

Cold War Summit: Nike Missile Site, 1958-1963

by Donald E. Bender

Through the end of the Second World War, New Jersey's coast and the entrances to the ports of Elizabeth, Newark and New York City were defended by seacoast fortifications at sites such as Fort Hancock and Highlands in New Jersey and Fort Tilden in New York. By late 1945, however, the ability of a long-range aircraft to deliver an atomic bomb across oceans and continents had already been twice demonstrated with devastating results. Accordingly, as postwar tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union increased, the need to deploy anti-bomber defenses capable of defending American cities against a growing Russian bomber threat became increasingly acute.

The most ubiquitous of the new Cold War era "fortifications" were the Nike missile sites of the U.S. Army. Construction of these surface-to-air guided missile batteries began during the mid-1950s. Named for the mythical Greek goddess of Victory, the Nikes would ultimately be installed at over two hundred sites within the continental United States.

Some nineteen Nike installations were planned for the sprawling New York metropolitan area. However, in spite of widespread fears of a nuclear war, when the Army announced its intention to construct a Nike battery in Summit and within the unspoiled woods of the popular Watchung Reservation, both local residents and Union County officials protested. Although possible alternate sites were discussed, these actions served only to delay the construction pro-

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cess, so that the installation was one of the last sites activated within the New York Defense area.

Officially known as Nike missile battery NY-73 the Summit Nike site became operational during 1958 under the command of the 483rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Guided Missile Battalion of U. S. Army Air Defense Command, a major component of the joint U. S.-Canadian North American Air Defense Command, NORAD, which was responsible for the air defense of the entire North American continent.

Site NY-73 consisted of two distinct facilities. The Launcher Area on Summit Lane in the Watchung Reservation was where the missiles were assembled, tested and subsequently stored within three heavily-constructed underground storage magazines. Each magazine was capable of holding as many as ten supersonic Nike Ajax missiles, designed to intercept and destroy Soviet bombers with their high-explosive warheads. Although no missiles were ever launched from this site, frequent practice alerts were held during which missiles were brought to the surface of the site, placed on launchers and erected to a near-vertical firing position.

The separate Control Area was located atop the mountain ridge on the opposite side of Glenside Avenue in order to obtain extensive radar coverage of the region. Three types of radar and an analog computer which guided the missiles to intercept their targets were located within this facility.

Ironically, although site NY-73 was one of the last Nike sites to become operational within the New York region, it was also one of the first to be inacti-

vated. The introduction of a more advanced Nike missile -- the Nike Hercules -- to ten other Nike sites in the region rendered the remaining sites obsolete. When the Cuban "missile crisis" erupted during the fall of 1962, the inactivation of site NY-73 was already underway. Final inactivation ceremonies were held by the New Jersey Army National Guard which closed the site during 1963.



*Nike Missile Battery (Launcher Area)
Watchung Reservation, June 1959*

During the 1980s, a new use for the then abandoned missile-site was proposed. Because the completion of Route I-78 would destroy portions of the Watchung Reservation, an agreement was made wherein the State of New Jersey would compensate Union County for this loss by constructing new stables and a riding facility at the former Nike installation.

Construction of the new Watchung Stables was begun during October 1983. On October 29, 1988 -- thirty years after the Nike site was first established at this location -- the new Watchung Stables were formally dedicated.

Today, relatively few traces of the Summit Nike missile site remain. The general arrangement of the Watchung Stables property, however, reflects the work performed by the Army some four decades earlier. The entrance road from Summit Lane retains the original alignment of the Army's access road; the stable building is located where the underground missile magazines were constructed; and the trailer parking area once contained the barracks and related buildings. A field located at the northwest corner of the property was also the result of the Army's handiwork. The trees were cut down at this spot so that they would not obstruct the beam of the Missile Tracking Radar located

at the Control Area atop the mountain ridge which had to be aimed down the hill and directly at the missile selected for firing.

Adjacent to Governor Livingston High School, a few elements of the former Control Area are still visible at this time including foundation remnants and portions of the barbed wire topped fences which once secured this facility. The steep access road leading up to this site from Glenside Avenue, closed to vehicular traffic, is now a popular site with cyclists and runners most of whom probably have no knowledge of its origins.

During four tense years culminating with the Cuban missile crisis, the Summit Nike missile site served to defend the region and the nation, in much the same manner that our historic seacoast fortifications did in earlier times. Although the soldiers and their missiles have long since departed, the story of Nike site NY-73

remains a significant chapter within Summit's recent Cold War past.

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About the author: *Donald E. Bender has assisted government agencies, museums and historical organizations worldwide with Nike related research. He has discussed former Nike missile sites on public radio and was recently featured in a WABC-TV (Boston) historical documentary film about New England during the Cold War. During 1998; the U.S. National Park Service asked him to comment on its plans for the ongoing restoration and interpretation of Nike site SF-88, the nation's only officially restored Nike installation, which receives thousands of visitors each year. He founded the New Jersey Nike Missile Site Survey in 1994 as a self-sponsored historical project to help document and preserve the history of former Nike missile sites located in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.*