

# Nuclear Bombs and Siren Towers

by Rick Reil

As I laid on the floor next to the wall in the hallway, I could smell the odor of the paste wax used on the asbestos floor tiles. I could see the swirls in it left by the buffer the night before. The tiles were a checker-board pattern of alternating deep red and light gray, with squiggly lines that was suppose to make them look like marble. Occasionally there was a break in the pattern where a broken tile had been replaced with a new one, never mind that it didn't come close to matching the others.

The hurried click of high heeled shoes passed by my head as the siren wailed. As I looked up I could see the seam in Mrs. Berkeley's nylons as she passed by. Her shoes reminded me of the ones Minnie Mouse wore, they were squat and the heels were fat. I wondered how much longer I was going to be stuck there on the floor with the siren warning of an impending Communist attack. I wasn't too concerned about a nuclear bomb devastating our city, I was more worried about missing recess. It was 1957 and I was in Kindergarten at Jason Lee Elementary School in Richland, Washington, and our school was going through another air-raid drill. I wondered if laying on the floor would really protect us from a nuclear bomb.

Our little city of twenty-five thousand was the bedroom community for the workers at the Hanford Atomic Energy Works. Prior to World War II, Richland was a sleepy little farming town of about 250 residents located on the Columbia River in Southeastern Washington State. In 1943 the residents were forced to sell their property to the U.S. government as Richland and the rest of the communities for 40 miles north became part of the super secret Manhattan Project. Within a year 50,000 workers were working at the governments facilities at Hanford to manufacture the plutonium that would fuel the bomb that devastated Nagasaki, Japan.

When World War II ended, the cold war soon began. By the early 1960s there were nine reactors producing sufficient plutonium to fuel enough bombs to destroy our entire earth, but more than likely about a dozen or more additional ones too.

Security in Richland was tight. If you didn't work for the government you couldn't live in the town. All homes were rented from the government. If you worked at a non-government job you had to live in a nearby city and commute.

As a Kindergartener I was vaguely aware that things were a little different in our town. In many subtle ways Richland did not quite resemble the towns on television. There were no slums, no unemployment, and little crime. I was also sure most other towns didn't have siren towers located next to their schools.

The towers resembled those used by the look-outs in the Northwest's forests. Rather than a small hut on the top platform there was a big black siren. There was a fence around the base and a locked gate. A maintenance ladder ran up one of the legs. While the other kids were entertaining themselves on the playground equipment, I would wonder how I could scale the tower fence and climb that ladder. Not for any

diabolical purpose but more for the challenge. I was always up to a challenge and this one didn't seem insurmountable.

My days in kindergarten were often challenging. Our school was built with blackout curtains for each classroom. Our classroom had a large fish aquarium located near an outside corner by the windows. It was purposely moved about three feet away from the corner to allow room for the opened curtains to hang without blocking the aquarium. This left a little space in the corner just large enough for a chair and a small boy.

Long before the myriad of childhood disorders were understood, such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), it was common to treat the resultant behavior with discipline. In my case the three bowls of Sugar Pops, Sugar Frosted Flakes, or Wheat honeys, I had for most breakfasts, usually contributed to my inability to sit still. Mrs. Berkeley's remedy was to banish me to the chair behind the curtain, out of sight, out of mind. This was not for my good but rather for the good of the rest of the thirty students in her charge. It was a rare day that I didn't spend at least twenty minutes on that chair. I wasn't always thrilled with the punishment but it did have its pluses. I could stand on the chair, and because of the curtain no one could see what I was doing.

Standing there allowed me to play with the fish in the aquarium. It also allowed me to look out the window. The window afforded me a great view of the siren tower. Most days I had plenty of time to view the tower and figure out a way to overcome its security measures.

It must have been in the Spring, after I had turned six, when I developed my plan. I decided that the best time to scale my "Everest" would be at night. Spring had arrived and the days were getting warmer and longer. My father was a policeman who was working shift work at the time. I figured the best time to sneak out of the house would be when he was working the night shift. My mom and two older sisters were sound sleepers and didn't hear me leave via the backdoor. I wore my jeans and my dark wool coat my grandmother had given me for Christmas, I decided to take my bath towel too. I had it wrapped over my shoulders as I walked the two blocks to the school. I made it to the tower undetected.

When I arrived at the tower it was partially illuminated by a street lamp on one side of the lot. A large, wild Russian Olive tree had grown up near the back corner. I walked around behind the tree which shaded me from the street light. The fence was of the chain link variety. I don't think the security folks ever envisioned someone as small as me climbing the fence. My little feet fit comfortably in the holes of the mesh of the chain link. As I neared the top I saw two strands of barbed wire, something I was well aware of from my reconnoitering from my chair in the corner. I grabbed my bath towel from around my shoulders and threw it over the wire. The thick towel protected my hands from the barbs as I climbed over the top.

Once in the enclosure I noticed the bottom of the ladder was higher than I could reach. Fortunately the tower's legs were built of a steel lattice. The small holes in the lattice were just barely big enough to wedge my toes into. I inched myself up to the ladder, grabbed the lower rung and began to climb.

The tower was about 60 feet tall, and it took me a while to scale the height. The ladder was enclosed in a tube like structure for safety, so I wasn't scared of falling. As I neared the top I could see a car coming toward the tower. Just as I pulled myself up on platform the car stopped at the curb by the tower. I flattened myself on the wooden platform and pushed up against the black metal of the siren.

I could see through the cracks in the platform that it was a police car. A cop got out of the car with a flashlight. He shined the light up at me and hollered, "Who's up there!" Oh, no ... it was my dad on the night patrol! I didn't move a muscle. He walked around the fence shining the light up toward me the whole time. I was thankful for my dark clothes. As he neared the tree he saw my towel over the top of the fence. He must have thought whoever left it there was gone. It was too high for him to reach, so he walked back to his car and left.

I stood up and walked around the siren. It was huge and had a big electric motor with some pulleys and belts to drive the mechanism that made the wailing noise. Looking around I could see the roofs of the school and all the houses nearby. I could even see my house!

Time to go I thought, so I climbed down the tower, then up the fence, grabbed my towel and went back down the other side. As I ran toward home I looked back and saw the police car return with another man in a pickup. I watched them get a ladder out of the truck. The other man unlocked the gate. He and my dad took the ladder into the enclosure. I thought this would be a good time to leave.

I ran all the way home and quietly went in the backdoor. I put my towel back on the towel bar in the bathroom, undressed and slipped into bed. Then I heard a door open and the hall light came on. With my eyes barely open I saw my mom open my door to check on me. Shortly after that I heard the toilet flush, the light went off, and then I heard the door close.

The next thing I remember was my dad calling me for breakfast. He often fixed us kids breakfast when he got home from the night shift. I walked into the kitchen and there were my sisters sitting down to pancakes. My mom walked in and sat down too. She smiled at us all and asked my dad how his night had gone.

"It was pretty quiet, except I think some teenagers were trying to climb the siren tower over by the school. We got a call from one of the neighbors," he said, "I think I scared them off. When I got there, the only indication they'd been there was a towel thrown over the barb wires at the top of the fence. I went and got a guy from city maintenance with a ladder to get it off. When we got there it was gone. Crazy kids! Please pass me the syrup."

My mom smiled and handed it to him. I just kept my head down and didn't say anything.

I went to school that morning. As usual I spent my time in solitary confinement, standing on my chair in the corner, looking at the tower. I then turned and played with the fish.

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