

Chapter 6 The Nike Life

“We’re the Nike boys, we play with tinker toys, we raise our missiles up and down but they never leave the ground.”

Nike soldiers were dedicated to defending the country at a moment’s notice. Men passed countless hours training and maintaining equipment to accomplish a mission that, fortunately, never had to be executed. The saying cited above circulated amongst the Nike crews, articulating one interpretation of the mission. Warrant Officer Don Neal of Battalion Headquarters explained how the daily routine could be simultaneously demanding and tedious for the typical soldier:

It was sort of like having a Cadillac limousine sitting out here in the driveway and everyday you have to wash it, you have to grease it, you have to take it apart, you have to check the air pressure. Sometimes you’ve got to change the brake lining, whether you need it or not. But you’re never allowed to start it and drive away with it. And you can see that after four or five years of that it gets real boring in that way...They’d go out and the launchers would start to rust, so they’d scrape all the launchers off and then they’d paint the launchers and they’d paint the racks and a guy like me would come along and gig him for painting over the grease fittings and painting over the gauges. So take all that off and get it right and six months later they were rusting and they’d have to do it all again. And a guy that spent two years on a Nike site up here has probably torn apart twenty missiles and put them together, probably painted his launcher twenty times...He’s got a whole lot of guys like me that are trying to catch him doing something wrong. I mean not that we wanted to find something wrong, but our job was to find out about it if there were. So in the mean time, after painting launchers all day, he’s getting rocked out of bed in the middle of the night [for Operational Readiness Inspections].

Nike duty was similar to combat duty in that a constant state of readiness was required. “It was as close to a combat situation as you could get except nobody was shooting at you...I imagine it tired them out. They were under constant pressure,” remembered Jackson Murray. Yet there were some marked differences from combat duty. The following statement was made in reference to anti-aircraft artillery operations, but it is an equally applicable description of the Nike service:

Soldiers at such stations are not faced with frequent crises. Rather, their existence is marked by monotony and seeming purposelessness. Like other soldiers, they are there to meet crisis when it comes. The difference is that crisis does not come to them in peacetime and their lot is to wait and to watch...Passive defense, with its vigilance tasks and its monotony, certainly offers different stresses and different rewards from those offered to the soldier in the field.⁴¹

Nike batteries on fifteen-minute alert status had to be up and ready to operate around the clock. There were only around 110 men per battery to carry out the mission. Shifts were generally 24-hours on, 24-hours off. Even batteries on the lower alert statuses had an incredible amount of maintenance work to keep up with. “They spent an awful lot more time actually involved in the

⁴¹ *Military Small Group Performance Under Isolation and Stress. Critical Review III. Environmental Stress and Behavior Ecology.* Technical Documentary Report AAL-TDR-62-33. Arctic Aeromedical Laboratory, Aerospace Medical Division, Air Force Systems Command, Fort Wainwright, Alaska. June 1962. 13.



conduct of their mission, probably more than any of the other combat arms would as far as I can tell,” remembered George Bristow.

In addition to the rigors of maintaining mission readiness, service at an Alaskan battery could be a strain because of site isolation. While Nike service was certainly not the most remote, isolated military duty one could be assigned in Alaska, especially compared to the isolation faced at DEW Line and AC&W radar sites, it was definitely a greater hardship than regular service on an Army post or Air Force base. Nike batteries were isolated, distinct units. Though soldiers were free to leave the battery in their off time, elevated battery status, lack of transportation, and extra duty often meant people were stuck on-site for days or weeks at a time. “I didn’t get off the hill that much, sometimes it would be three or four months,” remembered Ronald Gaunt of C Battery in Fairbanks.

Though the Nike system was never used for combat in the United States, most soldiers still had a sense that they were involved in an extremely important effort. As one explained the Cold War threat, “we had to do what we were doing because they [the Soviets] were doing what they were doing. So it was a stalemate. Yeah, we figured it would never get used, but that’s a good thing. But it had to be there so it wouldn’t get used, because they would use theirs.”⁴² Billy Badger said, “For a while it was about the only thing we had, I guess, that really made it look like we meant business... I think that it played a big part really in the Cold War. That was there day and night. And they knew [it].”



Figure 29: Nike Hercules missiles, Site Summit. Ca. 1976. U.S. Army photo.

⁴² Gregory Durocher, interview with Kristy Hollinger, Anchorage, AK, 22 August 2003.



Cold War Pressures

“The threat of catastrophic attack on our homeland is total and immediate. We must not forget that a single aircraft, carrying a single bomb, can spell total destruction for our largest city”

- Excerpt from ‘Nike—Surface to Air Guided Missile,’ 1962.

The Nike Hercules system was developed for defense purposes. Accordingly, political tensions could directly affect the status of the missile batteries. The early 1960’s were marked by several serious episodes with the Gary Powers incident, construction of the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. At times the conflict rumbled dangerously close to open violence.

Often such Cold War tensions produced a ripple effect at the Nike batteries in the form of high alert statuses or elevated site security measures. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was a particularly tense period when many Nike soldiers thought the defensive missile system might actually be put to use. Photos of Soviet missile bases under construction were revealed, and the United States threatened to invade Cuba if the bases were not dismantled. The United States warned that an attack from Cuba would be considered an act of Soviet aggression, prompting full U.S. retaliation. Nike batteries were put on high alert and along with the rest of the country, anxiously waited for events to unfold. Billy Badger of C Battery, Fairbanks, stated:

I went to work one morning and here we were and the battery commander told us when you guys have time today you might want to contact your wives and tell them you’re not coming home tonight. And tell them if you want you can have her pack some clothes and we’ll have a bus to come in tomorrow to pick them up. And that was it. So we were stuck up there I think about four days is all. But it looked pretty imminent then.”

MP Thomas Kontes of C Battery remembered how Cold War pressures could affect battery personnel even during their personal time. The battery was given permission to attend a party on base in 1960. It transpired around the time that Nikita Krushchev made his infamous speech to the United Nations, beating his shoe on the podium stating, ‘we will bury you’. The men celebrating in Fairbanks were called back to the battery, which was elevated to hot status along with the rest of the Fairbanks sites. Kontes remembered receiving the order to get the battery personnel back on-site:

I said do you realize the condition those people are in? So after I got through down to base, people were hanging up on me when I was calling, they thought I was joking. Finally I got a hold of the Captain. He sent two buses down, to bring the guys back. We had black coffee out, and we were ready. It was a three-ring circus.

George Bristow recalled that the Soviet Union’s proximity to Alaska could contribute to a consistent, underlying feeling of threat. “At that time the Russian bombers were constantly probing the defenses, the radar defenses of Alaska. Testing us to see how quickly we would respond. So...it [Nike service] involved a lot of tension, a lot of stress on our people maintaining these alert statuses...It was a very intense job...The troops spent a lot of time on the site, away from their families, doing exercises, things of that type.” Radar technician Phillip Parks recalled an example of a conventional probing incident detected at Site Point in Anchorage:



There were times when the Russians would sit out here in a trawler and jam us just to see what we were doing and how quick we were to react to it. I was watching the scope one time when I was tuning the system, and...I normally didn't watch the scope you know, because the operator did that. But I was adjusting it one day and happened to watch it and they sent us what was called a spoofer. It was a false target and it was traveling so fast that it couldn't be a regular target. Because within three revolutions of that radar scope it went from 350 miles to us in like three revolutions...So we knew that they were out there spoofing us. And of course we called it in and they flew over and found a trawler out there.

A personally demoralizing effect of the Cold War occurred in August of 1961, three days before the border between East and West Berlin was closed, when President Kennedy issued Executive Order 10957. The decree authorized the Secretary of Defense to extend enlistments, appointments, and periods of active duty that expired before July 1, 1962, for up to twelve months. At Alaskan Nike sites the order resulted in a six-month service extension for many soldiers. To men eagerly anticipating their return home the additional duty was a crushing disappointment. As Dan Caputo put it, "I [saw] grown men cry." The extension was a testament to the pressures the United States was operating under. Kennedy authorized another service extension on October 23, 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Once again many Nike soldiers had their discharge dates pushed back.⁴³ Soldiers stationed at C Battery in Fairbanks during this period recalled that the Army sent a psychiatrist to the site to study the effects of isolation on the men. Ostensibly, there was concern that the extended duty could negatively impact the men's mental condition.⁴⁴

Natural Disasters

In addition to the occasional excitement caused by political pressures, natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes could also punctuate the typical routine. The 1967 Chena River flood in Fairbanks, for instance, knocked A Battery (Site Tare) out of commission for ten days. Electronics technician Bobby Pace remembered no one could get on or off the site:

I was pulling duty one night for a fellow that had a new baby, and he had to be home for his baby that night...Anyway, I stayed out for him and I got stuck out there for about ten days because a flood came and nobody could come or go. ...Our launching control area was down at the flood. The fire control area, we were up on a hill probably three or four hundred feet. But nobody could get to us or away from us so we were stuck there for quite a while...All the other batteries, like I say, they were up on hills mostly. But the launching area for A Battery was down very low, it was, well the floodwaters got it. That was an interesting time too. We made do with the equipment we had on-site, the food we had...and everything worked out fine.

While Fairbanks had the Chena River flood, Anchorage had the Good Friday earthquake. On March 27, 1964, one of the biggest earthquakes in recorded history hit south-central Alaska. Measured at 9.2 on the Richter scale, the quake rattled for a solid three to seven minutes,

⁴³ The second service extension, Executive Order 11058, had a provision exempting personnel still on duty due to the previous year's mandatory extension.

⁴⁴ An attempt was made to locate the results of this visit, but nothing was identified in records available in Alaska.



destroying buildings, triggering tsunamis and resulting in 131 deaths. Aftershocks continued for days, plaguing recovery efforts and fraying nerves. Property damage in Anchorage was substantial, particularly in the Turnagain area where a massive landslide occurred.

The earthquake seriously impacted the Nike batteries at Site Point and Site Summit. At Site Summit the TTR Radar was shifted off its pedestal. Ordnance Corpsman George Wallot stated, "The parts that were broke were impossible to find (never had broken before) and the system was down for several months." Wallot also remembered that the ordnance shop on Fort Richardson was heavily damaged; every light bulb in the building shattered and the contents of every drawer and shelf spilled onto the floor.

Site Point suffered the worst effects from the earthquake. Damage to the launch area was particularly severe. The quake knocked missiles off their racks: cracking exteriors, damaging fins and exposing highly combustible rocket propellant. The exposed solid fuel propellant could have easily ignited and set off the explosive warhead shells. The men at Site Point worked virtually nonstop for three days trying to stabilize a very volatile situation. The battery was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation for their efforts to bring the site back into operation and for their work to deactivate live munitions. Though the site was fully operational within two weeks of the quake, repair work continued throughout the year.

Meritorious Unit Commendation

By direction of the Secretary of the Army, under the provisions of paragraph 203, AR 672-5-1, the Meritorious Unit Commendation is awarded to the following unit of the United States Army for exceptionally meritorious achievement in the performance of outstanding service during the period indicated: The citation follows:

Battery A, 4th Missile Battalion (Nike Hercules) 43d Artillery, distinguished itself by exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of an extremely difficult and hazardous mission in Alaska from 27 March 1964 to 3 April 1964. Immediately after Alaska was devastated by a severe earthquake on 27 March 1964, the members of this Battery promptly displayed fortitude, dedicated devotion to duty, and perseverance in conducting hazardous recovery operations. Despite the frequent aftershocks which continued throughout the period and the impending danger of ammunition explosions, the personnel of Battery A completely disregarded their own personal safety, and unhesitatingly started operations to eliminate the unsafe conditions. Through their determination, efficient utilization of all resources, and willingness to work on an around-the-clock basis, major items of equipment were successfully repaired and tested, enabling the unit to resume its operational status on 3 April 1964. The loyalty, esprit de corps, and spontaneous response of Battery A to this major disaster reflect great credit upon themselves, and the military service.

Donald Dukes describes the sight that met him after the earthquake at Site Point:

We went inside the first launcher section of the fire unit on "hot status" after prying open the blast doors. It was a big mess. No complete missile round was intact on the tracked launchers or handling rails. All the yoke structures had been sheared. The skins were gouged open; fins bent in all directions. Solid propellants cracked and the rocket motor covers were off. Strong stench from the exposed rocket propellant. Arming lanyards were pulled, energizing the on-board battery-operated electrical power systems, and gyros were spinning. Large components strung across the handling rails and launchers and on the floor, in all directions. Each missile representing upwards of five tons of high



explosive just waiting for the initial spark to set off the entire lot... We were looking around in the launcher section by light of spark proof flashlight, only... The loneliest and scariest 72 hours of my life was just getting underway – even more so than some of my later times in Vietnam.

Personnel worked under extremely stressful and dangerous conditions to render the battery safe. As explained by one munitions expert, “Since no fire and subsequent explosions ensued, it can be assumed that they did their tasks expertly and with more than a modicum of safety principles correctly employed.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Lee Griffin, DPW Environmental Resources, communication with Kristy Hollinger, April 2004.

