

Cyanide Poisoning in Hanford H-Bomb Cleanup: 57% of Workers Report Toxic Exposures

By Kelly Lundeen

Three workers in the Hanford Reservation plutonium production cleanup program spent 24 hours at the Richland, Washington hospital June 18, 2021, “after reporting headaches, nausea and rapid heart rates at one of the nuclear reservation’s tank farms. The symptoms were consistent with those linked to inhalation of vapors from the toxic waste held in underground tanks,” the *Tri-City Herald* first reported August 3.

The *Herald* reported further that, “Nine of the workers were evaluated by the on-site occupational medical provider.... Since then, four more workers ... have asked for medical evaluations.”

Hanford Challenge, a watchdog organization focused on the 570-square mile site, reported in a release, “This mass vapor exposure incident followed the Hanford contractor’s decision to downgrade the respiratory protections for tank farm workers.”

The Hanford Reservation in eastern Washington state is responsible for having produced two-thirds of the plutonium used in the US nuclear arsenal, including the very first atom bomb, code named “trinity,” detonated outside Los Alamos, New Mexico, and the plutonium bomb, dubbed “fat man,” dropped on Nagasaki, Japan. The Hanford site is now the most radioactively-contaminated site in the United States, perhaps the worst EPA-designated Superfund site, and is undergoing decades of “cleanup” work.

Information about workers sickened at Hanford trickles out slowly. Neither the Department of En-

ergy, nor Hanford site management have made any announcement of the recent accident to the public or the State of Washington.

However, recommendations from the recent Hanford Healthy Energy Workers Board could provide part of the answer to the lack of information and inadequate health care for workers. The Board was created by the Washington State legislature to “conduct an unmet health care needs assessment for

Recommendations include creating a Hanford Healthy Energy Workers Center as an independent entity for disseminating medical and scientific literature concerning exposures, a sort of library where the hundreds of studies of occupational health risks, exposure data, and best health practices would be gathered and accessible for workers.

Weeks after the June 18th exposures, some workers reported continued symptoms. “This lack of information sharing and reporting smells like a cover-up,” said Tom Carpenter, Executive Director of Hanford Challenge. “We do not want to see a return to downgraded worker protections that result in routine vapor exposures. The cycle of exposures must end at Hanford, and meaningful and long-lasting regulations should be enacted to assure that Hanford tank farm workers can conduct a cleanup without risking their own health and safety,” Carpenter said.

Decommissioning and cleanup of the site slowly inch forward. A vitrification plant is projected to begin converting some of the least radioactive waste into a more stable glass form by 2023, which will then be disposed of within the Hanford site. In August a two-thirds mile long pipeline connected radioactive waste tanks to the vitrification plant.



Cleanup workers in Hanford’s “tank farm” report illnesses. Photo: Department of Energy.

Hanford workers and develop recommendations on how these health care needs can be met.”

A final report issued in June included the results of interviews with 1,600 current and former workers. The board found that 57% of workers reported being exposed in a toxic or radioactive incident. Almost one-third reported long-term toxic exposures.

Meanwhile, radioactively contaminated water continues to flow into the Columbia River and groundwater, radioactive waste tanks continue to leak, and 11,000 workers continue the hazardous work of decommissioning the Hanford site.

— Hanford Challenge, Aug. 27; *Tri-City Herald*, Aug. 3; “Hanford Healthy Energy Workers - Healthcare Needs Assessment and Recommendations” - Washington State Department of Commerce, June 1, 2021

Rejection of US Hiroshima Bombing Mythology Long Overdue

By John LaForge

Hiroshima was “a military base.” The US atomic bombings “ended the war,” and they “prevented an invasion and saved lives.” Our government’s tests of atomic weapons on people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki 76 years ago were rationalized using these myths which transformed indiscriminate destruction into a “good thing.” This mythology stands as a roadblock to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The “good bomb” story is still believed by many in the United States because of decades of deliberate myth-making started by President Truman. He announced after Hiroshima, “The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.” Some 140,000 people were killed in Hiroshima, another 70,000 in Nagasaki. Almost all were civilians. The bombs were dropped miles from the nearest military base in both cases.

The incurious can be excused for accepting this cover-story — even though it was publicly rejected at the time by great thinkers and writers including Albert Camus and Dorothy Day — because documents that prove the president and his administration lied were kept secret for decades.

One is the April 1946 US Strategic Bombing Survey, led by Dr. Paul Nitze who would later become Navy Secretary and later still a presidential advisor to Ronald Reagan. Nitze’s extensive official government study demolished Truman’s whitewash, concluding, “Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated,” according to *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* by historian Gar Alperovitz.

Likewise, the 1946 report of the Intelligence Group of the War Department’s (now Pentagon’s) Military Intelligence Division — only discovered in 1989 — concluded that atomic bombings had not been needed to end the war. The Intelligence Group “judged that it was ‘almost a certainty that the Japanese would have capitulated upon the entry of Russia into the war,’” according to *The Decision*.

Of the 300 doctors in Hiroshima at the time of the explosion, the Red Cross says 90% were killed or injured. Of the 1,780 nurses, 93% suffered the same fate.

— From the essay “Why Did You Do This To Me?: Medical Perspectives on the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima,” by Ben Stanley, August 4, 2020

The judgment of Major General Curtis LeMay made six weeks after Nagasaki was more emphatic. Gen. LeMay headed the 21st Bomber Command and directed the firebombing of Osaka, Tokyo and 58 other Japanese cities. LeMay said September 20, 1945, at a New York press conference reported in *The New York Herald Tribune*, “The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb.” A surprised reporter asked, “Had they not surrendered because of the atomic bomb?” and LeMay answered, “The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.”

So for 76 years debate has raged about whether the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was ethical.

Truman’s shrewd deception that mass destruction “saved lives” has long obscured the (previously classified) historical record, as well as the voices of high-level critics who rejected the big lie.

In 1945, Brig. General Bonnie Feller wrote, “Neither the atomic bombing nor the entry of the Soviet Union into the war forced Japan’s unconditional surrender.” President Eisenhower said, “First, the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.”

Admiral William Leahy, Truman’s Chief of Staff, said later in life, “It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan.”

Returning to Paul Nitze, after 43 years in government spent promoting nuclear weapons he went from the Strategic Bombing Survey’s crushing of Truman’s Hiroshima myth in 1946, to obliterating all the remaining excuses for nuclear weapons in 1999. He wrote in *The New York Times*:

I see no compelling reason why we should not unilaterally get rid of our nuclear weapons. To maintain them ... adds nothing to our security. ... I can think of no circumstances under which it would be wise for the US to use nuclear weapons, even in retaliation for their prior use against us.

Today, the global clamor for abolition is invigorated by the entry-into-force of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. With it, we have a new opportunity to renounce fairy tales about the atrocities of August 6 and 9, to eliminate the needless costs of perpetual nuclear threats (“deterrence”), to cease our radioactive terrorism, and to finally scrap our nuclear arsenal.

— A version of this comment was syndicated by PeaceVoice.org.