

## **Nike Missiles...Our Cold War Heritage**

By: Maurice P. Abraham - April 27, 2011

During the Cold War era that followed World War II, the hills above El Sobrante became home to a strategically important military installation, a Nike Missile launch facility. Fearing potential Soviet Union bomber attacks, the United States established these missile sites near vulnerable urban centers and military installations across the country. The United States had developed the Nike-Ajax missile, the nation's first supersonic anti-aircraft guided missile, soon after the war's end. The Nike-Ajax, named after the Greek Goddess of Victory, was capable of intercepting and destroying all types of bomber aircraft.

By 1953, under the auspices of the U.S. Army, Nike bases were operational around vital industrial areas and densely populated strategic areas throughout the nation. The Bay Area was one of approximately two hundred such "vital" areas. At its peak size, El Sobrante's Nike base consisted of 24 Nike-Ajax guided missiles. The base was located on San Pablo Ridge, directly above today's Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area, and just below the highest point of the ridge, Wildcat Peak. The base was visible from certain El Sobrante vantage points, particularly at night when it was brightly illuminated.

The El Sobrante Nike base was accessible from Tilden Park's Inspiration Point, just over two miles to the south. However, it was highly secured by military personnel and completely off-limits to the general public. The paved Nimitz Way access road, now a popular, ridge-line trail through Tilden and Wildcat Canyon Regional Parks, was then the carefully guarded entrance to the Nike complex. Approaching the site today from Inspiration Point, Nimitz Way follows the ridge, then veers sharply left around Wildcat Peak. At this point it then circumscribes a route to the left of a broad, level meadow area below the peak. This man-made meadow occupied by a few small structures and an aging road network are the most visible remaining evidence of this once-vital national defense installation.

El Sobrante "old-timers" may recall the surreal sight of a military-escorted truck caravan transporting those 24 Nike missiles along San Pablo Dam Road to their new base. The sight of this missile caravan rendered undeniable the constant Soviet threat that hung over the U.S in those times. Each Nike missile was 34 feet in length including its booster rocket, and one foot in diameter. They each weighed over 2,000 lbs., flew at over twice the speed of sound, and delivered non-nuclear high explosives to a target within a 25 mile range. In the event Soviet bombers from the north made it to the Bay Area, these missiles would be launched into the bomber formation and detonated in their midst, hopefully destroying the bombers en masse. The Nike was not capable of impacting specific targets the way today's weapons are.

Nike missiles were guided to their targets by special radars located within a mile or two of the missiles' launch point. In one of the earliest uses of computer technology, computers were used to analyze the radar information and send the appropriate signals to the missile, guiding it to its target and telling it when to detonate. This assemblage of missiles, launchers, and attendant radars comprised a Nike missile battery or base.

Technical requirements of the Nike systems dictated that their radar equipment be located at least one mile away from the launch site, yet still maintain a clear line-of-sight to the missile from launch to detonation. The radars used at the El Sobrante installation were located about 1½ miles north on Potrero Ridge. The only remaining physical evidence of the radar installation is some old concrete slabs.

Nike missile installations typically stretched over several miles. Because of their line-of-sight requirement they usually had long sweeping views of the area where they were located. This characteristic contributes to the popularity of these sites today as Regional Parks.

In addition to the radar structures and missile launch and storage facilities, each site had administration buildings, housing, and even guard-dog kennels and training facilities. Each site had a round-the-clock military presence with dozens of military personnel.



***An aerial oblique of the El Sobrante area Nike launch site circa 1959. Note the four missiles standing upright on upper right launch pad. The El Sobrante community can be seen in the upper left background and San Pablo reservoir is in the right background. The Nike site is now a large, flat, open meadow.***

By 1958, the successor to the Nike-Ajax missile, the Nike-Hercules, had been deployed at four sites in the Bay Area. This bigger and faster missile had a range of 87 miles; a crucial distinction as the Nike-Hercules carried a nuclear warhead. The thinking at that time was that if there were to be nuclear

explosions, they had to occur as far away from populated areas as possible. Also in 1958, the operation of Bay Area Nike bases was transferred from the U.S. Army to the National Guard.

Eleven Nike missile bases ultimately protected the Bay Area, including the installation above El Sobrante and beginning with the first such base in San Francisco. These included a Nike base in northern San Rafael, one on Angel Island, two in the Marin Headlands, one in the San Francisco Presidio, one at Fort Funston in Daly City, one near Pacifica, one at what is now Coyote Hills Regional Park in Fremont, one at what is now Chabot Regional Park in Castro Valley, and one at what is now Las Trampas Regional Park in San Ramon. In the Bay Area, a division of Bell Telephone was responsible for the design and installed of the Nike systems.



***On the left Nimitz Way wraps around the hillside to its junction with today's Havey Canyon Trail. The "meadow" in the center area is the former Nike launch site.***

Most Bay Area Nike bases had a brief lifespan. By 1962 they were already being deactivated as changing military technology made attack from long-range bombers unlikely. Intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's) were being deployed and the defense of the United States homeland relied on the concept of "mutually assured destruction." It was assumed that the Soviet Union would not think of attacking the U.S. or our NATO allies if the Soviets knew that our ICBM's could reach their country and lay waste to it.

By 1974, the last of the four remaining Nike missile bases in the Bay Area had closed and the National Guard had turned over site SF-88 in the Marin Headlands to the National Park Service. Today SF-88 is a museum open to the public and is one of the best-preserved "functioning" Nike sites in the country. The El Sobrante Nike installation's administration and housing buildings had been torn down; the missile launch and storage facilities were covered with earth fill and its associated radar installation on Potrero Ridge was also removed. Over time, the remaining signs of this local strategic defense installation will continue their surrender to the overtaking forces of nature.

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