

THEY DROPPED THE A-BOMB ON ME!

By Soldier "X"

THE WIND is whipping through the desert like a sharp bladed knife and mesquite and tumbleweed roll all over the loose sand in a frenzy. It must have looked like this to the wagon trains that wheeled over this same territory so many years ago. But then I hear the metallic voice over the loudspeaker droning, "Zero-hour, minus three minutes" and I'm roughly pulled back to the present. I dragged my eyes reluctantly away from the cold glitter of the early morning stars and shifted around searching for comfort in the small trench I'm crouched in. The man crowded in front of me partially turns and I see the vapor of his breath as he whispers, "It won't be long now until the big bang." I nod and burrow a little deeper into the hole trying to recall the instructions given to me as to my course of action during and after the blast. Keep my head down, wait until how many many seconds after the explosion to open my eyes? I'm trying to recall but the beating of my heart seems to interfere with my thinking powers.

"Zero-hour, minus 20 seconds," the amplifier voice of the talker cuts through my thoughts. If the

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next twenty seconds are anything like the last hour, they'll be an eternity. I couldn't keep thinking.

In the beginning there was none of this excitement. In fact I felt rather detached when I was informed I was to be included in the personnel observing a Nevada Test Site atomic explosion. My job was to assist in testing radiological safety gear and procedures for decontamination. Before leaving my base I'd had to bone up on procedure and attended daily lectures and advanced instruction until my head was swimming.



Infantrymen dropped into the trenches preparatory to setting off of A-Bomb.

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When I first arrived in the vicinity of the testing grounds I blinked at the sight that met my eyes. Several overturned tanks, jeeps and jeep parts were scattered all over the countryside, and "dead soldiers" everywhere, horribly mangled with many completely decapitated. A few of the heads rolled in macabre fashion with the wind currents. It was a horrendous display of annihilation on a full and frightening scale. It looked *too real*!

This awesome scenery I learned, was the results of a previous A-bomb test, and even as I stared I saw a Sherman tank collapse suddenly in a pile of rubble as one of the supports keeping it standing gave away. The clatter sounded like a pile of scrap metal being moved. It was then I felt the probing finger of fear in my vitals. The classroom was too far removed from the actual scene and during instruction I would find my thoughts wandering often. *But here I knew this would never occur.*



The men participating in the test sat in an open trench with their backs toward ground zero as the big flash whitens sky. Trench is 3500 yards from the zero spot.

A few days after our arrival we were notified that barring bad weather the test would be "on." From that minute I guess I joined the brigade of clock watchers for sure. We did everything by the clock and I must have worn out the sleeve of my uniform as I checked my watch hundreds of times each day.

Now it was the beginning of the big day. The time was . . . "Zero-hour minus ten seconds." My cramped body began to throb with pain, or was it excitement? I shivered and wished I had brought two blankets instead of the one I huddled in. The man in front of me began to fidget and coughed hollowly.

"Zero-hour minus five seconds." The talker droned on.

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What am I supposed to do? Quick! God, I can't remember a thing!

Then it came to me in a rush . . . don't move now . . . count off eight seconds before the shock hits . . . then, out of the trench and watch the explosion.

Quick now, did I forget anything? Yeah, don't spring out of the trench immediately after the eight second count.

"Three."

There may be two shock waves . . . keep your glasses on . . . take off helmet if it interferes with vision . . .

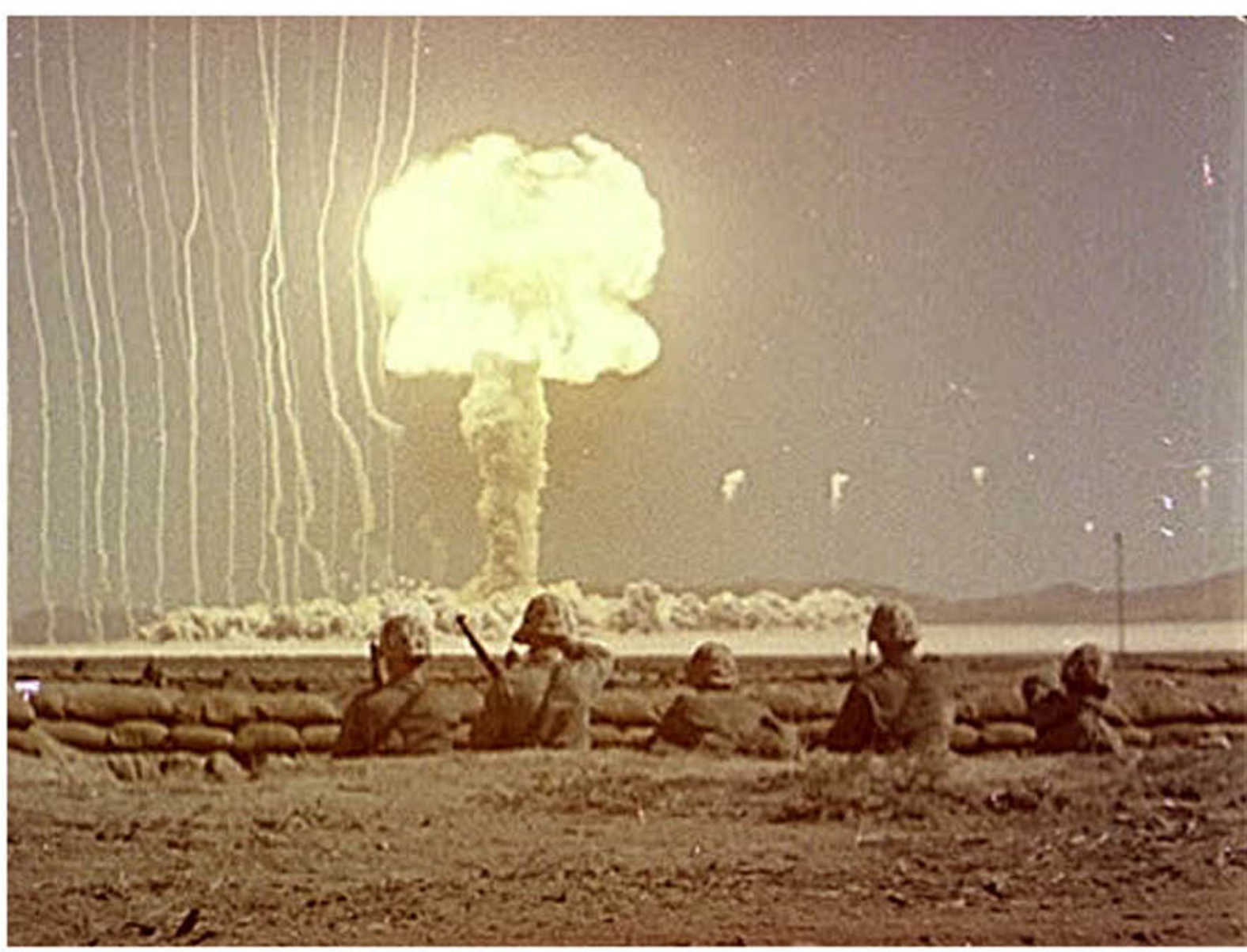
"Two."

Will I be able to get up? My legs feel paralyzed . . .

"One!" For the first time the calm voice broke slightly.

Suddenly it seemed my eardrums would burst from the dead silence that pressed in upon us like a huge smothering blanket. I kept my eyelids tightly clenched, my arm and blanket over my face but there was no protection on this earth to keep the blinding orange light out. It filled my skull, distorted my eyes, I felt filled to capacity with a body disintegrating orange flame.

I began to count off the shock seconds automatically . . . one, two, three, four, fi . . ."



The first and second blast were almost as one, and it seemed the whole earth trembled under their fantastic power. My buddy and I tangled legs for an instant as the explosion sent us flying and I felt dirt cover us. It was almost as if I were dead and the first spadeful of earth was hurtling down on my coffin.

I leap to my feet and the cramped feeling is completely forgotten . . . dirt surrounds me . . . the air is thick with it . . . I throw my helmet to the ground along with my gas mask and move to the exit fast.

Then I saw the true power and

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fury of nature as a giant fireball sluggishly rolled upward through the thick layers of dust: I estimated its distance at about 15,000 feet up. Surrounding the red mass are twisting white snakes of clouds. I see no flame as the cloud turns a sickening purple against the washed out blue of the sky. This is color as few humans have ever seen it, magnificent, threatening . . . and horrible.

Beneath the fireball is a tornado shaped formation of dirt forming the deadly dust known as fallout. Then came the familiar mushroom of death that still haunts the Japanese after our attack on their country during W.W. II.

"Like a mushroom of doom," is the silly rhyme which pops into my head. Then there is nothing to see as the thing rides higher and higher into the sky. The dust is settling quickly now and the remainder of my job begins. After checking radiation levels we gratefully head for the canteen and some hot joe. I feel the biting cold of the desert winds again and shudder momentarily as the cramp in my leg returns with renewed force. Cursing, I know everything is normal again.

It's strange how a deal like this affects us all. Take Cory, a joe who's always sounding off. You know, one of those jokers you meet every day in the service. I looked at him expecting some left over Bob Hope material, but he was sitting, coffee cup tightly clenched in trembling hands, staring at the table. Bill, the guy we idolize because of his sage and comforting advice . . . he sat very silently, staring . . . Balassarian, the intelligent and sensitive young Yale boy the men like to call

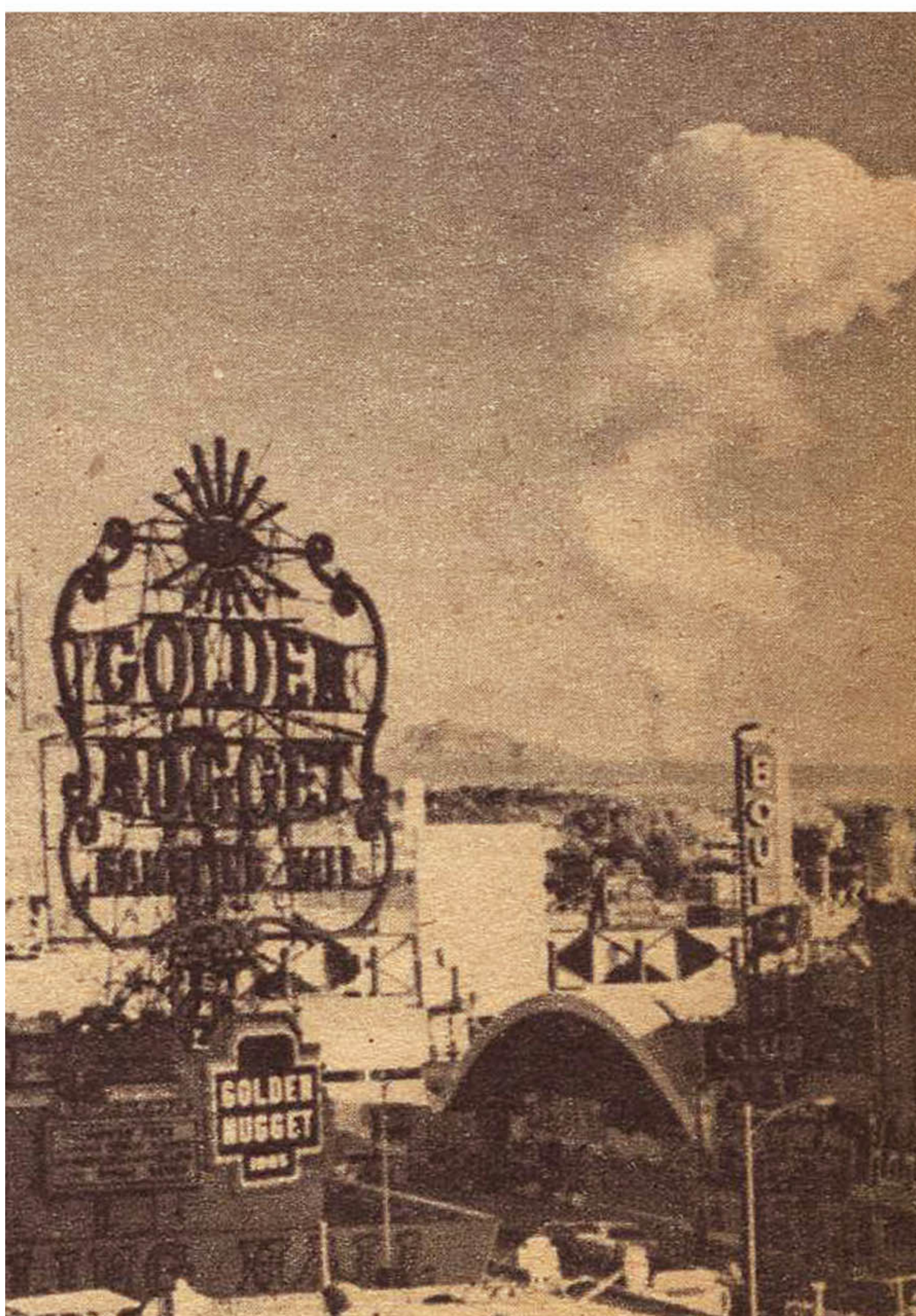


My job was to test radiological safety gear and procedures for decontamination. In background, far right, is house number three, miraculously standing after test.

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"lawyer" was sitting beside me his lips soundlessly muttering something. In fact there was a hushed silence about the men in the canteen, a silence strange and alien to those boisterous quarters. A silence, I guess a lot of us prayed would never blanket the world . . . a quietude of death. This was an experience that will be etched upon my brain for as long as I shall live.

After seeing this bomb with my own eyes and reviewing all I've been taught, I realize that it is possible for man to survive it, and most of the dread and awe I regarded it with in those minutes in the trench have disappeared . . . until the next time.



One of largest mushrooms rises 40,000 feet over skyline of Las Vegas, Nevada.

TAB

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