

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: Job Well Done, Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 15, 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-first installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his efforts to honor civilians and industries who made the Manhattan Project a success, while Oak Ridge begins transition to peacetime.

The men and women working throughout the United States in the MED responsible for the success of the Manhattan Project reached a peak of 125,000 under Colonel Kenneth Nichols. The MED was staffed with:

- Army "regular" officers,
- Army medical officers,
- Army reserve officers,
- Civilians given direct commissions,
- Naval officers,
- Civil Service employees,
- Women's Army Corps personnel, and,
- Special Engineer Detachment (SED) consisting of technically trained enlisted men.

The civilian workforce included:

- Construction workers,
- Production Facility Operations personnel,
- City Government officials for Oak Ridge & Richland Village,
- Oak Ridge's day-to-day operations handled by Roane-Anderson as well as Richland Village operations that included Schools, Hospitals, Transportation, Garbage collection, Management of housing, Hotel, Fire department, Central eating facilities, and Coal delivery,
- Personnel to handle water purification and sewage treatment plants, electric distribution system, telephone service, jail operation, and,
- Newspaper and communications.

All of them deserved special recognition for their service during the war. Awards, citations and presentations took place during 1945, (especially after the war) at all Manhattan Project sites including Oak Ridge, Knoxville, Los Alamos, Washington D.C. and around the nation. Over 85,000 U.S. companies were recognized for their war production efforts with the Excellence in War Production Award ("E-Award").

Oak Ridge hosted the Army & Navy "E" awards late September 1945, to recognize the men and women from local industry. 70,000+ invitations were sent for the occasion and Oak Ridgers were asked to walk or ride buses, not drive, to the high school field. In the Oak Ridge Award Ceremony photo, you can see

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signs above the stage identifying several of the companies representing their massive workforce: Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Corporation; Clinton Laboratories of the Monsanto Chemical Company; H.K. Ferguson Company; the Fercleve Corporation; Ford, Bacon & Davis, Inc.; J.A. Jones Construction Company, Inc.; and the Kellex Corporation. Not shown in the photo were signs & representatives standing for Stone and Webster Engineering Corporation and Tennessee Eastman Corporation.

Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson honored all in attendance by giving the key address; Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols served as Master of Ceremonies; Maj General Groves made special presentations. Many other dignitaries including the TN Governor Jim Nance McCord, US senators, and Commodore W.S. Parsons attended. Excerpts from General Groves message include, "The lights have come on again earlier all over the world because of what you did here. . . Your government is giving public recognition to your performance of a war task without parallel in the engineering and production annals of the world."

And from Colonel Nichols, "You remember the long hours of work for months on end. . . You remember the impossible construction and production schedules which the Army set and you met. You remember the necessity for continuing your efforts month after month without full knowledge of our objectives and with little hope of official or public recognition, due to the secrecy requirement which surrounded the project."

Later that evening in Knoxville, a dinner was held for special guests and Nichols was surprised to be awarded a Distinguished Service Medal by the Secretary of War.

The DSM is the highest non-combat medal awarded by the U.S. Army. General Groves, who read the citation, described Colonel Nichols as "a key man for the entire project," which "inspired a tremendous ovation from the assembled guests".

The citation read: "Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, Corps of Engineers, as District Engineer, Manhattan Engineer District from August 1943 to August 1945, distinguished himself while performing duties of great responsibility in connection with the development of the greatest military weapon of all time, the Atomic Bomb. Overcoming many and varied difficulties, he perfected the organization of diverse elements and installations and by his outstanding knowledge determined procedures for the most effective utilization of all components, thus creating a secure and efficient team to carry out a work of unparalleled magnitude and complexity. His initiative and resourcefulness, sound judgment and executive ability, and indefatigable devotion to a major task contributed in great measure to the successful prosecution of the war. Colonel Nichols' accomplishments reflect great credit upon himself and the military service."

Col. Nichols turned to his fellow workers after the award was made, saying, "Your good judgment, intelligence and hard work have made our project a success. I never thought I could spend an entire war in U.S.A. and be proud of my work. But I am very, very proud tonight, and I thank you all from the bottom of my heart."

In Los Alamos an Army & Navy "E" Awards ceremony was also held. Those in attendance included Dr. Oppenheimer receiving special recognition and awards, Groves making presentations, Nichols serving as Master of Ceremonies, Robert Gordon Sproul, President of the University of California, and Commodore W.S. Parsons. "Deak" Parsons worked with Dr. Oppenheimer at Los Alamos at the Project Y research laboratory and served as the weaponeer on the *Enola Gay* which dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Nichols would soon see him again at the Operation Crossroads nuclear weapon tests at Bikini Atoll in 1946 and Nichols, as Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project, would have Parsons as one of his deputies.

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The MED in Oak Ridge underwent partial demobilization while continuing essential operations: Y-12 alpha stages and the S-50 plant were immediately shut down at Nichols' recommendation and Groves' approval. Scientists, industrial contractors, reserve officers – all wanted to return to pre-war activities. Nichols recalls, "I was no longer coordinating an outstanding team of individuals and organizations. Instead, a real effort was necessary to keep everything from falling apart. To keep the Manhattan District functioning, Groves secured authority from the new Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson, over objections ... to select by name about 50 young, outstanding regular officers, mostly West Point graduates to fill key positions in the MED vacated by the departure of reserve officers who wished to resume civilian status asap."

Groves and Nichols worked hand in hand with leaders in Washington D.C. on the steps needed to terminate war efforts. And they sent Dr. Stafford Warren, and his radiation survey teams to Japan. Dr. Warren's reports on radiation, blast damage, and medical effects are detailed in General Nichols' book, *The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made* at pages 217-223.

Dr. Warren also included an interesting comment in his report, "The ethics of the use of the atomic bomb had been raised by U.S. newspapermen in Tokyo, but many Japanese told the survey team they could not understand why the question should have been raised at all: Their own forces would have used it without the slightest qualm if they had had it themselves. It is realized that this information was not the concern of the survey team, but the discussion came up, and it is included for record."

Dr. Warren returned with a different type of an award for General Nichols – a Japanese saber. Nichols recalled, "When Warren returned to Oak Ridge, he presented me a very fine Japanese saber. He told me that when he first visited the Japanese hospital in Hiroshima, the commanding medical officer surrendered his saber to him. Warren was reluctant to accept it, but when the Japanese insisted he must surrender to someone and Warren was the first American officer to reach the hospital, Warren finally accepted the saber on behalf of his commanding officer and would present it to him at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. It was a fine saber, my only war trophy."

While everyone else was packing up and going home, Nichols was multi-tasking to keep CEW and Hanford Engineer Works running all the while traveling around the country to give well-deserved praise to others.

Next up: Job Well Done, Part 2

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; 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.

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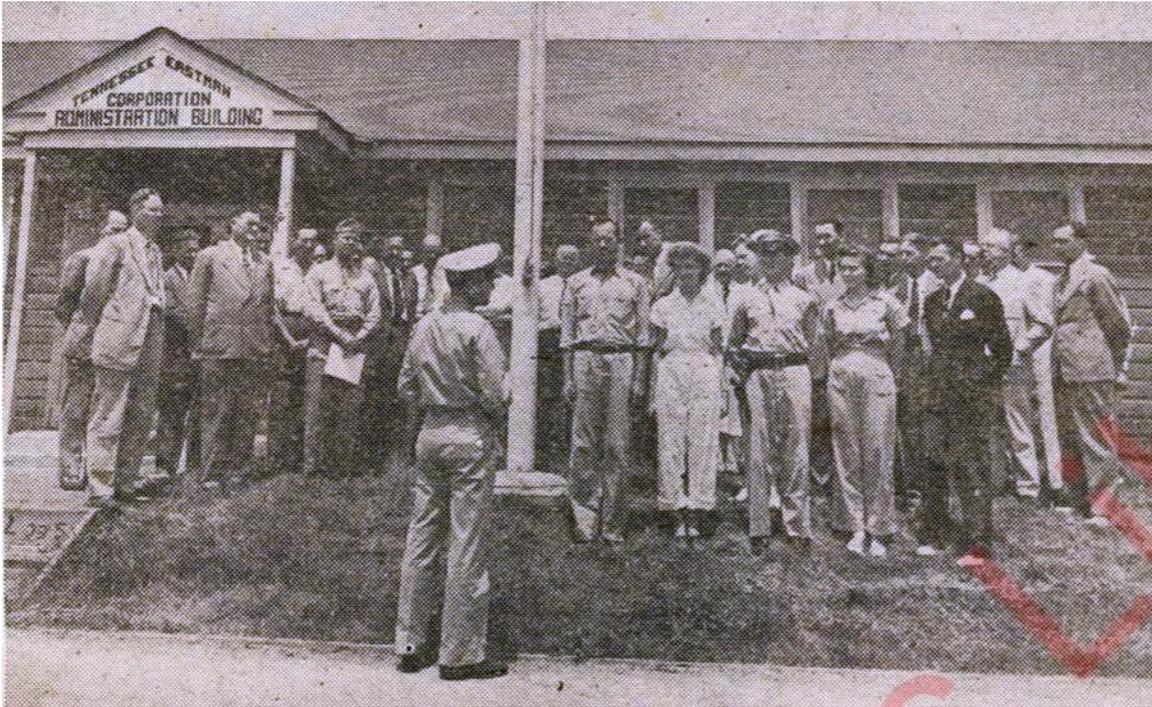
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Col Kenneth D. Nichols awards George C. Aug a citation from the War Department, Army Service Forces, for 10 years of service. Aug, first arrival among the U.S.E.D. employees on the project, was in charge of much of the construction in the early days of Oak Ridge. (Courtesy of The Oak Ridge Journal, Jan 4, 1945. Photo by Ed Westcott. Provided by Emily (Westcott) and Don Hunnicutt)

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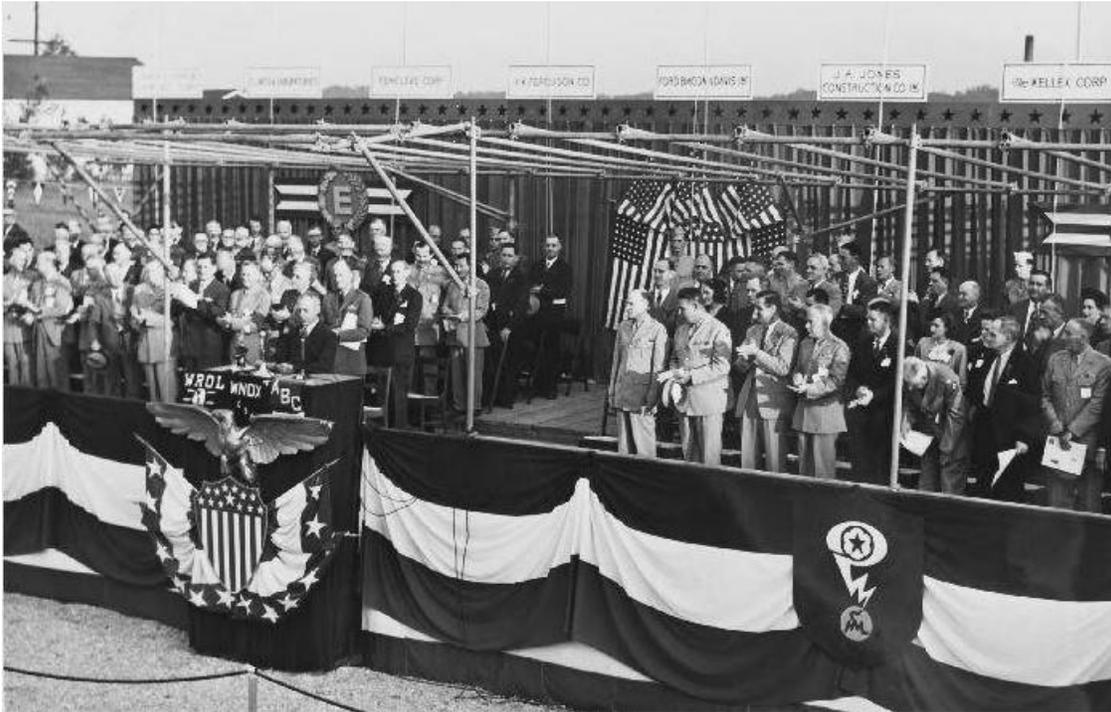
Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, District Engineer, addresses key war bond salesmen at Tennessee Eastman Corp (Courtesy of The Oak Ridge Journal, July 26, 1945. Provided by: Oak Ridge Public Library)



"War Department Authorizes Pin" announced the Oak Ridge Journal, Front page, October 4, 1945. Awarded to MED employees with 6 months' service. Bronze for 6-18 or more months service; silver for more than 18 months.(Courtesy of K. David Nichols, Jr.)

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Secretary of War Robert Patterson speaks at Army-Navy "E" Award Ceremony. Master of Ceremonies Col K.D. Nichols and Special Presenter General Groves stand to the right of the podium. The Manhattan Engineer District shoulder patch emblem hangs with the bunting. Sept 29, 1945, Oak Ridge TN. (Courtesy of Oak Ridge Public Library)

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Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson pins the Distinguished Service Medal on District Engineer Col. Kenneth D. Nichols after Maj. General Leslie Groves read the citation. Sept 29, 1945. Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of Oak Ridge Public Library)

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Presentation of the Army & Navy “E” Awards at Fuller Lodge. Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer at the podium; Colonel K.D. Nichols, District Manager of the MED and Brig. General Leslie Groves, Commander of the Manhattan Project, seated to the right. Los Alamos, NM. October 16, 1945. (Courtesy of Dr. Robert Serber)

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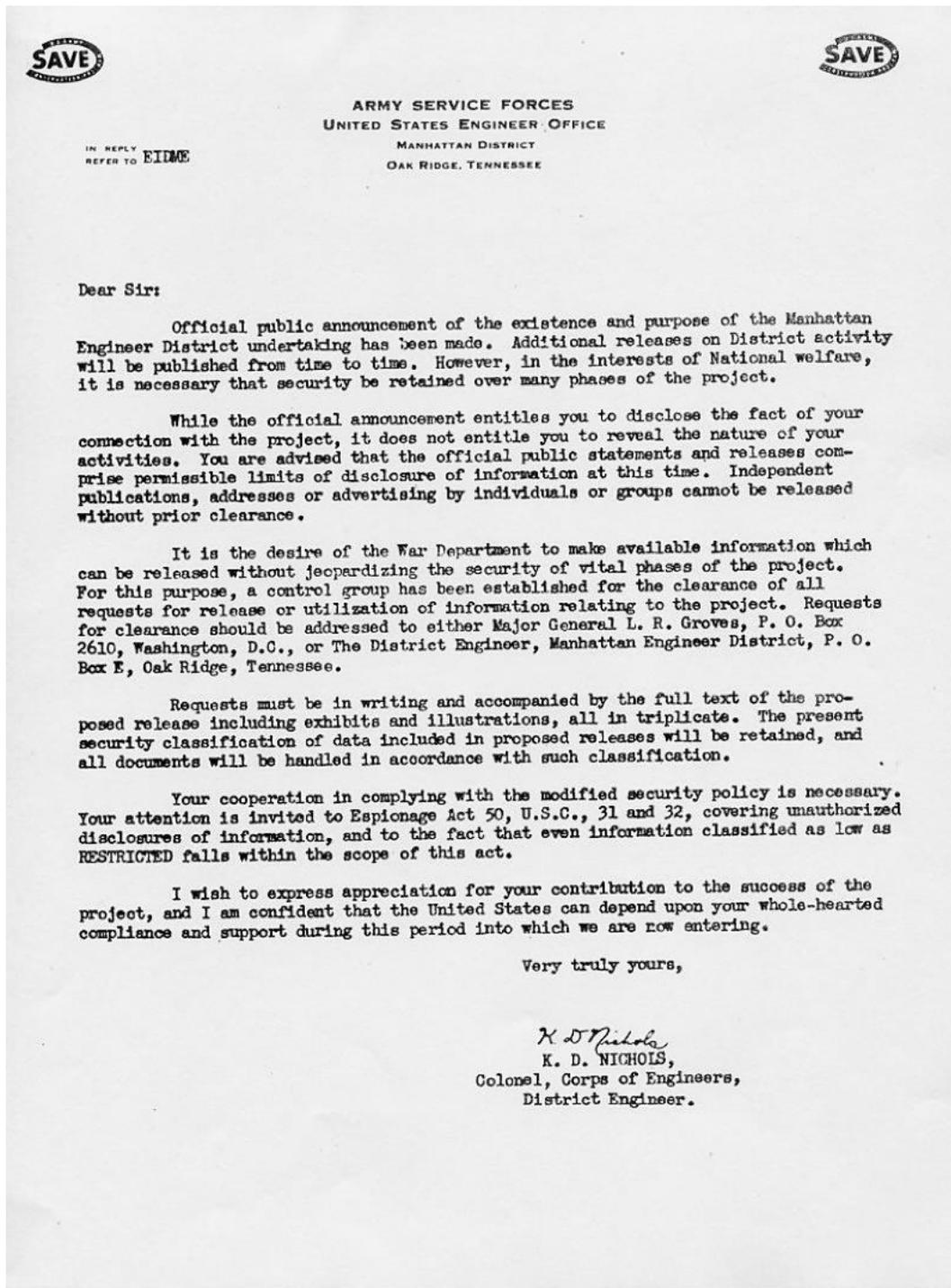
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Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, District Engineer, looks on as Capt. Arlene Scheidenhelm, CO of the local WAC detachment, cuts the cake for the WAC's 3rd birthday party. The Oak Ridge Journal, May 24, 1945. (Over 275 WACs served the Manhattan Project at peak strength and Nichols personally obtained approval after the war from the Secretary of War for the WAC's shoulder patch.) Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of Oak Ridge Public Library)

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Letter issued by Colonel K.D. Nichols, District Engineer MED, to his leadership team and principals of major outside vendors urging caution when releasing information concerning the Manhattan Project. August 1945. (Courtesy of K. David Nichols, Jr.)