be used not only as an effective war weapon but in the future may it play a major part in humanity's service.

Bomb Has More Power Than 20,000 Tons Of TNT; Pride Is Reaction Of Workers

The most exciting day in the era of secrecy and suspense which has governed the life of Oak Ridge residents occurred Monday with President Truman's announcement that an "atomic bomb" had been used against the Japanese, and the subsequent stories in the press and on the radio describing the production of the fantastically powerful weapon.

The reaction of Oak Ridge residents and workers on the whole was a feeling of pride that they had a part to play in this great development, and a thrilling satisfaction in knowing that their efforts had been so effective, as the story of the efficacy of the bomb was told.

Stating that the bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of TNT, the President described it as "harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East."

Secretary of War Stimson's statement followed the President's disclosure of the use of the atomic bomb, giving facts concerning the production, center here, at Bldg. near Santa Fe, New Mexico. "We have spent two billion dollars on the biggest gamble in history—and won," the President declared. The "battle of laboratories" held "fatal risks" for the United States, "and we now have won the battle of the laboratories as we have won the other battles," he said.

Workers React To Biggest News Story Of Year

When the story of Oak Ridge was told Monday, an Oak Ridge Journal reporter stopped people on the street and asked them their reactions. Here are some of the answers:

Mrs. Susie Richards, a TEC employe, said, "Something turned over inside me when I heard the news. I had no idea what I was

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First Man-Made Atomic Explosion In New Mexico Desert Heralds Man's Arrival At 'Atomic Age'

(Official Release)

Mankind's successful transition to a new age, the Atomic Age, was ushered in July 16, 1945, before the eyes of a tense group of renowned scientists and military men gathered in the deserts of New Mexico to witness the first end results of their \$2,000,000,000 effort. Here in a remote

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Oak Ridge Journal, August 9, 1945, Front Page (Courtesy of Oak Ridge Public Library)

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Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols (seated in middle of photo) holds a press conference. Oak Ridge TN, August 7, 1945. Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of Emily [Westcott] and Don Hunnicutt)

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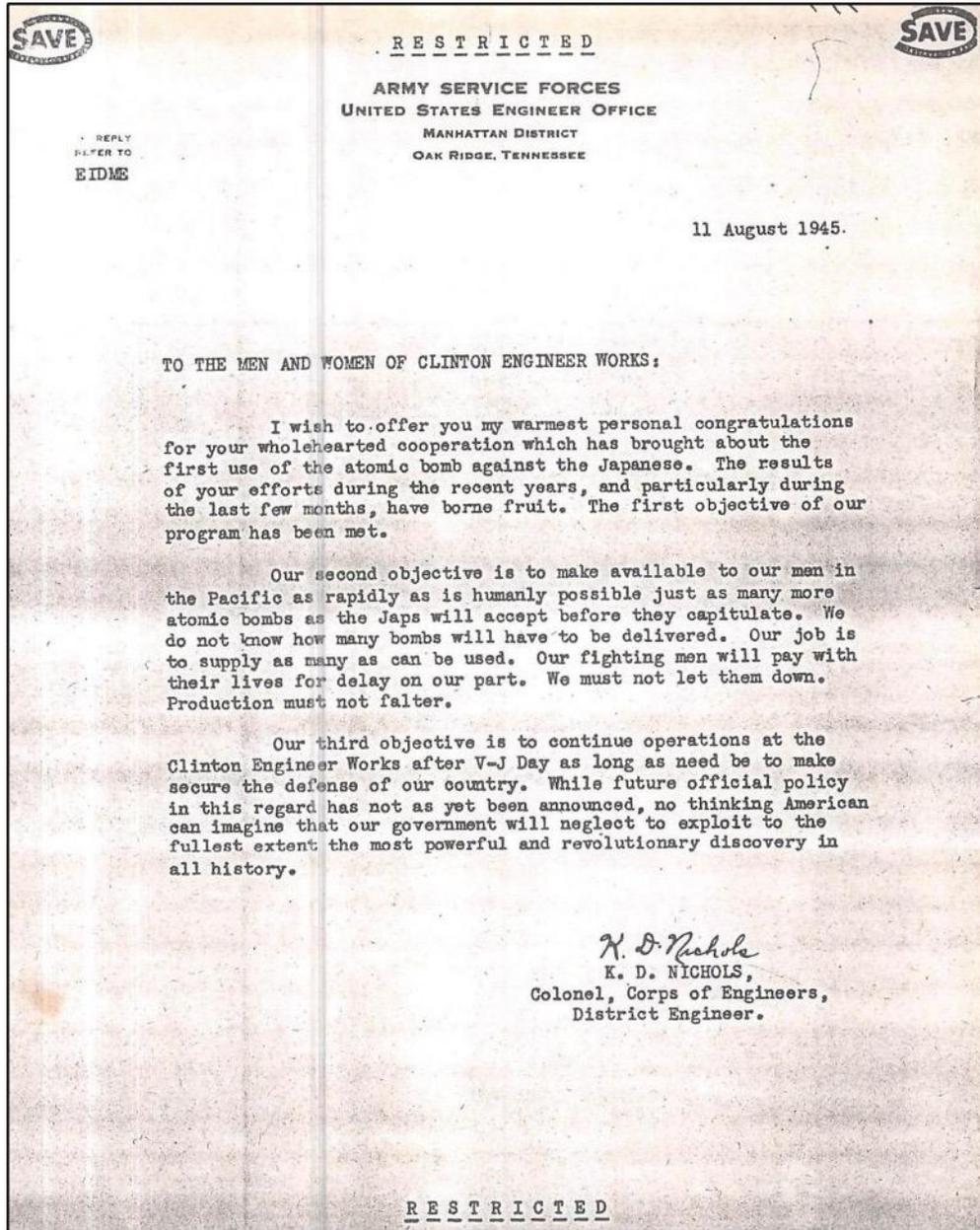
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Colonel Kenneth Nichols autographs a napkin as his wife Jacqueline and two others look on. Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of Emily [Westcott] and Don Hunnicutt)

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Letter to CEW personnel from Colonel K.D. Nichols August 11, 1945. (Courtesy of K. David Nichols, Jr.)