

Special Engineer Detachment

The Gadget (Trinity, July 16, 1945), Little Boy (Hiroshima on August 6, 1945) and Fat Man (Nagasaki, August 9, 1945) depleted the entire stockpile of nuclear weapons ready for use at that time. Because of the difficulty associated with the design of Fat Man, more gun barrel (Little Boy style) weapons were considered necessary. This would require a production process, it was no longer single unit laboratory work.

The production of these additional weapons fell to Los Alamos Laboratory. Maintaining a workforce to do this work was difficult. With the end of the war, many workers left to go back to their careers prior to the war. Some scientists were opposed to working longer on atomic weapons and chose to leave.

Meanwhile, Y-12 was facing an uncertain future, but kept producing uranium 235 at record levels until December, 1946. During this interim and uncertain transition period Los Alamos struggled as well, but for entirely different reasons. The first months and years of weapons production were filled with frustration and uncertainty. Many people left Los Alamos thinking the project had come to an end.

Y-12 was reducing its workforce even before December 1946, as K-25 began supplying feed material that exceeded the ability of Y-12's Alpha calutrons. The Alpha racetracks were placed in standby with only a small crew left in each building to keep the vacuum on the equipment, paint the magnets and other surfaces of the racetrack and generally keep the equipment from deteriorating.

The manpower for much of the work at Los Alamos during the war had come from a most unique military group formed by the Army to meet the need for technically trained workers. These workers made up a high percentage of the overall workforce at Los Alamos Laboratory. At the height of the war effort, 42 percent of the workforce at Los Alamos wore an Army uniform. They were also assigned to other Manhattan Project sites.

Formed as the 9812th Special Engineer Detachment on May 22, 1943, the SED sent young engineers and scientists to the various Manhattan Engineer District sites. Originally formed with a compliment of 334 men, by September 1945 there were over 1,800 of these young men who were in the Army and stationed at Los Alamos and more than 1,200 at Oak Ridge. The work they did was a far cry from what most military personnel were doing during the war.

Their average score on the Army General Classification Test was 133—the highest of any unit in the Army! While they were not subjected to basic training, they were originally expected to conform to many of the same requirements as the regular Army. This included early morning exercise, drills and inspections.

The story is told that on one occasion when top Army officials were reviewing the troops, the military police, the regular Army and the WAC's paraded by the reviewing stand in good order. But when the SED came by, they were having trouble staying in step or keeping formed up into straight lines and they were even waving to the crowd.

This was not taken well by the general doing the review who commented that those SED boys were a "disgrace to the Army." Eventually the requirements were relaxed and these young scientist and engineers who were working long hours were allowed to sleep in and to forego drills, inspections and exercise. Of course, the other Army personnel at the sites felt this was not fair and many wanted to transfer to the SED.

In October 1943, the first company of the 9812th detachment arrived in Los Alamos. Scientists and engineers, who had been drafted into the Army, were now making a much different contribution to the war than any they could have anticipated.

The first person in the SED to be assigned to Oak Ridge was Perry R. Gershon who arrived on July 19, 1943. The first commanding officer of the Oak Ridge detachment was Captain William A. Fogg who was assigned in May 1943. He was succeeded by Capt. William A. Barger in March 1944.

In Oak Ridge, initially the SED personnel were assigned to dormitories to live with civilians. However, in February 1944, they were moved into barracks. In December 1945, they were returned to dormitories but entire buildings were then devoted to the SED.

In Los Alamos, the SED contributed significantly to the work leading up to the Trinity Test on July 16, 1945, the manufacture of Little Boy and Fat Man and were called upon to continue production after the war ended. However, the many of the staff were leaving and the SED was coming to an end with the transfer of responsibility from the Army to the Atomic Energy Commission.

Thanks to Martin Skinner, a retired Y-12 employee for providing me a copy of the 1945 Special Engineer Detachment Yearbook from which much of the above information was obtained.

Some unusual actions were taken to keep up with the demand for continued production after the war. We will examine some of them in coming weeks. For one thing, at the various sites, many of the SED personnel stayed on to work as civilians after the Army released them.