

## ► History



# CHARIOTS OF FIRE

## NUCLEAR SCHEMES ON ALASKAN SOIL

by Michael Engelhard

**P**HYSICISTS SEE THE SUN AS A REACTOR that could hold 1,300,000 Earths. To the ancient Greeks, it was Helios, a charioteer-god racing across the sky. Ever-covetous mankind harnessed his vigor and loosed it on August 6, 1945.

Cold War leaders continued the fissile trajectory. The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and Pentagon chose Amchitka Island, a fisheries and migratory bird preserve since 1913 and a WWII outpost that lacked urban “Downwinders” in the immediate fallout radius—this orchid-growing sliver in the Aleutians had lain unpopulated since the 1800s and was deemed suitable for a warhead too dangerous for Nevada.

Like a third of Nevada detonations, Amchitka’s *Long Shot* sowed death when on October 29, 1965, the equivalent of 800 train-car loads of TNT flash-bloated half a mile underground. The military wanted to know how nuclear seismic signatures differed from those of earthquakes, to monitor Russian testing. Earth’s crust split, lake levels dropped, mud geysered, and rocks cratered dirt two miles away. Krypton and Tritium escaped. Governor William J. Egan, worried Alaskans still shaken by the 1964 quake might get spooked, had been reassured and was “pleased that we have been selected as the hosts, so to speak...”

*Milrow*, sparked during massive anti-Vietnam marches, sought to gauge risks of an even bigger device,

as domino-style tremors unleashing tsunamis were feared. It domed tundra two miles around 16 feet high, frothing the adjacent sea. Repercussions included lasting societal shifts: “Make Peace, Not War!” gained a colorful edge, which environmental movements soon learned to wield.

The last of this unholy Trinity, 1971’s *Cannikin*, despite international outcries, a legal attempt at defusing, and a protesting fledgling Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), became history’s largest U.S. subterranean nuclear test. Outgunning Hiroshima’s *Little Boy* by a factor of 385, it registered 7.0 on the Richter scale, with 4.0 aftershocks. (The 1964 Good Friday spasms managed a record, traumatizing 9.2.) Hurricane winds kept Don’t Make a Wave Committee members—future Sea Shepherds and Greenpeace “Rainbow Warriors”—from reaching ground zero. The pressure pulse crushed sea otter heads, snapped bird spines, and ruptured fish air-bladders and seal lungs. A creek vanished, drained into an aquifer now polluted. AEC

**Above:** Beach at the north end of Amchitka Island.

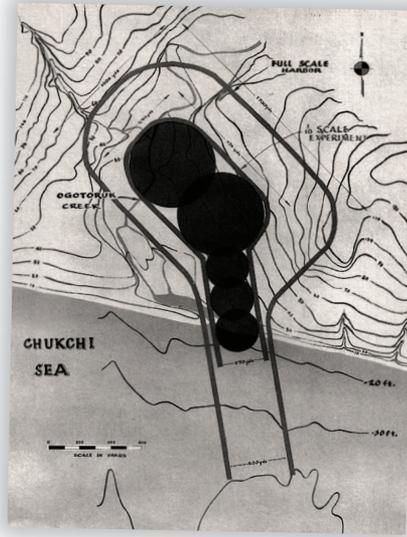
Courtesy Deborah Rudis

chief James Schlesinger, watching man's wrath with family, thought it "fun for the kids."

Since the AEC dissolved, biologist-divers check Amchitka for seepage. Cleanups have been attempted. Radiation-linked cancers killed seal and fish-dependent Aleuts who'd drilled bomb shafts and topped blast zones with soil they reseeded. The Department of Energy earmarked the tortured land as a future, limited-access wildlife haven.

Alaska's mainland south of the Inupiaq village Point Hope was luckier. In 1958, the year before statehood, the AEC proposed excavating a coal-shipping harbor at Cape Thompson with a near-surface chain of six hydrogen bombs. Beating some swords into plowshares, some spears into pruning hooks, the government's "Firecracker Boys" considered geographical engineering, the remodeling of "a slightly flawed planet." "Peaceful" titanic technology should serve fracking, reroute ocean currents, turn the Mediterranean Sea into a freshwater reservoir, or gouge a second, Israeli-run Suez Canal.

Project Chariot's economic and military benefits—a port fazing the Soviets—were dubious. Still, touring Alaska, the "Father of the H-Bomb" Edward Teller, who'd suggested nuking the moon "to observe



what kind of disturbance it might cause," hawked the scheme as a windfall. He gave a UAF commencement speech and received an honorary degree. The *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* called Chariot "a fitting overture to the new era" dawning for the state. It was really a sales pitch showing other countries that this was efficient and safe.

Hardly anybody backed the venture. Alaskan conservationists, Point Hope caribou hunters and whalers, Russia, The Wilderness Society and Sierra Club, plus three contract biologists researching its likely impacts objected. The ex-bronc

**Left:** Five thermonuclear explosions were to create a keyhole-shaped harbor at Cape Thompson for Project Chariot in 1958. The larger outline shows the original design deploying more kilotons. **Below:** The crew of a Greenpeace mission to Amchitka, which preceded the world-famous activist environmental organization's official birth in 1972.

rider and Korean War vet Peter LaFarge's *Radioactive Eskimo* on airwaves rallied support:

My wife can't suckle our babies,  
The milk must come from cans.  
My wife's too radioactive,  
Say, we're real atom fans.

Fallout from can-do-will-do attitudes worldwide poisoned lichen and via reindeer blossomed in humans and wolves. Some was scattered at Cape Thompson to measure how it moved in groundwater and runoff. Chariot closed shop in 1962, the year Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* revealed the creep of toxins up food chains. Local Inupiat suffered beyond-average stomach and throat cancer casualties. Diesel-soaked soil and infrastructure debris was removed, but shallowly buried radioactive waste ruled harmless remains.

Ecological and technical concerns ultimately doomed the Ploughshare program. Plans to pulverize caribou pastures fizzled. Funding evaporated in 1975—the EPA had barked watchdog barks for five years. No apologies or amends consoled Aleuts for Amchitka.

One day long, long ago, Phaethon, against paternal advice, took dad's shiny rig and fire-breathed steeds for a spin. Losing control, he crashed and scorched Earth, scarring Africa with deserts. To appease Gaia, Zeus killed the reckless driver by lightning bolt. ⚡

*Despite being a bleeding-heart tree hugger, the author prefers Alaska's tundra. The only thing radiant there should be wildflowers, fall colors, sunsets, and auroras.*



Top: Courtesy Department of Energy, Wikimedia Commons; Bottom: Courtesy DJ Kinney