NAAV NEWS

SEPTEMBER 2026 **3RD QUARTER**

Publication of the National Association of Atomic Veterans

FROM THE DESK OF OUR NATIONAL COMMANDER

Rapid City Convention Recap: Remembering Service, Honoring Allies, and Pressing for Atomic Veterans' Compensation

It was a pleasure to meet with everyone who made it to this year's NAAV Convention in Rapid City, South Dakota. Technical glitches aside, the mood throughout was good, and the gathering reminded us why these reunions matter: they put people who share a unique history in the same room.

A Missile Site and a Veteran's Perspective

A highlight of the trip was our visit to the Minuteman missile site, made far more meaningful by Al Hall, a former Minuteman missile veteran. Al's firsthand knowledge brought the Cold War hardware to life. He was also part of the convention presentations, which gave attendees a chance to connect the history of the site with the experiences of those who served in the nuclear era.

Mount Rushmore in the Nation's 250th Year

Watching the lighting ceremony at Mount Rushmore was an impressive experience, especially in the 250th year of the country. Unfortunately, audio-visual equipment problems struck twice: once at the national park and again during our own convention presentations. Our presenters worked around the issues and kept the program moving, but the park service was unable to overcome its difficulties, which dampened an otherwise memorable evening.

Recognizing Our Supporters

This year, two advocates received awards for their support of NAAV's goals and objectives:

- **Kevin Davis** of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS)
- **John Wells** of Military Veterans Advocacy (MVA)

Our thanks go to both for their continued work on behalf of Atomic Veterans. I would also like to thank everyone who presented, shared what their organizations are doing, and contributed their expertise. The convention is only as good as the people who fill its schedule.

Legislative Update: H.R. 10115

There is progress to report on Capitol Hill. The **Radiation Exposure Compensation Reauthorization Act of 2026 (H.R. 10115)** was introduced in the House on August 17. Key provisions of interest to Atomic Veterans include:

- **Extending the sunset date** for the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA).
- **Expanding eligibility** by adding cleanup veterans from Enewetak Atoll, Palomares, Spain, and Thule, Greenland as eligible "on-site participants."
- **Increasing the one-time payment** from $100,000 to $150,000, with a retroactive provision.

A Realistic Outlook

It's important to be candid: this bill is not law. If it is not passed by both the House and Senate before December 31, 2026, it will have to be reintroduced in 2027. With the ongoing election and budget and appropriations battles consuming Congress, the likelihood of passage this year is very small. That should not discourage us. Introduction of the bill is itself a step forward, and it puts the cleanup veterans' cases on the legislative record. Whether it moves this year or returns next, continued contact with members of Congress will be essential. Atomic Veterans and their families are encouraged to stay engaged, share their stories, and ask their representatives and senators to support reauthorization.

Thank you to all who attended, presented, and continue to carry this cause forward.

Keith (K²)

Keith Kiefer
NAAV - Commander



FROM THE DESK OF OUR NAAV VICE COMMANDER

September 1, 2026

Looks like summer is passing in the Pacific Northwest.

Most of the items in the Store are on the webpages correctly now. Prices have settled down for a while. Some Items may not be available in different colors. I have received 50 headstone markers. I will post them on the website. The price will be $50.00 including S&H.

We had a wonderful Convention. It was a great time to meet and greet old and new friends.

We have many members and spouses with health problems. We need to keep them in our prayers.

Membership: On the front of the newsletter, you will find the date your annual dues are due.

Keith has set up an account to pay your dues online or to pay your dues and orders from the store. If you want to pay online, call Keith. His phone # is 612-232-6596.

I will repeat this. "**Keep working with your State's Congress to Get July 16th as Atomic Veterans Day annually. Also get a section of highway to become Atomic Veterans Memorial Highway.**

State Commanders PLEASE, please make contact with your members and get members to get current in dues and information. **Just $35.00** will get them current. Please update your information. If your phone numbers are not current, e-mail or call with that information. When you send in dues let us know of any changes.

Thank you to the members that send in extra dues earmarked for helping someone who needs help with their dues and other support of NAAV.com, **Please make checks out to NAAV, not to me. Let's help update the database.**

A big **Thank you** to the state commanders who are getting info on members in their states and updating their info. Many of our life members have passed away and we were not notified.

Please stay safe and be careful.

Thank you.



Fred Schafer

National Vice Commander

derf@trcschafer.com

Veterans Crisis Line

DIAL 988 then PRESS 1

VA's Office of Suicide Prevention

https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/find-resources/spread-the-word/



Ballot Results

Vice Commander & Treasurer Fred Schafer, Director at large Bob Pfeifer, and Director at Large Haskell Watts Jr. have been reelected to their positions. Paul Sparacino was elected to fill the position vacated by Frank Farmer's passing. Paul will be Director at Large.

LABRATS INTERNATIONAL

We are very much looking forward to our annual re-union which will take place in Weston-Super-Mare between the 14th and 18th September. We are welcoming approximately 96 people to the event which is always well attended.



Our fight for truth and justice continues with our new Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, he has been a very vocal supporter of our cause and we are hopeful that he will continue to support us whilst he is in office. We have had regular meetings with his team and continue to fight for truth and justice.

We have started a new campaign entitled 'Andy Burhnams Nuclear Test'.

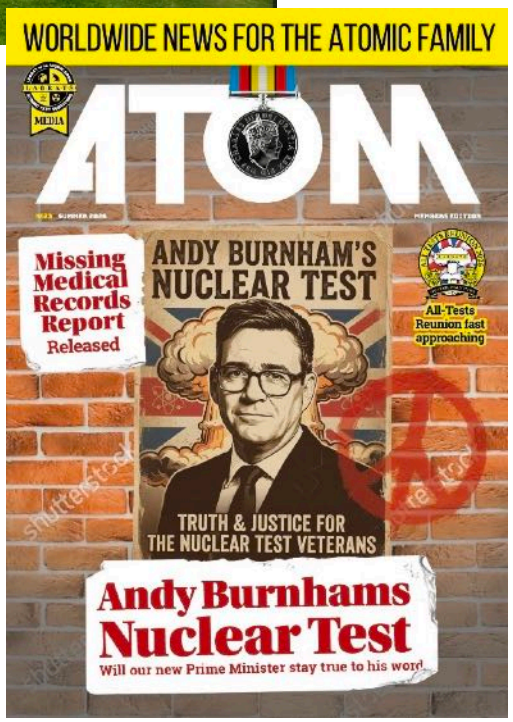
This campaign puts pressure on Andy to continue his support; we have created a petition which we hope to deliver to him personally and have called upon him to honour his word.

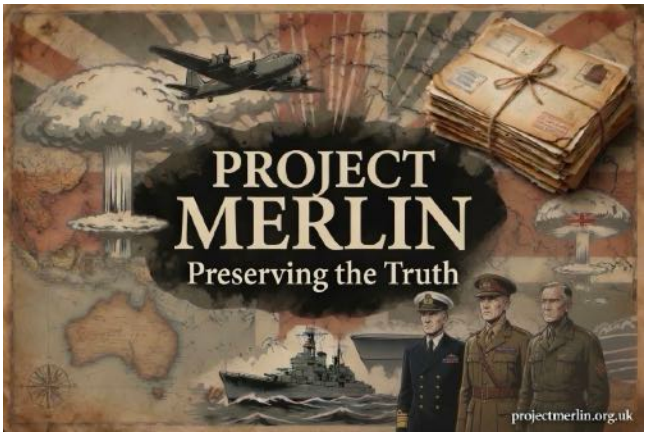
Full details can be found at

https://www.labrats.international/andyb

Where you can keep up to date with all aspects of the campaign.

2027 will be the 75th anniversary of the first British Test in the Montebello Islands in Australia, so we need full recognition and accountability before then.





An exciting new project will be released in October entitled 'Project Merlin', which will allow access to a previously classified database created by the Ministry of Defence. This database contains 28,000 documents. Using AI technologies, we are able to provide access to pinpoint information within the documents in seconds. It will be accessible for all and will open up the secretive database for the first time. Look out for releases at https://www.projectmerlin.org.uk/

We will be visiting the USA in November for the Review Conference of the Treaty of the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in New York. This important conference brings together affected communities for week long talks and events and is essential for global awareness.

Stay safe and healthy.



Alan Owen
LABRATS Founder

South Dakota NAAV Convention 2026

Interpersonal relationships trumped technical difficulties at the NAAV 2026 convention in South Dakota. From opening night to the ending of the Banquet and Auction, it was fun watching Atomic Veterans, many of whom were accompanied by their wives and descendants this year, enjoy each other's company and swap stories. Most of the group did the tour on Thursday, encompassing the South Dakota Air & Space Museum, the Minuteman Missile site and it's museum, and a ride through the Badlands. The highlight was our docent at the Minuteman Missile Silo, Al Hall. He is retired Air Force, and spent his military career working in the Minuteman missile program. He is very knowledgeable about the subject and patiently answered the plethora of questions we threw at him. Al joined us on Saturday, giving a more thorough presentation about the missile program, then later for the banquet. We made a second bus trip out Friday evening to have dinner at Mount Rushmore and watch the lighting ceremony. The park was struggling with sound and video issues, but we did get to watch the lights come up on the President's faces as the twilight faded behind the mountain.

Saturday's line up of presenters started with Al Hall. We had video greetings from Congressman Tom Emmer, House Majority Whip, and Alan Owen of LABRATS. The later was sporting amusing British T-shirts and gave a unifying message to the U. S. Atomic Veterans. John Wells, of Military Veterans Advocacy talked about his Organization and the mutual work NAAV and MVA have done together. Hannah Dailey from the WWII Museum in New Orleans shared about preserving the stories of as many veterans as possible. Bob Ruyle reviewed the presentation he uses for school and other lectures. Victoria Moore and Kathy Sinai gave us the run down on IGLOW and it's efforts to produce genetic data to map the the damage caused by radiation exposure in veterans and their descendants. Both women are the daughters of Atomic Veterans. Victoria brought three examples of her paintings from her Atomic Babylon series which explores the repercussions of living with the physical and emotional consequences of the secrecy shrouding her Atomic life. We also heard from a delightful young lady, new to the group and another Atomic Veteran descendant, Rachel Bolin. She shared about her upcoming PHD program at Manchester University in England, which will focus on Atomic Veterans. We hope to get progress reports from Rachael on her work-studies. Kevin Davis from the Union of Concerned Scientists wrapped the program up with slides and the ongoing efforts to expand RECA. There were technical difficulties early in the day, but they allowed for more opportunities to visit with table mates. The end result was not having enough time for Karen Cobb to give us an update on the web site. Hopefully she'll be willing to present next year.

The Banquet was another occasion for bonding and creating memories. Frederick Collin's family presented him with a beautiful plaque honoring his service as a 95th birthday present. Birthday cake was enjoyed in his honor. Thank you to Jill Pearce for coordinating the convention so successfully, and to her husband, Mike, for being the muscle getting things done. And thank you to all who helped make the event more enjoyable for us.









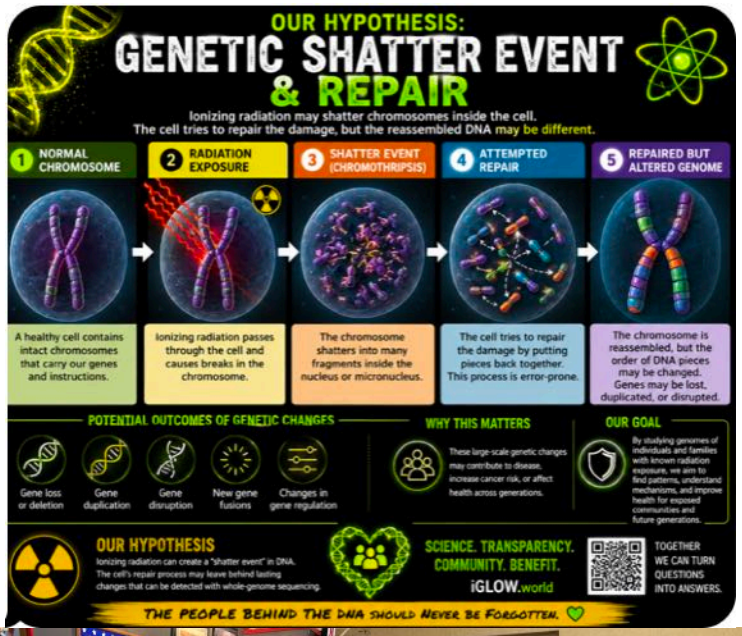


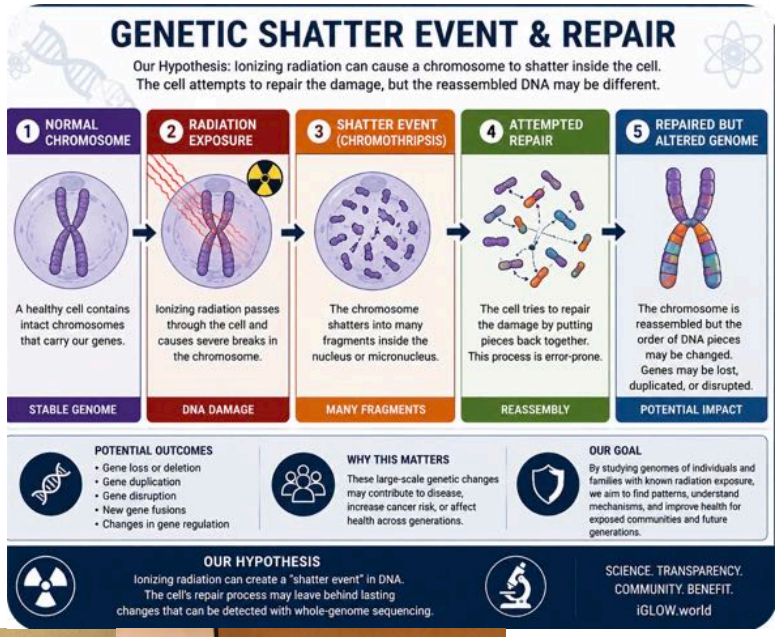
NAAV was presented with Proclamations from both the Governor of South Dakota and the Mayor of Rapid City.

Photography by Jill Pearce



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NAAV members were very generous at this year's convention. Several had to cancel their attendance due to health issues or family death, but donated the money they had paid in to help cover costs. And those who did come donated many wonderful items for the auction, which turned out to be our most successful one yet. And then there were the exuberant buyers who generously closed the circle with their bids. The auction was fun - this year Fred Schafer had the assistance of his two sons as spotters to make things go more smoothly. And Karen Cobb served as our Vanna White, holding up and describing items. Mike and Jill Pearce, our convention coordinator and her assistant, not only donated several fun items, but this year they set up the auction tables ahead of the banquet so attendees could look over the items during the day. There were books by authors John McCabe, Alan Owen and Congresswoman Dina Titus, handmade shawls from Joan Grahlfs and Jill Pearce, and four quilts made by Pam Ebert that brought in a healthy share of the proceeds. Plus Pam made a 5th quilt with our name on it that we will bring to future conventions for display. Many other nice things were donated and sold. Thank you to everyone who participated in this last event of our South Dakota convention.

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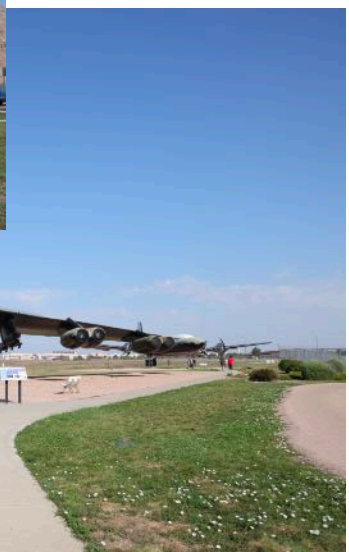









Photos courtesy of Bob Ruyle


Atomic Veteran Philip Pantoja Recognized at Western Air Defense Sector JOINT BASE LEWIS-McCHORD, Wash. June 2026

Members of the Western Air Defense Sector (WADS) recently had the privilege of hosting Atomic Veteran Philip Pantoja and a group of fellow veterans for a tour of the nation's air defense mission. The visit provided an opportunity for today's service members to meet one of the men whose service helped shape America's Cold War history, provide he and fellow veterans a WADS mission brief, and to learn firsthand about his remarkable lifetime of service.

During the visit, Mr. Pantoja was recognized by Col Rebecca Bissette, the WADS Director of Mission Support and 225th Squadron Commander, for his military service, public service, and continuing commitment to veterans and young people throughout the Joint Base Lewis-McChord community. As part of the recognition, he was presented a commander's coin and a special "Bigfoot Stomper" award, a symbol reserved for individuals who quietly exemplify dedication, resilience, and commitment to others. Born into a family of service, Philip Pantoja followed four older brothers who served during World War II. Although he missed that conflict, he answered his nation's call during the Korean War era by joining the United States Marine Corps.

While serving with Marine Corps Training Unit No. 1, Mr. Pantoja participated in atomic-era military training associated with Operation Teapot at the Nevada Test Site. Like many Atomic Veterans, he was asked to perform duties in support of a mission whose long-term significance would not be fully understood for years to come. His participation placed him among a unique generation of Americans who stood at the forefront of the Atomic Age and helped shape the nation's understanding of nuclear warfare and deterrence.

After his Marine Corps service, Mr. Pantoja continued serving the nation in the United States Army, including service in Vietnam. His military career has spanned multiple eras of American history and reflect a steadfast commitment to duty and country.

Following his Army service, Mr. Pantoja became a National Park Service employee and smokejumper, continuing a life dedicated to public service, adventure, and protecting others. Whether serving in uniform, parachuting into remote wilderness areas to combat wildfires, or mentoring future generations, he consistently sought opportunities to contribute to something larger than himself.

Today, in his early 90s, Mr. Pantoja remains an active volunteer and a familiar face throughout the JBLM community. Alongside fellow veterans affectionately known as "The Gang," he spends countless hours speaking with students, sharing experiences with service members, and preserving the stories of a generation whose sacrifices helped shape the modern world.

For the Airmen who met him during his visit, the most powerful lesson was found in the example of a man who has spent a lifetime answering the call to serve—whether as a Marine, Soldier, smokejumper, public servant, mentor, or Atomic Veteran.

As the ranks of Atomic Veterans grow smaller, the responsibility to preserve their stories grows greater. Through his example, Philip Pantoja reminds us that service is defined by a commitment to others. His example continues to inspire and reflect the enduring values of courage, sacrifice, humility, and service before self.

"Pantoja served with Marine Corps Training Unit No. 1 during the atomic testing era, later served in Vietnam, became a smokejumper and National Park Service employee, and continues to volunteer throughout the JBLM community."

We (The Western Air Defense Sector (WADS)) is a bi-national unit of the Washington Air National Guard located at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Tacoma, Washington. Operating under the callsign "Bigfoot," WADS is one of two sectors responsible to the Continental U.S. North American Aerospace Defense Command Region (CONR) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). We function 24/7, 365 days a year to defend homeland airspace.



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Former blue vest volunteer awarded the Gray Dragon
By Melanie Nelson, Public Affairs Officer

Byline: The Order of the Gray Dragon Award is an exclusive, rare honor presented to a Veteran with the earliest entry into the Navy Nuclear Weapons Program, often recognizing those who served under high-level secrecy agreements during classified missions.

Last week, Xavier Gagnon, age 93, received the Order of the Gray Dragon Award from the leadership of the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association in a ceremony attended by his family at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center. The event took place just down the hall from where he has been recovering in the community living center for the past month.

Gagnon served in the Marines from 1953 until the day before Thanksgiving in 1956. Afterwards, he spent five years in the ready reserve and was called up once during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His occupational specialty remains something he rarely shares, even today. He will disclose, however, that he held a Q Clearance—one step above Top Secret—and primarily served in Nevada at the Lake Mead Naval Base, a Cold War-era facility established for the Defense Atomic Support Agency.

His interest in all things nuclear stretches back to his 13th birthday, July 16, 1945. This was also the date of the "Trinity" test, the world's first detonation of an atomic device in the New Mexico desert.

Despite never attending high school and being entirely self-educated, Gagnon has developed an impressive depth of knowledge about nuclear warfare and the lasting effects of atomic bombs. Ten years ago, his passion for the subject led him to tour Fort Campbell, Kentucky's Clarksville Base—one of the nation's earliest and most important nuclear weapons storage facilities.

Even while his days at the VA are busy with therapy sessions, he continues to engage with nuclear issues by staying informed through the National Association of Atomic Veterans' quarterly newsletter. He also is a daily newspaper reader, completing the Cryptoquip puzzle as often as he can.

Gagnon, who is reportedly the oldest living member of the Navy Nuclear Weapons Association, anticipates moving into assisted living soon.

Not that far in the rear-view mirror, Gagnon volunteered every Monday at the Minneapolis VA as an escort. He was proud of his 23 years of volunteerism and

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disappointed when it abruptly ended due to the COVID pandemic, thwarting his goal of receiving his 25-year volunteer pin.

July 16, 2026, Gagnon will celebrate his 94th birthday. He takes special pride in sharing the date with National Atomic Veterans Day—a designation first proclaimed by President Ronald Reagan in 1983. The coincidence is less a calendar quirk and more a meaningful connection to his fellow Atomic Veterans, a legacy he's proud to keep alive.









KUER

This is a study being done at the University of Utah. If you live in Utah, New Mexido, Nevada or Arizona, you can participate. It would further the cause for Atomic Veterans.
https://www.kuer.org/science-environment/2026-08-31/university-of-utah-downwinder-radiation-research

What you were exposed to… my Fellow NAAV Veterans

Part I of III Jack LaDuke

I am no stranger to danger. I was a member of a Foreign Legion airborne/helicopter Rapid Response Anti-Terrorist Unit in Africa for almost 3 years in a maddening and vicious civil war to prevent the insanity of Communism taking over the country. I came away from that with only a piece of fine Chinese hard steel shrapnel, that is still lodged in the bone of my index finger. I should be dead, for what I went through. I was involved with relentless combat almost daily. It was dangerous.

So… the safety of electronics in the United States Air Force (USAF) should be a piece of cake, right!? Wrong! I was told it was safe by the government to sit directly on the Thermo Nuclear bomb case… so it must be safe, right!? Wrong! It's killing me as I write this. **My urologist just called me last week and told me I definitely have prostate cancer. That, in addition to hypothyroid condition and periodic raging diabetes. Those last two indicators of absolute DNA damage from irradiation that show up late stage in life.**



BOMARC "B" Model IM-99 Solid Fuel Ground to Air Missile I worked on.

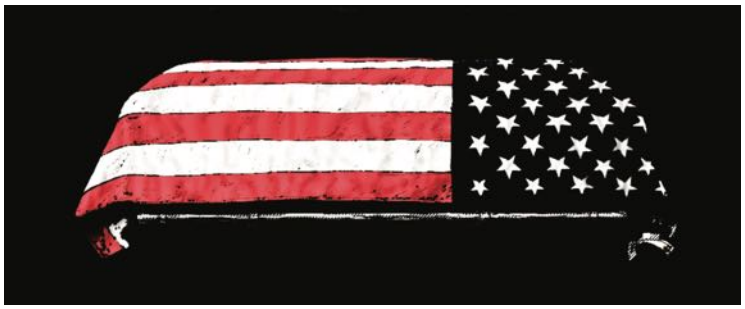
I know I have disrupted, damaged and rearranged DNA. It's apparent in my children. Some months back, during a conversation with an Army Colonel, who is familiar with radiation issues regarding my health and my offspring's health issues, he blurted out *"You've been irradiated!"* He suggested I put in a claim for this to the Veteran's Administration. I am currently paid 100% TDIU (Total Disability Individual Unemployability) on the basis of 81% disabilities of other service-connected issues, since 2009. ALL from the USAF.

I am concerned about my wife being denied the benefits she would get on the basis I am rated and for service-connected disabilities that I would die from. I start considering issues such as this as I'm much closer to the end, than the beginning so, when I go on to that 'Big Nuclear Warhead Depot In The Sky,' she will be taken care of. Service-Connected diabetes is what will most likely take me off to learn The Grand Secret.

I have researched irradiation and know that the diabetes and hypothyroid condition I have are commonly caused by irradiation and show up in later life. These issues have started to kick my arse the older I get. The U.S. Air Force is now doing a study of cancer and birth defects in Air Force technicians working 5 to 6 foot from the Minute Man Nuclear Warhead.

I have been irradiated… and you, my Fellow NAAV Veteran, have faced a greater threat than combat also. Your body has had millions of little Gamma Rays shoot through it!

TAPS



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FOR NOTIFICATIONS

Please use the following email address to submit articles for the newsletter and to notify NAAV of members who pass so we can include them in taps. (Fred Schafer is the other option for taps.) Pics of Atomic Veteran events, new Atomic Veteran Memorial Highways, and Atomic Medal recipients are also welcome. **maryannnaav@yahoo.com**

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Have a good day!

