

This article appeared in the Fall 1999 edition
of the *Burlington County Historical Society Newsletter*,
the quarterly publication of the Burlington County Historical Society

LUMBERTON'S COLD WAR LEGACY: NIKE MISSILE BATTERY PH-23/25

Donald E. Bender

Seacoast fortifications played an important role in defending American coastal cities and harbors through the end of the Second World War. By that time, however, the development of long-range aircraft capable of carrying atomic bombs necessitated the development of new defenses. The first of these Cold War era air defense "fortifications" -- the U.S. Army's Nike missile batteries -- were constructed during the mid 1950s. Named for their mythical Greek goddess of victory, Nike missiles were ultimately deployed at over 200 sites across the nation serving for two decades as a last line of defense against nuclear-armed Russian bombers.

Twelve Nike missile sites were constructed to defend Philadelphia, Camden and the surrounding region. Seven of these sites were located in Pennsylvania, the remaining five, plus a regional command center, were built in New Jersey. Lumberton's Nike missile site became operational during 1956 as a component of the Philadelphia Defense Area. Designated as Nike missile site PH-23/25, the Lumberton installation was assigned to U.S. Army Air Defense Command (ARADCOM) which was a component of the joint U.S.-Canadian North American Air Defense Command known as NORAD.

Site PH-23/25 was one of a relatively small number of "dual" Nike sites, in essence two Nike missile batteries located side-by-side containing two sets of missile launching facilities and two sets of radar and guidance equipment. The missiles were assembled, tested and then stored within underground storage magazines at the Launcher Area on Newbold's Corner Road. An Administration Area containing offices was located adjacent to this facility.

Two separate Integrated Fire Control Areas were constructed one half mile east at the intersection with Eayrestown Road. The "IFC" Areas (one for each missile battery) contained the Nike system's ground-based guidance systems and controlled the operation of the missile batteries. Radar units mounted atop tall towers at this facility detected and tracked hostile aircraft, and would have guided the missiles to their targets via computer-generated steering commands.

As many as sixty supersonic Nike Ajax missiles were first stored at the site. During 1958, four of the six missile magazines were converted to fire a second-generation Nike missile, the Nike Hercules. The new missiles offered superior performance, increased maximum range and could be armed with powerful nuclear warheads capable of destroying a formation of several attacking aircraft. As a result, fewer sites were needed to defend the region. Only five of the twelve Nike sites defending the Philadelphia region received the Nike Hercules. These sites remained active through the 1970s while the other seven sites in the area were inactivated by 1963.

The Lumberton site was first manned by the Army's 738th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Guided Missile Battalion. During 1963, however, control of the site was transferred to the New Jersey Army National Guard's 112th Artillery under

a nationwide program to divide air defense roles among active and reserve units. The NJARNG's 254th Artillery assumed command of the site during 1971 and continued to operate the site until its closure during 1974.

Today, Lumberton's municipal complex occupies some of the Army's original buildings. Nearby, behind rusting barbed wire topped fences, stand the towers for the radars which searched the skies for nearly two decades, seeking an enemy which would thankfully never arrive. Just as the seacoast fortifications at Fort Mott, Cape May and other locations defended the region and the nation in earlier decades, Nike missile sites such as site PH-23/25 in Lumberton, played a similar role during the Cold War and should not be forgotten.

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About the Author ...

Donald E. Bender is the founder of the New Jersey Nike Missile Site Survey, a self-sponsored historical project designed to document the history and present condition of former Nike missile sites located in the New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia areas. He has assisted governmental, military, academic and historical organizations with research related to former Nike missile sites and other Cold War era military installations across the nation and internationally. He is presently completing a book about New Jersey during the Cold War. He can be reached via e-mail at cwresearch2@yahoo.com

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