Lineage and Honors

Nike Missiles in Connecticut

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During the first decade of the Cold War, the Soviet Union began to develop a series of long-range bomber aircraft capable of reaching targets within the continental United States. The mission of Nike within the continental U.S was to act as a, "last ditch," line of air defense for selected areas.

The Nike system would have been utilized in the event that the Air Force's long-range fighter-interceptor aircraft had failed to destroy any attacking bombers. Within the continental United States, Nike missile sites were constructed in defensive rings surrounding major urban and industrial areas.

Nike, named for the mythical Greek goddess of victory, was the name given to a program which ultimately produced the world's first successful, widely-deployed, guided surface-to-air missile system. Planning for Nike began during the last months of World War II.

A typical Nike air defense site consisted of two separate parcels of land. One area was known as the Integrated Fire Control Area. This site contained the Nike system's ground-based radar and computer systems designed to detect and track hostile aircraft, and to guide the missiles to their targets. The second parcel of land was known as the launcher area. At the launcher area, Nike missiles were stored horizontally within heavily constructed underground missile magazines. A large, missile elevator brought the Nikes to the surface of the site where they would be pushed (manually) by crewmen, across twin steel rails to one of four satellite launchers.

A Soldier inspects a Nike Ajax anti-aircraft missile.(Photo courtesy of http://www.fosa-ct.org/)

The missile was then attached to its launcher and erected to a near-vertical position for firing. The near-vertical firing position ensured that the missile's booster rocket (lower stage) would not crash directly back onto the missile site, but, instead, would land within a predetermined booster impact area. The control and launcher areas were separated by a distance of 1,000 to 6,000 yards (roughly 0.5- to 3.5-miles) and were often located within different townships.

An aerial view of the Portland, Conn., Launch Battery, Oct. 21, 1959. (Photo courtesy of http://www.fosa-ct.org/)

In Connecticut, there were a total of 15 Nike sites, located in two defense areas: Bridgeport and Hartford. The sites were in Ansonia, West Haven, Milford, Fairfield, Westport, Monroe, East Windsor, Warehouse Point, Manchester, Portland, Cromwell, New Britain, Plainville, Simsbury and Avon. Early in my career (1980's), CTARNG units trained at some of these former missile sites. Today, many of the sites are owned by the towns or private owners.

The locations of the Connecticut Nike Missile Sites. (Photo courtesy of Bwmoll3 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12156774

All Nike Ajax sites in the continental United States were closed down by 1964. Closures of select Nike Hercules sites began during the mid 1960s. During 1974, all remaining operational sites within the nationwide Nike air defense system were inactivated. A Nike missile is on display at Camp Niantic.

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