

A Personal Perspective on the Years of Russian collaborations

By Greg Mann, SNL

Planning and conducting trips to Moscow and to St. Petersburg from Albuquerque were always a challenge. The bureaucracy was always unpredictable and the weather always cold. The project reviews were fascinating and always offered unexpected twists. In particular, the MOD colonels would often want to be center stage and insist on their invitation and attendance at the next US meeting. Foreign travel by the MOD officers was a unique perk that offered them a chance to see the US culture first hand...a visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery or a walk down Bourbon St. in New Orleans; it was a pleasure to their tour guide.

After our closeout meetings either in Russia or in the US, we would have a special banquet of food and drink. Everyone looked forward to these celebrations and the glorifying the great deeds and accomplishments of the visit. Toasts would be offered back and forth. First the laboratory host-leader would offer a toast to the joint cooperation & success of the program. Then the guest-leader would rapidly respond with a toast to the graciousness of the host, the third toast was always to be the ladies, then a toast to our soldiers in uniform, and of course to a safer world and peace, somewhere there would be the toast to our grandchildren, etc. Most any moment you would be expected to offer up a toast, the longer you waited the more difficult it was to come up with an original toast. But after a while the protocol didn't matter too much. After about toast number 6 or 8, my lips and nose would be numb to the vodka and the realization that the banquet was about to get blurry. It was time to quit. Most American's knew they couldn't keep up with or out drink our Russian colleagues, but occasionally, some middle-age frat boy would try. This invariably resulted in a messy van back to the hotel.

Usually at the farewell dinners, each side would exchange gifts of some cultural significance with one another. On one such occasion, the VNIIA delegation was visiting Sandia, and I asked Andrey Sviridov to step forward so I could present him a small gift. Andrey has a fake shyness that goes along with his matchless dry sense of humor. It took months for me to pick up on his wit and his quiet drama. Most of his joking comments just went over my head. On this occasion, as we say in English - I wanted to "pull his leg." I had a bogus, but official looking set of blueprints of the Fat Man atomic bomb, courtesy of the National Nuclear Museum's gift shop. As I explained to Andrey, this was a sensitive and special gift to my dear friend. And, I hoped he could appreciate the difficulty of getting approval from the US Department of Energy to give him drawings of US nuclear weapons. At first glance he seemed cautious to accept such a gift. But, he quickly realized the wry opportunity to remind everyone of the Russia nuclear weapons program history. Without hesitating, he said: "I have seen the originals many years ago."