

RICHBORO NIKE BASE *by James Briggs*



I was asked by the Northampton Township Historical Commission to write an article on the former "Nike" site now utilized by the Township as their Recreation Center, 345 Newtown-Richboro Road. There has been a plaque at this location since 2007 commemorating its former use. But the metamorphosis has been so complete few residents realize the property's former life in the defense of our country.

This article will present the history of the Army Nike missile program, data on the specifics of the Richboro site, and transition to its present use. A later article will present personal memories of this Army base, interaction with the local population, and contribution to our country's "Cold War". Hopefully younger Township residents will appreciate the past efforts of their Supervisors as they utilize recreational opportunities at this site.

By the end of the Second World War, it was increasingly obvious to the military that standard anti-aircraft guns were ineffectual against high-altitude aircraft. In 1945 Bell Labs was contracted to develop a surface-to-air radar-guided missile system called Project Nike. Progress proceeded slowly until the realization was made that Soviet developments meant the entire continental United States was accessible to enemy bombers.

The project was accelerated and the first plane was destroyed by a missile at White Sands, N.M. on 11/27/51. Nike-Ajax missiles were rushed into production eventually resulting in 350 batteries at over 200 key urban, military, and industrial sites in the U.S. Production of this missile was stopped in 1958 at over 13,000 manufactured, replaced by the Nike-Hercules (nuclear capable), and ending with the Nike-Zeus.

The Philadelphia area with its refinery and chemical industries was protected by a total of 12 bases. There were 3 missile sites in Bucks County: Warrington designated as PH-099; Richboro as PH-07; and Bristol Twp. PH-15. The bases were named for their positions on an imaginary circle with true North at zero degrees and an unknown location in Philadelphia, as the center. Richboro and Warrington (the only base with 2 batteries) were manned by regular Army units and Bristol by the PA Army National Guard.

The U.S. government announced in March of 1954 that there was going to be a Nike base in Richboro and condemned the approximately 19 acre site on Newtown Road on 6/10/54. In September 1955 they purchased approximately 10 acres on Twining Ford Road 1/2 mile away and the base began operations in 1956. All Nike bases contained IFC (firing control and radar facilities); Administrative (enlisted men's barracks, offices, Officer's quarters, and a mess hall); and launch sites. The barracks in Richboro are close to Newtown Road. They were first converted to the Northampton Township Library in 1970 and are now the main building in the Recreation Center. The mess hall was on the Twining Ford Road property, but there are different accounts on the barracks and mess hall locations.

The Richboro Nike base followed the usual pattern of separating the radar (Twining Ford Road) from the launch area. The actual missile 20 feet long and 12" in diameter utilized solid propellant. Conversely the booster was liquid-fueled with a mixture, so caustic personnel wore protective clothing. Because of the liquid chemicals most Nike bases including Richboro were designated Federal hazardous cleanup sites. The booster supplied such rapid acceleration separating the radar from the launch site gave more time to calculate the missile's trajectory.

Richboro's Nike site housed approximately 100 men often working 12 hour shifts. The base was equipped with 2 Type B magazines (missile storage area), 20 Ajax missiles, and 8 Type A launchers. The Type B magazine had blast-proof doors (presently welded shut and covered by batting cages) and an elevator to raise the missile. Early in the program existing safety protocols mandated separating the missile launching area from the magazine. The large amount of acreage required made the system untenable where land prices were high. Most Nike sites like Richboro had underground installations lowering the real estate requirements.

The development of the more powerful and longer range Hercules missile lowered the number of sites required to protect a specific area. The Richboro Nike Base was deactivated in 1961 along with 6 other bases protecting the Philadelphia area. The remaining base in this area, Warrington, was active until 1971. And all sites in the U.S. were removed prior to the signing of the 1972 Salt I treaty with Moscow prohibiting anti-ballistic missile (ABM) capabilities.

The Army offered the Richboro site to the Navy with existing bases at Johnsville and Willow Grove. In 1965 the Navy announced their intent to build 200 apartment units at the Richboro site. The only housing allowed by Northampton Township Zoning Laws at this time were 1/2 acre lots. Representatives from the Township Supervisors, Council Rock School Board, and the local community went to Washington and argued against the proposal before a Senate Hearing Committee. On 12/9/66 the government advised Northampton that the Nike Base was officially declared surplus government property. The Township immediately applied for ownership of the old Nike Base and transferred the upper site to the Council Rock School District.



This information was obtained from the archives of the Northampton Township Library and is also available on the Internet at PH-07 or Richboro Nike Base.