

Interview of Ralph (“Suit Guy”)

Ralph: Boy this is just reputable looking, isn't it?

Interviewer: (Laughter).

Ralph: I was afraid to wash it, it might fall apart totally. Twelve is the building at Los Alamos. It was called “DP Site,” which, right now is totally surrounded by--

Interviewer: Okay, Ralph, tell us what you're wearing and why this is such an unusual piece of history.

Ralph: Well, I'm wearing a piece of GI issue, which doesn't look like normal stuff, but the CM-12 designation on here stands for Chemistry Metallurgy Division 12. Now, this is where we handled radioactive material, particularly plutonium, in preparation for the bomb. When the war was over, right at the end of it, I had been working at S-site where they kept the high explosives, but I no longer had a job because we stopped making those bombs immediately. But we still continued to process plutonium and other radioactive materials and I was looking for something else to do. I didn't have enough points to get out of the service at the time. So I asked if I could go into something that was a little bit more involved with chemistry because my training had been in chemical engineering, not high explosives. So they found a site for me at DP-site. DP-site was where they did most of the processing of the plutonium before it was put inside the bomb. In 1995, I went back 50 years later and wanted to show my recently deceased wife where I worked with plutonium and you can't get near the place because it's closed in barbed wire now and it's totally off limits because it's highly radioactive. So this uniform is what we would wear when we worked in there with the, the radioactive material. When I left, I managed to commandeer one of these uniforms because they were supposedly turned back in and went to the

laundry every day after we used them. I don't have any idea that there was any radioactivity left in it because I remember I had four children so it didn't bother me that way (laughter). I have had two mild cases of cancer, once or another, whether or not it's associated with that or not. But I don't think this glows in the dark. We did wear this during the day. We'd go in, in the morning, through a change room, get rid of my clothes, put on one of these coveralls, go back in and do the work. At lunch we reverse that: got rid of these coveralls, took a shower, they took various radioactive tests of us, and go out and have lunch, and then come back again. So we repeated this two or three times a day. Well, I took one of these with me when I left. I think it's too late now for them to get me for stealing government-issue or something. This is what it was, and it's a little tattered over the years. I was afraid to wash it again because I think it might have fallen apart.

Interviewer: So this is a piece of Los Alamos history.

Ralph: Yes, this is what we wore, and that was the designation of the unit where we worked.

Interviewer: So, are those stains? Are those work stains?

Ralph: They probably were stains from -- maybe, this is in the trunk of my car for a number of years, something like that. No, I think the stains and so forth probably have accumulated over the years because I have had this tucked away somewhere.

Interviewer: So, you spent a lot of hours in something like that, a lot of days?

Ralph: Yes, quite a few days. I may have told you the war was over now, so I was in a new job and working with the radioactive stuff and they were very concerned about how much radioactivity we might have absorbed. So every six weeks, we were forced the pleasure to leave

the hill and go on a three-day pass -- I was still in the Army -- and that was to get away from any further contamination. When we'd come back in, we'd report immediately into the infirmary, into the hospital, and they would check everything going in and going out of me for 24 hours to check for residual radiation. As far as I know, I never had enough that they were concerned about it and I never heard anything about it, so I think they probably did a pretty good job of taking care of us in that respect. But these were the uniforms we wore.

Crew: So, this was worn *after* the war ended?

Ralph: Yes

Crew: You didn't wear this *during* the research?

Ralph: I didn't because I wasn't involved in that. I'm sure this was a standard uniform at DP-site while the war was still going on, but I didn't transfer over there until shortly after the war was over.

Crew: Okay, can you say that to him? Can you say, "This was the standard uniform for those working," and say what "DP" stands for.

Ralph: Well, DP-site was the site at Los Alamos. It was on the same mesa that the tech area was, and I do not know what the DP stood for. Could be the P stands for plutonium, I never knew that, and maybe the D was for deuterium or something. I don't know what the DP stood for. But that was the particular site. The CM-12 was the division -- Chemistry Metallurgy was a division -- where they worked with radioactive materials.

Crew: And if you could tell him, say, "The DP-site during the war, this is the suit—"

Interviewer: Yes, just make it a declarative statement, rather than responding to a question, just say, "This is--"

Ralph: This is one of the uniforms, the coveralls that we wore while we worked at DP-site during the day and, this was the clothes we wore. Every day they were changed and checked for radioactivity and washed. So there were new uniforms every day, but this was the standard uniform that was used at DP-site.

Ralph: At S-site, what did you wear?

Ralph: At S-site, just normal GI clothes. We were working with high explosives there, so I probably had GI fatigues on, something like that. That was standard military, this was not military stuff.

Crew: So, you saw several men walking around in these big white pajamas? I mean, I think that would be interesting going onto this--

Interviewer: Everyone was dressed like this?

Ralph: As far as I know, everyone was. I believe that when you went inside the radioactive area where they process these materials, this was the uniform that they wanted you to wear so that they could make sure that it was checked and carefully taken care of. I imagine -- I saw others wearing them, whether they were some of the revered physicists or just some of us young engineers who were doing this type of thing. I think everyone probably wore these as long as they were in the radioactive area.

Crew: Okay, can I get another tilt-up with you looking at Jeff? He's going to tilt-up from--

Ralph: I have been looking at him.

Crew: But you don't need to talk.

Interviewer: You can just look at me and they'll do the tilting.

Ralph: Okay.

Interviewer: --because he needs to do his magic camera work.

Crew: Thank you. Okay.

Interviewer: Okay, Ralph.

Ralph: That does it. I was debriefed, I was told things I should never talk about, and I didn't for years. I told you about the time, two years later, when all the information came out in Life magazine, which totally described what we were doing in casting these high explosives for the detonation of the bomb. Even so, after that, when my children were growing up we didn't talk about the war. I didn't tell anybody about it. It was probably not until, maybe 1995 -- 50 years or so later -- when things began to look a little bit different with the cold war and the end of the Cold War. All of a sudden, some of us older guys say, "Hey, wait a minute. This may sound prehistoric, but it was typical of people then and is probably typical of people now to think that there can never be another war like this as dangerous." We are concerned, I am concerned, I think many of my contemporaries are concerned, that there's too much impractical idealism going on to think we cannot have things like this develop again. If they develop again, it won't be a single nation we're fighting. We're at war and it's not with a single nation. It's with a whole concept that spread over, and the difficulty is that any of those small elements in this war could cause us a lot more harm now than anybody could have caused the United States during the Second World War. We were protected so by the oceans then. We're not protected that way

now, and I am concerned that there's not enough concern about what can happen if we don't confront the bad parts of the war that we're in right now. We're in a war, it's just a different type. That's why I think we talk about it today more than we ever did before. It's out of concern for the next generations.

Crew: You also mention while Bob was leaving, Ralph, that you also think that men talked about it 50 years later because kids, people, young people, didn't understand the war?

Ralph: As my kids grew up and matured, I think young people today, and I have met some of them in high school, talked about this, the Second World War is like prehistoric times. I have the feeling that they can't believe that people are like that anymore, that they could not do things like this -- the Holocaust, how unreasonable, unbelievable. Somehow or another, impractical idealism tells them that these things can't happen again. That's my big concern and I think that's why we talk about it as much as we do. Before we finally are gone, I hope we don't have any more of this, but I think being prepared now is more important than it was at the start of the Second World War. We had time to prepare. We weren't attacked, 9/11 shows us that that's not possible anymore. We can't protect ourselves. So, we need to confront this where it is, and I'm a strong advocate in favor of our continuing what we're doing now. While I didn't vote for Obama, my hat's off to him -- the presidency has made this man, and he's not going to pull us out just because the mass of the people of the United States want him to. They don't like it. They can't believe that it's that dangerous. Before we were bombed at Pearl Harbor, I remember so well the majority of the people of the United States didn't want us to get involved in that. But when you are confronted with something, you have to respond. I think our President, after all the political rhetoric that got him elected, and support of all the people who wanted him to pull us out of all

these things, he looks at it differently now. He has an important responsibility that goes beyond being a Republican or a Democrat.

Interviewer: I am amazed the uniform fits you so well. You know, the overalls fit you so perfectly.

Ralph: Well, at one time, when my wife got ill, I weighed 30 pounds more than I do now. But I have been at this weight now for four years.

Interviewer: Well, it looks great on you still.

Crew: Yeah.

Ralph: Well, I don't know I'll wear it to church (laughter).

Interviewer: How did you protect your head? I mean, you got stuff on your body, but what did you wear to protect your head?

Ralph: I'm sure we had skull caps of some sort, I thought about that. I didn't bring one of those.

Crew: I find it all so silly. That there's absolutely no -- how does this protect you?

Interviewer: Well, they were making it up as they went along.

Crew: I know.

Interviewer: They just had to do something.

Ralph: I'm sure I had a little cap around, and thought about that.

Crew: The face would be exposed?

Ralph: I would probably wear gloves, but this was the main protection. We had to strip and get rid of everything when we left there at noon, and again when we left there in the afternoon. We got rid of everything and took a shower and got other clothes and they kept all that.

Interviewer: Who was the father of the hydrogen bomb? It was, um--

Ralph: Teller.

Interviewer: Teller, did you ever meet tiller?

Ralph: No, I didn't meet him. As I told you, the only -- I met Oppenheimer. I had lunch with him, but I had no idea who he was. He was the boss of the operation, but I had no knowledge of nuclear physics at the time. That wasn't that far advanced, literally, not more than two handfuls of people in the world who knew about that.

Crew: Thank, you Ralph.

Ralph: All right, good.

End of recording