

When In Rome...

Dave Conrad

In 1988, Soviet and U.S. teams conducted measurements of nuclear detonations at each other's nuclear testing sites for the first time in history. Conrad recounts his adventures in Russia as part of the U.S. team.

In August 1988, a Russian team came to the Nevada Test Site to take measurements on one of our shots as part of the Joint Verification Experiment. We were scheduled to go to the Russians' test site later and do the same. These experiments were part of a verification scheme to prove that both sides—the United States and Russia—were playing by the rules.

Any official communication between our two teams was to be conducted through interpreters. This caused major difficulties, since our interpreters had nontechnical backgrounds. So whenever we had a technical problem, we'd take our notepads, meet with the Russians outside their trailer, and start drawing pictures. We managed to communicate our thoughts and ideas fairly well through charades, pictures, and hand signals.

Getting to know the Russian scientists was a fascinating experience. They were not only first-class scientists and engineers but also first-class people. We quickly sorted out which of the Russians were KGB plants. They were usually the ones who looked terribly bored or fell asleep anytime we were having technical discussions. Everyone else was animated and engaged.

The Russian team leader was Victor Mikhaylov, who eventually became the Russian equivalent of our Secretary of Energy by heading the Ministry of Atomic Power and Industry in the early 1990's.

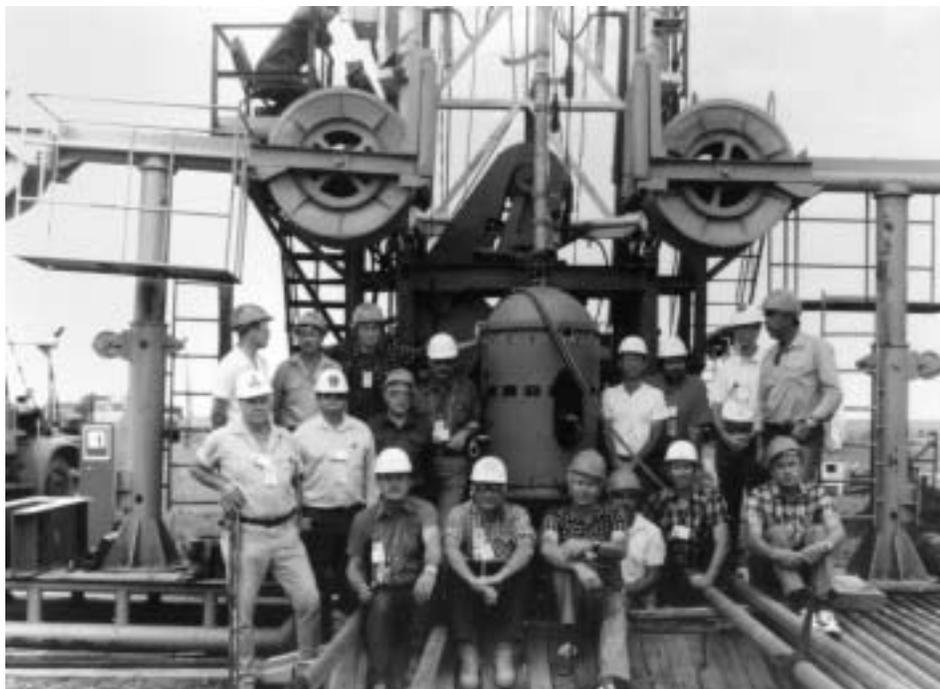
The Russian test site was located at a military base about 200 miles from the Chinese border. It was very different from our test site—there was no Las Vegas 60 miles away. Semipalatinsk, the nearest town, was small. But the people were great. We were the biggest show they'd ever had; they just loved the Americans coming to town.

But the food at the Russian test site was terrible—absolutely horrible. Horsemeat was a staple, and the people there ate a lot of barley and cabbage. They also boiled all their vegetables to mush. The meat was so tough that we could hardly eat it, so we imported most of our food. We even shipped in lettuce for salads. Unfortunately, the Russians didn't know the difference between lettuce and cabbage. So we had boiled lettuce for the first meal after the lettuce shipment arrived.

Fortunately, I wasn't in the first wave. By the time I arrived, other Americans had already been there for three or four weeks. When the first Americans arrived at breakfast one day, they found a horse tongue to be the entree. The whole tongue was laid out, and the visitors were invited to carve off the parts that they wanted to eat. Even worse was when they came back for lunch later that day—only to find the rest of the tongue left over from breakfast.

We were told to drink only bottled water while at the test site. Then one day, someone found the cooks filling up all the water bottles from the tap. The cooks knew that we drank water from those bottles, but that was all they knew. So when the bottles were empty, the cooks simply filled them back up.

We were never sure if our phones would work. It depended on how the Russians were feeling about us at the time. Whenever



Joint Verification Experiment: The white hats are U.S. members, and the colored hats are Russian members. A Russian device is in the center.

they thought we were being bad, they would express their displeasure by cutting off our communications. For instance, we had a major dispute over grounding. The Russians wanted to put in a scheme that would have grounded out all of our signals, so we would not have received any data. We, of course, were opposed to that. So for one weekend, we had no communications with the outside world. Eventually, Mikhaylov reestablished his control, and we had seven or eight weeks of good working relationships with the Russians.

Second Visit to Russia

After leaving, I participated in the “lessons learned” meetings in Geneva, and the next meeting after that was held in Moscow. Mikhaylov, who had moved up to an important Russian position, was again our host.

We were there for nine days and had an incredible adventure. Each day was busy with meetings, but the Russians always had something fun planned for us afterwards. We went to the Moscow Circus, the ballet, and music recitals. In fact, we were treated so well that we had to ask for a night off to catch up on sleep and write letters home.

Our nine-day trip had extended to over a weekend, and since we knew that we wouldn’t be working on Saturday or Sunday, we tried to finagle a trip from the Russians to go to Leningrad. When we pushed for the trip, the Russians said, “We’ll consider that, but we were actually thinking about taking you to see one of our physics laboratories.” When we heard that, we lost all interest in Leningrad. We assumed that the Russians meant one of the

Academy of Science laboratories in the Moscow area. But it turned out that the Russians were sending us to a closed city to visit Arzamas, which was their equivalent of Los Alamos.

The Russians came to pick us up at about 4:30 a.m. They drove us out of town, put us on a plane, and flew us to Arzamas. Along the way, they told us, “By the way, you’ll be the very first foreign visitors ever to this city.” The visit was incredibly well orchestrated. We listened to talks given by a variety of their scientists, including a lecture on Russian nuclear-weapons history by the Russian equivalent of Edward Teller.

But then events happened that caused us to feel that we were back in the Cold War. The Russians put us on buses, but they didn’t tell us where we were going. The buses started out across the countryside, and the Russians looked very serious. My first thought was, “Oh no, we saw something we weren’t supposed to, and now they’re going to take us out and shoot us!” By this time, it was around 2 p.m., and we had passed through two different guard stations, filled with men carrying machine guns.

The buses came to a gap in the fence along the side of the road, pulled off the road, and started driving down a path. The path wasn’t even paved, so all of us knew we were definitely in trouble. But then our bus stopped at this big, long tent. There, inside the tent, was a picnic spread for us. This was in October and it was snowing, yet the Russians had brought their number-one chef, made a big fire, and were cooking up an incredible barbeque for us inside this tent. The Russians assured us they were barbequing beef—not horsemeat—but who knew?

“The first time we had Russian visitors in the summer of 1994, I sat in the meeting and thought, ‘This is so strange. For my entire life, I have grown up believing that the Russians are the enemy, and now we’re sitting at a table talking about sharing data and algorithms.’”

Faith Shimamoto