

Babysitting 'Pale Pinto'

Rich Heffern | Aug. 14, 2009



The blast door at the entrance to a Minuteman missile launch control center (U.S. National Park Service)

Foxtrot Seven brooded in its concrete silence near a grove of cedar trees perched on a glade overlooking a tiny stream. On a bright October day, the glade was colorfully spotted with wildflowers -- goldenrod, morning glory and mullein. I lay in the breeze-nudged grass and watched a flock of chickadees move through the cedars, then walked back to the Minuteman missile silo.

Four members of the warhead crew were down in the silo itself, separating the missile from its nuclear tip. In the large white truck that squatted over the opened silo, two or three of the 'reentry vehicles' -- the warheads -- were lashed tightly against a stout center panel. A maintenance crew member sat in the back, peeling an orange, his legs dangling over the back bumper. If he leaned back just a little he could rest his spine against enough explosives to blow nearby Kansas City, Memphis and St. Louis completely off the map.

The Air Force had trained me as a military policeman. My job that day was to accompany the reentry vehicle team as they opened a silo and removed the warhead, replacing it with the newer multiple, independently targeted version. It was a tedious two-day duty, but it was possible to wander off from the fenced-in area to spend time in the peaceful countryside.

The year was 1969, the height of the Cold War. The Minuteman missiles -- 150 of them, property of Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, had been in place for about 10 years then. A targeting team's lieutenant told me once that the Air Force had secured hundred-year renewable leases from the farmers who owned the land the silos were dug into.

Stationed there for over three years, I don't recall ever having a conversation with anyone about what we were doing, though every day we were reminded somehow. Daily tasks centered on the commonplace -- making sure cattle gates weren't left open after we passed through, wrestling with the rusted locks on the silo's gate, avoiding low-water bridges after storms, what the military called 'checklist discipline.'

We got briefings on repelling 'intruders' but never got any info on what these weapons could do. Our heads were filled with nicknames, code words and euphemisms. The silo itself was called a Launch Facility. The control center, where two officers sat under 60 feet of concrete ready to turn the keys and launch their 10

missiles if ordered to do so, was tagged the Launch Control Facility. Each of Whiteman's 150 silos was named and numbered with the military alphabet ... Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta 1, 2, 3 ... An accident with a nuke was a "Broken Arrow." "RON on an LF" was staying overnight on security when the missile had been opened and maintenance crews gone home. Such language helped us keep the real meaning of what we were doing at arm's length.

On the Strategic Air Command logo that stood near Whiteman's main gate was the motto: "Peace is our profession."

Yet all the military euphemisms in the world couldn't keep them out of your nightmares. Nuclear war haunted the world then. Any superpower flare-up reported on the nightly news caused shudders.

Minuteman missiles were considered technological wonders because they were the first solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missiles, which allowed for a hair-trigger launch response, precise accuracy, remote control and mass production by Boeing. A Minuteman can strike a target 6,500 miles away dead on in the time it takes to watch a 30-minute TV sitcom.

The development and then the Cold War deployment of the bomb and the decades-long, carefully maintained tension between the superpowers is a story on the scale of Captain Ahab's pursuit, yet to be in the midst of it felt like merely navigating life's vigorous bazaar and humdrum comings and goings while eating government food and wearing starched brown fatigues.

As we "babysat" Foxtrot Seven, my partner placed a little framed photo of his girlfriend on the dashboard while he penned a love letter on a government-issue clipboard. Twenty feet away the maintenance guys, using hydraulics, removed the 80-ton "blast" door that gave access to the sleek Minuteman crouching in its hole.

After the team left that evening, we gulped down our rations as the sun set over the high chainlink fence. I watched a flock of goldfinches peck seeds from the Jerusalem artichoke flowers that grew outside the fence. Later a full moon rose over the alarm mechanisms and antennae like a wan vampire, lighting the machineries of doom with a pale spectral light.

In the 1980s, before Missouri's missiles were all deactivated and removed, peace activists who mounted protests against the Minuteman bases tagged all of the nation's nuclear missiles with apt nicknames like "The Death of Us," "Burns and Lacerations," "We're History," "No Pal of Mine."

Someone named Missouri's Foxtrot Seven "Pale Pinto" after the apocalypse's steed.

When the U.S. bishops wrote their peace pastoral in 1983 I have never been prouder to be a Catholic.

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