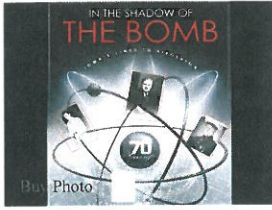


# Iowans helped make, deliver bombs, and felt impact

Rick Jost 4:28 p.m. CDT August 1, 2015

[The Des Moines Register](#)



(Photo: Mark Marturello/The Register)

Seventy years ago Aug. 6 the United States dropped a uranium-loaded atomic bomb, "Little Boy," on Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later a plutonium bomb, "Fat Man," was released on the city of Nagasaki. Together, it's been estimated these two weapons instantly killed more than 100,000 people. Later many more died as a result of injuries or radiation exposure. Soon after the airstrikes World War II ended with Japan's surrender. And to this day the events cast a long, nuclear shadow over Iowans who helped create, ship and drop The Bomb.

## THE MARINE

Bill Griffin survived combat landings at three Pacific islands in World War II: Saipan, Tinian and Iwo Jima.

Nothing could've prepared him for the days ahead.

After Japan surrendered, Marine Cpl. John William "Bill" Griffin of Morning Sun was deployed to guard duty at Nagasaki, Japan. It was just a few weeks after "Fat Man" had demolished the city. He never did understand, he later said, just what he was supposed to be doing there. Guard what? Nagasaki was in ruins — miles of charred rubble, ashen rivers full of bloated bodies, and the acrid odor of burned human flesh.

Upon his discharge, Griffin returned home and found work as a welder and riveter. He and his wife, Mary, raised three children: sons John William Jr. and Patrick, and a daughter, Tamara.

Not long after his return to the states, however, Griffin began to exhibit signs of radiation illness. His hair began to fall out, his teeth too. His gums bled.

In 1969, tragedy struck the Griffins. Patrick, 8, died of leukemia. There was no evidence that radiation exposure caused second-generation leukemia, but Bill Griffin was certain.

"The United States government was well aware of what they were sending us into — we were used as radioactive guinea pigs," he said in a 1990 interview in People magazine. "I feel they should repay me in some way. But what do you charge for a little boy?"

Still, his surviving children say, he was not bitter. Nor did he lose his sense of humor. He even mischievously made a sign that hung by the front door of the house: DANGER, ATOMIC RADIATION VETERAN.

"That's Dad's sick sense of humor," laughs daughter Tamara "Tammy" Martin of Columbus Junction.

Like so many other Americans, he viewed the bombs as horrible, but also essential to bring the war to a swift end and save many lives, says Griffin's son, John, of Mooresville, N.C.

John's father, a long-time smoker, developed emphysema. On Aug. 26, 1997, he was struggling to breathe and was taken to a local hospital.

"They said the doctor and nurse came into his room," says John. "He was laying in the bed, and sat up, and said, 'Oh God,' and then fell back into bed, dead."

He was 74.

## THE SCIENTIST

[A rock marks the spot. \(/story/opinion/editorials/2014/12/20/manhattan-project-isu-role/20684131/\)](#)

The rock, about the size of a bushel basket, is nestled on the eastern edge of the Iowa State University campus in Ames. A small, affixed plaque reads: "On this site, between 1942 and 1946 over 2,000,000 pounds of uranium metal were produced for the Manhattan District Project by Dr. F.H. Spedding and associates."

Frank Harold Spedding was an acclaimed chemist who in 1937 joined the faculty of Iowa State, then named Iowa State College. The Manhattan Project was the United States' hush-hush program to develop an atomic bomb.

Spedding founded and managed a secret wartime laboratory in Ames and is credited with creating technology to produce rich metallic uranium on a large scale. The uranium core would become explosive material in the Hiroshima bomb, and lead to development of plutonium for the Nagasaki bomb.

His team produced enough uranium for the world's first nuclear chain reaction, tested at the University of Chicago. In Ames, research and production was conducted in a modest building where fires were common and where there was at least one explosion.

The chemist continued to manage the Ames Laboratory until his retirement in 1968.

Edith Landin, 65, of Boone County, who was Spedding's secretary after his retirement, says the good-natured professor chain-smoked cigars, lighting one Roy Tan Perfecto Extra off another. He also kept a box of Russell Stover chocolates in his office, she says.

It's a wonder Spedding didn't die young, considering his habits and years of potential exposure to radiation dust.

As Spedding observed in his notes: "When one considers all the new types of chemicals and materials chemists employ in their researches, one might wonder how a chemist ever grows old."

Spedding died in 1984 at age 82.

## THE SAILOR

Glen Milbrodt was too young to join the Navy in World War II and, besides, he couldn't swim.

He took care of the first problem by lying about his age. The Navy solved the second problem when some sailors simply tossed him in the water during basic training, his sons Arlin and Ken Milbrodt recall.

A cigarette may have helped save his life.

Milbrodt, from Akron, shipped out in 1945 with 1,195 other seamen on the cruiser U.S.S. Indianapolis. The ship's classified mission: Transport the atomic bomb to Tinian island. A B-29 bomber took it from there, and the Indianapolis left to rejoin the fleet.

The ship never made it to the fleet. Shortly after midnight July 30, 1945, two Japanese submarine torpedoes slammed into the cruiser. About 300 sailors died in the explosion. The rest, nearly 900 men, made it into the water minutes before the ship sank.

"By dusk ... hundreds of sharks had encircled them," wrote Doug Stanton in "In Harm's Way." "... the boys, lying in their rafts, hanging from floating nets, and bobbing in life vests, began to feel things bumping from below — nudges and kicks they mistook for the touch of their comrades treading water."

"Four days later, when the Navy finally learned of the sinking, only 321 of these sailors were still among the living."

Glen Milbrodt was one of the lucky 321. He was on deck, taking a smoke break when the torpedoes hit. Upon hearing "abandon ship!" Milbrodt jumped into the sea and started swimming, says Arlin Milbrodt of Sioux City.

Milbrodt swam through ship debris and diesel fuel and found a life raft. He managed to pull five or six more men into the raft. That's where he stayed for more than four days, surviving on a malted milk tablet and a can of Spam until they were rescued, says Ken Milbrodt of Rogers, Ark.

An estimated 30 Iowans had been on the ship and two survived. Milbrodt's sons say he struggled for years with the nightmarish memories.

"I think Dad experienced survivor's guilt," says Ken Milbrodt.

Glen Milbrodt died in 2000. He was 73.

## THE PILOT

There are no historical markers like that of the Meredith Willson boyhood home in Mason City.

But the handsome neighborhood on Waterbury Road in Des Moines was once the childhood home of a man whose exploits did much more than "Seventy-six Trombones" to shape history.

Lt. Col. Paul Warfield Tibbets Jr. (<http://data.desmoinesregister.com/famous-iowans/paul-warfield-tibbets-jr>) was the commanding pilot of the U.S. Army Air Corps B-29 that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. He named the plane "Enola Gay," after his mother, born in Glidden, Ia.



Col. Paul W. Tibbets stands beside the B-29 Superfortress bomber the Enola Gay in 1945. (Photo: AP)

The feisty Tibbets steadfastly defended the mission until his death. No regrets.

In Bob Greene's 2000 book "Duty: A Father, His Son, and the Man who Won the War," Tibbets explained: "Do you have any idea how many American lives would have been lost had we launched a ground invasion of Japan, instead of dropping the bomb? And how many Japanese lives? I sleep so well because I know how many people got to live full lives because of what we did."

Tibbets lived a life in full, dying in 2005 at age 92 in Columbus, Ohio.

And his legacy continues to fly. His grandson, Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul W. Tibbets IV, 48, in June took command of the 509th Bomb Wing at Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo.

The grandson's Air Force nickname: "Nuke."

## THE DOCTOR

For nearly 15 years the Department of Energy has been required to provide medical screening to former employees of the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant near Burlington, where nuclear weapons were once assembled.

For 10 years the DOE has done the same for former employees of the Ames Laboratory at Iowa State University.

The Burlington plant now produces only conventional weapons. The Ames center still operates as a national lab of the U.S. Department of Energy, but its nuclear reactor has been shut down.

Yet all these years later, Dr. Laurence Fuortes of the University of Iowa College of Public Health, says, "we're still finding people who come to us for their first appointment. It blows my mind."

Fuortes and his staff have screened more than 3,000 former employees at Ames and Burlington. These checkups have detected a range of health issues for some workers, including suspected lung disease, hypertension, diabetes and more than 20 kinds of cancer.

Federal law also requires financial compensation for workers who successfully file claims for some occupational lung diseases and radiation-induced cancers. The government has paid millions of dollars to former Burlington and Ames lab workers.

Fuortes, 61, says he continues the work because "it is a great combination of clinical and social service with a very interesting population."

Most of the World War II-era workers are gone now. Back then, of course, winning the war was job one and it trumped worker safety. As evidence, Fuortes pulls a copy of hand-written letter from his files. It's from an Ames lab worker to his family in Oregon, postmarked Aug. 8, 1945 — two days after Hiroshima was destroyed.

"To say we have dreamed of this thing for over two years is no exaggeration," he wrote. "I hope that it will shorten the war and that it will be an instrument in the preservation of peace. I think it has a good chance of doing both of these things."

## THE MUNITIONS MAKER

The story ends where it began.

Mary Dilts was born Jan. 16, 1932, in Toolesboro, Ia., the daughter of James and Florence Court Dilts. She married John William "Bill" Griffin Sr., the Marine we met earlier, on July 3, 1949, in Columbus Junction.



An avid mushroom hunter and gardener, Mary Griffin worked in production at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant near Burlington from 1964 to 1995, building missiles and bombs. She worked in the nuclear area but never discussed exactly what she did there, says her daughter, Tammy Martin.

Many production workers had to handle ammonia nitrate, called yellow powder or yellow cake. "When we were little," Tammy recalls, "mother would come home and she was yellow."

Mary Griffin got sick with cancer — non-Hodgkin's lymphoma — and died in 2002 at age 70.

Her sickness and death led Tammy Martin to wage a long, spirited campaign to persuade the federal government to recognize that her mother's work at the munitions plant had contributed to her death.

Mary Griffin worked at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant near Burlington. (Photo: Special to the Register)

Ultimately the federal government surrendered and granted a benefit payment of \$150,000, Tammy says.

The money comes in handy, she says, "but at the time I just wanted them to admit they had killed her.

"Because I think my mom gave her life for our country, too."

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### **Celebration of Peace**

It's a big bell, a 2,000-pounder that hangs quietly in a shelter atop a grassy rise south of the Iowa Statehouse in Des Moines.

The people of the Yamanashi prefecture presented the monument to Iowa in 1962. It was a thank-you to Iowans for sending breeding hogs and feed corn to the Japanese district after a typhoon devastated the area in 1959.

That mission to Japan became known as the "Iowa Hog Lift."

Thursday at 7:30 p.m. the bronze carillon will be the site of an annual Hiroshima/Nagasaki observance — a time to reflect back on 1945 to look forward in peace.

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