

A tour of the Test Site

By Paul McGinnis

About 20 people met at the Department of Energy (DOE) Las Vegas, a pretty non-descript building near I-15 and Spring Mountain Road. We met our guides, a couple of veteran Cold Warriors. After about a 65 mile (104 km) trip on US Highway 95, we turned into the gate and were given ID badges with radiation sensors (oddly enough, made by Panasonic). After being inspected by Wackenhut security personnel, we stopped in the "company town" of Mercury. As we went past Wackenhut's security headquarters, we noticed a large number of unmarked security vehicles (with red and blue lights on top only). In addition to the Blazers and pickup trucks others have reported up at Groom Lake, we also saw dune buggies and armored vehicles with gun mounts on the roof. Best sign - over Guard Station 200, there is a sign that says "Welcome to the Nevada Test Site, an environmental research park."

After picking up water and hard hats, we left Mercury for Frenchman Flat, where air burst nuclear tests were done in the 50s. We saw a number of blast damaged structures including domes of 6 inch (15 cm.) thick reinforced concrete that were crushed like an eggshell. We also got to see the remains of Motel Row, whose walls had been blasted out. Oddly enough there was ancient graffiti on one wall stating "Bob sucks". After we left Frenchman Flat, we were given a tour of the nearby low-level nuclear waste facility in Area 5. The tour was given by a woman named Cindy who appeared to have drunk far too much coffee and was hyperactive. We got to see the DOE people burying drums and boxes of nuclear waste in a big trench. (If the Test Site property is ever returned to the Washoe tribe of Native Americans, they will get a big surprise if they start looking for ancestral burial grounds...)

Next, we visited CP-1, the command post for nuclear testing. It sits on a hill overlooking Frenchman Flat, and Yucca Flat (where underground tests are performed). CP-1 is sort of like NASA's Mission Control, with large screen video and computer monitors. We were shown a couple of films about testing, with the highlight being the ground collapsing into a concave depression as the molten earth far below cooled. One of Bruce's friends tried to talk a guy from DOE into letting us be present at the next test... They also had a large map of the Test Site on one wall, showing some of the surrounding land (more on this later).

We headed north into Yucca Flat and saw numerous craters created by underground nuclear testing. The bus driver drove the DOE bus down into Bilby Crater. We headed north and stopped at Sedan Crater, a huge crater where the idea of using nuclear weapons for peaceful construction purposes was tested. The crater was about 100 feet (31 meters) deep. Some people had rolled tires down the crater to see how far up the opposite wall they would go. After seeing the map in CP-1 that showed Groom Lake, I realized that we were about 15 miles from Groom Lake. I joked around with one of the old DOE guys and asked when the tour would be allowed to go past Guard Station 700 on Mercury Highway and up to Groom Lake. He said that even he was not allowed up there (this was a senior official who had been in charge of numerous nuclear tests). Unfortunately, we couldn't get any of the T-shirts he told us about that have a picture of a nuclear blast on them with the logo, "Made in America, Tested in Japan"...

We then went up towards Rainier Mesa and P-Tunnel. P-Tunnel is a series of long tunnels drilled in the side of a mountain, where nuclear weapons effects are tested. After putting on hard hats and mine rescue equipment, we boarded a mine train into the tunnels. A very impressive piece of civil engineering!! We saw the large pipes where small yield weapons are detonated, so that a blast of radiation travels up the pipe towards the electronic equipment or satellite that is being tested. Immediately after the blast, explosive devices seal the pipe so radioactive gases and debris are contained. (Several techniques are used such as pinching the pipe (imagine pinching a soda straw, but on a large scale) and having doors closed by explosives block off the pipe. We were lucky that the Defense Nuclear Agency allowed us to visit their part of the Test Site. (Apparently, P-Tunnel is not part of the normal tour).

After that, we headed back to Mercury, turned our badges in, and went back to Las Vegas. Several observations about the Test Site -- it is large (approximately 1350 square miles (3456 square kilometers) -- larger than the state of Rhode Island). The terrain is typical Mojave desert / Death Valley terrain -- a series of flat valleys surrounded by mountains. If you plan on taking the tour, you should call Brenda at DOE External Affairs (702) 295-0494 soon, because they may not do tours much longer. This is because the Test Site is starting to close down, particularly because of the current moratorium on nuclear testing.

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