

Brief History of the 351st Strategic Missile Wing

From 1963 through 1995, the 351st Missile Wing, Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri, stood at the vanguard of America's deterrent force. While at Whiteman Air Force Base, personnel assigned to the wing manned and maintained the 150 Minuteman II Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) scattered throughout west central Missouri.

The saga of the 351st began in the early 1960s at the height of the Cold War when America fielded ICBMs as a deterrent to war. In 1961, the Strategic Air Command informed Whiteman's host unit, the 340th Bombardment Wing, that the wing's B-47s and KC-97s would be phased out by 1963. Although SAC didn't have a specific mission to replace the bombers and tankers at Whiteman, it did have an idea. In April 1961, test borings were made in the areas surrounding Whiteman to determine if the geological make-up would support a land-based ICBM system. It would and in June 1961, the Department of Defense announced plans to base Wing IV of the Minuteman I ICBM system at Whiteman. The announcement set off a massive land buying frenzy by the Air Force. Ground-breaking ceremonies with a host of dignitaries in attendance were held in April 1962 at the site now called Oscar-01.

Over the next year, construction of the sites occurred at a breakneck pace. By early 1963, SAC decided to activate a unit to initially oversee construction and then take over as the operating unit. Much discussion followed before SAC settled on the 351st Strategic Missile Wing (SMW), a direct descendant of the historic World War II unit, the 351st Bombardment Group. On 1 Feb 1963, the 351st was activated. Obviously, the wing needed operational squadrons and this was rectified in May, June, and July 1963, respectively, when the 508th, 509th, and 510th Strategic Missile Squadrons were activated.

In September 1963, the 340th moved to Texas leaving the 351st as the host unit. Construction continued and on 29 June 1964, the 351st went on full operational alert. Amazingly, the construction and equipping of the 150 missile sites and 15 launch control centers had taken only 2 years, 2 months, and 2 weeks. Throughout the years, Whiteman's missile system continually received modifications to improve performance. In fact, less than a year after the wing went on full alert, its missiles underwent one such modification. From May 1965 to October 1967, the 351st switched from the Minuteman I to the Minuteman II. Another modernization program in the late 1970s and early 1980s further improved the system and increased the survivability of the missiles. In the mid 1980s, the Minuteman Integrated Life Extension (Rivet MILE) program began to improve the safety, maintainability, and reliability of the missile facilities.

During its operational life, the 351st SMW distinguished itself by winning many awards. In fact, the 351st was the most honored missile in Air Force history. A partial list of the awards earned include:

The Blanchard Trophy at the annual Missile Competition (first and only unit to win six times: 1967, 1971, 1977, 1981, 1989, and 1993),

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards (1 Jul 65-30 Dec 66; 1 Jul 67-30 Jun 68; 1 Jul 69-30 Jun 70; 1 Jul 80-30 Jun 82; 1 Jul 92-30 Jun 93; and 1 Jul 93-31 Jul 95)

Col Lee R. Williams Trophy, Best Missile Wing in SAC/ACC: (1966, 1968, 1974, 1982, 1989, and 1993)

Col George T. Chadwell Trophy (1980, 1983, and 1987).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, change began occurring for the 351st. In 1988, Congressman Ike Skelton announced that the B-2 Advanced Technology Bomber would be based at Whiteman. In preparation for a second wing at the base, the Air Force activated the 100th Air Division in July 1990 to oversee all support functions on Whiteman. Thus, the 351st was no longer host unit on the base.

This arrangement did not last long, however, as the Air Force, preparing to absorb cutbacks, eliminated its air divisions. In July 1991, the 100th was inactivated and the 351st assumed once again its host unit role. The changes did not end there.

On July 31, 1991, President Bush and Premier Gorbachev signed the historic Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) which called for, among other things, the dismantling and destruction of the Minuteman II ICBMs. In September 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed thereby signaling the end of the Cold War. In a show of good faith, President George Bush ordered a standdown of the all Minuteman II missiles from alert -- well before the requirements of START called for action. Less than 24 hours later, the 351st reported to SAC that its missiles were off alert.

The end of the Cold War also spelled the end of the 351st. The now-called 351st Missile Wing immediately began deactivating its Minuteman II system. Over the next several years, the members of the 351st carried out the process with the same vigor they had defended America. On January 8, 1993, India-01 was the wing's first launch control center to shut down operations. On May 7, 1993, the missileers removed the last reentry vehicle from the field. The historic site was Golf-02. Later in the year, on December 8, the wing imploded its first silo, India-02. Then, on May 18, 1995, the last Minuteman II missile, located at Juliet-03, was removed from its site. The job of the 351 Strategic Missile Wing was almost over.

On a warm summer day on June 9, 1995, base personnel, along with a number of former 351st'ers, gathered at Whiteman to conduct the missile wing's final act, that of inactivation.

The activation didn't become official until July 31, 1995; however, with wing personnel rapidly leaving the base, there would be few attending the ceremony. As

such, an early ceremony would allow wing personnel to say good-bye to the 351st. Afterward most of the missileers moved on to other jobs, other careers, and other bases. By the time of the actual July 31, 1995 inactivation, only a handful of wing members were still on base.