

The background of the cover is a photograph of a tall, modern building with a curved facade and many windows. The building is light-colored and stands against a clear blue sky. In the foreground, there is a lower, white building with a sign that reads "PHOENIX FINANCIAL CENTER".

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# BULLETIN

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# PARTNERSHIP BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO HISTORIC NIKE HERCULES MISSILE SITE

BY DARRELL LEWIS



**SITE SUMMIT STAR.** Circa 2007. Courtesy of Fort Richardson Public Affairs Office.



Visible from all over Anchorage and across Cook Inlet, the Arctic Valley Star has been an icon in Alaska's largest city for decades. The 300'x300' star, lit by 350 60 watt light bulbs, is turned on the day after Thanksgiving each year and is turned off when the last Iditarod musher comes into Nome each March. The highly visible star is a link to part of Alaska's Cold War past. Just above the Star on a bench of Mt. Gordon Lyon is the former Missile Launch and Storage area of Nike Site Summit, one of 145 Nike Hercules Missile sites constructed across the nation as the last lines of defense against Soviet bombers during the Cold War. A thousand feet higher and a mile away, is the former Integrated Fire Control (IFC) area of the Site, which included the barracks, command center, and radar for the site. In November 1960, the men stationed at Nike Site Summit constructed the Arctic Valley Star on the side of the mountain to wish the residents of Fort Richardson and Anchorage a Merry Christmas.



## PARTNERSHIP BREATHES NEW LIFE

Constructed from 1958-59, Nike Site Summit was one of eight Nike Hercules Missile sites constructed in Alaska, and three that ringed Anchorage. Unlike most Nike Missile sites constructed across the nation, Nike Site Summit was built on a 4,000 foot mountain. Engineers blew off 60 vertical feet of the mountain to make a place for the IFC building, a garage, and radar. With the coming of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) the Nike Hercules Missile became obsolete and Nike sites across the nation were closed in the 1970s. Nike Site Summit and a site in Homestead, Florida were the last two sites to close in 1979.

Their purpose being aerial defense, Nike sites typically consisted of a missile launch and storage area, battery control area, and barracks, and were constructed near or within major cities. These interrelated areas were separated geographically from each other. They often occupied prime real-estate and when they were closed they were quickly swallowed up, parceled out, and developed. Today at most sites the only evidence of their existence are the concrete portions of the missile launch and storage areas.

Nike Site Summit, being located on the eastern edge of Fort Richardson Army base, on a 4,000' mountain was afforded protection from developers. The 244 acre site was never sold off or parceled out. Recognizing this, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1996 and is considered to be of national significance. The NRHP reviewer observed that "...the site is an exceptionally well preserved example of a Cold War-era Nike-Hercules missile installation."

Its location on an active military base has both helped and hindered its preservation. With the pressures of force reduction that came after the end of the Cold War, many military bases that were not closed were required to reduce the square footage of their garrisons. This meant the demolition of unused or underused buildings across the nation. Nike Site Summit with its 27 unused buildings was proposed for demolition



INTEGRATED FIRE CONTROL AREA. U.S. Army Alaska, Fort Richardson, 2008.

several times to help U.S. Army Garrison Alaska meet its facilities reduction requirements. These proposals often came from reluctant commanders and were always met with strong opposition from a public with deep military roots and a growing interest in the Cold War.





In December 2000, a group of Anchorage community leaders tasked by the Army to come up with a solution for what to do with Nike Site Summit recommended a public-private partnership to manage the site for public tours. After the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, public access to military bases across the nation was

strictly curtailed. It was not until 2007 that the Army was ready to discuss Nike Site Summit again.

In February 2007, U.S. Army Garrison Fort Richardson began taking public comments for future management of Nike Site Summit. That same month Friends of Nike





**MISSILE LAUNCH AND STORAGE AREA.** Circa 2009. Photograph courtesy of Jon Scudder, U.S. Air Force.

Site Summit (FONSS) lead by Jim Renkert, veterans and other community leaders, formed to advocate for preservation of the site. The Alaska Association for Historic Preservation (AAHP), a statewide preservation organization joined in the call for preservation. More than one hundred comments in support of preserving Nike Site Summit were received, including support from The Cold War Museum in Alexandria, Virginia and the Nike Historical Society in Alameda, California. In June 2009, an agreement was reached to preserve most of the site and allow guided summer tours.

The partnership recommended nearly 10 years earlier was formed as part of the agreement and Friends of Nike Site Summit (FONSS) became the lead private organization in the partnership. Most of the 27 buildings that make up the site will be preserved and FONSS is responsible for preserving five of them. After being abandoned for more than 30 years they are in poor condition. The site's location on a mountain means that it is regularly subjected to high winds in the winter. A veteran of the site observed that when he was stationed at Nike Site Summit in the mid 1970s they always seemed to lose the anemometer when the wind got





up to about 130 mph. Heavy snow loads are a common occurrence in the winter as well.

With strong support from AAHP, a statewide 501(c)(3) preservation organization and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's representative in Alaska, FONSS has been able to raise funds, apply for grants, and attain a level of recognition that would have otherwise been more difficult. As FONSS' umbrella organization AAHP has highlighted FONSS' work in their quarterly newsletter, and co-sponsored workshops in cooperation with the National Park Service to train FONSS volunteers in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for

Treatment of Historic Properties. AAHP treasurer and board member, Bob Mitchell, a Historical Architect, has played a critical role in developing work plans and overseeing work at the site.

In 2010, FONSS began preservation work at the site. With a grant from the Alaska Historical Commission and donations from individuals and private organizations FONSS restored the three sentry stations that guarded the entrances to the site. The object of restoration is to stabilize the buildings and restore their exteriors to their Cold War appearance. Over





800 volunteer hours went into the restoration, which required removal of lead based paint and asbestos.

A number of Nike veterans have been involved in the preservation efforts, including two that were stationed at the site in the 1970s and two that periodically worked at the site. Having individuals with first-hand knowledge of the site involved in its preservation is invaluable. Manuals from the 1950s and 60s explain the interrelationship and purpose of the buildings at a Nike Hercules Missile site; however the Nike veterans explain that things were not always done according to the manual. Some buildings were used quite differently from the way they were described in the manuals.

In September 2010, U.S. Army Garrison Fort Richardson and the adjacent Elmendorf Air Force Base were merged into Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER). Under the new command structure Elmendorf AFB is now the lead federal agency for resource management on Fort Richardson, and replaced Fort Richardson as the partner in the Nike Site Summit preservation partnership. "It has been a cooperative effort between federal, state and community groups blending mission and historical preservation requirements," John Scudder, JBER Cultural Resources Manager said. "The close relationship continues to mature, benefitting everyone."

The strong level of support for FONSS' efforts continues. To improve logistics for the 2011 work season JBER approved the placement of a CONEX container at the site to store materials and tools. Restoration of power to the site to establish an onsite electrical supply for power tools is also in the works. JBER has also increased efforts to deter trespass at the site. While the site is located on military land it is adjacent to Chugach State Park, a hugely popular recreation area for Anchorage residents. The vast majority of trespassers are simply curious, however vandalism is a problem. Preservation efforts are meaningless if vandals are able to damage or destroy what has been accomplished.

Vandalism has been as mundane as graffiti and as appalling as broken windows and doors, destruction of garage doors and blast doors on the magazines, removal of building materials for use in campfires, and attempted theft of fencing that surrounds the site. JBER is working aggressively to stop vandalism of the site. "We are currently working on some significant projects to improve human health and safety, security and preservation of Site Summit,"



Scudder said. "One of those projects currently underway includes the upgrading of fencing and signage."

Cooperation between the military and FONSS has been phenomenal! Part of the access road to the site is in the fan of a firing range located at the base of Mt. Gordon Lyon. A key concern of the military regarding public access to the site has been the danger of crossing the firing fan during live fire exercises. Access to the site is controlled by Range Control, which stops firing to allow FONSS volunteers to drive up or down the mountain. Communication from the site to Range Control is via radio or cell phone. The mountainous area surrounding Nike Site Summit is also used for alpine training. Troops passing through the area while FONSS has been working have been respectful and supportive.

FONSS' preservation efforts during the summer 2011 work season will focus on the Launch Control Building. While the order to launch came from the IFC Building nearly a mile away the "button" was in the Launch Control Building. It actually consists of three interconnected buildings: a concrete building; a cinder block building; and a wood frame building. Removing debris from inside the buildings, replacing badly deteriorated plywood on the exterior of the wood frame building, repainting, sealing window and door openings, and repairing the roof will be priorities.

The Launch Control Building is the largest of the five buildings that FONSS is responsible for preserving under the terms of the agreement.

**(opposite left) SENTRY STATION 1.** September 2009, prior to its restoration. Photograph by Darrell Lewis, National Park Service

**(opposite right) SENTRY STATION 1.** September 2010, following its restoration. Photograph by Darrell Lewis, National Park Service

**(below) LAUNCH CONTROL BUILDING.** September 2008. Photograph courtesy of Bob French.

Completion of this building will be a major step toward public tours of the site, leaving just one more building to preserve to meet the terms of the agreement. Public tours are planned for summer 2012.

FONSS Director Jim Renkert observes, "The efforts to preserve Nike Site Summit are being undertaken to [save] this important part of Alaska and Cold War heritage...to honor the men who served there. For twenty years those stationed at this mountaintop fortress kept watch over Anchorage and our nation..." Perched atop a 4,000' mountain overlooking Anchorage and Cook Inlet, with views of the Alaska Range, Chugach Mountains, and Talkeetna Mountains it is a fitting monument to all Cold War veterans. Even with the modest level of demolition planned for the site, essentially the IFC Building and Vehicle Maintenance Building, so much of the site will remain that it will nearly speak for itself. Rarely do historic preservationists and interpreters have so much to work with to tell the story of a historic site.

The preservation partnership between Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Friends of Nike Site Summit, the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation, National Park Service, and the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer should stand as a model for historic preservation projects on other military installations. It leverages each organization's resources to support a preservation effort that none could do alone. In the end Alaska and the Nation will have a premier historic site to tell the Cold War and Nike Hercules stories. ■

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