

## **Major General Kenneth David Nichols**

Oak Ridge Operations, formed September 15, 1947, was the result of changes made over several months after the Atomic Energy Commission formally took control of the nation's atomic energy program on January 1, 1947. Up until then, the daily operations of the entire nuclear program had been directed by Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols from Oak Ridge.

Before exploring the early years of the Oak Ridge Operations, we should take a closer look at Colonel Nichols. His role was to administer the mundane as well as the urgent daily activities that made the Manhattan Project successful. He is credited with holding the line regarding the design of the town of Oak Ridge and insisting the ridges not be flattened and the roads follow the contours of the land. He also convinced the State of Tennessee that a new road should be built from Knoxville to Oak Ridge.

Colonel Nichols had been assigned to the Manhattan Engineer District on July, 1942, and stayed with the Manhattan Project until it was turned over to civilian government control. He lived at 111 Olney Lane in Oak Ridge. An interesting side note – when he and his family left Oak Ridge, the family moving into his house was surprised to find an electric furnace had been installed. His may have been the only house in Oak Ridge with electric heat!

Nichols was the District Engineer responsible for all research and development for the design, construction, and operation of all Manhattan Project facilities required for the production of the atomic bomb. He reported to General Leslie R. Groves, who commanded the Manhattan Project.

The following information comes from the citation accompanying the award of the West Point Distinguished Graduate Award for 1996 and details his life after the Manhattan Project:

...Appointed Professor of Mechanics at the United States Military Academy in 1947, Colonel Nichols found that his expertise and preeminent reputation in the field of atomic energy required nearly full-time duty as a consultant to the United States Delegation to the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission and to the Military Liaison Committee to the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.

Early in 1948, as international tensions mounted, Colonel Nichols was relieved from duty at West Point, promoted to major general, and assigned as Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project. Charged with the responsibility for atomic weapons logistics and training, General Nichols commanded this joint Army-Navy-Air Force organization for three years, until 1951.

During the same period, he was Deputy Director of Atomic Energy Matters, Plans and Operations Division of the General Staff U.S. Army and Senior Army Member of the Military Liaison Committee to the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. In 1950, General Nichols was handed an additional assignment of grave responsibility by President Truman. He was appointed deputy to Mr. K. T. Keller, Department of Defense Director of Guided Missiles. He continued as Mr. Keller's principal assistant until 1953, advising the Secretary of Defense on the research, development, and production of guided missiles.

In 1953, at the request of President Eisenhower, General Nichols retired from the Army and accepted an appointment as General Manager of the Atomic Energy Commission, with the mandate of improving the relations between the AEC and the Army and speeding the development of commercial Atomic Energy electric power. In both arenas he was successful, and in 1955 General Nichols retired from government service.

General Nichols is a member of the National Academy of Engineering, a Fellow of the American Nuclear Society, and an Honorary Member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

In addition to the Nicaraguan Medal of Merit, General Nichols has been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission Distinguished Service Award, the American Society of Civil Engineers Collinwood Prize, and the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (Degree of Commander). In 1984, he became only the fifth individual to be awarded the Chief of Engineers Award for Outstanding Public Service.

In 1987, General Nichols published a personal account of the making of America's nuclear policies, entitled: *The Road to Trinity*. A glowing review in the *New York Times* called it "...the best possible book on the subject."

Throughout a lifetime of service to his country, General Nichols made lasting and invaluable contributions to the national security of the United States during periods of great international tension; his brilliant leadership in the development of atomic weapons and later in President Eisenhower's Atoms-For-Peace program exemplified outstanding devotion to the principles expressed in the West Point motto: DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY.

Accordingly, the Association of Graduates takes great pride in presenting the 1996 Distinguished Graduate Award to Kenneth David Nichols, USMA Class of 1929. (This concludes the citation.)

After retirement from government service Nichols then spent several years as consulting engineer in the fields of missile research and development as well as commercial atomic power. He died in Bethesda, Maryland, on February 21, 2000.