

Little known heroes of the nuclear age, part 2

Arnold Kramish, mentioned in part one of this series, was a private in the Special Engineer Detachment in 1944 and he was stationed at the Clinton Engineer Works. In August 1944, he volunteered along with nine other enlisted men to participate in an unknown secret effort at the U.S. Navy shipyard in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He would become one of the first people injured in the Manhattan Project.

The S-50 Thermal Diffusion Plant was being constructed at the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant site. General Groves told the contractor, M. H. Ferguson, that he needed a thermal diffusion plant built right beside what was then the world's largest steam plant, having been designed to produce electricity for the gaseous diffusion plant also being constructed.

However, the gaseous diffusion plant was not yet ready and the steam plant was completed. So Groves wanted to take advantage of the steam to operate a thermal diffusion plant to create a slightly enriched uranium feed for the Y-12 Beta Calutrons to speed up the process of separating uranium 235 for Little Boy, the world's first atomic bomb ever used in warfare.

Groves said he needed that thermal diffusion plant built in 90 days. The contractor spokesperson said, "It can't be done!" General Groves is said to have looked him straight in the eye and said, "You've got 80 days!" They built the S-50 Thermal Diffusion Plant in 76 days, operated it less than a year and it is said to have shortened the war by three weeks.

The special secret project that Arnold Kramish volunteered to help with in August 1944 was the experimental work being done at the Navy shipyard on thermal diffusion. As described in part one of this series, Kramish was one of five people injured or killed as a result of a chemical explosion.

Kramish was thought to be one of the people who were dying at the accident scene. A Catholic priest was summoned to give last rites to the dying victims. He did so to the two other individuals but when he came to Arnold Kramish, he awoke from his unconscious state long enough to refuse the rites.

Kramish wrote some 50 years later, after the accident had been declassified, as quoted in the Atomic Heritage Foundation's Web site, <http://www.atomicheritage.org/index.php/ahf-updates-mainmenu-153/494-ahf-remembers-arnold-kramish.html>

"Father McDonough administered last rites to Bragg and Meigs as they died on the floor near me. A physician, pointing to me, said, 'He's next.' Certain fundamentals dominate when one is told he is dying. With the slight vigor left in me, I rejected the blessing for my soul; it was not that of my faith. Then I lapsed into unconsciousness."

He went on to say, "In Denver, the KLZ news ticker announced my demise. Newscaster Morey Sharp, a cousin, rushed to S. Lincoln Street to be at my parents' side. My father, John, was in the shoe shop, but shortly after Morey arrived, someone phoned to tell my mother, Sarah, that I was dead. She fainted."

"Fortunately, as Morey was on his way to tell my father the sad news, KLZ phoned to say I was alive. My mother was my first visitor at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. For three days, she had carried on the train (a priority flight had been denied) a large jar of chicken soup.

"We were under armed guard on the fifth floor of the Naval hospital. But, when she arrived she pushed the guards away, charged into my room, raised my oxygen tent and fed me the well-matured chicken soup—Jewish penicillin for all ills.

"A while later, Father McDonough came and gently admonished me that I had blasphemed the Lord. I replied, 'Well, Father, it worked didn't it?' We had a good laugh. Ever after, I credit both 'cures' for my survival.

An interesting side note to this accident happened years after it had occurred. You see the priest had never been told what had happened.

Kramish wrote, "But there was another victim too—a final victim, the Navy chaplain who gave last rites to those who had died soon after the accident and was a comfort to those who lived. He was Lt. Cmdr. Louis V. McDonough. I later learned that he had been pastor of St. Joseph Parish, in State Center, Iowa, until he joined the Navy in January 1944."

"...Throughout my life, those moments remained vivid, although I did not remember the chaplain's name. In 1980, I wrote to Cmdr. Herbert Bergsma of the Navy Chief of Chaplains Office. Within days, he called, saying he had found the Navy Yard chaplain, who wanted to speak to me right away because he was gravely ill."

Next, Arnold Kramish tells about his last conversation with the priest who attempted to administer last rites to him after the Philadelphia Navy Yard accident.