Cold War History: Nike Missile Sites in Connecticut

A Circle of Defense

IN 1944 THE WAR DEPARTMENT demanded a new air defense system to combat the new jet aircraft, as existing gun-based systems proved largely incapable of dealing with the speeds and altitudes at which jet aircraft operated. Project Nike was a US Army project proposed in May 1943 by Bell Laboratories to develop a line-of-sight anti-aircraft missile system. The project delivered the United States' first operational anti-aircraft missile system, the Nike Ajax, in 1953.

IN CONNECTICUT, missile batteries were concentrated in two areas, the Hartford Defense Area (HA) and the Bridgeport Defense Area (BR). Regular Army units manned these sites after activation in 1956-57. The Bridgeport Defense Area would become integrated into the New England Defense Area before being deactivated in 1971.

THE NIKE BATTERIES were situated to protect strategic and tactical sites within the US. As a last-line of defense from air attack, they were positioned to protect cities as well as military installations. They were organized in Defense Areas and placed in a circle around population centers and strategic locations.

Each Nike site actually consisted of two facilities: a control or radar site known as an "RC" most often located on a hill for maximum line of sight range, and a companion launch site also known informally as a "Battery" which was usually within two miles of the control site. There were also Nike housing units assigned to most batteries and a regional maintenance center in Windsor Locks, CT.

The Nuclear Edge

THE NIKE was a two stage missile using a solid fuel booster stage and a liquid fueled second stage. The missile could reach a maximum speed of 1000 mph, an altitude of 70,000 feet and had a range of 25 miles. The missile used a high explosive fragmentation warhead that could successfully destroy or at least damage a single incoming Russian bomber.

As Soviet bomber production increased, the one missile one bomber scheme was deemed impractical so the decision was made to equip some of the second generation Nike missiles, the Hercules, with atomic warheads in the 1-40 kiloton range (in comparison, the nuclear bomb which destroyed Hiroshima was approx. 15 kilotons). The atomic warhead would be detonated in front of an incoming group of bombers and would in theory destroy or damage them either by the blast or by the radiation effects, including thermal and EMP. Having nukes detonate above the continental US was thought to be a desirable alternative to having them go off in our cities!