

How Close was the U.S. to Firing a Nike Missile?

**Excerpts from the *Last Missile Site*
by Stephen A. Haller and John A. Martini**

As nuclear stockpiles increased, the United States encouraged citizens to build fallout shelters and created civil defense systems designed to cope with an enemy attack. In 1956, Congress added \$928 million to the Air Force budget for the purchase of B-52 aircraft. At the same time, the U.S. Army, the armed service responsible for protecting American ground forces, also was anticipating the threat of an enemy strike. As early as 1953, the Army began deploying the first Nike anti-aircraft batteries around American cities.



Given the short warning times inherent to the defensive situation, there were inevitably moments of high tension. Ron Parshall tells of one such incident in 1960-61:

We were at fifteen minute alert and we heard the siren go off and we are running down, and the call was for one missile at that time. We got the missile up in position and run all of the checks to make sure we could plug in the squib, and. ... The last thing you do is plug in the squib but you don't actually do that. About that time you get a call from the IFC saying that it was just a test, everything is fine. We never got that [call]; we got the command to plug it in. Our sergeant in charge that night said ... I was standing next to, behind him ... and he had the earphones on. I didn't hear what was said to him but he kept on saying "Are you sure, sir?", "Are you sure, sir?" He repeated it five or six times and he was practically screaming it the last time, making sure this man was telling him the right thing. And the command was to plug it in which meant that we were going to fire it, because that was the end result. You never plugged it in. It was too dangerous to plug it in.

The man in charge of the IFC for that night [told us to plug it in]. It was the night shift. It was about three o'clock in the morning, actually. And so after we plugged it in we, the sergeant and I, are both are running down here. He put the keys in the console back there. We got in contact with them. It took at least five minutes before we phoned out, and then it was finally said that, "this is just a test." ... All we would have had to do was just shut up and fire it. We were never given that command, but they were going through other tests at the same time—we thought waiting for the target to come closer. That's all we thought we were doing. That fifteen minute alert generally means that a plane will be here in fifteen minutes, but we had that missile up in less than five minutes, so we had ten minutes to spare by the time we had everything down here. And it's "tick, tick, tick," waiting for something to happen.

We thought we were at war. I definitely was very fearful at that time that we would be at war, and then you start thinking that San Francisco would have been gone if we don't do our job. . . . We would have shot it out of the sky. We would have had to, you know, because why take a chance? (pages 30-31)