

70th anniversary of atomic bomb detonation

Bryan Betts, Alamogordo 10:22 p.m. MT April 4, 2015



(Photo: Jett Loe—Sun-News)

WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE >> At about 8:30 a.m. Saturday morning, a caravan of over 200 vehicles left Tularosa High School and headed west, driving along normally restricted roads that cross the Tularosa Basin before turning north, toward Mockingbird Gap and the Oscura Mountains to a site in the desert that seems like the middle of nowhere.

About the same time, motorists coming from other places like Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Socorro were already turning off U.S. Highway 380 and driving onto what was once called the White Sands Proving Ground, showing their photo identification to employees at the gate before continuing south across the desert.

The visitors converged in record numbers Saturday at the location called the Trinity Site, where the U.S. Army detonated the first nuclear bomb almost 70 years ago and caused an earth-shaking explosion with implications for human life that continue to be felt worldwide.

White Sands Missile Range opened Trinity Site for the first of two tours this year. It's also the 70th anniversary of the top secret testing of the first atomic bomb being detonated.

WSMR Chief of Public Affairs Erin Dorrance said visitors from across the country and the world traveled to see a spot that quite literally marks a turning point in history.

"It brought a quick end to World War II, and it ushered in the atomic age," Dorrance said. "So out here in the middle of nowhere New Mexico changed the world 70 years ago."

A final tally posted on the WSMR's Facebook page stated that 5,543 visitors came out for the day's tour. The tours, she said, typically draw 3,000 to 4,000 people.

Visitors began gathering at Tularosa High School for the tour before 7 a.m. Workers with the Alamogordo Chamber of Commerce directed drivers to park in rows that would allow for an orderly exit out to the site.

Many of the vehicles bore New Mexico license plates while others had registration from states as close as Texas and as far away as Washington and Michigan.

Claire Bertollo, 67, said she and her husband started at their home in Murphy, North Carolina, and drove four days across six states to attend Saturday's tour. They said they have visited other sites throughout their cross country journey but were motivated foremost by a fascination with the science and imagery of the Trinity test.

"This is the whole reason for the trip, to come to here," she said.

Marine Corps veteran Pete Rosado, 47, drove from San Diego to see the site with another military veteran who'd taken an interest in the bomb. Both men said they'd previously visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese cities where the United States dropped atomic bombs weeks after the test at the Trinity Site.

"This completes the loop," Rosado said.

An Army police vehicle led the caravan from Tularosa, passing the Tularosa Basin Downwinders protesting the alleged fallout from the atomic test. The caravan arrived at the Trinity Site about two hours later to a parking lot quickly filling with cars, recreational vehicles and tour buses.

The remains of a massive steel shell greeted visitors at the entrance. Nicknamed Jumbo, the shell was designed to contain the explosion in case the nuclear chain reaction didn't occur, a backup to prevent plutonium from spreading across the desert. Confidence in the bomb's mechanics, however, led scientists to conduct the test without the steel shell.

A quarter mile walk leads from the parking lot to ground zero, which is surrounded by fencing. A lava-rock obelisk marks the exact location where the bomb was detonated atop a 100-foot steel tower.

Visitors posed for photos near a footing from the tower and in front of the monument. A plaque states the date of the test, July 16, 1945.

Several documentary crews were on hand for the day's tour, including crews with members from Japan. WSMR official Dorrance said the 70th anniversary had drawn a significant number of Japanese tourists and journalists.

Other attractions at ground zero included a bomb casing similar to that of the Fat Man bomb detonated over Nagasaki and a shelter protecting a portion of the crater created by the explosion, which has since been filled in.

Just outside ground zero WSMR employees displayed samples of trinitite, rock that formed when desert sand swept up into the nuclear fireball melted into a green glass-like material. Most of the material has since been removed from the site, though a rock shop off U.S. Highway 380 advertised the rock for sale.

Back at the parking lot, a bus shuttled visitors two miles away to the McDonald Ranch, where scientists assembled the bomb. The house on the property remarkably survived the explosion despite its proximity to ground zero, which scientists attribute to the way the bomb's shock wave crested at that location.

The military released a cover story following the test that attributed it to the explosion of an ammunition magazine. The Alamogordo Daily News published a brief about the explosion midway down the front page, though the true significance of the test would not be known until after the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Albuquerque resident Gene Glasgow, 69, visited the Trinity Site for the time Saturday with relatives from Arizona. Born and raised in New Mexico, he said he'd grown curious through talking to people who witnessed the explosion, including one man who was laying trap line in the mountains at the time.

"He thought the end of the world had come," he said.

The WSMR hosts tours of the Trinity Site twice yearly, on the first Saturday of April and October. The next tour will take place on Oct. 3.

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