

# Minuteman Missile Visitor Information

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site  
South Dakota



## Launch Facility Delta-09



### A Shadow Over The World

Near the end of World War II foreign relations between the United States and the Soviet Union spiraled downward, leading to the Cold War. During this time the shadow of nuclear armageddon haunted the world. Due to events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States and Soviets

became involved in the greatest arms race in history. Each side attempted to trump the other with superior weapons. The Minuteman Missile system was a technological breakthrough for the United States. It acted as the main deterrent to keep Soviet military power in check.

### The Minuteman System

The missile housed today in Launch Facility (LF) Delta-09 is a Minuteman II test missile. The Minuteman II was the second in a series of upgrades which improved the precision and range of the United States Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) force.

The missile stood in a reinforced concrete launcher, consisting of the silo and an adjacent equipment room. The silo itself was covered by a 90-ton enclosure door. In the event of a launch this door would have been blown off into the adjacent ranchland.

The Minuteman was the first solid fuelled ICBM. It was remotely monitored by missileer crews stationed several miles away. It could be launched in a matter of minutes toward a target up to 6,000 miles away. This quick strike ability meant that the United States could respond to a Soviet nuclear first strike before the silos could be destroyed.

Surface features at Delta-09 included a reinforced concrete support building and several antennae. The support building contained an array of electrical and mechanical equipment. All support facilities were placed on site with one mission in mind: to keep the missile ready for launch 24 hours a day.

### Technological Wonder or Terror

The Minuteman II would propel its warhead toward a target in the central Soviet Union at speeds of over 15,000 miles per hour. The missiles range could extend to distances 6,000 miles away. Its warhead had the capacity to reach a target in just half an hour. It was truly a technological wonder.

A nuclear warhead detonation releases a tremendous amount of energy. Any structures surrounding ground zero are totally vaporized. Those witnessing such an explosion see a fireball many times brighter than the noon day sun. Viewing such an explosion can cause blindness.

Each Minuteman II carried a 1.2 megaton warhead. This singular weapon could wreak devastation upon a target, also making it a technological terror. A Minuteman II warhead had 120 times the explosive capacity of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan during World War II.

Following such an explosion a fire storm with wind speeds of over 100 miles per hour engulfs the countryside. Life as we know it in the general vicinity of a detonation would cease to exist. A full scale nuclear war with such weapons could threaten the existence of civilization.



“I never thought they would be used. The fact that they were there was enough. That was enough deterrent for anyone. I don’t know why anyone would want to put themselves in a position to antagonize the United States because the might we have in our arsenal is pretty impressive.”  
Ken Bush, Flight Security Controller,  
Ellsworth Air Force Base

## The Missile Next Door

Nuclear weapons, controversial from the day the world first learned of their existence in 1945, changed warfare as well as the way humans understood life on earth. The mushroom cloud these weapons produce upon detonation has become not only an icon of the Cold War, but of also fear, chaos and death.

To the people of the Great Plains, missiles were not merely symbolic. Living beside ICBM silos, community members adapted in different ways to the threat of nuclear war. While most gave the weapons little thought, others took an activist stance and joined anti-nuclear organizations.

The missile field also brought advances in electricity, transportation and employment to the region. Many local citizens came to feel that the missiles represented security and were dismayed when the Minuteman IIs were deactivated. The missile silo had become an icon of the plains landscape.

Although there are no longer any active Minuteman silos in South Dakota, 500 nuclear missiles are still deployed in the upper Great Plains, a reminder that the end of the Cold War era did not bring hoped for peace and security to the United States.

## Missile Myths

Because nuclear weapons sites were under high security, most civilians developed their understanding of missiles from popular movies like Wargames (1983) and Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964). As is often the case, the "Hollywood version" of life around the missiles often could be misleading and highly inaccurate.

The missile facilities were easily seen from the highway and were not disguised in any way, The existence of the sites and their capabilities were also relatively well known. In fact, some sites were filmed for nationally televised broadcasts. Air Force personnel even gave local residents periodic tours. Three elements of the system were top secret though, the specific targeting of each missile, whether or not individual missiles had nuclear warheads, and the procedures necessary to execute a successful launch.

Although the phrase "finger on the button" has become common, there was no button used to launch an ICBM. Launch required proper authentication codes and two keys, turned simultaneously by two officers in the underground Launch Control Center (LCC). At the same time, two officers in another LCC had to also turn keys to successfully launch a missile.

In almost every movie involving a missile launch, one officer is shown frozen in terror hesitating to turn the key for fear of the implications of such an action. In reality, launch control officers were tested repeatedly to ensure their ability to follow launch orders. As a result, they would launch a missile without reservation. The words of now retired Air Force Maj. Steven Hall were echoed throughout the missile field, "there absolutely would be no hesitation on anybody's part to do what they needed to do."

## Protecting the Past

Under the terms of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), signed by American President George H.W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, the United States and Soviet Union began to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear arms.

The treaty did not eradicate, but did limit the number of nuclear warheads each nation was allowed to deploy. Minuteman II missiles in South Dakota had been given minimal upgrades over past two decades and were costly to maintain. Thus they were among those selected for deactivation.

The START treaty did allow for the preservation of one Launch Facility for historic interpretive purposes. Delta-09 was chosen as a representative example of a Minuteman silo in its operational state during the Cold War

Delta-09 had a deactivated Minuteman II missile emplaced for display in 2001 along with a viewing enclosure to allow the public an intimate look into a Minuteman silo in its historic setting. Today the site offers visitors an unprecedented window into the world of nuclear weapons.

## Getting There

Launch Facility Delta-09 is located six miles west of Wall, SD. Take exit 116, off Interstate 90, then go one-half mile south on Pennington County Road T512. Visits to the Launch Facility are included in the tours given daily. The Launch Facility will also be open on a limited basis for walk-up visitation during the summer season, (Memorial Day - Labor Day).

The park project office at exit 131, Interstate 90 has exhibits and information. Please phone the park first at 605-433-5552 for tour times, reservations and operating hours. For information on planning your visit to the park and the history of the Minuteman system check the park website at: [www.nps.gov/mimi](http://www.nps.gov/mimi).

