

Muddy Boots, Y-12 and looking to the future

On Tuesday, December 01, 2009, the East Tennessee Economic Council's 2009 annual Meeting an Awards Celebration was held in the Doubletree Hotel. Brigadier General Garrett Harencak, Principal Assistant Deputy Administrator for Military Application Office of Defense Programs National Nuclear Security Administration was the keynote speaker.

Rarely has a stronger message been conveyed that stressed the importance of the Y-12 National Security Complex to the security of the nation and the world. The General minced no words when he described the important mission of Y-12 today.

He recognized the importance of the history of Y-12 going back to the World War II days of electromagnetic separation of uranium for Little Boy, the first atomic bomb used in warfare. It was the first mission where Y-12 seems to have established the ability to meet the needs of the nation and to dedicate the innovation, drive and determination to make the seemingly impossible just take a bit more planning and effort.

Through the years, Y-12's missions have changed, but the constant element of Y-12's primary mission has been the tie to our nation's security and that of the entire world. General Harencak boldly stated that Y-12 is necessary as the nation's nuclear weapons dismantlement facility and uranium processing plant.

This capability to dismantle nuclear weapons and process uranium is required now and will continue to be required regardless of the number of nuclear weapons the nation and the world has. Ideally that number could and should reach zero. Even then Y-12's Uranium Processing Facility would still be needed to process the uranium from nuclear weapons and repurpose it for peaceful uses such as nuclear energy - one of the MOST GREEN of our available energy sources!

If the nation follows the recommendation of Senator Lamar Alexander to build "100 nuclear power plants in the next 20 years," and if the decision is made to down blend a portion of the nation's supply of highly enriched uranium to provide fuel for these reactors, then Y-12's Uranium Processing Facility could be a key element of this process. Y-12 has in storage enough highly enriched uranium to supply the nation's energy needs for several hundred years or more.

Y-12, which has been known affectionately by some and disparagingly by others as a "bomb factory" is being seen in a whole new light. There are no new nuclear weapons being manufactured at Y-12 and have not been since the late 1980's. Yes, life-extension work for existing weapons has continued, but no new weapons have been designed or built in nearly 20 years.

Dismantlement of existing nuclear weapons is fast becoming the mainstay of Y-12's work with uranium. The Uranium Processing Facility will essentially be dedicated to dismantlement for the foreseeable future.

General Harencak said of Oak Ridge, “The foundation of all we have done in our nuclear security enterprise is in Oak Ridge,” as he reflected upon the heritage of our history since the Manhattan Project and through the Cold War. He continued to observe, “but, more important, you are the pillar upon which we will build the future.”

The future is one where we can all dream of a world without nuclear weapons and the Uranium Processing Facility may well help us get there. Yet, there are many other factors such as terrorists and rogue nations determined to gain the “big stick” of nuclear weapons and our nation must lead the world in strength of resolve to address such tough issues, until the day the dream becomes reality.

Very specific details of the “top ten” accomplishments by Y-12 during the past year were key elements in the general’s talk to a packed crowd. Those of us who work at Y-12 were bursting at the seams with pride to receive such praise. It did fit quite well with the tone of the meeting for recognition of significant accomplishments.

The Muddy Boot awards given to Steve Buckley, Vice President and General Manager, Bechtel Jacobs Company, Barry Goss, President and Chairman of the Board, Pro2Serve Professional Project Services, Inc., and Lawrence Young, Founding President and CEO, Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee (CROET) are all well deserved. The Postma Young Professional Medal Winner, Stan Mitchell, Editor and Publisher, The Oak Ridge Observer, is also a most deserving recognition.

These awards presented by the East Tennessee Economic Council each year represent some of the most significant accomplishments in our community. Previous award winners continue to serve as leaders and provide examples for others.

The 2009 winners are but the most recent of a whole host of dedicated and tireless people who tackle the problems and create the solutions that take us forward to the future. They are truly the “pillars,” as described by General Harencak, on which to build our future!