

Ray's Ramblings

Nuclear Coyotes

Autumn of 1957 was coming to a fast-paced close. The high Nevada desert was turning cold and windy. Summer's dust devils were shifting to wind storms of gigantic rolling sagebrush, marching across the valley floors of a nuclear wasteland at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site 120 miles north of Las Vegas, Nevada.

The detonations of 'test devices', or 'gadgets', as nuclear weapons were lovingly referred to at Area 7, were being increased at an alarming rate. Normally the test frequency was every four or five months. Now that it had been decided by treaty with Russia that atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons within the continental United States would end by such-and-such a date, we started testing almost every two weeks ... racing with political policy to ensure that the world would not be deprived of a few more bombs being exploded in the atmosphere. Area 7 looked like the surface of an ancient wind-swept moon.

It is difficult to describe just how arduous the job was. No longer having time to build the fifteen-hundred foot steel towers for the weapon platforms, we resorted to suspending the shot cabs from large helium-filled balloons. Working hours were typically eighty or ninety per week with little time for sleep, or anything else. Accommodations at the Control Point twelve miles away were minimal, so many of us grabbed a few winks of sleep half-standing in a corner of the instrumentation bunker which was located in a concrete and steel fortress mounted on shock absorbers and springs fifty or so feet below ground directly beneath ground zero. The area around ground zero was so 'hot' from a nuclear standpoint that leaving the bunker subjected one to extremely high levels of radiation, so we were better off making as few exit trips as possible. We took turns going out for food and rotated food 'getters' each day to exit and drive the three or four miles to the ground zero three-mile perimeter and the food trucks. I tried to stay in the bunker for a minimum of forty-eight hours before going back to the Control Point for sleep in a real bed. Usually that was no treat as the beds were frequently slept in by several people between linen changes, and consequently nearly all of us had a constant case of crabs. The only true reward was the long hot showers.

Senses were dulled by the long hours of thankless work and the darkness and dampness in the bunker contributed to an already lousy environment. All of the equipment operated at very high voltages so there was a constant smell of ozone and the occasional unnerving loud cracks of mini-lightening when a power supply or transformer would let loose. Very little fresh air was available in our bunker for fear of inviting in too much radioactive contamination. Add to this the pervasive smell of the photographic chemicals used in large quantities, and one can begin to get a sense of living conditions.

About noon ... I remember it was a Tuesday ... time came to take some supplies and test data back to the Control Point...and get some real sleep. Donning a complete bunny suit and full Scott air pack, I made my way up the steep steel grate stairs and out through the double blast doors, being careful not to slip on the greenish vitrified desert sand turned into glass by the high temperature of too many nuclear fireballs. I was stopped dead in my tracks by the sight of a single coyote standing at the edge of a nuclear pot hole. Although it was important to get the hell out of there because of the radiation levels, I was transfixed. It took some time for my eyes to adapt to the blazing sunlight. When I could see clearly, I was immediately

choked to tears. The mother coyote was sitting slumped sideways on her haunches with a front paw limply hooked over her dead cub. Both eyes were burned out and white puss dribbled down from her face.

Down deep inside, I guess I knew what nuclear weapon testing might be doing to the world, and had vowed to get out of it ... someday. It's hard to describe why we ... no, I ... kept on. Somehow it was wrapped up with get the Russians, the flag, apple pie, save us from communism, and in general all of the things that most people were thinking about in the fifties. Then maybe it was just a technological addiction. Perhaps a lot of us just happened to be riding on the wave of a popular movement which when looked at from a distant and future perspective certainly had many less than positive features. I'm not apologizing, just saying I'm sorry. There's a difference. It was, after all, a different time.

I can't be certain how long I stood there, but looking at that nearly dead animal imbued a radically different perspective about what we were doing out there in the Nevada desert. Strange how the predicament of this suffering animal had a more immediate impact on me than an obviously sublimated concern for people around the world that were possibly being irreparably damaged by our acts. Newborn babies potentially having their future lives ruined by disfigurement and diseases and even early death. It is indeed sometimes strange what events will lead one to a better and higher truth.

A nearby piece of steel re-bar became the merciful executioner's weapon. Navigating across the ridge of the small nuclear canyon brought me face to face with the tortured animal. Her breathing came in short uneven pulses. A discomforting deep gurgling death rattle could be heard from within her nearly motionless body. Several times I swung the steel bar back to deliver the fatal blow, but each time my courage failed me. By now, in 100 degree plus temperatures, my face mask was full of tears, snot, and sweat. Finally, with one mighty announcement, I brought the weapon down on the side of her skull, closing my eyes just before contact. The feeling of her crackling bones telegraphed up the steel bar, up my arm and forever riveted that experience in my brain. Only some merciful mental power kept me from seeing her body or that of her cub as I stuck the bar in the ground as a marker.

Although my entire family had been hunters, it was only at that moment the realization came to me. Before that day, other than fishing with my favorite uncle, I had never killed another creature. I haven't since, either.

Walking to the twenty RAD line, the hovering Marine chopper dropped down in a flurry of dust to pick me up and we headed back to the Control Point.

I never looked back ... and I never went back to Bunker 7. Except on those occasional visits with my worst nightmares!



Ray Winn