



Photo by Daniel Walker

# Cold War front line

## Wilbarger County stood one 'pushed button' from nuclear war

By Daniel Walker

Fifty-five years ago, in October 1962, the world stood on the edge of destruction – closer to nuclear war than it has come before or since. And deep inside a missile bunker in northern Wilbarger County a finger hovered over a button poised to begin that war.

At the heart of the matter lay Cuba – the Communist controlled island 90 miles from Florida. On Oct. 14, 1962, a U.S. U2 spy plane took photos over the island showing Russian nuclear missiles that could strike the U.S. within minutes. Thus began 13 tension-filled days of back-room negotiation and military preparedness that reached a boiling point on Oct. 23, when a U.S. spy plane was shot down and its pilot killed. President John F. Kennedy took the country one step from nuclear war.

“My crew was on alert duty when (we) went to DEFCON 2 - the only time that ever happened,” retired airman Jerry Burns remembered of that day.

“The Missile Combat Crew Commander and I were on the console and decoded that alert message from SAC Headquarters. It went something

like: ‘Skybird, Skybird. This is Looking Glass with a Red Dot Two message,” Burns said. “Holy mackerell! This was the real thing.”

Burns has retired to Arizona, but in 1962, he was assigned to Launch Crew 43 of the 577th Strategic Missile Squadron out of Altus Air Force Base. The 577th manned 12 Atlas missile silos built in a circle around the Oklahoma air base. One of those silos was in Texas – No. 5 – buried in a pasture near Odell just off FM 91, three miles south of the Red River.

“Yes,” Burns said, he thought there would be war. He believed it so much that his crew was making plans for bringing their families to the missile silo. That idea was “squashed” by command, Burns said, when the plan instead was made to reload the silos.

“We were just one more button, and two minutes away from WWII. You could have cut No. 10 washers off my sphincter for a month after that experience. I guess the world will never really understand how close we came that night,” he said.

Construction on the 12 silo sites of the 577th began in May 1960, and the Fargo silo was the last completed. It was dedicated on Nov. 8, 1961. The sites became operational in the summer of 1962, just months before the crisis with Cuba began.

### CONSTRUCTION WAS DIFFICULT

Declassified documents show that the Fargo silo site in particular was plagued with a unique problem during construction.

“Normal evacuation procedures were used to a depth of approximately 16.5 feet where operations were halted due to subsurface groundwater,” the document stated.

According to the document, workers installed a French drain, built two rings of pilings, cut two sump pits and poured a 12-foot curtain of concrete to deal with the water that was seeping into the pit at a rate as high as 600 gallons per minute. The contractors tried using cottonseed hulls, horse manure, 40 sacks of calcium chloride and 2,170 sacks of cement to seal the shaft to the bedrock – all to no avail. “Inability to

control subsurface water has been a major concern and developed numerous problems in evacuation,” the report stated.

The problem was finally solved when a hardwood lagging was installed around the shaft wall and “water was handled behind this lagging and pumped from the bottom,” the report said.

It worked – Burns said he couldn’t recall any water seepage in the silos.

The construction was also dangerous – a carpenter was killed at the Fargo site on March 24, 1961.

“At the time of the accident, the victim was bending over the top of a concrete form attempting to remove a grade strip. He appeared to start to stand erect, lost his balance and fell off backwards from the top of the concrete form to the ground -- a distance of 29 feet,” an

Air Force briefing from the time stated. Fatality accidents occurred at two other silos as well.

Fire was also a concern. On May 11, 1961, a Caterpillar generator and two buildings were damaged in the early afternoon when a pile of sawdust caught fire. High winds blew embers under the generator igniting a prior oil and fuel spill.

In addition to the silo, an underground command center (LCC) was built at each site. The two were connected by a tunnel. The entire facility was built on springs to limit shaking in case of Soviet bombing of the site.

Secrecy didn’t seem to be a concern – the construction was reported on at different intervals in the Vernon Daily Record. More than 200 schoolchildren took a tour of the facility when it was dedicated.

Gary Chapman, who still lives in the area, said he remembers the construction being a great source of interest and that the missile was often out of the silo in plain view.

Burns said that those Atlas missiles were visible for a reason – so the Soviets would take note.

“I believed then, and I believe now, that our ICBMs were what caused Khrushchev to pull his missiles out of Cuba. I believe that the USSR feared our ICBMs more than anything else we had. Our ICBM reaction time was extremely short compared to our aircraft, and the USSR had no way to defend against our ICBMs,” he said.

### LIFE UNDERGROUND WAS ‘FANTASTIC’

Duty at the silo was a “fantastic” posting for Burns, who was a 20-year-old from Kentucky when he drew the assignment.

“They took very good care of us. Of course, when you think about it, they pretty well had to. My tech school training lasted over a year and must have cost the USAF a bundle. I do recall that each LCC had a decent kitchen. We were provided meals which we heated up in the oven. We picked up the meals at the in-flight kitchen on base prior to

departing for the silo. There was a nice shower in the LCC also. The bunks were typical G.I. type, and to me were comfortable. Funny thing is that I do not recall who changed/launched the sheets,” he said.

Burns was part of a five man crew – two officers and three airmen. They were transported to the silo by station wagon or helicopter, and served a 24-hour alert duty – which usually lasted much longer due to briefings. Burns said that a duty tour could be at any of the 12 silos.

“We would be informed at the squadron daily briefing which silo we were going to that day,” he said.

The silo was equipped with an Atlas F missile held upright underground behind two 75-ton blast doors. The rocket was fueled by liquid oxygen, reached 18,000 mph and had a 6,300-mile range. It was 100 feet tall, 14-by-13 feet wide and topped off with a type W-38 nuclear warhead with a 4-megaton yield.

“I did not fear the missile, but I respected what it could do,” Burns said.

Burns was a Ballistic Missile Analyst Technician (BMAT) with duties that included all missile electronic systems, including the Inertial Navigation System. Another airman served as Missile Facilities Technician and was responsible for silo mounted electronic and mechanical equipment such as the elevators. The Electrical Power Production Technician was responsible for the two large diesel generators.

“Servicing of silo diesel fuel, LOX (liquid oxygen) would be monitored top side by a crew member. All silo and missile systems were monitored electronically, and any failure was indicated in the LCC and had to be immediately fault isolated. Of course, we had more than our share of ‘here comes the General’ alarms, plus many no-notice on site evaluations and practice alerts which were generated by SAC Hq. I do not recall being bored,” Burns said.

By October 1962, Burns said the tension had gone up for the crew culminating with the call to DEFCON 2. DEFCON 1 would have been all-out war.

“I do recall the mood of my crew was somber and professional,” Burns said of that night.

The alert call sounded and the crew was faced with an immediate malfunction.

“We had a problem with our Inertial Navigation System, which I was able to solve, and countdown was completed up to ‘Commit,’” he said. “One more pushed button would have raised the missile to full up and locked position and started WWII.”

The missiles never fired, Kennedy’s blockade of Cuba led to negotiations that resulted in the missiles being removed from Cuba in exchange for U.S. missiles being removed from Turkey.

The 577th silos were shut down three years later. The Atlas-program was deemed outmoded and unsafe following an explosion at the Frederick, Okla. site.

“The Frederick accident was terrible,” Burns said. “I heard a dozen explanations for what happened, but I never trusted any of them. I do recall a rumor that one of the silo doors was blown a quarter mile away.”

The missile was removed from the silo in February 1965 – Chapman said it happened fast, one day it was there, the next day it was gone. The air conditioning and generators were sent to Southeast Asia to prepare for an escalation of forces in Vietnam. Many of those who saw duty in the silos also went to Asia. Burns said he knows of five 577th airmen that went to Vietnam as helicopter pilots and all were killed in action. Burns retired from the Air Force in 1981 and retired from Honeywell in 2002.

Today the entrance to the Fargo missile silo has been filled in to stop the adventurous from exploring it. The site itself is owned by the Northside ISD which utilizes the outbuilding for school activities and storage.