

A.

The USS De Haven sailed from Hawaii's Pearl Harbor on May 5, 1958, carrying 240 men deep into the Pacific on a secret mission.

Gunner's mate Wayne Brooks had only a vague idea of their destination. But within a few days, he would experience an explosion so immense and bright that he could see his own bones. He and his crewmates had been assigned to witness [Operation Hardtack I](#), a series of nuclear tests in the Pacific.

... As they reached an area near where tests already had been underway, they sailed into heavy showers. Radioactive rain poured down and "hot" seawater contaminated the ship's wash-down system.

The sailors were ordered to decontaminate the ship by scrubbing the decks with long-handled brushes.

Then, as they closed in on Enewetak on May 12, Brooks spotted a far-off flash in the distance: a nuclear blast.

Brooks, a slender Texan, had enlisted in the Navy a year earlier at 17. That morning, he manned his gun station on deck. He had no special goggles or clothing. He and the other sailors wore long-sleeved shirts and tucked their pant legs into their socks. They did as they had been told, turning away from the blast site and putting their hands over their eyes.

The flash was so bright that even 20 miles from the blast, Brooks, now 75, said, "When you put your hands over your eyes, you saw your bones in your hands and in your fingers."

...

In the decades since Brooks witnessed those 27 tests, he has suffered throat and lung problems, rashes and prostate cancer. Like other atomic veterans, he blames his ailments on his radiation exposure. So far, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs seems to disagree.

Brooks has applied multiple times for the special VA compensation reserved for atomic veterans. He was denied each time on the grounds that his pains and diseases are not among those that qualify.

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"We were used as guinea pigs – every one of us," Brooks said. "They didn't tell us what it was gonna do to us. They didn't tell us that we were gonna have problems later on in life with cancers and multiple cancers."

Accessed on 3.27.19 at <https://www.revealnews.org/article/us-veterans-in-secretive-nuclear-tests-still-fighting-for-recognition/>

B.

In the aftermath of World War II and during the height of the Cold War – between 1946 and 1962 – the U.S. detonated more than 200 above-ground and undersea nuclear bombs.

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The estimated number of service members who participated in the tests varies from source to source, but could be as high as 400,000.

All of the atomic vets were sworn to secrecy. Until the secrecy was lifted decades later, they could not tell anyone about their experiences. Even if they became ill, they could not tell doctors they might have been exposed to radiation.

Scientists had known from the earliest days of building the atomic bomb that radiation posed risks. Research found increased rates of certain cancers among the survivors of the Japanese bombings. It also showed that the children of survivors were more likely to have smaller heads and physical disabilities.

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C.

Jim Bunting . . . became an atomic veteran when he witnessed the largest above-ground nuclear explosion on U.S. soil: Shot Hood, a 74-kiloton blast in the Nevada desert. More than 3,000 personnel were there, two-thirds of them Marines. Like Bunting, then 18, many were on temporary assignment from Camp Pendleton near San Diego.

Before dawn on July 5, 1957, Bunting and his fellow Marines clambered down into trenches. He remembered that day vividly.

He said he crouched in a trench 3,500 yards from the detonation site. He was given dark glasses to wear. As nearly every atomic vet was told to do before a blast, he put his arms over his eyes. When the flash came, he saw the bones in his arms.

The detonation ignited brush fires, and the shock caused some trenches to collapse. It shattered windows and shook buildings in mining communities at least 60 miles north of the test area. People in Los Angeles could feel the ground shake from the blast, according to government documents, and San Franciscans could see the flash.

After the blast, Bunting and other Marines were ordered out of the trenches. They participated in a “coordinated air-ground maneuver against the attack objective,” according to a [Defense Nuclear Agency report](#) about Shot Hood.

“We played war games right up to ground zero, where the sand had melted into glass,” Bunting said. “We could feel the crunching beneath our feet. Anyway, that was about the size of it. It was a hell of a firecracker, we thought, hell of a firecracker.”

The health problems came later.

“I’ve had a heart attack, three strokes, an aneurysm, abdominal aneurysm operation, which went to my feet later on,” Bunting said at the barbecue. “I couldn’t walk for two years.”

Bunting did not apply for atomic veterans compensation because he knew his conditions were not eligible, even though studies have linked radiation exposure to heart attacks and strokes.

But he wanted atomic veterans to get recognition. He died of congestive heart failure on Dec. 16 without seeing that happen.

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D. Lincoln Grahlfs

Navy veteran Lincoln Grahlfs, 93, was one of the first atomic vets. . .

Grahlfs thinks the government lied to atomic vets and ignored their concerns. During the tests, he and his shipmates called themselves “The Royal Order of Guinea Pigs.”

He enlisted in the Navy in 1942, two months shy of his 20th birthday. When World War II ended three years later, Grahlfs was the lead quartermaster on a seagoing tugboat. He was stationed in San Francisco when the Navy asked for volunteers to participate in an atomic test.

“My commanding officer said a guy would have to be crazy to volunteer for that service,” Grahlfs said.

Too few volunteers stepped up, so Grahlfs and others were ordered to the Marshall Islands. He was assigned to [Operation Crossroads](#), a series of tests around Bikini Atoll.

He was the helmsman, steering a 146-foot-long wooden-hulled tug toward an atomic blast code named Able. The bomb exploded on the morning of July 1, 1946, about 10 miles away. He and his crew were told when the countdown started to put their arms over their eyes. He had no special glasses. . . .

Within a few hours, Grahlfs’ tugboat and others were ordered into the highly radioactive lagoon where the bomb had been detonated. Empty ships placed varying distances from the blast to test their resilience were ablaze. He and his crew helped put out a fire on the USS Independence.

Two more tests were scheduled for Operation Crossroads, but only one of those shots, Baker, was conducted. Radioactive water contaminated nearby ships. . . .

. . . Grahlfs gets about \$650 per month in compensation for skin cancer. He applied for compensation in August 2012, though it took nearly two years for the money to show up. . .

Grahlfs’ daughter suffered from endocrine problems throughout her teenage years and died of a malignant brain tumor in 1996 at 46. One son has bipolar disorder. Another has Addison’s disease, a rare adrenal condition. His granddaughter was born with a deformed foot. . . .

Why, he asks, has the government never studied what radiation exposure may have done to families? He works with the National Association of Atomic Veterans, often taking calls from others vets trying to get help for themselves and others.

“When my daughter was dying, I simply told her that I will not stop fighting for justice for these veterans until I die,” he said, “and I’ve kept my promise so far.”

The children and grandchildren of other atomic vets have reported immune disorders, cancers and reproductive problems.

E.

Atomic Energy Commission press releases promised that atomic tests would be conducted "with adequate assurances of safety." Residents of southern Nevada and southern Utah who lived downwind of the tests initially believed what they were told; as one historian wrote, "Their faith and trust in their government would not allow them to even consider the possibility that the government would ever endanger their health." However, their experiences during and since the 1950s have convinced them of just the opposite--there was no safety for either people or livestock from atmospheric nuclear testing and the AEC knew it. Declassified transcripts released from 1978 to 1980 show that scientists knew as early as 1947 that fission products released by atomic bomb tests could be deadly to humans and animals exposed during and after the tests. The AEC chose to ignore warnings from its own scientists and outside medical researchers and continued with a "nothing-must-stop-the-tests" rationale.

Atomic testing during its first two years actually received very little attention in Iron County, if the pages of the *Iron County Record* are an accurate measure. Residents could read about detonations in statewide daily newspapers, but the local paper was more likely to describe civil defense preparedness. . . .

The sheep and their owners were Iron County's first victims of radioactivity. While being trailed across Nevada from winter range to the lambing yards at Cedar City, some 18,000-20,000 sheep were exposed to large quantities of radioactive fallout from tests in March and April 1953. Kern and McRae Bulloch first noticed burns on their animals' faces and lips where they had been eating radioactive grass. Then ewes began miscarrying in large numbers and at the lambing yards wool sloughed off in clumps revealing blisters on adult sheep. New lambs were stillborn with grotesque deformities or born so weak they were unable to nurse. Ranchers lost as much as a third of their herds. (accessed on 4.26.16 at http://www.historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/utah_today/nucleartestingandthedownwinders.html)

F.

Within three to five years after atmospheric testing, leukemia and other radiation-caused cancers appeared in residents of Utah, Arizona, and Nevada living in areas where nuclear fallout had occurred. Communities in which childhood leukemia was rare or unknown had clusters of cases in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the 1990s, people in Iron County believed that those who lived there in the 1950s were guinea pigs and victims, like the sheep. They have adopted the appellation "downwinders," signifying they lived "downwind" of atomic tests. Tests were usually conducted when the wind was blowing east or northeast in order to avoid fallout over more densely populated areas to the south and west, including Las Vegas and southern California. Iron County is centered in the fallout arc. Even though it is impossible to prove that any particular person died or was afflicted by cancer caused by radioactive fallout, the perception of people living in Iron County is that atmospheric nuclear testing brought an epidemic of cancer to the area. The link between radioactive exposure and tumors can, however, be drawn statistically. There is also a local perception that infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects are part of the legacy of living downwind of nuclear tests.

(accessed on 4.26.16 at http://www.historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/utah_today/nucleartestingandthedownwinders.html)