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The Bomb Chroniclers



"How to Photograph an Atomic Bomb"

ZERO HOUR Milliseconds after the image at left, the vehicles beneath the fireball were obliterated.

By WILLIAM J. BROAD Published: September 13, 2010

They risked their lives to capture on film hundreds of blinding flashes, rising fireballs and mushroom clouds.

Multimedia

The blast from one detonation hurled a man and his camera into a ditch. When he got up, a second wave knocked him down again. Then there was radiation.

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"How to Photograph an Atomic Bomb"

SHOCK WAVE Capturing an atomic explosion at a test site in the Nevada desert in 1957. Much of these filmmakers' work has been declassified since 1997.

While many of the scientists who made atom bombs during the cold war became famous, the men who filmed what happened when those bombs were detonated made up a secret corps.



Their existence and the nature of their work has emerged from the shadows only since the federal government began a concerted effort to declassify their films about a dozen years ago. In all, the atomic moviemakers fashioned 6,500 secret films, according to federal officials.

Today, the result is a surge in fiery images on television and movie screens, as well as growing public knowledge about the atomic filmmakers.

The images are getting "seared into people's imaginations," said Robert S. Norris, author of "Racing for the Bomb" and an atomic historian. They bear witness, he added, "to extraordinary and terrifying power."

Two new atomic documentaries, "[Countdown to Zero](#)" and "[Nuclear Tipping Point](#)," feature archival images of the blasts. Both argue that the threat of atomic terrorism is on the rise and call for the strengthening of nuclear safeguards and, ultimately, the elimination of global arsenals.

As for the atomic cameramen, there aren't that many left. "Quite a few have died from [cancer](#)," George Yoshitake, 82, one of the survivors, said of his peers in an interview. "No doubt it was related to the testing."

The cinematographers focused on nuclear test explosions in the Pacific and Nevada.

Electrified wire ringed their headquarters in the Hollywood Hills. The inconspicuous building, on Wonderland Avenue in Laurel Canyon, had a sound stage, screening rooms, processing labs, animation gear, film vaults and a staff of more than 250 producers, directors and cameramen — all with top-secret clearances.

When originally made, the films served as vital sources of information for scientists investigating the nature of nuclear arms and their destructiveness. Some movies also served as tutorials for federal and Congressional leaders.

Today, arms controllers see the old films as studies in gung-ho paranoia.



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SCIENCE

[Atomic Cinematographers](#)

snapshot of what our last century was like.”

After inaugurating the nuclear age and dropping two atomic bombs on Japan in World War II, the United States threw itself into expanding its nuclear arsenal. New designs required test detonations to make sure they worked properly. Between 1946 and 1962, the nation set off more than 200 atmospheric blasts.

The secret film unit, established in 1947 by the military, was known as the [Lookout Mountain Laboratory](#). Surrounded by the lush greenery of Laurel Canyon, just minutes from the Sunset Strip, the lab drew on Hollywood talent and technology to pursue its clandestine ends.

“The neighbors were suspicious because the lights were on all night long,” Mr. Yoshitake recalled.

Film historians say the unit tested many technologies that Hollywood later embraced, including advanced lenses and cameras, films and projection techniques.

The cameramen fanned out from Wonderland Avenue to governmental test sites in the South Pacific and the [Nevada](#) desert, their job to chronicle the age’s fury. It put them as close as two miles from the blasts.

The visual records helped scientists do everything from estimating the size of nuclear detonations to measuring their destructive power. Mock towns went up in flames.

“They have this very odd voice,” said Mark Sugg, a film producer at the World Security Institute, a private group in Washington. “You and I would be appalled that some hydrogen bomb vaporized a corner of what used to be paradise. But they’ve got a guy bragging about it.”

A 2006 book, [“How to Photograph an Atomic Bomb.”](#) explores the nature of the cameramen’s secretive enterprise, its pages full of declassified photographs and technical diagrams.

“They’re kind of unrecognized patriots,” said Peter Kuran, the book’s author and a special-effects filmmaker in Hollywood. “The images that they captured will, for a long time, be a



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Mr. Yoshitake recalled documenting what a fiery explosion did to pigs — whose skin resembles that of humans.

INSIDE I

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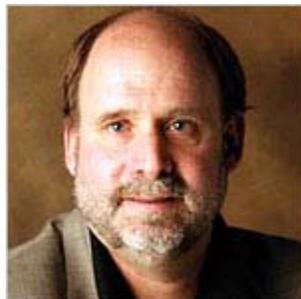
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