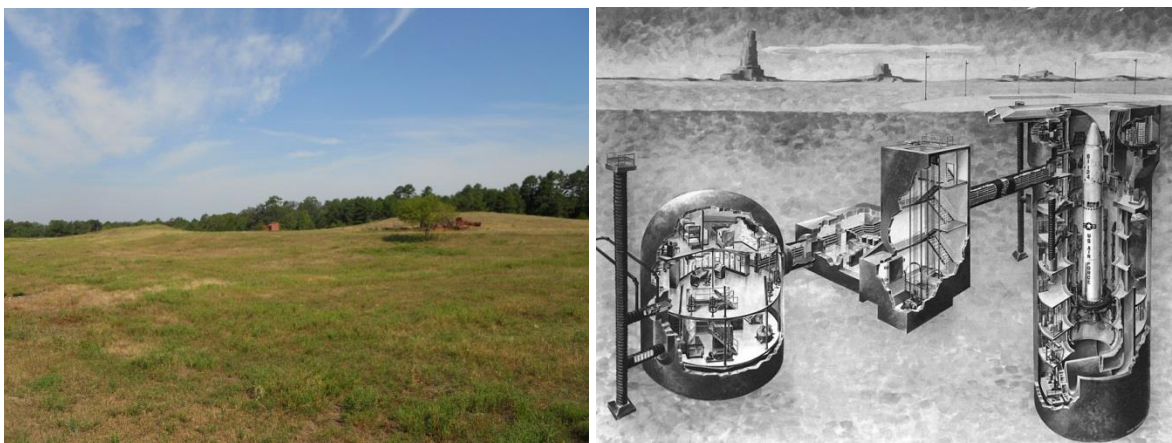


Walks through History
Titan II ICBM Launch Complex 374-7 Site
Southside vic. (Van Buren County)
September 12, 2015
By Rachel Silva



Intro

Good morning, thank you all for coming! My name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of the Titan II Complex 374-7 Site. Our agency provides free walking tours of historic sites and districts all over the state each month from March to December. You may visit our website at ArkansasPreservation.com for more information on our tour schedule.

Before we get started, I’d like to thank a few people for their help with the tour.

Reba Jo Parish—she and her late husband, Ralph, were “strongly encouraged” by the U.S. Air Force to sell part of their farm for national defense. And then they had to live about a third of a mile from a missile silo for 17 years.

Ralph and Reba Jo Parish’s daughter, Mona Parish Harper, and her husband, Ben Harper, who currently own this land and gave us permission to be here today.

Mona’s son, Aaron Black, who knows a lot about this site and is here today.

And last but not least, Ken Grunewald—Ken is going to do the second half of the presentation today. He served in the Air Force for 22 years. He was a Titan II Missile Combat Crew Commander at LR Air Force Base from 1974 to 1979 and had alerts in all of the Arkansas missile sites, including this one. More on Ken in a few minutes...

Titan II Complex 374-7 was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2000 for its nationally significant role in the Cold War arms race. Many of you remember the explosion that happened at this site on September 19, 1980, which resulted in the death of Senior Airman David Livingston. 21 people were injured in the accident or during rescue efforts. Next Saturday marks the 35th anniversary of the explosion.

Cold War & Titan II

In its simplest terms, the Cold War was a prolonged state of political and military tension that existed between the United States (and its allies) and the Soviet Union (and its allies), beginning soon after World War II and lasting until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was called a “cold” war because there was no large-scale fighting directly between the two sides; however, major wars took place in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan during this time that were supported by the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The United States and Soviet Union emerged as major superpowers after World War II, but without the common enemy of Nazi Germany, the one-time allies had no reason to be friends. They had fundamentally different political philosophies—one rooted in capitalism and the other in communism. Distrust soon developed between the two countries; each thought that the other would not hesitate to improve its situation or expand its influence, regardless of the cost. This culture of distrust bred secrecy and paranoia, which helped to fuel the nuclear arms race.

Although the United States Air Force strategic missile program began studying ballistic missiles as early as 1945, the program received little financial support

until 1953 when the Soviet Union detonated its first thermonuclear bomb. The Atlas program, which was part of the first generation of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), became the Air Force's top development priority in May 1954. Just two months later, the Air Force Atlas Scientific Advisory Committee began issuing proposals for a two-stage missile design to complement and improve the Atlas missile. This program would come to fruition with the first captive-fire testing program of the lighter weight, two-stage Titan I missile beginning in December 1958.

However, these first-generation ICBMs relied on missile elevators to raise them from their silos before launching, which left them vulnerable to enemy attack. In addition, these missiles lacked a storable propellant system, meaning that they also had to be fueled immediately before launching, resulting in a 20-minute delay. These weaknesses prompted the Air Force to improve the Titan I program. The culmination of their efforts was the Titan II ICBM, which had an increased payload, storable propellants, and in-silo launch capability, allowing it to be deployed in less than a minute.

Because of its quick flight time and destructive power, the ICBM represented a "quantum leap in nuclear warfare" during the Cold War. The Titan II carried a nine-megaton nuclear warhead that could destroy enemy capabilities with a single blow. Titan II ICBMs had a range of 6,000 miles, which enabled them to reach core target areas in the Soviet Union and China.

Whereas a bomber took hours to reach its target, the Titan II had a flight time of 30 to 35 minutes, greatly reducing the enemy's ability to mount a defense against the weapon. Therefore, ICBMs were practically indefensible, and a second strike or counter-strike would have resulted in the complete devastation of both sides, thus the concept of "mutually assured destruction." Titan II ICBMs required the daily attention of a four-man crew who had very close contact with the missile in order to guarantee its constant readiness.

The Titan II program consisted of 54 launch complexes located in Arkansas, Arizona, and Kansas. Arkansas's 18 launch complexes were clustered around the center of the state in Faulkner, Conway, White, Van Buren, and Cleburne counties. Launch complex 373-4 near Pangburn in White County was the first Arkansas complex to be placed on strategic alert on May 16, 1963. Because of these complexes, Arkansas was a major target for the Soviet Union. We were on the front lines of the Cold War.

The Parish Family

Ralph Parish was born in 1926 at Morganton, northeast of Bee Branch. He served in the Army during World War II. After the war, Parish attended the Arkansas State Teachers College (now the University of Central Arkansas), graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree. In 1949 he married Reba Jo Fleming of Southside. The couple worked as teachers, but Mr. Parish was interested in farming. In 1953 he purchased 20 acres from his father-in-law, Joe Fleming, and bought his first herd of Black Angus cattle. In 1956 Parish was appointed by Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller to serve as the director of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) for Van Buren County. He held the position until his retirement in 1984.

The Parishes gradually increased their landholdings and the size of their cattle herd, amassing 700 acres and about 200 head of cattle. Ralph and Reba Jo Parish had five daughters: Mona Ann, Theresa Jo, Pamela Sue, Welda Kay, and Libby Denise.

When people from the Air Force came out to speak to the Parishes about using their land, Ralph and Reba Jo decided to settle with them and were paid a small amount of money for the requested acreage. Construction at Launch Complex 374-7 began on January 30, 1961. Reba Jo Parish remembered that the explosives used to make the holes for the missile silo and control center shook nearby houses. Every Sunday evening, the Parish family would walk over to check the progress of construction.

Complex 374-7 was placed on alert on December 18, 1963. Oxidizer leaks happened from time to time, and the Parishes were evacuated three or four times because of it. But they were never told how toxic the oxidizer really was—it **was bad stuff**. The worst of these leaks occurred on January 27, 1978, when oxidizer leaking from an oxidizer trailer tank created a cloud about 3,000 feet long, 300 feet wide, and 100 feet high. Highway 65 was temporarily closed and nearby civilians were evacuated, including students at the Bee Branch School. Four people were hospitalized after being exposed to the oxidizer, and the toxic vapor killed some cattle.

But these incidents were nothing compared to the explosion. Shortly after 6:30 p.m. on September 18, 1980, Ralph and Reba Jo Parish drove toward the complex, which they often passed on the way to feed their cattle. The red warning light was on, and white smoke was visible near the complex. A guard at the surface gate allowed them to drive past the complex but instructed them to go out the back way when finished. By the time the Parishes returned, the situation had gotten worse. Law enforcement gathered on Highway 65 at the road to the complex. A state trooper from Clinton who knew Ralph told him to get his family and drive as far away as possible.

The Parishes drove eight miles north to Choctaw, where they stayed with one of Ralph and Reba's nephews. They felt the blast at 3 a.m. The family immediately loaded up and drove on to Clinton. Then they decided to go all the way to Harrison. As they drove north on 65, the air was filled with smoke until they got to Marshall. The Parishes rented a hotel room at Harrison and spent the day there. At about 8 p.m. on September 19, just 17 hours after the explosion, the Parishes received a call from a neighbor at Bee Branch, saying it was safe to return home. As the family drove back toward Southside, they didn't know if their house would still be there. Although the explosion blew out windows in homes two miles to the south, the Parish House—just a third of a mile away—was not damaged.

It is my pleasure to introduce Ken Grunewald:

Ken was in the Air Force from 1967 to 1989, when he retired after earning the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He retired to Arkansas because his wife, Marlana, is from Fort Smith. From 1989 to 2007, Ken served as deputy director, and then director, of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. I am so grateful to have his help today. Please welcome Ken Grunewald.