A Pershing missile lifting off from Black Mesa.

SAN JUAN COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION
After World War II, as the Cold War intensified, nuclear deterrence became a centerpiece of American foreign policy, and—perhaps surprisingly—Utah’s remote San Juan County had more than a passing involvement with the American effort to win the nuclear arms race. In 1957, after a decade of heightened tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Soviets launched their first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Their first satellite, Sputnik, followed shortly thereafter. If this relatively low-flying satellite had the visual capabilities of today’s high-flying orbs and space stations, it might have signaled back to earth the comparative lack of activity in southeastern Utah. This scenic portion of the Four Corners area—with its canyons and rivers, mountains and plateaus—seemed hardly a threat to communist Russia. San Juan, although the largest county in Utah, could only boast 250 miles of paved roads linking the hamlets of Monticello, Blanding, and Mexican Hat to Moab just over its border to the north and with western Colorado.¹ The 1960 census showed slightly more than nine thousand residents in the county with Monticello and Blanding each with slightly more than three thousand inhabitants. If isolation during the Cold War was a key to survival, there were few places in the United States that could have been safer from the perceived communist threat.

Perhaps due to the region’s relatively low population, as well as its valued natural resources, the Cold War had a greater per capita impact on San Juan County citizens than on the people of any other county in Utah. Economically, socially, and militarily, this region’s civilian population became involved in combating communism on a sometimes daily basis, much of this due, ironically, to its isolation and what many people believed the land had to offer. Southeastern Utah was a major supplier of uranium for nuclear weapons developed after 1945. Because of this industry, the county’s population doubled between 1940 and 1960. The

¹ Robert S. McPherson, A History of San Juan County: In the Palm of Time (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1995), 261.
entire infrastructure of roads, schools, hospitals, and community businesses (as well as uranium mills and supporting efforts) shifted in a boom-and-bust economy, to the point that the pursuit of radioactive materials had a tremendous impact on the area's people. The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) purchased large amounts of uranium from the neighboring states of New Mexico and Arizona. By the mid-1950s, shipments of uranium ore were coming from nearly six hundred producers on the Colorado Plateau, with more than eight thousand people working in the mines and mills. What was more, a “bonanza in penny uranium stock established Salt Lake City as “The Wall Street of Uranium.” This government-purchased “yellow cake” contributed to a nuclear arsenal that by 1981 included eight thousand ICBMs to oppose the seven thousand held by the Soviets.

In many a poor mining family, the devotion through service to country in mining these materials was also mixed with a desire to put bread on the table. Yet there were other indicators of an intense awareness of the Cold War in southeastern Utah. The national Civil Defense Program (CDP) was an attempt to prepare Americans for the worst. Beginning in 1951, San Juan County began efforts to ensure its population would be ready for the “undeclared war that seems likely to envelope the nation.” The county commissioners did not foresee an attack by aircraft, which at this time was the only means of weapon delivery worth contemplating because of San Juan's sparse population. Yet officials believed a “strong likelihood” existed that the people of the county would host evacuees and that its resources would assist in a national emergency. “There is our uranium mill, which figures prominently in the national defense scheme. It could quite conceivably be the object of sabotage or the target of a demolition bomb.” For this and other reasons, the federal government allocated three billion dollars to bolster the national CDP following President Harry Truman’s declaration of defense as an emergency measure to protect uranium mills and other high-level targets of Soviet aggression.

While fear and anxiety of an unknown future settled over the country, the people of San Juan joined in preparing for a potential attack. The need for preparation was the driving factor behind much of the CDP. Leonard Higgins, deputy director and field representative from the CDP in Salt Lake City, visited Monticello in 1953 to meet with A. J. Redd, the civil defense director in San Juan. Higgins was particularly concerned about the possibility of panic after an atomic attack as refugees escaped from bombed areas to neighboring cities and states. Citizens had to be thoroughly prepared to prevent fear from exacerbating the situation. Together the two men agreed upon training local citizens to handle such emergencies because, “It is known that after an atomic blast,” said Higgins, ninety percent of all emergency measures will depend on the prevention of panic among survivors in the first 90 seconds. . . . Like the atomic bomb, panic is fissionable. It can produce a reaction more destructive than any explosive known. . . . It is believed that mass panic will be the cheapest and easiest way to win the next war. Therefore every city, town, and hamlet must be informed and trained to prevent panic. While this immediate area may not suffer a direct attack, we must be ready to meet emergencies caused by a direct attack on large population centers and target areas within several hundred miles of southeastern Utah.

While starving, pillaging mobs uncontrolled by local police never materialized, recent tests
conducted in Yucca Flat, Arizona, had created an even gloomier picture as scientists increased their study of radioactive fallout and its effects on the population. Contamination from Nevada test sites and the problem of living downwind from the tests added more fuel to the nuclear fire. The peril from these fallen particles has given Civil Defense new stature and importance in the training of the home front on family survival in the event of enemy attack. Thus the clarion call in the local San Juan Record went out: “Trained, alert citizens can cut our casualties in half, keep our production lines going, and give our armed forces a fighting chance! Learn, live, and join the Civil Defense.” A year later, in 1956, Higgins returned to Monticello to announce training for volunteers to handle civilian evacuation of all towns in case of enemy attack, as well as training in first aid and in the use of radiological monitoring devices, and the addition of more auxiliary police. Higgins believed that while Monticello might not be a target, fallout from bombed regions could be highly dangerous and that the most likely scenario included handling evacuees from metropolitan centers and from the coast.

As the people of San Juan County became increasingly concerned, they launched a program known as Operation Skywatch, which proved, if nothing else, to be a physical symbol of their resolve to protect the country against Soviet attack. Beginning in 1956, the Civil Defense Program established a series of ground observation posts, designed to detect and report Soviet aircraft flying over southeastern Utah. Since radar technology was still in its infancy, the Air Force called upon citizens to identify enemy aircraft that might use an air stream that originated in Siberia, headed south across Alaska, and then cut through Utah. With the extra boost from the air stream, enemy planes traveling at 250 miles per hour at an altitude of 15,000 feet could reach Utah in three-and-a-half hours. To counter this threat, Sergeant Gene C. Rochelle and Corporal Pat Masur of the Air Force began a civilian training program in Monticello named the Ground Observer Corps (GOC). They were to recruit and train civilian volunteers to man observation posts. Boy Scouts were the primary recipients of this training, but men and women also joined in for both night and day duty.

The first such station started in Monticello in February 1956 under the direction of post supervisor Frank Coombs, with Boy Scouts providing the manpower around the clock. After proper training in aircraft recognition and classification in case of an enemy’s sneak attack, members of the post became “of vital importance in national defense plans.” Each observer attended two training meetings before receiving his Ground Observer Corps wings. Next he began a minimum of a two hour shift per week; once he completed 250 hours of service, he received his first “hour bar” and a certificate of merit. The neighboring town of Blanding, not to be outdone by its friendly rival, started its own post soon thereafter.

The observation posts arose from local materials. The one in Blanding had a foundation of four long quaking aspen poles firmly rooted in the soil with a base platform approximately fifteen feet above ground, accessible by ladder. Part of this deck was surrounded by a rail, which in one corner had a roofed structure made of slab lumber from a local sawmill to give shelter to observers during inclement weather and at night. The detection gear, however, was the main feature. What appears to be an off-balance chimney on the roof is really a sound detector, or a dynamic microphone, housed in a weatherproof container. This microphone is hooked up to a control box inside the “house” and through the control to a loud speaker and a common door bell. The outside [microphone] picks up a sound such as made by an airplane and relays the

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10 “New Methods to be Studied by Local CD,” SJR, March 17, 1955, 1; see also John G. Fuller, The Day We Bombed Utah, America’s Most Lethal Secret (New York: New American Library, 1984).
11 “New Methods to be Studied,” March 17, 1955.
12 Ibid.
14 “Ground Observer Program to Begin Soon,” SJR, February 16, 1956, 1.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
sound to the house through a loudspeaker. With the set so adjusted, any noise of more than five seconds duration and from three to nine decibels above the normal noise level will activate the alarm bell.\textsuperscript{17}

Pete Black, a former Blanding Boy Scout and GOC participant, later recalled the motivations of the people who assisted in the program: “for us, the general population, I wouldn’t label it as fear, but more of a ‘Be Prepared,’ like you’re supposed to be in scouting. The government provided the equipment, including a high tech microphone suspended by springs inside a large canister and wired to a receiver inside the post headquarters.” This microphone detected the sound of overhead airplanes, which would set off an alarm—no matter the time of day. The person on duty would then observe important details and telephone that information to the place “where the airplanes were being tracked.”\textsuperscript{18} Although these observation post shelters looked like nothing more than a playhouse, they were built to withstand the elements, and for the boys, “The thrill of being involved in such a project was no small thing for a group of twelve and thirteen-year-old scouts,” Black recalled.\textsuperscript{19}

Representatives from the Civil Defense arm of the Air Force on occasion drove the scouts in a station wagon to Salt Lake City for training. The boys learned to identify types of aircraft, their approximate altitude and direction of flight, the number of engines, and other information the Air Force needed to know in the event of a plane being spotted. The trainer also showed the boys around “the Salt Lake Airport with its radar tracking—kind of made a tour of it, which was really interesting for a bunch of twelve to thirteen year-old boys back in those days.”\textsuperscript{20} Eventually the program declined as better tracking methods and equipment became available, replacing part of the need for manpower.

Even as the GOC program waned in its importance, San Juan County—because of its isolation—became a hub for the testing, firing, and tracking of nuclear-delivery units associated with both the Army and the Air Force. The local population was deeply involved with this missile program, which began in 1962 and lasted for twenty years in southeastern Utah. While secrecy characterized much of the Cold War, this program had a very public aspect. Indeed, the local newspaper made weekly postings outlining present and future events, the comings and goings of specific units, and where military activities would take place.

In the summer of 1962, the Salt Lake Tribune and the San Juan Record announced that the government was currently surveying a site three miles wide and fifteen miles long. Eventually a two-million-dollar facility, located on Black Mesa southwest of Blanding, would arise to facilitate the firing of mobile Sergeant and Pershing medium-range missiles. The intended target: White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, a military installation four hundred miles away that eventually received test-fired missiles from several launch sites, including three in Utah. The Air Force would also join in to test booster rockets for its ICBM program. The potential monetary boon from these projects prompted William Riley Hurst, the mayor of Blanding, to state that “We are happy that this thing is developing in our community, and we have assured these people of our full cooperation in every way that we can help them. It is bound to have a helpful impact on our economy.”\textsuperscript{21}

Not everyone agreed. While Senator Wallace F. Bennett pushed for the development and use of the missile site in Congress, an article in the San Juan Record noted that there was in Utah, “a wind of protest and dissent brewing over the announcement of a missile site” in San Juan County, because it would “close off... some of the more scenic and archaeological portions of

\textsuperscript{17} “Youngsters Take Over the Civil Defense Duty at Detector Post in Blanding,” SJR, October 24, 1957.

\textsuperscript{18} Pete Black, interview by the authors, November 16, 2013, in possession of authors.

\textsuperscript{19} Pete Black, “Blanding’s Ground Observation Post,” Blue Mountain Shadows 32 (Summer 2005): 81–82.

\textsuperscript{20} Black, interview.

arm that is attempting to save our lives. Protecting our glorious natural scenery is fine, but let us insure that posterity will be here to enjoy it.23

Despite such opposition, the proposed Blanding launch site became a reality.

With the city’s welcome and cooperation, the military began, by degrees, to reveal more information to the public. Mayor Hurst assured the people that the missile program was beneficial and would cause little damage to the land.24 Since the missiles were so portable, the base would be temporary, with an Army battalion deploying to the area to fire its missions under tactical conditions before leaving. There would be no need for a permanent installation.25 By February 1963, news arrived that a one-month exercise would begin on May 20, the first in a series of such undertakings ranging from one week to one month and continuing through 1966.26

The purpose of this training was to prepare American and West German units during field exercises to move into an area, establish camps, set up the Pershing missiles, and then fire them. The medium ground missile (MGM) 31 Pershing 1 was the Army’s only medium-range ballistic missile. Designed to give the Army theater-level nuclear capabilities, it delivered a four-hundred kiloton warhead over four hundred miles. This warhead had around thirty times the destructive power of the bomb first dropped on Hiroshima.27 These missiles were to counter the Soviet military buildup under Nikita Khrushchev, who by 1960 had over 1,700 atomic weapons. The Soviet Union was also the first nation to obtain an intercontinental ballistic nuclear capability. American Pershing missiles were developed to close the perceived missile gap between the United States and the

24 “Blanding Men Discuss Missile Site, Road Project,” SJR, August 9, 1963, 1.
26 “Missiles to Fly from San Juan in June,” SJR, February 14, 1963, 1.
Soviet Union, and serve as a defense against the Red Army. None of the missiles launched from Black Mesa, however, were armed with a nuclear warhead.

Earlier the Air Force had decided that it would not be involved in firing from San Juan County because of the relatively short distance between the Black Mesa site and the target area in New Mexico. However, a launch site constructed in Green River, Utah, provided enough range for the Air Force to test its ability to hit targets at White Sands. As these missiles flew over San Juan County, they needed to drop a propellant booster, which required a quarantined area of...
some 280,000 acres as a “drop zone.” Most of this area was open rangeland, and so ostensibly the firings would affect only ten livestock owners and a few scattered ranchers and farmers. The Air Force would fire twelve Athena missiles per month, three quarters of which would be launched at night, while notification of the activity would be well-advertised. The actual evacuation would occur for only twelve hours during firing times. Those affected by the quarantine would receive reimbursement for the inconvenience after they signed a waiver agreeing not to stay behind, or if they did, not to hold the government responsible. 29

Livestock owners, however, were denied the range for a full eighteen months. Some feared that the closure would allow deer herds to take over the range lands, leaving little vegetation for returning livestock. The Fish and Game Department solved the problem by having the missile firing suspended for a week to ten days to allow hunters to fill their tags. Still there would be money to pay for the inconvenience, and new grazing lands would need to be made available. 30 Accordingly, Utah’s Senator Wallace F. Bennett obtained $1 million to pay ranchers and residents who would have to temporarily move. He also disclosed that

At Green River, the Air Force will launch a total of 77 Athena solid fuel research and development test vehicles. Each four-stage missile will weigh approximately 16,000 pounds . . . The chief concern regarding the Green River launchings is the impact area or drop zone of the first stage of the missile. The other stages will impact at White Sands, N.M. A piece of metal about 12 feet long will fall with each launching. The zone . . . will encompass 286,000 acres—244,000 of which is public domain. 31

On September 5, 1963, the reality of the Cold War became clear to San Juan residents when 460 military personnel from the Second Battalion, 44th Field Artillery from Fort Sill, Oklahoma, rolled through the county in a 185-vehicle convoy. Prior to this deployment, an advance party had preceded the main body to the launch site on Black Mesa and to a bivouac area in the national forest, near the rock formation known as Bears Ears. Now the full force of the operation was visible. 32 Winston Hurst, the sixteen-year-old son of Mayor Hurst, recalled of that day, “It was very strange—this huge, long convoy of army vehicles one after another after another, coming forever through town. I was working in my family’s gas station and remember being in awe at the number of military vehicles. For a little town like this, it’s like all of a sudden the real world has come to Blanding in force.” 33 The convoy followed established procedure, moving in three segments at an average highway speed of thirty miles an hour with a distance of 100 meters between each vehicle and fifteen to twenty miles between each segment, making each element two to three miles long. 34

Plans went awry. The Army postponed the first launch, which was scheduled for September 9, as well as subsequent firings. Not until the week of September 24 did the missiles get into the air on their four-minute flight to White Sands. 35 The delay, however, was not enough to dampen community ardor and military showmanship. The Army put one of its thirty-four-foot Pershing missiles on display at a high school football game, went through a mock firing, and, at halftime, landed a thirty-man contingent of soldiers in helicopters on the playing field. 36 Later, when missile firings became more routine, the

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31 “$1 Million is Available for Missile-caused Moves,” SJR.


33 Winston Hurst, interview by the authors, November 6, 2013, in possession of authors; see also “Missile Battalion Convoy Arrives Here Next Thursday,” SJR, August 29, 1963, 1.

34 “Missile Battalion Convoy Arrives Here Next Thursday,” SJR, August 29, 1963, 1.

35 “First Pershing Firing Now Set for Late in September,” SJR, September 12, 1963, 1.

military attempted to synchronize some launchings with the halftime at local football games, a type of fireworks display at the expense of the government. At one game, following a dramatic countdown of “T minus 10 and counting” technical delays caused the halftime to triple in length before the Pershing took to the air.  

Less than a week before initial firing began, Major General John Frederick Thorlin, commander at White Sands, took the opportunity to assure the people of San Juan and all those in the flight path that there was complete safety during the military exercise. He explained that if a malfunction occurred, the problem would be detected within a minute from launch at which point the Pershing’s engine would undergo a controlled stop, causing the projectile to fall harmlessly to the ground. He assured the public that “after 45 seconds the flight is governed strictly by the physics of ballistics. The missile cannot fall from the sky as an airplane might. It will land only where we want it to land. As the Pershing is a two-stage missile, the first or booster is jettisoned early in flight, landing within the safety zone.” Only eight days after the successful launch of its first five missiles, the Army packed up and rolled on toward Fort Wingate, New Mexico, to finish testing. The servicemen left with fond memories of local hospitality; their commander, James T. Wortham, commented, “The people of this town have been wonderful; I wish I could thank them all personally.” The San Juan Record reported that “a total of some 800 Army and civilian personnel have resided around the Blanding area since early September and since we arrived here, the many kindnesses of the people of this area have been endless.”

With this exercise, the Army launched not only its initial set of missiles, but also an ongoing program that remained viable for years. Announcements in the newspaper each year heralded the military’s arrival in late spring, beginning the summer’s activity of training. The Army constructed a set of bleachers on White Mesa, a safe distance from the launch site on Black Mesa, so that locals could observe the missile firings. People watched the fiery propellant boost its payload into the sky as it flew southward in a blaze, filling the townspeople with awe and pride.

Beginning in 1964, West German army and air force units were a regular part of the mix of soldiers and airmen who came to train on the missiles as part of their hands-on portion of experience and graduation exercise. The general consensus from community members who remember those days insist that the military personnel were well-behaved, kept to themselves, and did not overwhelm Blanding and Monticello with a “foreign” culture. Winston Hurst remembered the interaction between the town and the military as “pretty much arm’s length. The town didn’t know quite what to make of, and they sure didn’t know what to make of the town. It wasn’t close and real friendly, nor was it really unfriendly either.” Regarding the foreign troops from Germany,

It was an odd, sort of cultural interaction—no one quite knew how to relate to those guys. They’d go swimming at the Blanding pool and be kicking the soccer ball around the pool and doing that sort of stuff that we just didn’t do. Nobody played soccer in those days. They just had kind of a different coordination, a different way of moving, a different way of looking, and we didn’t try very hard to get across that bridge.

As missile firing from Black Mesa increased in pace and volume, in 1965, another site—Gilson Butte, thirty-seven miles southwest of Green River, Utah—also became a launch point, one that gave an increased target distance. That year, one of the missiles launched from Gilson Butte malfunctioned and was destroyed approximately five miles north of Blanding.

37 Hurst, interview.
40 Ibid.
41 Hurst, interview.
42 Ibid.
While few people publicly expressed their disturbance about the event, it did point out that not everything went as planned. The destruction in midair of other rockets continued through the years, underscoring the necessity for the evacuations of people living within the trajectory of the missiles.

This was particularly true of the Air Force's Athena missiles, which launched from Green River, followed a flight corridor over southeastern Utah, and then impacted a target at White Sands, New Mexico. Blanding's role in this process was as a midpoint tracking station: radar in Green River followed the missile's flight until it passed out of radar range; at a site approximately six miles outside of Blanding, a second set of radar assumed tracking the Athena missile and recorded data until a third radar at White Sands watched the final approach. San Juan County hired additional deputies to clear potential areas around Indian Creek and Hatch Mesa, notifying residents of evacuation times and stopping traffic with signs and officers at key locations. With an estimated six firings a month, the booster impact zone saw a lot of activity. Headlines and front page news in the San Juan Record underscored why this precaution was necessary.

On February 13, 1964, the story began: “Misguided Missile Drops in Colorado.” After jettisoning the first of its booster stages in San Juan County, the missile proceeded to plop down some sixteen miles south of Durango, Colorado, near the airport and a natural gas plant—thirty degrees off its intended course. The Record commented that “the unexpected behavior of the Athena left some red military faces and made local populace think again about how safe it was going to be to have these ‘birds’ flying overhead for the next year and a half.” This was the first of an anticipated seventy-seven launchings. The next launch in June did not do much better; the tracking crew destroyed it after sixty-three seconds of flight with the body of the missile crashing outside of Shiptock, New Mexico. It didn't get better. Local newspaper headlines attested to this: “All Missile Firings Halt,” “Air Force Plans More Testing,” “Stop Firing Athena Missiles,” and “Errant Missile Remains Lost.” This final headline referred to a missile that overshot its target, landing eighteen miles outside of Fabens, Texas. The year 1965 had proven to be no better than 1964. Of the twenty-seven missiles launched from Green River that year, only seventy percent had been effective in providing data. Additional testing over the next few years continued as accuracy increased for this fifty-foot, 16,000-pound missile; meanwhile, San Juan citizens continued to evacuate their homes and ranges.

In September 1967, a Pershing fired from Black Mesa raised eyebrows when it sailed beyond White Sands, landing twenty miles south of Van Horn, Texas, in Mexican territory. The impact zone was an uninhabited stretch of desert, so once Mexican and American authorities became aware of the incident, they took steps to retrieve the remains and ensure that it would not happen again. It did, however, happen again, and the next incident was not as easily reconciled.

50 “Missile Misses,” SJR, September 14, 1967, 1.

On July 11, 1970, Athena missile number 122 from Green River soared through the sky on its way to White Sands, carrying two small containers with radioactive cobalt-57. Military personnel watched helplessly as the missile rocketed deep—450 miles deep—into Mexico, over the horizon and beyond radar tracking screens. It was lost. All that the technicians could say was that the first two booster stages performed flawlessly but that as the last two stages began reentry from its normal 200 mile altitude at a speed of 15,250 miles per hour, something went wrong. Telephones rang, a specialized team scrambled, diplomats converged, and technicians went to work, trying to reconstruct the errant missile’s path. On August 2, twenty-two days after the missile went astray, a team found the remains of its nosecone in a crater with a relatively small radioactive signature. That night, the American investigators treated their Mexican escorts to a celebration and turned their information over to diplomatic channels. The Mexican government insisted that Americans remove the slightly contaminated soil and ship it by rail to the United States at a cost of $104,000. This closed the incident. The only thing the scientists and technicians figured as the cause was a premature firing of the fourth stage's rocket propellant that kicked the nosecone up and off course. This incident, coupled with the 1967 misfire, made America's neighbors to the south more anxious.

From the start of the Athena program in 1963, the Air Force had fired missiles at a relatively slow pace; in contrast, the Army conducted an extensive program of firing Pershings from Black Mesa. Newspapers were filled with firing schedules, the arrival and departure of convoys, and even a few new records achieved by the visiting units. For instance, on August 30, 1967, for the first time in history the Army launched four Pershings within an hour, two of which were fired simultaneously. German and American generals visited Blanding and the test site. By May 1969, the Army had fired seventy-two missiles from Black Mesa; with the last test firing in 1972, 169 Pershing missiles had flown from

52 Ibid.
southeastern Utah. The Air Force had fired 141 Athena missiles from Green River by 1973, each of which required a continuous schedule of evacuation of San Juan County residents.53 In 1970, prefabricated metal buildings replaced the more temporary encampment, composed of 145 tents, that had sprung up in the sagebrush each spring on Black Mesa and disappeared in the late fall.54 While much of the military activity—with all of its evacuations and routine correspondence—began to receive less newspaper space, the San Juan Record named a column that ran for a number of years “Missiles from Blanding.” Though this column had nothing to do with Army or Air Force activities, it did recognize the importance of the community’s efforts in the Cold War.55 Not until 1973 did the Green River site “cease fire,” so that by 1975 it was relegated to caretaker status, only to be reopened occasionally in the 1980s for the test firing of new weapons.56

During the years of Cold War military activity, both civilians and the military tried hard to maintain friendly relations with each other. Monticello and Blanding provided the only two practical places for off-duty entertainment, and, notwithstanding the large number of soldiers who could inundate the towns, there were few incidents to mar the peace. Indeed, a number of occurrences strengthened relationships. For instance, in the winter of 1969 and 1970, when the temperature had not risen above twenty degrees for days, the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital in Monument Valley experienced a power outage. With no heat, no lights, and no hope of restoring them soon, hospital administrators sought assistance from the military in Blanding to relieve the suffering of the young and old housed within. In short order, a generator and a man to install and reorganize the electrical circuit arrived and quickly restored the hospital.


54 “Army Arrives in Black Mesa,” SJR, March 6, 1969, 2; “Pershings to Fire from Back Mesa,” January 22, 1970, 1, SJR.


tal to normal, with the understanding that the facility could keep the generator until the power supply was fixed.57 That same year, Operation Navajo got underway when the military at Hill Air Force base provided five tons of food, clothing, and toys to each of the Native American communities in Blanding, Bluff, and Monument Valley. While this act of kindness was unrelated to the errant Pershing missile that landed seven miles east of Bluff in May 1969, it likely had a soothing effect on sensitive nerves.58

On the other side of the coin, the soldiers, airmen, and civilians who came to Blanding to fight the Cold War had their own tales to tell. Not surprisingly, many of them revolved around girls, even in this staid Mormon community. Since Blanding was a dry town, with no bars for recreation, the best place to meet young women was the Elk Ridge Café. Young high school waitresses became the target of attention, and although very little developed from these casual acquaintances, there were stories that did. When the next group of soldiers rotated to Blanding, they had a list of those who the “hot dates” were, though local people who knew the girls believed the stories to be a total fabrication.59

Perhaps Rudy Alonzo’s experience as an outside technician gives a better idea of the atmosphere at the time. Born and raised in New York City, he came to Blanding in 1968 to track missiles launched from Green River and to record data about their reentry into the atmosphere before impact. With his duties completed at the three large trailers south of Blanding, Alonzo and his fellow workers would head for excitement in southeastern Utah: the Monticello bowling alley or the Blanding movie theater and restaurant. He befriended Terry Hunt, a local man who also worked at the tracking site, and went with him to look at Navajo handicrafts the Hunt family had obtained. During one of these trips to the family trading post, he met Terry’s sister, Sharon, just back from her first semester in college. In Alonzo’s words, “We got friendly and the next thing I knew before I left we were


59 Hurst, interview.
married.” When asked how the family felt about this, he mentioned that only Sharon’s stepmother gave him much of a grilling before the wedding; otherwise, everyone understood that he was a good man who came to Blanding on assignment to perform an important job for the government. Alonzo was no troublemaker. The rest of the town, which had always been friendly but reserved, opened its doors a little wider for him now that he had a greater investment in the community. He is quick to point out that he was an exception when it came to dating, and he does not remember any of his associates going out with women from town.

While the people of Blanding were keeping the pledge of Mayor Hurst to welcome the military personnel, his son felt duty-bound to dramatize just how welcome they were. On the other hand, the site’s nine-man military police force—which was charged with operating eight different road blocks during firings, moving seventeen signs for road closure, providing security for the headquarters van, and keeping civilian traffic out of the launch site—was perhaps not impressed with Hurst’s exuberant display of teenage friendship. Hurst recalls how he befriended a teenage son of one of the mess sergeants cooking on Black Mesa. Together with other teenagers from Blanding, the two would cruise the dirt roads of southeastern Utah in Hurst’s 1956 Plymouth, .22 rifles protruding from the windows, ready to engage targets of opportunity.

One day, this armed militia decided to drive out to the military installation to have some fun. The mess sergeant’s son, who was used to dealing with the soldiers, thought it would be a grand time, but the local boys worried how the other side would respond to their shenanigans. Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Hurst remembers:

I had that car clear full of Blanding guys. There were guards posted along the roads, on duty with their M14s [rifles] and equipment so we took those guys very seriously. We just hauled off and went through there, blasting right past the sentries. They’d be out there with their rifles trying to flag us down, but we’d fly by in a cloud of dust with our .22 rifles sticking out the windows. I drove into the compounds where they had their tents set up in a big ring around their unit battery flag poles. We just drove into their compounds in that Plymouth and spun some donuts, threw dirt and gravel all over the place, and took off again.

It was a very odd reality. Those military men were practicing to fire nuclear missiles in Eastern Europe if they had to, while the Blanding boys were running rough shod all over the place without paying much mind. They didn’t know what to do with us. They really didn’t have authority over us, and so once we called their bluff, those sentries were befuddled. They just didn’t know what to do, and so we did what we wanted.

For the most part, however, both sides worked at maintaining friendly relations that allowed daily life to remain peaceful.

While missiles fired from Black Mesa and Green River were spectacular events for the local populace, other activities—less easily observed but just as dramatic—occurred in the air. By the early 1960s, the Air Force had secured 102 miles of horizontal distance and an unlimited amount of vertical height as a no-fly zone above the Black Mesa launch site. This space was closed only during the firing window, at the same time that evacuations were taking place on the ground. In 1967, the San Juan Record announced that Green River and Blanding were now in the flight path of the Air Force’s SR-17 reconnaissance aircraft, originating in California and terminating its training flight over Lingo, New Mexico, close to the Texas border. Sonic booms were to be expected, as the aircraft traveled at 2,000 miles per hour.

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60 Rudy Alonzo, interview by the authors, January 4, 2008, in possession of authors.
62 Ibid.
The experience of Felon 22 in January 1961 was particularly dramatic. The B-52 was on an eight-hour, operational training mission. By dusk on January 19, its seven-man crew had entered the airspace over southeastern Utah. As the plane approached Monticello, it encountered heavy turbulence and attempted to ascend to 40,000 feet for a calmer journey. Suddenly there was a violent bump, the plane veered twenty-three miles off course, dove to an elevation of 7,000 feet, spun around, and broke apart. The left wing burst into flames but not before three crew members parachuted to safety. Debris from the disintegrating aircraft scattered over an eleven-mile distance; the primary impact point of the wreckage was on the west side of U.S. Highway 160, near Church Rock, fifteen miles north of Monticello, where burning gas scattered about, illuminating the landscape.

Several local people witnessed the crash. Winston Hurst recalls, “It exploded pretty high in the sky. My brother was on the front lawn of our house at the south end of town and saw it explode. The pieces went clear over the mountain and into Dry Valley.” Gene Schaefer had just walked out of his father's house in Monticello when he saw a flash that “lit the whole sky up like a sunrise.” Eighty miles north of the crash site, San Juan County Sheriff Max King was heading home from a convention in Salt Lake City when he “noticed a bright blue light in the sky south of me. When the light exploded into a ball of fire, I called the Moab sheriff’s office and asked if they’d seen a ball of fire in the sky.” They had not. King dispatched all available law enforcement officers to the site.

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66 Hurst, interview.


68 Ibid.
by the time he arrived, everyone who had either seen the explosion, heard the crash, or had been notified was there.\textsuperscript{69}

As the blaze subsided, officials found the bodies of four crew members. Of the three who had managed to exit the aircraft and deploy their parachutes, two reached the ground uninjured, about a mile from the main crash site, and walked to the gathering party of rescuers. The third man was missing but in the minds of the first two, there was confusion and uncertainty if there even had been a third man able to escape. Sheriff King ordered a preliminary search, but his men found no one. Four hours later, security officers from Hill Air Force Base arrived and took charge. Law enforcement personnel offered their complete cooperation, volunteering to search for the missing crewman, but the Air Force officer now in charge of the crash scene refused and ordered the evacuation of all civilians from the area. The military personnel did not believe that the missing man had managed to escape the aircraft and thought they would find his body in the wreckage. They were wrong.

On Saturday, January 21, two days after the aircraft went down, the military allowed local search parties to return to the crash area. Within an hour, they found the body of the missing Air Force sergeant, who had apparently survived the explosion and parachuted to safety while still injured, only to later die of exposure before he was found. The San Juan Record noted, “His body was still warm and it was felt that he had not been dead more than a few hours...his body was nearly hidden under the low branches of a tree...his parachute was on a small bundle near the body, indicating he had pulled it together in an effort to keep warm.” King realized that members of the original late-night search party “came within 150 yards and three people came within 50 yards of where the body was found.”\textsuperscript{70}

In the aftermath, local search party members expressed anger and frustration regarding the restrictions placed on the civilian search party. Likewise, questions arose about Felon 22’s payload. Though the suspicion that there might have been a hydrogen bomb aboard was quickly and officially quashed, some local people did not totally accept this. Four years later, an inquiry from a Monticello resident sent to the Air Force drew a brief reply: “The information we obtained from several Air Force Safety Agencies confirmed that an aircraft crashed in the time frame mentioned in your letter; however they assured us that no nuclear weapons were aboard the aircraft.”\textsuperscript{71} Further correspondence in 1995 and 1996 from the Air Force Safety Agency assured Monticello residents that there was no nuclear payload aboard Felon 22, severe wind currents had caused the crash, and no radioactive contamination was in the vicinity. Still, despite these statements, in 1995 the government listed the Felon 22 crash as one of twenty-nine nuclear accidents that had occurred since 1950.\textsuperscript{72}

The intensity of the Cold War for the people of southeastern Utah became clear again in 1968, when the Air Force announced that B-52 bombers would start testing two new airborne missiles, the Short Range Attack Missile and the Firefly.\textsuperscript{73} Tracking and data-recording facilities in Green River required that 227 permanent employees and eighty temporary employees in Blanding would annually follow the launch and execution of the airborne missiles, as they made their way to White Sands. These crews were composed of Army and Air Force military personnel, civilian employees, and civilian contractors, some of whom came from Bluff, Blanding, and Monticello.\textsuperscript{74} As with the Athena missiles, the Air Force required ground evacuations in the area of La Sal Junction, Canyonlands National Park, and Monticello to ensure the safety of civilians under the flight path. By 1979, one of a new generation of missiles—the Advanced Strategic Air Launched Missile, fired from an Air Force A-7D aircraft—flew through southeastern Utah skies, requiring 350 people to voluntarily evacuate an area west of Blanding.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 83.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 82.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 83.
\textsuperscript{73} “White Sands Announces Full Schedule,” SJR, January 4, 1968, 1.
\textsuperscript{74} “Utah Missile Firings Scheduled for Spring,” SJR, January 15, 1970, 16.
During the 1980s and 1990s—as the Cold War abated and technology grew in sophistication—the Air Force continued to use San Juan County as a training ground for high-performance jet aircraft and bombers, flying nap-of-the-earth missions. In 1984 a B-52 bomber crashed in Monument Valley, piling into Hunts Mesa during a low altitude training flight and killing two of the seven crew members aboard. The others parachuted to safety.75

This incident added yet another tragedy to that of the Felon 22 crash, but even that event left only slight reminders—bits of glass and aluminum, part of a wing—of what happened during the anxious years of the Cold War. On Black Mesa, deer and jackrabbits dodge between abandoned telephone poles, around remaining fences, and onto the graveled paths and pads that used to keep military men and machines out of the mire. The Ground Observation Corps posts have disappeared into housing lots, while the scouts and adults who manned them have either died or are entering retirement. The “evil empire” of the Cold War is gone. Now for the people of southeastern Utah—those desert Cold Warriors—there are only memories and a few physical reminders of how they supported the fight against communism.


A local Boy Scout troop (c. 2004) stands on the remains of Felon 22, the B-52 bomber that crashed in Dry Valley in 1961. Residents still question the Air Force’s handling of the incident.

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SAN JUAN RECORD

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WEB SUPPLEMENT

At history.utah.gov/uhqextras we reproduce Robert McPherson’s interview with Rudy Alonzo, who worked in the tracking station south of Blanding, and provide links to further information on southeastern Utah missile launches.
THE GREEN RIVER LAUNCH COMPLEX

Caitlin Shirts, while serving as an editorial assistant for Utah Historical Quarterly, wrote the text for this essay. Cory Jensen, of the Utah State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), took the contemporary photographs; Chris Hansen and Chris Merritt, also of the SHPO, contributed to the essay.

In 1962, United States Air Force officials visited Green River, Utah, as scouts for the White Sands Missile Range, a military installation in New Mexico that may have been best known to the town’s residents as the site where the first atomic bomb had been detonated nearly twenty years earlier on July 16, 1945.¹

Since the 1940s, the southern New Mexico firing range had tested small rockets and missiles. Its mission expanded when the Air Force initiated the Advanced Ballistic Re-entry System program and chose White Sands as the location to test long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). However, the range was too small to test these aerial missiles within its borders. The search began for an off-site satellite installation to launch missiles that would terminate at White Sands.

An area near Green River proved attractive: its sparse population promised isolation, its proximity to a town ensured access to utilities, its geographical position allowed for future extension of launch paths to Washington or Alaska, and its existing industrial buildings and railroad provided a starting

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2 “Land Utilization Survey.”
This United States Army image from the 1960s shows instrumentation structures at the Green River Test Complex.

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A historic photograph of the Athena assembly area, circa 1960s. The entire Green River complex occupied approximately 25,000 square feet and included the missile assembly building (pictured here) and buildings for payload assembly, support operations, balance, and storage. The letters “ARC” on the water tower refer to the Atlantic Research Corporation, which built and assembled the Athena vehicles.

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UTAH STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The Air Force leased the property from Union Carbide, which had used it as part of a uranium operation. The newly established Green River Launch Complex was slated for an eighteen-month program to assemble and test Athena missiles: scaled-down aerials that simulated the speed and reentry phenomena of larger ICBMs.

On February 5, 1964, the complex launched its first test, firing a first stage of the four-stage Athena. This exercise tested the evacuation process for populations in areas that the booster stages would impact and elsewhere along the flight paths. Thirty people near Moab were evacuated for a few hours and compensated for their time and travel expenses.

The first Athena missile fired from the complex strayed from its course and crashed near Durango, Colorado, but eventually 141 Athena missiles were launched from the site between 1964 and 1974. In 1971, the Pershing missile testing program in Gilson Butte, Utah, was absorbed by the Green River location. Over four years, sixty-one Pershing missiles, designed to carry nuclear warheads, were fired from the complex to White Sands.

The Green River Launch Complex became inactive around 1975 when advancing technology expanded the range of Pershing missiles and tests required an even longer flight corridor. The site was officially decommissioned in 1983. Thirteen facilities and forty-seven buildings still stand, or partially stand, today. The Department of Defense has scheduled these structures for demolition.

To mitigate the destruction of these historic properties, White Sands Missile Range plans in the coming decade to develop interpretive programs on the history of the Utah complex, including repairing and updating the commemorative missile display that currently stands in O.K. Anderson Park in Green River, creating both an interactive exhibit for use at public schools and a full-color brochure, and interviewing key informants to gather firsthand recollections.

The contemporary photographs below, taken in 2013, represent part of the Utah State Historic Preservation Office’s effort to record the Athena launch sites and auxiliaries in anticipation of their removal. They are presented here with images from the Utah State Historical Society’s collection.

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8 “Loki,” February 4, 1964; Feit et al., Cultural Resource Assessment, 22.
11 Feit et al., Cultural Assessment Report, 32.
12 Ibid., 33, 3, 6.
The interior of the TCEE, which contained the heating units and air conditioning used to maintain the environment needed to protect the temperature-sensitive Athena motors.

The Athena rockets were built in California and assembled at the Green River site. The main Athena assembly building was previously a Union Carbide uranium mill.

In this photograph (circa 1966), three Athena vehicles are positioned for firing at the three Athena launch pads. Utah State Historical Society

This concrete blockhouse—humble in appearance and surrounded by an earthen berm—contained the computer equipment and meteorological tools used to monitor flights. The 2,865-square-foot building is roughly in the center of the Athena launch complex. Roads from the blockhouse lead to the three launch pads.

Three Temperature Controlled Environmental Enclosure (TCEE) buildings once covered the three launch pads at the Athena site. As their name implied, these steel structures created the setting needed to protect rockets from dirt, wind, precipitation, and, especially, fluctuating temperatures. The building pictured here is the sole remaining TCEE at the site.
PREVIOUS PAGE TOP
The remains of equipment inside one of the TCEE buildings.

PREVIOUS PAGE BOTTOM
This photograph shows an electrical junction and firing boxes underneath one of the Athena launch gantries.

TOP LEFT
Metal slides transported cable throughout the Athena site. These slides emanate from the blockhouse in the center of the Athena complex.

BOTTOM LEFT
The interior of a metal slide.
PREVIOUS PAGE TOP
Cooling ducts, such as these from an Ashland site, supported each launch pad from behind a blast shield.

PREVIOUS PAGE BOTTOM
A radar and instrumentation building that once contained sophisticated equipment used to monitor missile launches.

ABOVE
The residence area of the Green River Launch Complex housed workers and provided necessities including a telephone exchange, a dining hall, and a fire station, as well as luxuries such as a theater and basketball and tennis courts.

WEB SUPPLEMENT
See history.utah.gov/uhqextras for additional historic and contemporary photographs of the Green River Launch Complex.