**Silent Soldiers: Missileer Duty**

By the fall of 1963 there were 150 Minuteman Missile Launch Facilities (silos) dispersed across western South Dakota. For every 10 silos there was a support structure known as a Launch Control Facility (LCF). This building had a facility manager, cook and several security police who were stationed on the topside to provide support for two missileers stationed in a Launch Control Center (LCC) capsule 31 feet below the surface. These topside personnel worked for three straight days followed by another three days off. The missileers in the underground Launch Control Center were on duty for 24-hour shifts at a time. About 80 miles east of Rapid City, South Dakota and Ellsworth Air Force Base was Launch Control Facility Delta-01. This LCF was operational for nearly 30 years. The Air Force personnel on duty here experienced some of the tensest moments during the Cold War. Though they were not on the front lines of international incidents, they were on the frontlines of America's Cold War defenses. These were the forgotten soldiers who performed these shifts year after year.

Of all the duties performed by Air Force personnel at Delta-01 there was none more important than that of the missile combat crew which occupied the LCC. The crew consisted of a commander and deputy who were both military officers. The capsule in which they were stationed, buried 31 feet below the surface, was both their living and work area for an entire 24-hour shift. The missileers underwent intense training for several months before they were allowed to go on duty in an active missile field. Not only were they expected to learn a mind boggling amount of technical data about the Minuteman system, but they also had to be psychologically stable. Their jobs could possibly be one of the most stressful in the Air Force. Once they were properly trained and on duty they were expected to be no less then perfect at their jobs.

A typical day for a launch crew stationed at Delta-01 would start early in the morning when they arrived at Ellsworth. They would first undergo a security briefing about the international situation around the world. It was during this briefing that they would be informed if there was any reason that the base might be placed on higher alert status. They would then drive an official Air Force vehicle out to the LCF. Usually the drive to Delta-01 would take about an hour and a half. Once they arrived at the security fence surrounding the LCF they would radio in their dispatch information to the Flight Security Controller who monitored the grounds from the Security Control Center. This information was checked for accuracy then the gate would be opened by remote control. The missileers would pull up to a door adjacent to the Security Control Center to have their identification checked. Once they had been properly identified they were allowed into the building. The missileers would then call down to the missile crew already on duty in the underground capsule to authenticate secret codes. They must have the correct codes or it would mean a trip all the way back to base for another set of codes.

From the Security Control Center they would then be allowed entry into the elevator leading down to the capsule. When they arrived underground the deputy crew member already in the capsule would open the eight ton blast door to allow them in. This door was to be kept shut at all times unless someone had the proper authentication codes to enter the capsule. When passing by the door they would see painted on the wall: "No Lone Zone, Two Man Concept Mandatory." This meant that no one could ever be in the capsule alone. All areas of extremely high security in the missile field adhered to the two man concept. Being in such an area alone would result in the loss of one's job.

The off-going missile crew always gave the new crew a short 10 minute briefing which consisted of among other things the handing over of two .38 revolvers for use if any intruders entered the capsule. The crew going off duty would then exit the capsule and the new crew's shift would officially begin. Former missileer Andy Knight recalled years later what a typical work shift was like:

Ninety percent or ninety-five percent of the time, usually we'd just sit there. We would read magazines. Study for the professional military programs, or some people would work on their master's degree. It was a great time, at that time. And at that time they didn't allow any kind of t.v. sets or anything like that down there. It was just the crew. And, as I said before, there was one cot there and one crew member could go to sleep. And usually the person who had the graveyard shift--the midnight to six o'clock in the morning shift--usually that person would crawl into the cot right after dinner. Usually we'd have dinner right around five o'clock, so that person'd get in the cot and go to sleep from five, and then from five until about midnight. And then the deputy, at midnight then we'd swap off. And, you'd get into, it was like a hot bunk and you'd sleep until about six o'clock in the morning. That was generally what took our tour.¹

Even though many shifts were spent passing time, the missileers knew from their training that their jobs were of the utmost importance. As Knight recalled:

it was probably the most, most responsibility that I've ever had in my life. And, we were tested constantly. And, the tests that we were, whether it was, whether it was multiple choice or written exams. Or whether it was actual training scenarios in the simulator, we always had on the written exams one hundred percent was passing, if you missed one question, you failed, and you had to start all over again. So there was no room for error.²

During their shift the missileers received coded messages from Strategic Air Command (SAC) in Nebraska. Though the crew may have been stationed at Ellsworth they took their orders from SAC. The most important and feared command they could ever receive was known as an Emergency War Order (EWO). This order would mean the missiles were to be launched. The following description is a detailed account of executing such an order:

In the Delta One capsule, an alarm would have alerted the two-person missile crew of those directives. Immediately, over the speaker system, the launch control officers would hear a coded message, giving the command to launch. After verifying the message's authenticity, the launch officers would unlock a small, red, "Emergency War Order" safe above the deputy commander's control panel. Within the box were two launch keys. Each officer would take one key, and insert it into his or her control console. The missileers would then strap themselves into their console chairs and begin the final countdown.At the end of the countdown sequence, the officers would turn their launch keys. The Air Force employed several fail-safes to prevent an unauthorized missile launch. For example, both officers had to turn their launch keys in unison. Because the launch switches were 12 feet apart, it was impossible for one person to turn both keys at once. The final command to launch also required another "vote" (two missileers performing the same procedure at another Launch Control Center in the missile field) from outside of Delta One.

When the second vote came in, the LAUNCH IN PROCESS display would illuminate. Explosive gas generators would then push open the 90-ton launch doors covering the ten Delta Flight missile silos, and the nuclear-tipped Minutemen would begin streaking toward their targets half a world away. As each missile blasted from its silo, its upper umbilical cable would sever, triggering the MISSILE AWAY light on the commander's control panel.

In less than five minutes, the Delta One missileers would have completed their mission. The Minuteman missiles would take another half hour to reach their targets.³

Though missileers never executed an actual launch there was always the distinct possibility that such a moment could come. As the Emergency War Order proceedings illustrate, the missileers had one of the toughest jobs in the Air Force. For nearly 30 years at Delta-01 they worked shifts awaiting orders which fortunately never arrived. These silent soldiers went relatively unnoticed by the general public or even their own fellow Air Force personnel. They protected America from armed aggressors thousands of miles from home and the end result was a valuable contribution to victory in the Cold War.

In 1991, less then two years after the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union began to crumble. The Soviet economy had been faltering for years. The cost of keeping up with advanced American military weapons systems such as the Minuteman had led the Soviet economy to the brink of bankruptcy. The nation's infrastructure began to fall apart. For decades, the Soviets had barely been able to take care of its military needs, but this came at the expense of their citizen's standard of living. By the beginning of the 1990s the Soviet people began to grow increasingly restless as they saw democracy and free enterprise economics take hold in the nations of Eastern Europe that had once professed their loyalty to communism. In a remarkable series of events which included street protests, rallies, and the attempted overthrow of leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union finally dissolved in December of 1991. The Cold War ended with world civilization intact. The arms race subsided and many of the Minuteman Missile facilities were slated for deactivation, including the Minuteman Missiles in South Dakota. These missiles, which had acted as silent sentinels guarding the United States for nearly three decades, had completed their mission.

**Questions for Reading 3**
1. Why would the missile combat crew have the most stressful job at Delta-01?
2. What is the primary mission of a missileer's duty?
3. Why do think there were so many security procedures for missileers? Do you think other jobs in the Air Force require secret codes and high security? If so, what might those jobs be?
4. What role do you think missileers played in both protecting the citizens of the United States from nuclear attack and helping the nation eventually win the Cold War?
5. Why do you think missileers did not receive the glory and accolades that other military personnel have?

*Reading 3 was compiled from Knight, Andy, Interview by Dr. Steven Bucklin. Typed transcript. May 19, 1999; Manson, Craig, Interview by Sue Lamie. Typed transcript. June 27, 2002;*Special Resource Study for Minuteman Missile Sites: Management Alternatives and Environmental Assessment. *Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, Department of Defense and the U.S. Air Force Legacy Resource Management Program (Denver: National Park Service, 1995);*The Missile Plains: Frontline of America's Cold War, Historic Resource Study, Minuteman Missile National Historic Site, South Dakota *(Omaha: Mead & Hunt Inc., 2003).*

*¹ Knight, Andy, Interview by Dr. Steven Bucklin. Typed transcript. May 19, 1999, 17-18.
² Knight, 5.
³*Special Resource Study for Minuteman Missile Sites: Management Alternatives and Environmental Assessment,*51.*