

CHATSWORTH PAST & PRESENT

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Did you know that at the top of Browns Canyon at



the end of DeSoto in 1958 there was an Army base with Nike Hercules missiles armed with nuclear warheads?

The Nike Missile Base LA-88 located in Chatsworth on Oat Mountain was part of the “Ring of Steel” that protected Los Angeles from 1958 to 1974.

The Cold War, between the Communist World (the Soviet Union and its allies) and the Western World (the United States and its allies), lasted from 1946 to 1991.

During this time of political, military and economic conflict, various strategies were undertaken by the United States to defend against a nuclear attack.

Nike Missile bases provided that defense. They were initially equipped with anti-aircraft missiles (Nike-Ajax in 1953), followed by the Nike-Hercules in 1958, which was armed with nuclear warheads and could intercept ballistic missiles.

By 1958, the Army had established over 200 Nike missile bases within the United States (including Alaska and Hawaii).

Los Angeles was defended by a ring of 16 Nike sites, referred to as a “Ring of Steel”. To protect its aerospace industries, Los Angeles received extensive air defenses. Oat Mountain towers over the San Fernando Valley and provides visibility in all four directions and far out into the Pacific Ocean.

LA-88 was the last of the scheduled 16 Los Angeles Nike sites to be completed due to the rugged terrain and only one usable road through Browns Canyon. Construction difficulties leveling a mountain peak and also digging deep into the ground for the three underground launchers caused delays. The site was completed and operational as of August 26, 1956.

Each Nike missile base contained three sections. The Control Area contained the radar systems to detect incoming targets and direct the missiles, along with the computer systems to plot and direct the intercept. It was located 3 miles away from the launch site via road, 1.5 miles as the crow flies.

The Launch Area held three underground missile magazines, each serving a group of four missiles, for a total of 12 missiles. The site had a crew of 109 officers and men who ran the site continuously.

The Administrative Area contained the battery headquarters, barracks, mess, recreation hall, and motor pool. The launch and administration areas were located next to each other at LA-88.

LA-88 was known for being the first in the Los Angeles area to convert to “HERCULES” nuclear warhead missiles for use alongside the earlier AJAX missiles.

LA-88 was the first in the Los Angeles Area to employ K9 sentry guard dogs to patrol the open mountain expanse surrounding the site.

Growing up in the 50’s and 60’s with the threat of nuclear attack, you would have been familiar with the Civil Defense test sirens sounding off once a month on Friday at 10:00 AM. If it had been a real warning, you would have found the closest Fallout Shelter.



Children in school were taught “Duck and Cover” drills. Duck and cover drills and still practiced today as earthquake drills in California.



The United States never fired a conventional Nike Ajax or a nuclear Nike Hercules missile against an enemy. By 1974, the Los Angeles area bases that protected 4,000 square miles were quietly closed

and the warheads disassembled, 20 years after the first one went into operation in Malibu.

Since then, the LA-88 control area has been occupied by radio relay and other antenna systems. The Administration area was occupied by the California Conservation Corps until 1990. LAPD Swat teams continue to use the Launch and Administration areas for practice.

Unfortunately, the Sesnon Fire in October of 2008 completely burned the area and only charred remains of the facility exist above ground today.

For additional information on LA88 and the Nike Hercules project go to www.nikemissile.org maintained by the Nike Historical Society.