

C Battery, 2nd Missile Battalion, 55th Artillery, Manchester, CT Nov. 1958 – Aug. 1961

The following is by an enlisted man, Michael Doherty, who served in the Manchester, CT, Nike site. It is based on personal recollections, not informed by historical documents, except for the description of the Capehart housing.

During the cold war, Nike missile sites formed a protective ring around Pratt & Whitney, in East Hartford, CT, then the largest manufacturer of jet engines in the United States. One of those Nike sites, C Battery, 2nd Missile Battalion, 55th Artillery, was located partly in Manchester, partly in Glastonbury, two towns roughly in the center of Connecticut. The sites that formed that protective ring were designated as “combat ready,” as they were supposed to be prepared to fire missiles on very short notice.

The “site” actually comprised three different locations, a fire control (FC) area, a launching area, and a separate “Capehart” housing area. The FC area and launching area were less than 2 miles apart, and were connected via underground cable. This brief recollection describes only the FC area.

Physical Description of the FC area

The real action in the FC area was on top of the hill on which three radars were located, two tracking radars and a Scanning radar. The Scanning radar provided a representation of any aircraft in the vicinity, with the aircraft showing up as a brighter spot in the circular array of the scope in the van. Each revolution of the scanning radar was shown as a radius sweeping the sky. Also on the hill was a small block building, to which were attached two radar vans, one of which had the electronics for the Target Tracking Radar, or TTR, and the other for Missile Tracking Radar, or MTR. In the other van were the electronics for the scope showing the activity in the sky as revealed by the scanning radar, and also the command apparatus for actually firing the missile. Another small, block building, close to the vans, housed the generator that was needed to produce electricity in the event of a power failure. A well-traveled path is still evident on the satellite photo on page 1, downloaded from GOOGLE Maps. That path wound its way upwards and leftwards from between the orderly room and the mess hall to the radars. The radars were perhaps 200 yards up from the administrative area.

There were seven significant structures in the administrative area of the FC site, shown on page 1, above. The buildings can be identified using the key below.



1. Battalion headquarters
2. Orderly room
3. Mess hall
4. Barracks for enlisted men assigned to battalion HQ
5. Living quarters for unmarried NCOs
6. Barracks for enlisted men assigned to C Battery
7. Motor pool

I do not recall the small building between 6 and 7, and it may not have been there when

the site was active. It was either been added when Manchester converted the FC area into the Manchester Recreation Center or my memory fails me. Nor do I recall the small structure across the road from the northernmost edge of the Battalion HQ. It, too, may have been added?

Access to the FC area was by a road that ran south, up the road past the Battalion HQ. Access was via a gate across the road. That gate was operated manually by a guard from a very small guard shack, just inside the fence that surrounded the FC area.

On the hill

The van for the MTR and TTR electronics was rather small, and tightly packed with electronic equipment. My estimate is that it was perhaps 20 feet long by 10 feet wide. As one entered from the concrete block building between the two vans, the A-scope for MTR was on the left, with a seat for the lone MTR operator. An A-scope has a diameter of about 8 inches, and it provides information to the operator. Then came two cabinets filled with electronic gear. These cabinets were opened for a very brief time for checking the status of the system during preparation for firing a missile. Across the far end of the van was a wide console with three A-scopes, one for each of the three TTR operators. One man operated the elevation, one the azimuth and the third the range. Their task was to locate and lock on a target by manipulating hand wheels that were about 5 inches in diameter that in turn drove servomechanisms. Specifically the perceptual motor task of each operator involved getting and keeping a small “spike” inside a “gate,” on the A-scope. The gate was essentially a break between two rows of signals representing noise. When the spike was in the gates of all three operators, the target radar was locked on the target. On the right hand side of the van were some rather shallow cabinets.

I was rarely inside the other van, and cannot describe even remotely completely what was in that van. The C-scope, perhaps 12 inches in diameter for the scanning radar was next to a console on which there was the switch that the officer in charge would have to throw to launch a missile, in case of an actual attack.

The block building between the radar vans was about as big as one of the radar vans. It was essentially a storage and work area, with a large worktable at the front and tall metal storage cabinets at the back. When the battery was “hot,” that is in a status such that we were supposed to be able to launch a missile with a 15 minute notice, the central block is where the operators slept on cots, on the table or even on top of the tall cabinets. The battery was hot for a week at a time about once a month.

Maintaining readiness

There were two “sections” of operators manning the radars in the FC area. I believe that each section had 5 or 6 men. At any given time when the battery was on standby, i. e., not hot, some members of one section would be responsible for routine maintenance of the radars on the hill. The members of the other section and the remaining members of the crew assigned to the hill would be pulling guard duty, KP, and whatever had to be done onsite down the hill. The crew on the hill would be responsible for performing routine checks on the electronics in the vans, and whenever some check showed a subsystem to be malfunctioning, a maintenance man would be called, and it was his responsibility to make the required adjustments or, if necessary, remove and replace the malfunctioning unit. Replacement was done not at the level of vacuum tubes or transistors, etc, but at a level of components above that, functional modules that could be removed and replaced as a whole. The defective unit was sent off to be repaired at a higher level than the battery.

The operator personnel on the hill would perform those checks on a routine basis, every 4 hours if I recall correctly. We would also go out on a regular basis, climb up on the low platforms on which the tracking radars were mounted, and collimate the MTR and TTR. Collimation, an operation that assured that the azimuth was correct., was a daunting task, especially on a hilltop at 2 A.M. on a wintry New England January night!

Assessing readiness

The basic assessment of the battery’s readiness to fire was the routine checking and maintenance of the equipment, performed under the close supervision

of Chief Warrant Officer Rasmus. He had a dedication to keeping the battery ready, which I’m sure was shared by his counterpart in the launching area. Equal attention was paid to the readiness of the crew, with on-the-job training of incoming operators by the senior operators there. We took great pride in being good at the job, and being in a state of readiness, even if we were unhappy about the nature of the duty to which we had been assigned.

An organizationally higher level of the assessment of readiness came the “Ops checks,” the formal evaluations that were conducted randomly and completely unannounced. These were most often conducted by teams formed at the battalion level, but could be from a higher level, as well. They were conducted about once a month, when the battery was hot, and at any time of the day or night. We were required to sham fire a missile at an electronically fired “target” within 15 minutes as the ops check team observed and evaluated every action, and then gave the battery an overall score.

At the highest level of the assessment of readiness was the annual trip to a missile range in New Mexico, where the battery actually fired a missile at a drone flown into the vicinity of where we had set up our equipment. The importance of shooting down the drone was

drilled into us, with the constant reminder that the year after a failure to down it would be a very hard one! We were flown down and stayed one night in Fort Bliss, then trucked out to the missile range. When the time came to get ready to locate and fire a missile at the drone, the tension was high. I can recall the expectancy as the spike representing the target approached the gate on my elevation A-scope, and the relief and exultation when the spike turned from a sharply defined one to a mess of clutter and the radar's elevation dropped as the debris itself, to which the radar remained temporarily locked on, fell to earth. We went home a proud and happy crew!

Living quarters

The officers and, I believe, senior NCOs lived in the Capehart housing. In Manchester, there were 32 Capehart housing units. There was a sort of environmental impact statement in 1989 that described the Capehart housing in Manchester in some detail, and that indicated that the units were being decommissioned and turned over to civilian housing..

Married enlisted men could live "on the economy," and unmarried enlisted men in the lower ranks lived in the barracks shown on the plan of the site, above. The barracks were divided into sleeping areas, with 2 bunks per area. Those areas were separated by portable dividers, otherwise the main room in the barracks was a very large open room. The NCOs' quarters were individual rooms.

President Truman had integrated the armed services just 10 years before, so the site was obviously racially integrated. An African-American, Sgt. Davidson, was the senior NCO in the FC area when we arrived on the site in 1958, and the operators who were there before we arrived had great respect for him. There were many minority enlisted men, and the company commander when the site was decommissioned in 1961 was Capt. Everett, an African American. To the best of my recollection, there were no racial incidents on the site in the years in question.

With regard to another form of integration, it is my memory that there were very few if any problems between the soldiers and the people in the town of Manchester.

I do not know the number of personnel on the site at any one time, but it was very small for a military installation. My estimate is that there were not many more than 100 soldiers there at any one time, including FC and launching area personnel, as well as those in the battalion headquarters.

Food

The provisions for the site were obtained from Westover Air Force Base just across the state line in Massachusetts. The procedure was for two operators to drive a 2 ½ ton truck from the motor pool with a list of what was required. That list would be turned in at the appropriate warehouse, and everything requested would simply be placed on a loading dock. The enlisted man in charge would check to make sure all everything was there, sign a receipt, and the two of them would load the provisions onto the truck and drive back to the FC area.

The orderly room building

The orderly room building was subdivided into a number of rooms. The orderly room itself was right there as one entered the building. Behind the counter was the first sergeant's desk, and behind that was the door to the CO's office. There was a room in which the CO could sleep while we were on hot battery status. In addition there was a small room with two cots for the two men who were on guard duty, during their 4 hours not on the gate. There was a large room to the left of the orderly room as one entered the building. It was a recreation room with a billiards table and a ping pong table and vending machines. Once a month or so, a person charged with looking after morale on site would show up here. We knew her only as Sam, and we never did quite figure out what she was supposed to do. Within that large room that contained the rec room there was also a small room that functioned as the post exchange.

The PX was located in a room that was about 10 X 12 feet. One or two enlisted men were given the opportunity – and responsibility – of running the PX. It was open during mealtimes, and at other times due to demand and to the willingness of the guy running it. The one or two men operating the PX received a small percentage of the revenue from sales. Again, the proximity to Westover provided the opportunity to and means of this small Nike site to have a PX, and the routine for obtaining stock was essentially the same as for obtaining food for the mess hall, except for who made up the requisition. The PX stock consisted of anything that was needed or wanted by the men, soap, toiletries, etc. As you might suspect, given the era, cigarettes were a big seller. Toward the end of the life of the site, a new company commander decided that beer could be sold, and after that, many cases of beer would be added to the requisition for Westover AFB.

Routine duties

As one might expect of a radically hierarchical organization such as the army, many individuals were exempted from the most unpleasant jobs. Enlisted men assigned to battalion HQ did not have to pull guard or KP, nor did any personnel above the rank of E-4. Once one made E-5, however, he went on the duty roster for CQ (Charge of Quarters), which required staying awake all night. His alertness awake was checked about once an hour via phone from “cowboy,” which we assumed was the “handle” battalion

headquarters. Each call had to be answered promptly, and the CQ gave his initials in the traditional alpha-bravo alphabet. The company clerk, who worked closely with the first sergeant and company commander, was likewise excused from what might be characterized as “dog work.” That left the 12 or 14 FC operators and the equivalent launching area personnel (I do not know if they were referred to as “operators.”) to handle all guard duty at the FC and launching areas, and to pull all the KP. The launching area personnel took their meals at the FC mess hall, but there may have been some alternate food facility other than a full-fledged mess hall in the launching area?

KP A soldier assigned to KP might be given either of two tasks, doing whatever the cook said (helping prepare the food, serving, washing, cleaning up, etc.), or dining room orderly (DRO), whose main task was to serve meals to the officers, who sat in a segregated part of the mess hall. As you can imagine, KP was an all too frequent and onerous task.

Guard duty was also an all too frequent obligation, as so few men were on the duty roster. Guard duty was a 24 hour commitment, with four 2-hour shifts on post interspersed with four 4-hour shifts off. On post meant sitting in the small shack by the gate in the chain link fence around the FC area, and opening the gate whenever a car that had proper access to the site drove up. The guards rarely had to stop cars to ask for identification, as we soon learned to identify the cars that had access to the site, especially in light of the fact that relatively few operators had cars.

Miscellany

There were many tasks that simply had to be done as part of ordinary life. Keeping the barracks clean and one's bed made was an obvious one. Painting was another occasional task we were assigned, and on a few occasions we were shaking our heads, as we were told to paint the shower floors to make them look good for an inspection from a level above the battery. What led us to shake our heads was that we were using water-based paint on the shower room floor!

Another task was policing the area. I recall being lined up almost fingertip to fingertip and walking slowly along picking up cigarette butts and other trash to the refrain “If it ain't moving, either pick it up or paint it.” But policing did not have to be done very often, as site personnel rarely threw trash on the ground.

Odds and ends

Not too long before the site was closed contractors came in and built a basketball court and bulldozed a softball field part of the way up the hill toward the radars. It was a very long time before we were permitted to step foot on either, because the army had not

officially “accepted” them from the contractor. The same CO who told the PX that it was OK to stock beer told us to go ahead and use the court and the field. I have a vivid memory of a softball game between the FC and launching areas in which I played third base and a young African American soldier played shortstop. I took it with a grain of salt when he said that he had played for the Kansas City Monarchs – until I saw him play. He had such phenomenal range in the field and such a good arm that I just let anything to my left go! He could not hit a lick, though.

Saying goodbye

The site was decommissioned in 1961. Many of the AJAX sites were converted to fire the newer Hercules missile, but the Manchester site was shut down, and as far as I know it is now the site of the Manchester Recreation area. I still recall the zest we felt at doing the work involved in decommissioning the site, such as digging up cables.

Shortly after we closed up shop, to the extent that we could, we were sent to Fort Totten in Queens, New York, to be mustered out. It was so well understood that duty on a Nike site was not conducive to a love of military life that we heard not a single word about reenlisting!