

**David G, Keough
Veteran**

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Interviewers**

**Interviewed on May 12, 2006
Avala Sr. Home
Albany, New York**

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

DK: My name is David George Keough, born February 16, 1923, in New York City

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

DK: Well, grammar school and technical high school, in Yonkers New York

Q: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

DK: I was sitting in my comp [company] masters kitchen, having coffee with him and going over the next week's program and the announcement came over the radio.

Q: Do you remember how you felt when you heard about that?

DK: Well I had already been signed up for the draft so.... I felt a certain... inevitability ... coming.

Q: mmhm

DK: But then after that we just sat around waiting, to the details of the broadcast, talking about it and, speculating

Q: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

DK: I was conscripted, meaning that I was signed up for the draft... and when my number was called, I was asked to join the SED which was Special Engineering Detachment, of the Manhattan Engineering district.

Q: What was that called? SED?

DK: SED, Special Engineering Detachment

Q: Now you were assigned to this unit?

DK: Well I had worked for Columbia University as a civilian, as a laboratory technician. And prior to World War II it was known as the National Research Development, under the National Defense Act. And all of those fellas who worked there who were under 26 were subject to induction. So once I was offered an opportunity to go with them instead

of going into the regular army... I elected to go with them. I should say they elected me I didn't elect them... they said "this is your number"

Q: Now where did you enter service?

DK: Grand Central ... terminal ... Camp Claiborne Louisiana

Q: Now did you have to go through regular Basic Training?

DK: I took combat engineering training, for thirteen weeks... but it was cut short from thirteen weeks down to about five weeks because ... staff at Columbia was short on technicians... and unfortunately they didn't rotate them, they took all five of us at once... and then left the University short technicians so the University asked them to be speeded up so we were cut from the thirteen weeks.

Q: Now what did you do as a technician?

DK: Generally setup laboratory equipment, maintain it, keep the readings on it pressures and vacuum pressures, and check it for leaks, do machinery work, carpentry work, miscellaneous, maintenance work around the laboratory.

MR: That sounds pretty technically sophisticated.

DK: Well we were instructed by the professors and the doctors and the adults... realistically we were still teenagers. I had gained a lot of experience having previously worked with the Boy Scouts and the YMCA, and gone to a technical High School, so I had a pretty good feeling for tools and equipment.

Q: Now, what was your workday like?

DK: Well, when I was still a civilian?

Q: Either when you were still a civilian or how it changed when you went into the military aspect of it?

DK: When I was a civilian it was basically an eight to five job... when I went into the military there were no hours... you got no overtime. The only thing that really changed was the fact that I was in the military, more dog tags.

Q: Did you wear a uniform?

DK: Well that's the funny story, initially when we first came back from Camp Claiborne, we were instructed to get into civilian clothes and to pass as students going to Columbia, then some oh four or five months later they ordered us back into uniform... and the funny part was that one time I was in a local bar with my friends, in my civilian clothes and I was approached by an NP, and asked for identification, and I had been given instructions that in the event I ever was approached I wasn't to say nothing except to identify myself and to give my Army serial number and report to Captain LL Grogenar (?). So I sat in the Yonkers police station waiting for Captain LL G to show up [Laughter]. During the six hours I waited there I had all sorts of visions of going into jail.

MR: Now did you work for the same people?

DK: The same people yes. Doctor Dunning and his staff at 120th Street in Broadway.

MR: Were any of them in the military?

DK: No they were strictly associated with Columbia University.

MR: And at night when you went home, did you go home to barracks? Or did you stay at your house.

DK: No, since there were no facilities I was arranged in quarters so I lived... I had a funny arrangement, during the weekdays I stayed at 605 west 112th street in New York City with a couple of friends and then during the weekends I went back to Yonkers where I had been born and lived... and stayed there.

Q: Now were your parents aware of what you were doing?

DK: Well, my folks were both dead, they had diseased many years before that, so I was living with friends and foster parents. They were not aware of what I was doing, no , they were under the impression that I was going to school in Columbia, until the uniform arrangement showed them that I was actually in the army and my dog tags showed them that I was in the army.

MR: Now what rank were you at that point?

DK: At that point I was a private. I got my first promotion to a tech 5 I think some six months later. And then my second promotion when I moved out to New Mexico, and I received that in New Mexico.

Q: Now when did you go to New Mexico, do you remember approximately?

DK: Well I spent six months in New York so it would be December of '43 until say May of '44 at Columbia, and then from May '44 on to my discharge in May '46 at Los Alamos.

Q: Now did your duties change at all? How did your duties change when you went to Los Alamos?

DK: Well when I was at University I did mostly Lab work, and some procurement work, getting tools and getting materials and so forth. When I got to Los Alamos they found out, they needed my procurement skills more than the laboratory skills, so I was assigned to purchasing. And then as time went by I got to be purchasing more and more specialized equipment... items that had never been made before. Items where the inventor and producer had to talk to each other, while I acted as the liaison between the inventor and the producer.

Q: Now did you realize what the Manhattan project was?

DK: No I hadn't the idea. Their security system was very simple, you're given to know what you need to know to do the job and it was understood that there would be no free interchange beyond that. So when you were working in the laboratory you did your pumps, and you did your compressors, and you did your tool work, but you didn't know the overall purpose for which it was going.

MR: Did you know if you were being exposed to anything radioactive?

DK: No, no idea. The closest I came was when I was lifting some heavy equipment at Columbia and I got a collapsed lung, and they were very concerned... but I didn't know why other than they were concerned for me, but I didn't know for much, much later that they might have been concerned with the gaseous diffusion system we were working on.

Q: Did any of the men you worked with we talk about "Gee what are we working at"?

DK: No... there was a sort of understanding of, do what you needed to do and they'll be satisfied. That seemed to be the attitude

Q: Now did you work under any of the top named Physicists that worked there at all, or did you know who they were?

DK: Well at Columbia I worked under John R. Dunning, who was a Nobel Prize winner, and Clark Williams who was a doctor of Physics, there weren't many people in the physics line in those days... they were few and far between. Plenty of mechanical engineers, electrical engineers, and chemical engineers, but very few people in the physics group.

Q: What about at Los Alamos?

DK: Los Alamos was different in that some of the people there, I didn't know this until later, operated under fictitious names, in order to protect their identity. And I was their son's scout master, so I'd be talking to a kid let's call him Johnson and his name might really have been somebody from the University of Chicago, or University of Los Angeles, California. So uh, I was dealing with some famous people, but I didn't know that at the time, because they were... there sons... had assigned names, it wasn't until the war was over that I found out their true identities.

Q: Now when the bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, you had no idea that you had been working on something connected with this at all or?

DK: Well when the first bomb went off at Hiroshima and Nagasaki we knew because we had already found out from the test explosion at Alamogordo some three weeks prior... what it was that we were doing, however we still didn't know that it was a bomb, because there was another item of security that they introduced and that was the testing of composition B explosion. It was a conventional explosion... used to test the seismographs so that they would have a benchmark when the real one went off. But they didn't tell us that, they just told us "we're testing a composition B explosive... to get seismographic readings"

Q: Now the equipment you had then was very specialized?

DK: At Los Alamos?

Q: Yes

DK: Not at Columbia?

Q: No at Los Alamos

DK: See Columbia was really a miniature Oak Ridge, and it was not the same kind of work. One was a pure research job and the other was the development of a mechanical bomb. And I think to this day that distinction hasn't been established. But all the while that I was at Los Alamos up to and including the day of the explosion at Alamogordo I didn't know what we were doing.

MR: Now when you had time off you were probably warned to speak

Q: Were you allowed off the base at all?

DK: I was because I was a Scout master, but you needed special passes to get off of the base. See Los Alamos is approximately forty minutes from Santa Fe, and our official address was Santa Fe, New Mexico. But so you lived at Los Alamos even though you technically, were officially a post office box of Santa Fe.

MR: Did you get much free time off at all?

DK: No. We had a lot of free time off at Los Alamos, Movies, Swimming....

Q: Did you ever have USO shows come in?

DK: No

Q: Probably because of the security I would imagine

DK: Well what they would do is have the USA go into Santa Fe and they would bus us into Santa Fe. But the USO's were never on Los Alamos

Q: While you were at Los Alamos on the base did you live in a barracks there?

DK: Yes, in Uniform all time. The barracks were roughly a quarter mile away from the technical area, and the sites, there were sites off of Los Alamos... A site, B site, up to Y site. And I lived in the tech area because I was doing indoor work and office type work. So I lived at the technical area which was under security guard, needed passes to get in and out. And I didn't have to go out to the sites where they were actually doing the explosive testing and other type of work. In fact I didn't even know the sites existed until the war was over.

Q: No one you worked with talked about what happened?

DK: No you just talked about your own job. I had roughly eight guys that I worked with and we talked about our job, and only what we needed to know about that job. Like if you were procuring an inverter, or you needed to couple the guy who wanted the inverter with the producer of the inverter and maybe the person who did they typing and the checking of the equipment when it came in. Beyond that there was no need to discuss it with anyone else as long as the procurer needed to know what his progress was, and the producer needed to know what their configurations needed to be, you know how big it had to be. Now all of the sketches and the drawings were hand carried, so there was never any need to mail them out or ship them out that was a no no.

MR: What about telephone conversations was there a lot of that?

DK: I'll tell you a funny story, [Laughs] one time I was up in Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois, and I was going to call my girlfriend who is now my wife. And I dialed the phone number and I said "Hello and this is ..." and just then, an NP put his hand over the receiver and said "Sergeant you know better than that." [Laughs] I wasn't supposed to make any phone calls off base that might indicate my location.

Q: How about letters? Were they censored?

DK: They were censored. You wrote your letter and you left it open, and it had to pass a censor, sealed and sent on.

Q: And it never told where you were?

DK: Santa Fe, no Los Alamos. Everything was Santa Fe.

MR: Now besides your actual job there, did you have to pull any kind of duties like guard duty or KP or anything like that? It was just strictly a Job?

DK: No, strictly the job.

Q: Now what was the food like there? You must have had very good food.

DK: Mess hall food, but pretty good! And you could eat pretty much anytime you wanted. There was a regular lunch and supper break, but you didn't have to follow that. Whenever was convenient. The job was the important thing.

MR: So the place was probably running twenty-four hours a day?

DK: Around the clock, yeah.

Q: Now were your officers scientists?

DK: Well there were two groups at Los Alamos there was a civilian group, basically coming from industry and the universities. And the military Special Engineer Detachment, they call it the SED.

Q: Who were you accountable to, military officers or civilians?

DK: While I was in the technical area I was accountable to the civilians. However there was an intermix between the civilians and the military at the higher rank. For example there was a note from Commander Bradbury, who later became the director of Los Alamos Laboratories. He was the military commander. How he fitted in with Oppenheimer I don't really know but Oppenheimer was in charge of the civilians. And basically I reported to civilians while I was on the job. Took my queue from them. Once I was in the tech area I was under the SED, and took orders from them.

Q: So the SED was at Los Alamos?

DK: Yes along with the civilians, civilians had their housing area, and the military had their housing area.

MR: Were you allowed to off duty fraternize with the civilians?

DK: No, no, only for my scout work. See I was both a Cub Master and a Scoutmaster there, so I had quite a few... I have to be careful how I say this... because I became a Scoutmaster after the war was over, but while I was still at Los Alamos. In other words the war was over in '45, and I stayed at Los Alamos until May of '46. I was Cub Master during a period while the war was on, as well as when the war was over, but Scoutmaster after Commander Bradbury left, I filled his slot. So dealing with the civilians was a different situation during the war vs after the war. During the war all your socializing was with your own guys, with the military friends that you made and so forth. The socializing with the civilian staff wasn't necessary because it didn't take in your working relationship as well as your social relationship. So there was no need to, and therefore it wasn't done. It just seemed natural, there was nothing forced about it. I'm quite sure that if I had developed a friendship with some of the civilian fathers, more than the acquaintanceship that scouting would involve it wouldn't have been interfered with, but there wasn't any incentive to do it and there wasn't any need to do it.

Q: Now where did the civilians live? Did they have a separate compound?

DK: Well the civilians of the war... let's say sensitive nature, stayed on the base in a private housing section which was built for them. The ones less sensitive like the mechanics and so forth, lived off base and pretty much they were hired from the locals. Local towns. Laymee, and El Pandero.... And Santa Fe, bussed in every day. Those who were sensitive security requirements stayed on base in a civilian section.

Q: Is there any one person that impressed you more than others while you worked at Columbia and Los Alamos. Persons that stand out that you worked with?

DK: Not at the time, I wasn't impressed with anything other than the fact that they were so dedicated to their work. They seemed to be at it nine, ten, fifteen hours a day, six days seven day weeks didn't bother them at all. And I was happy to make 'em happy. Because realistically I was still a teenager, well just passed my teens, so I hadn't gotten over the aura of adulthood yet,

Q: Later on in retrospect how did you feel about working on this project, did you realize what it was?

DK: I was very proud of the fact that I had been involved, in fact I took a job after I got out of the army. I took a job for the University of California at San Deere in Albuquerque, and worked there for the Atomic Energy Commission, from 1946 to 1950.

Q: What did you do for them?

DK: Well that's another story. [Laughs] San Deere was located in Albuquerque and it was roughly fifty miles from Los Alamos. And the University of California which had the Los Alamos contract wanted to give up any more bomb development work and work on pure science. So San Deere was established for bomb development. And uh, mechanical improvement and so forth, so the work I did there was more logistical than it was procurement. The difference being that, at Los Alamos we were just trying to develop ones and twos, and at San Deere they were trying to manufacture more units than one or two. And of course the work at Los Alamos and San Deere both were top secret. And

there were no numbers that were discussed. And here again security was tight. My security went from confidential to top secret when I went to San Deere.

Q: Ok, is there anything else you want to add?

DK: Well other than the fact that, I had a lot of fun, particularly from '45 to '46 just before the war was over and I was getting out with the Scouts. With the Boy Scouts and the Cub Scouts. And I had less work to do, for the technical aspect of the job because Los Alamos was breaking down. People were all going home, back to their Universities, and back to their Job, and back to their General Electrics and so forth. And there were less, and less, and less staff every day. It became noticeable. I think we had a staff of about a thousand people, technical staff of about a thousand people during the height of '45, early '45. And by the time I left in '46 if there were a hundred there were a lot. So I had a great deal of fun and I was able to relax a little bit, with the kids, take 'em out on trips, and exploring and camping and so forth.

Q: Now were you always active after the war, were you always active with the boy scouts?

DK: Up until... up until I moved... I moved back to New York in 1950. I thought I was going to be transferred from San Deere to New York, take a contract with the Atomic Energy Commission, and I actually had the job. But Harry Truman laid off all the new hirers in 1951, shortly after he took office. And I was considered a new hire because I was going from the University of California, to the Atomic Energy Commission... so they dropped me, as a new hire [Laughs].

Q: When were you discharged?

DK: In May of '46

Q: Did you ever use the Fifty-two-twenty club at all, it seemed like you kept being employed?

DK: No I didn't, I was familiar with it, and there was a period when I could have taken advantage of it between the time I... lost my AEC job and the time I went to work for Ebasco.(?) I was roaming... hunting around looking for jobs. Nobody needed my experience, I couldn't discuss it then, because technically when we were let go from the army at San Deere, we were under a seven year security mandate. Which effectively said you couldn't leave the country for seven years, you had to report your job changes... keep the security of the Manhattan district advised of where you were.

Q: So you couldn't put on a job resume where you'd been and what you did in a way?

DK: Well you could, but not the work you did.

Q: Did you make use of the GI bill?

DK: No, I never did.

Q: How about joining any veteran's organizations?

DK: American Legion, but I wasn't very active in it. I signed up, I left New Mexico I let it go for a while, and then when I moved to New York I joined the American Legion at the Albany post. I didn't join the local posts. Which would have been either Yonkers or Putnam Lake.

Q: Is there anyone you stayed in contact with that you were in service with?

DK: For a very short while. The three Sergeants that I made friends with at Los Alamos, I stayed in touch with for about six months. Then they moved and I lost touch with them.

Q: The units you were in must have been very small. Did they ever have any kind of reunions or anything like that?

DK: They had a reunion... it would have been the fiftieth year of Los Alamos, and it was a reunion of the whole of the Los Alamos, not just the SED but the whole... so I went out to that. And when I was at San Deere I made a friend with a guy by the name of John Schuster, and he has since passed away, but his wife and my wife have been good friends and have been very good friends for the past sixty years. We still talk to each other on the phone and write each other.

MR: When you went back to the reunion were there still a lot of people you remembered, or they remembered you?

DK: No, when you were at Los Alamos you were in a very confined group, only the people that you needed to work with. I knew a little bit more than the few that I needed to work with because of my scouting associations. But when I was at Los Alamos for the reunion, there might have been, oh, a thousand people... that's now wives and husbands and so forth... and I only knew maybe a dozen of them. And most of the civilians who I had worked with in a liaison position as a procurement agent, I didn't get to see at all... I didn't even know if they were there. I would have fun some fun too because bear in mind some of them were under fictitious names.

Q: How do you think your time in the service and working with this project changed or had an effect on your life?

DK: Well if it weren't for that I wouldn't have gotten the job with Ebasco, Electric Modern Share Company. Which is an international construction company, specializing in electrical generation in outside countries such as Spain and Israel, and water salinization plants like in Egypt. I wouldn't have been able to handle that job if it wasn't for my experience in the military. And the same way for Duracell, when I worked for Duracell, in liaison and procurement and logistics, a lot of the experience I gained in Los Alamos, and San Deere, and Columbia I was able to put to use at Duracell... I spent twenty-five years at Duracell.