

A-bomb target says he's fine after 25 years

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"Here I was 20 years old and I was indoctrinated in the ways of the Army. The guy says to me, 'Get in the trench, I'm going to blow you up.' I got in the trench."

— Police Chief Charles Wilmoth



You may be suddenly interested in things nuclear following the massive radiation leak last week at a Pennsylvania power plant, but Garden City Police Chief Charles Wilmoth beat you to it.

He stood up and took notice 25 years ago, when the Army sent him to the middle of the Nevada desert. They kept him there cooling his heels for about a month, and then they told him to crawl in a hole while they fired a cannon loaded with a nuclear bomb in his general direction.

Wilmoth did what he was told.

"Here I was 20 years old and I was indoctrinated in the ways of the Army," said Wilmoth. "The guy says to me, 'Get in the trench, I'm going to blow you up.'"

"I got in the trench." So did thousands of other soldiers when the Pentagon conducted a series of nuclear experiments spanning six years in the '50s.

SURPRISINGLY, what happened at Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pa., last week didn't have a thing to do

with why Wilmoth started thinking of that 1953 day in the trench.

The day before the power plant accident, Wilmoth picked up the phone and found Tod Ensign at the other end.

Ensign is one of two writers at work on a book largely concerned with the military nuclear blasts a generation ago and the use of a Vietnam-era herbicide called Agent Orange.

"(Wilmoth) had the misfortune of getting there as the Army assumed all responsibility for radiation safety," said Ensign. "When the AEC (Atomic Energy Commission) was running the first series, they kept them back eight or nine miles."

WILMOTH ISN'T sure just how far he was from ground zero, but most people wouldn't think it was nearly far enough — he was close enough to see it.

"Right after the blast when things had stabilized I saw a pick-up truck drive right out to ground zero. A guy got out and picked something up and drove back — some kind of experiment, I guess," said Wilmoth.

Ensign said a Center for Disease Control (CDC) study on some 1,400 soldiers who were involved in a 1957 blast shows them with 2½ times the normal leukemia rate. However, Wilmoth reports no health problems as a result of his experience.

He is the first soldier Ensign has talked to who was involved in the blast of the nuclear-loaded cannon, but Ensign wasn't surprised by Wilmoth's story.

"The patterns are pretty much the same. They kept the guys ignorant of what the real risks were," he said, adding, "Of course, if you've got a guy standing there in a uniform and he sees scientists walking around bundled up in protective gear, he'll figure out on his own maybe he should be better protected."

"I DIDN'T see anybody who looked like a scientist," said Wilmoth, who was wearing a gas mask at the time of the blast.

"They really thought they were doing what was in the best interests of everybody involved," said the chief. "But in

retrospect, I think they were only doing what they knew at the time.

"They took us on a tour of the blast area after the explosion, a guy with a Geiger counter saying 'Walk here, don't walk here,'" said Wilmoth. "Then they had us shower to wash off the atomic particles, but when we were finished we put on the same uniforms."

Ensign said radiation detectors used in the experiments were capable only of detecting gamma rays, while other atomic particles like alpha and beta rays went undetected.

Vacationing Det. Richard Mager was also involved in a similar nuclear experiment, although he was farther from the blast site than Wilmoth. Still, Ensign said bombs exploded on towers were more dangerous than those bursting in the air because the steel tower itself became radioactive fallout. Police said Mager's experience involved such a tower.

Ensign said his book, written for Playboy Press, has a tentative publication date of this fall.

"I'm going to read it," said Wilmoth, who helped it get written.

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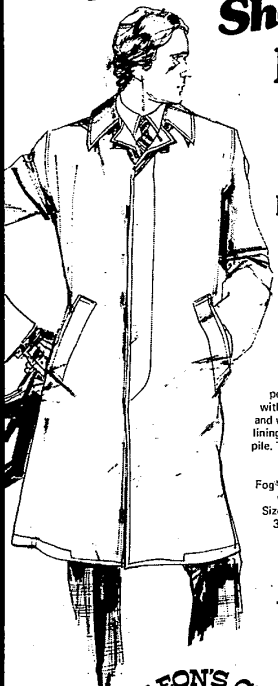


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