

**American Military University**

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**Virtual Museum Exhibit**

**Submitted By**

**Jonathan Wood**

**4227250**

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# **ABILENE MISSILE DAYS**

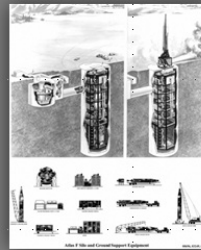
**In the early 1960s, the small West Texas town of Abilene was home to 12 Atlas “F” intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The launch sites were positioned in a 30 mile radius around Abilene and were operated by Dyess Air Force Base (AFB) located in the southwest area of town. During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, all 12 ICBMs were raised to their launch pads as missile crews nervously awaited their next order. Fortunately, the crisis was solved diplomatically and no missiles were ever launched. The costly Atlas “F” program was short lived as the ICBMs were phased-out, with the final one leaving Abilene in 1965. Today, there is little noticeable evidence of the missile program, except for 12 abandoned silos.**

# ABILENE MISSILE DAYS (OVERVIEW)

## Selection



## Construction



## 578 SMS



## Operational



## Phase-out



# SELECTION

In January of 1960, State Representative Omar Burleson and Senator Lyndon Johnson announced that Abilene had been selected as the only Texas location for construction of an Atlas “F” ICBM complex.

The original missile announcement mentioned the construction of nine firing sites. However, 90 days later the Department of Defense (DoD) expanded the Abilene complex to 12 firing sites. The launch facilities were to be spaced far enough apart to ensure that each constituted a separate target. At a minimum, the sites were to be separated such that a nuclear burst would not destroy the neighboring facilities. The 12 locations chosen for the sites were Phantom Lake, Albany, Clyde, Denton Valley, Oplin, Lawn, Bradshaw, Winters, Shep, Nolan, Anson and Corinth West.

# SELECTION



Rep Omar Burlesen



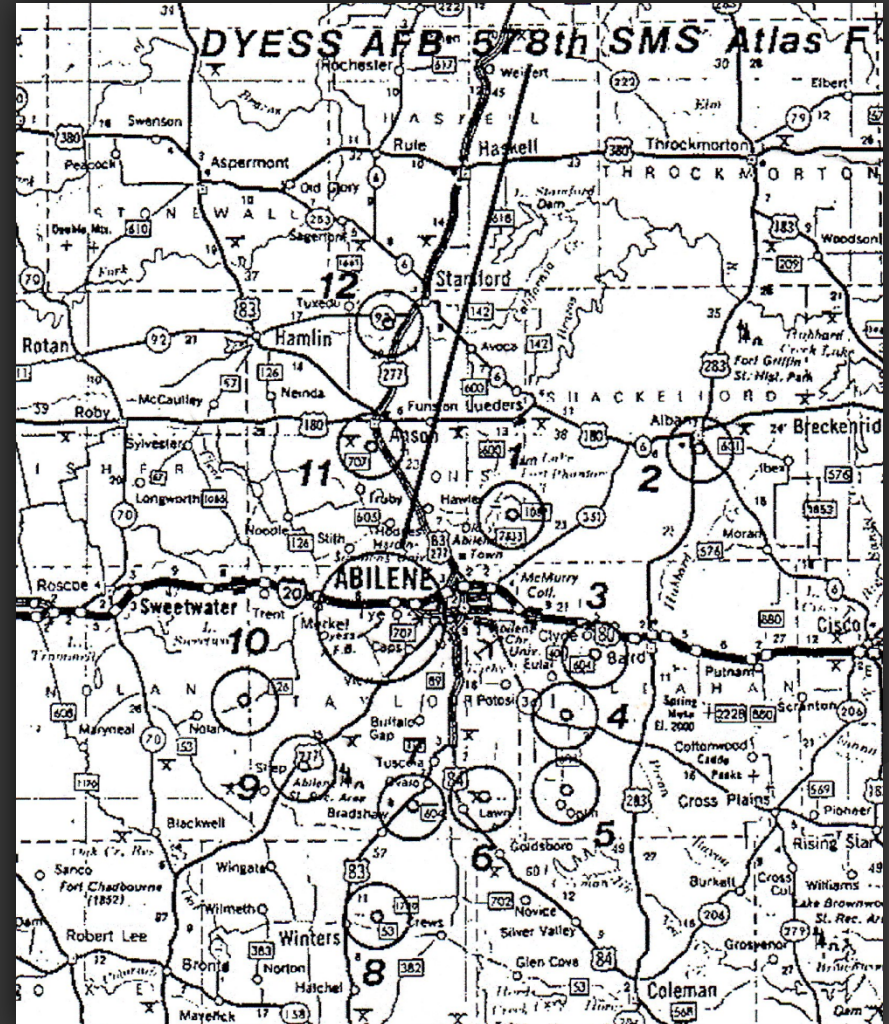
Sen Lyndon Johnson

Headline from 1960 in *The Abilene Reporter News*



# SELECTION

The Air Force determined where the exact locations of the missile launch facilities would be based on missile range and distance to the target. The missile facilities were located far enough inland to be out of Soviet submarine-launch missile range.



Map illustrating 12 firing sites strategically positioned around Abilene, TX.

# CONSTRUCTION

**In May of 1960, Zachry-Brown of San Antonio won the construction contract to build the 12 hardened underground silos with a total cost of 60 million dollars set by the DoD. The work was managed by the Army Corps of Engineers Ballistic Missile Construction Office (CEBMCO). The expenditures were credited to CEBMCO, keeping it off Air Force budgets and helping to deflect concern about the high cost of the ICBM program.**

**Building the silos to house the massive Atlas missiles was an enormous task as the sites would also have to contain all refueling and maintenance equipment.**

# CONSTRUCTION

Construction of each site began with the removal of 37,500 cubic yards of earth. This allowed for the building of the circular silo, measuring down to a depth of 174 feet.

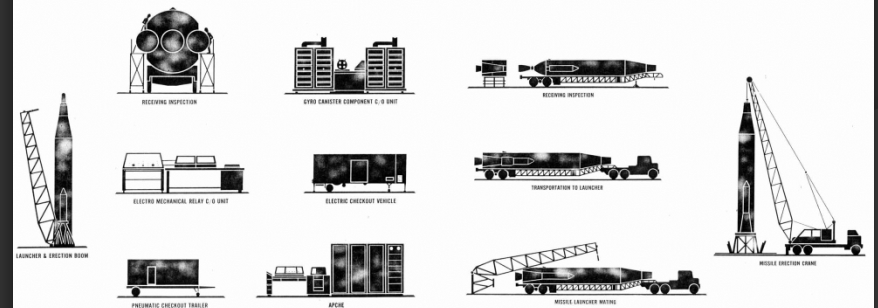
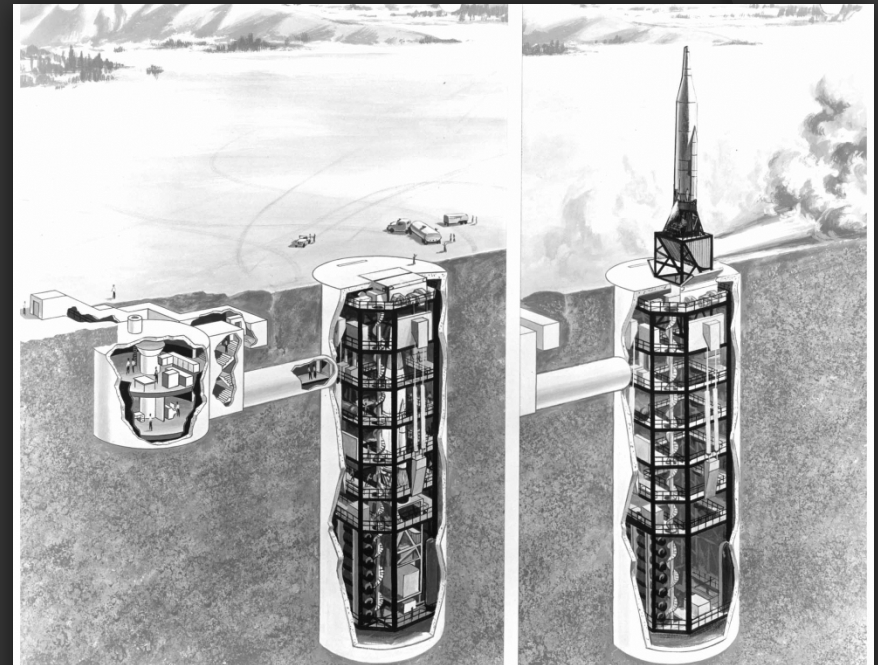




# CONSTRUCTION

Each facility consisted of the main silo with an underground tunnel connecting to the launch control center (LCC), both of which were only accessible through an above ground entry way.

The circular shaped LCC, which was 25 feet underground, remained fully stocked with food and water, which would sustain a missile crew for up to 30 days in case of nuclear war.



Atlas F Silo and Ground Support Equipment

00696, 03249, 03250

# CONSTRUCTION

On 21 June 1961, Oplin became the first of 12 sites to be finished. It would remain in the checkout phase as technical work and inspections had to be conducted by General Dynamic Astronautics personnel, the company which manufactured the Atlas.

By February 1962, the Atlas missile project had employed 3,500 civilians. During construction, 4 workers lost their lives, 3 by falling and 1 by electrocution.



# 578 SMS

Dyess AFB, a Strategic Air Command (SAC) installation, had control over the 12 sites with the first Atlas missile arriving at Dyess on 5 December 1961. During ceremonies in 1962, Col William McDowell Jr., commander of the 96th Strategic Aerospace Wing at Dyess, accepted the sites from Col Hugh Manson, commander of the Site Activation Task Force. Col Ray Cole was commander of the 578th Strategic Missile Squadron (SMS), which was the unit with operational control over the complex.

# 578 SMS



**Col William McDowell Jr.**  
*96th Strategic Aerospace Wing Commander*



**Col Hugh B. Manson**  
*Site Activation Task Force Commander*



**Col Ray M. Cole**  
*578th Strategic Missile Squadron Commander*



**578 SMS patch**

# 578 SMS

The first 92 million dollar Atlas "F" missile was delivered to Dyess AFB by aircraft on 5 Dec 1961.



It remained in Dyess' Missile Assembly Building until the Oplin site cleared the appropriate phase of checkout.



# OPERATIONAL

**The Oplin silo received the first Dyess Atlas “F” ICBM in April of 1962, with the remaining 11 silos receiving theirs soon after.**

**On 25 Oct 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy increased military readiness to DEFCON 2, one level below missile launch action. All Abilene missiles were raised 185 feet to their launch pads as missile crews awaited their next order. On 28 Oct, the crisis was solved diplomatically without nuclear or conventional war.**

# OPERATIONAL

In April 1962, the Oplin silo received the first Dyess Atlas "F" ICBM. A special convoy escorted the Atlas to the site, which took 90 minutes to travel 24 miles.



The missile was appropriately named "Spirit of Oplin".



# OPERATIONAL

On 25 Oct 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, all Abilene missiles were raised to their launch pads as missile crews awaited their next order.



On 28 Oct, the crisis was solved diplomatically without nuclear or conventional war.





# PHASE-OUT

**In November 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara directed the phase-out of the Abilene Atlas “F” missile complex with a deadline of 31 March 1965. This was done for several reasons, but mostly due to the liquid propellants used by the Atlas requiring cryogenic storage. Similar Atlas sites in New Mexico had several accidental explosions all related to liquid propellants. The situation essentially limited the missiles utility and prompted the search for less volatile, storable fuels.**

**The 578 SMS was officially deactivated on 25 March 1965. The Air Force’s ICBM mission would be carried out by more modern and powerful ICBMs at other locations.**

# PHASE-OUT

The phased-out missiles were transported via highway to Norton AFB, California, with the final one departing Abilene on 10 February 1965.



# PHASE-OUT

The silos are the only remnants of Abilene's ICBM days and are only visible to those searching for or familiar with their locations.



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