

## **New Mexico: National Treasure -- National Sacrifice Zone**

When the United States entered the Second World War at the end of 1941, New Mexico had been a state for barely 29 years. Its population was a little over half a million, of whom 42% were of Hispanic descent and another 7% were Native Americans. The roots of some Hispanic families were relatively recent, but many could rightfully claim, "We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us!"

The Native American families' roots were even deeper than that. Given the treatment both these groups had experienced in "becoming American", it might have been expected that they would be less committed to supporting the war effort than the mythical "average" American. The data, however, belies these expectations.

Having grown up during World War II, and having later served as a Marine Corps officer, I knew about the Navajo Code Talkers as well as the creation and testing of the atomic bomb, but what I later learned about the state's role in that war made me all the more dismayed that New Mexicans, the first victims of a nuclear explosion, have been excluded from benefits under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA).

That 1990 federal law has provided billions of dollars to people exposed during subsequent tests on U.S. soil or during uranium mining. A brief summary of the contributions of New Mexicans should prompt Americans everywhere to reach out to their members of the House and ask them to support H.R.4426 RECA amendments.

Within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese started their assault on the Philippines, culminating in the Battle of Bataan, in which the New Mexico National Guard's 200th Coastal Artillery played a major part, suffering some of the first casualties of the Pacific war. The battle was followed by the infamous Bataan Death March and imprisonment of POWs for the duration of the war. Of the 1800 New Mexicans captured, only 900 survived to come home.

By the time the United States started its island-hopping campaigns in 1942, the Marine Corps had trained its first 29 Navajo Code talkers, of whom 8 were from New Mexico. The first 29 eventually became 500, serving in all 6 Marine Divisions and two Raider battalions. They have been credited as being critical to the success of many Marine invasions.

Over the course of the war, close to 50,000 New Mexican, or roughly 10% of the state's population served in the armed forces. According to *A History of New Mexico*, this was the highest ratio of enlistee to population of any state in the country. Not only was the participation rate high, but the per capita casualty rate was higher than any other state and nearly double that of most states!

More than a thousand Pueblo Indians served on both European and Pacific fronts; one hundred and fifty graduates of New Mexico A&M ROTC program were listed as Army officers, and over 2,800 graduates of the New Mexico Military Institute served in the war. Probably the two most famous and beloved of war correspondents, cartoonist Bill Mauldin and journalist Ernie Pyle, went to war from New Mexico.

Like inhabitants of other states, New Mexicans actively participated in scrap metal drives and victory gardens, war bond campaigns, and rationing. New Mexico like other states provided land for army and army air corps bases as well as POW camps and even a relocation center for interned Japanese American.

But New Mexico was unique in being both the birthplace of the atomic bomb and the first target of a nuclear explosion: two facts that entailed huge continuing costs to New Mexico and its people, costs that have been almost completely and undeservedly uncompensated.

The first to experience those costs were probably the farmers who were evicted from their croplands on the Parajito Plateau in order to make room for the Los Alamos bomb factory. At about the same time, unprotected New Mexicans started going into the mines to dig out the uranium to be refined for the bomb. Ranchers in the Tularosa Basin found parts of their land expropriated to enable development of the Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range, which later became the White Sands Proving Ground.

It might be argued that the bomb factory has been a mixed benefit and burden for New Mexico. The construction and operation of Los Alamos National Laboratories has provided jobs for a significant number of residents of the pueblos and towns near the site; however it has also left a legacy of radioactive and chemical contamination that continues to threaten both the air and especially the drinking water of the region.

But unarguably the explosion of the “gadget” at the Trinity Site on July 16, 1945 has been a complete tragedy for the inhabitants of the Tularosa Basin and their descendants and will continue to be so for years to come. The radioactive fallout has created devastating generational physical, mental, and emotional effects.

That the State of New Mexico, that has borne so great a share of the national burden should then be denied benefits of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act throughout the 23 years of its existence is a travesty of justice.

On July 27, 2023, the US Senate passed the RECA amendments as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would add the Downwinders of New Mexico and the Post 1971 uranium miners/workers to the fund for the first time ever. The Senate NDAA and the House NDAA will now go through the reconciliation process. The House bill (H.R.4426) does not currently have the RECA amendments included.

It is imperative that everyone across the country reach out to their members of the House and ask them to support adding the RECA amendments to the NDAA to mirror what was passed in the Senate.

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