

## Chapter 1 Introduction

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For over forty years, from 1946 to 1991, international relations were defined by a conflict known as the Cold War. Though direct physical confrontation between the superpowers (U.S. and Soviet Union) was markedly absent, proxy wars raged in the developing world. The underlying, ever present threat of violence consumed the U.S. and Soviet Union, driving weapons research and development to a new apex. In the early Cold War years U.S. strategic doctrine focused on defense and deterrence as a means of preventing open confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The U.S. Army's Nike Hercules program was one means of defense which the country deployed in large numbers and at great expense. This ground-based anti-aircraft missile system protected vital U.S. cities, industrial centers and military bases from aerial attack. Multiple Nike sites were built in rings around areas in need of defense, and would have deployed missiles armed with high yield explosives or nuclear weapons to destroy attacking aircraft formations. Dedicated Army soldiers under the Army Air Defense Command operated Nike Hercules batteries around the clock. Though the system never had to be used in the United States, it was considered an important part of the country's defensive framework throughout the 1960's and early 1970's. At peak deployment there were 145 Nike Hercules batteries in the United States.

Alaska had eight Nike sites, with three batteries in Anchorage and five in Fairbanks.<sup>1</sup> The Alaskan Nike Hercules story is exceptional in terms of time, design and service. Here sites operated longer, under isolated conditions, and at a heightened state of alert. Alaska's proximity to the Soviet Union meant the state was a front line of warning and defense during the Cold War. Nike missile sites were a crucial link in the defensive system protecting the state and the country. Alaska's Nike batteries practiced live missile firings, making this one of just two states in the country where active sites had such an opportunity. Also, several design alterations were used to adapt the standard Nike site to the Alaskan climate. While Nike sites in the Lower 48 were largely decommissioned by 1974, the three Anchorage Nike batteries continued operating until 1979.

### Purpose and Scope of Project

In 2002, the U.S. Army Garrison, Alaska's (USAG-AK) Cultural Resources Program began an oral history project to record the personal experiences of Nike Hercules missilemen in Alaska. As one of the Army's central Cold War missions in the state, Nike operations were identified as an important historic context that merited further development. While there is extensive information on the history of Nike missile sites in general, there is limited information about Alaska's Nike sites. A report published by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1988 provides the sole overview of the state's system. The publication, by Colt Denfeld, was submitted with exhibit quality architectural drawings of Alaskan Nike sites to the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER). HAER documentation was occurring in conjunction with Defense Environmental Restoration Program (DERP) cleanup on several of the abandoned Nike sites in Anchorage and Fairbanks. Copies of the Corps study, *Nike Hercules in Alaska*, are available in Alaskan libraries.

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<sup>1</sup> Anchorage had three Nike sites with a total of four batteries. Site Point, near the Anchorage airport, was a double site with two complete batteries. One battery at the site was deactivated in 1970.



Since the publication of Colt Denfeld's study in 1988, additional information about Alaska's Nike batteries has come to light. This study was initiated to capture undocumented aspects of the story, and to detail the personal side of Nike operations through oral history. Fourteen oral history interviews were conducted with former Nike personnel still residing in Alaska, and fifteen interviews were conducted at a battery reunion in Washington, West Virginia. Personal communications with several individuals living outside the state rounded out the oral history interview data. Nike veterans were identified through private contacts and Nike websites containing contact lists or guest books. Two particularly useful web sites were 'Jeral Sexton's Site Summit Alaska' at <http://home.mchsi.com/~jerals/wsb/html/view.cgi-home.html-html> and 'Ed's Nike Missile Web Site at, <http://ed-thelen.org/>. An attempt was made to contact a diverse range of personnel so that every aspect of Nike operations were documented - from launcher maintenance to site security. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Cultural Resources staff plan to deposit the tapes in the oral history collection in the Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

This report is not intended to be a typical cultural resources study. Nor is it a comprehensive technical description and overview of the Nike system. For a complete developmental and operational history of the U.S. missile program see John Lonnquest and David Winkler's *To Defend and Deter: The Legacy of the United States Cold War Missile Program*. For additional operational and site information see Mark A. Berhow and Mark L. Morgan's *Rings of Supersonic Steel: Air Defense of the United States Army 1950 - 1979*. For more details on Alaska's Nike sites see Colt Denfeld's *Nike Hercules in Alaska*. The objective of this report is to provide a personal history, documenting what it was like for young servicemen to live and work at Alaska's Nike batteries where the weather, isolation, and pressures of being on the front lines of the Cold War culminated in a unique and unforgettable experience. Limited archival information was available in the state, and further research may add more to the Alaskan Nike Hercules story.

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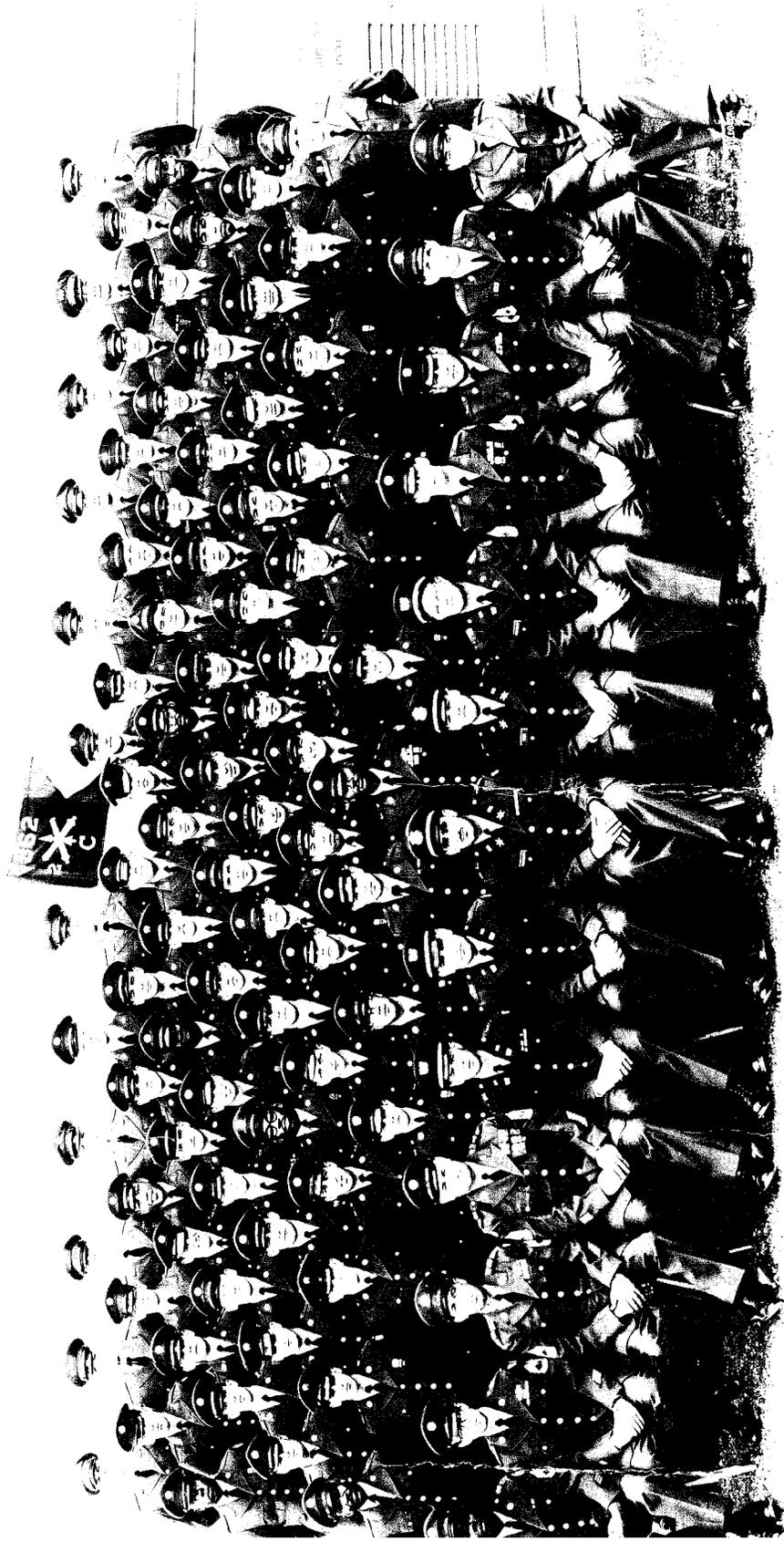


Figure 1: C Battery, 2<sup>nd</sup> Missile Battalion, 562<sup>nd</sup> Artillery, Fairbanks, ca. 1960. Courtesy of Ralph New.

