

California man on difficult mission to uncover Missouri Cold War missile site

HIGHLIGHTS

California man making first-ever attempt to reclaim Minuteman missile launch center

The U.S. deployed 1,000 of the missiles at the height of the Cold War, 150 in Missouri

Excavation has proved difficult, with environmental regulations and unforeseen hazards



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It took two years of fighting red tape and two months of excavating concrete and water, but Russ Nielsen was determined to find out what was inside this long-ago decommissioned missile launch complex in central Missouri. In triumph, he stands by the large heavy blast door that was opened this week for the first time in 22 years. The hallway leads into the rest of the underground complex. **Joe Ledford** - jledford@kcstar.com

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Not worth it.

This quixotic mission to dig up one of Missouri's entombed Minuteman II Cold War missile facilities is — two months into the hard labor — nothing but a muddied mess.

“If I knew then what I know now...,” says Russ Nielsen.

He's 66. He's some 1,800 miles from his California home and his wife of 45 years.

He's got the screaming roar of an industrial vacuum truck still punishing his ears as workers hacking away 35 feet down in the earth feed a sucking tube with the quasi-cement and rock and water that was meant to foil anyone as crazy as him.

The ground around him is littered with piles of discarded vacuum tubes, concrete chunks, steel debris and his muddy channel system for separating excavated dirt from groundwater.

He's twice over what he budgeted, and way beyond any concept of how long he thought this would take after spending the past two years generating 10 work plans to satisfy the relentless requirements of state and federal environmental regulators.

All of this only brings him closer to his biggest fear.

To date, he and the hired crews have only jack-hammered their way through the concrete cap and dug through the fill dirt and debris the military dumped into the elevator shaft when it decommissioned all of the Missouri intercontinental ballistic missile sites some 20 years ago.

What he really wants — access to the complicated den where missileers stood with the launch keys to 10 of the 150 underground missiles in Missouri — lies beyond a still-blocked blast door.

Its steel is some 2 feet thick. There's no work-around for that.

"What if it won't open?" Nielsen says. "Then all I've got is a shaft."

He sits in a folding chair on the asphalt that serves as his patio beside a borrowed camper, not looking like a man at the end of his rope. He's toughing this out.

"My father was a gambler," he says. "My grandfather was a professional gambler."

This would have been a good play for them, too.

"Like going into a pyramid," he says.

But instead of cutting an Indiana Jones silhouette windblown in desert sand, he's sitting in his T-shirt, work shorts and beater tennis shoes with a view of the dry tree line between him and the bend in a county road about an hour southeast of Kansas City.

Sitting on history, so tantalizingly close, but possibly as unreachable as the surface of Mars.

From the air, the dead missile sites look like tiny barren scars. Just two acres each, solitary, innocuous. Typically nothing around them but a lone country lane or open highway.

But they add up. The remnant outlines seen in aerial photos reveal the unwavering pattern of a military that marched — and built — to strict and consistent orders.

"Harden and disperse," says Ret. U.S. Air Force Col. Joe Sutter, describing the hallmarks of the ICBM system — hard enough to take a nuclear strike, and dispersed across the Plains so the Soviet Union couldn't take out more than one at a time.

It all was secret only up to a point. Plenty of people who grew up in rural Missouri had seen the military vehicles roll by into those small, high-fenced, identical plots of land.

Terry Jennings was one of those people who remembered. In 2012, when he bought a deer hunting lease in this rural piece of Missouri, he recognized the surface signs of the U.S. missile defense system.

"I'm an Air Force brat," he said. "I saw this and I said, 'That's military.'"

It was available for sale and he thought of Nielsen, his rapid-fire real estate friend.

They had met in Las Vegas when Nielsen and his wife were taking advantage of a housing boom in the desert. He sold 180 houses there in 2002.

But would he want to buy *this*?

The history of it fascinated Jennings. Here was one of 15 underground launch facilities that had been under the command of Whiteman Air Force Base. Each launch site was connected to 10 scattered missile silos, each housing a Minuteman II missile.

A terrifying defense. Primed to send its nuclear payload into the air within 30 minutes, by order of the president.

There were 1,000 Minuteman missiles in all, buried in the American plains from Missouri to Montana, though none in Kansas. First the Minuteman I, and then the refined Minuteman II — which was then the latest, most deadly precise generation of intercontinental ballistic missiles in America's Cold War arsenal.

“They were built as the ultimate deterrent force,” said Gretchen Heefner, an assistant history professor at Northeastern University in Boston and author of “The Missile Next Door: The Minuteman in the American Heartland.”

The earlier generation of nuclear missiles — the mere dozens of Titans and the Atlases — were massive, expensive to maintain, volatile because of their liquid fuel and in need of constant security, Heefner said.

But the Minuteman came aboard in the 1960s, seen as “a technological marvel,” she said. They used solid fuel and were built so they could be stored and left alone for decades, forever ready to launch.

“You could put them out in the middle of nowhere and forget about them, and it worked,” she said.

Four-hundred fifty of the missile’s current version, the Minuteman III, remain on alert in Montana, North Dakota and Wyoming.

Jennings got a lot of his history from Sutter, whom he looked up in Knoxville, Tenn., after discovering that Sutter had commanded much of the Missouri missile operation.

Sutter was excited to hear that Jennings and Nielsen had this idea about reclaiming one of those buried sites and getting back down into its dormant cavern.

“The fact that they were talking about getting back downstairs was interesting to all of us who had been involved,” Sutter said.

He saw one big problem, though.

He knew how the sites had been put to rest. The military’s intent was to ensure the surface was completely safe and reusable for any farming or other agricultural purposes.

Furthermore, part of the arms-reduction treaties with the Soviet Union was to decommission missile sites in a way that ensured they wouldn’t be reactivated.

“They wanted to make it close to impossible to go back down there,” Sutter said. “I told Terry, ‘It’s going to be nasty.’ ”

The first generations of U.S. missile sites — the Atlases and Titans — once decommissioned were often left uncovered and sold for civilian use, some stripped for scrap metal, some converted into subterranean homes.

But neither Heefner nor Sutter nor the historians at the Association of Air Force Missileers knew of anyone before who had tried to get into one of the deactivated Minuteman control centers.

“I know a lot of Cold War architecture has become 21st century capitalism,” Heefner said, “but this is the last thing I thought someone would try to do something with. I’m completely shocked. I’d love to be there to see them break into it.”

The missiles were removed and the silos themselves were imploded, never to be used again. The launch centers were cleaned out and then plugged — severely — with the residential and security building above them left behind.

Another difference in the pre-Minuteman missiles: They were decommissioned before the 1970s and before the Environmental Protection Agency and the nation’s awakening to the soil and water dangers in industrial waste.

It didn’t take long for Nielsen to begin accumulating a file box of documents, plans and rewritten plans, many times over. He was dealing first with the Air Force, but then and going forward with the EPA and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

“No one ever told me no, I can’t do it,” Nielsen said. “But I think they thought this was never going to happen. They thought I’d lose interest.”

First he had to get the government to ease the deed restriction that had prohibited any deep digging on the property. The environmental agencies kept rejecting his work plans for dealing with the excavated materials, but they also kept suggesting ways he could comply.

That's why he has a 21,000-gallon Frac Tank, into which he had to dump water from the site until it tested free of any hazardous content.

There were soil core samples to test for toxins like PCBs and lead. And once the digging began, the crews soon discovered that the elevator shaft was plugged not just with the flowable cement-like fill, but hundreds of chunks of concrete that had to be hoisted out by bucket.

The property came somewhat cheap — \$80,000 — but Nielsen doesn't want to say how much he's poured into the excavation.

Fifty-eight years of playing chess is helping him through this, he says. Solving problems, thinking long-term, with an abiding patience.

He was supposed to be home at least a month ago. His wife, Val, understands what he's gotten himself into, he says, but he adds with a laugh, "she's not as enthusiastic about this as I am."

His last conversation with her had come with him still not knowing what would come of that blast door excavation.

But at the moment, 11:30 Tuesday morning, he's sitting by his camper, back on the phone with the familiar voice of his Department of Natural Resources contact, when one of the excavation crew from Action Environmental of Kansas City is standing over him.

"The blast door is opened," he says. "It opened on its own."

For a moment Nielsen's cellphone hangs in his hand at his ear. He's looking at the face of the crew member.

"I've got to interrupt," he says to the state official on the phone. "I just got word they opened the blast door."

It takes another day before the excavation crew thinks the cavern is safe and the water level low enough to go in, but by then a welder has installed a ladder at the top, so at least Nielsen and the crew don't have to be hoisted down by harness anymore.

Going into the steel capsule "is a bit on the creepy side," he said.

It had been waterlogged for much of the past 22 years. It looks to him as he imagines a sunken submarine would look once lifted from the sea. No furniture was left behind. No computers. No missileer keys.

Whatever is to come of it still means a lot of work ahead, whether it is on Nielsen, or another investor, or a history buff or someone looking to shore up a sure bunker to survive the end of the world as we know it.

The whole thing was still too hard. Still probably not worth it. But now with a great relief, Nielsen said.

"At this point, I'm happy I did it."

Sutter would love to see someone make a museum out of it, or otherwise preserve the site and its piece of American history.

"It would honor the professionalism and commitment of the crews," he said. "This was an important part of our legacy."

Missileers left their marks, scratched into metal paneling on an electrical box.

"Ratman was here. Nov. 1973"

"Minuteman Mad Man, Mar. 83"

They spent their work lives 24 hours at a time in this bunker, where, if they ever were called on to do the job they'd trained for, Heefner said, they had a shovel in store to dig themselves out of the escape hatch, presuming that no one on the surface would be around to get them out.

"It's just so weird," she said.

But now, wherever they might be, Ratman and Mad Man can come home again.

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Excellent dedication, to dig this out, another piece of Cold War history revealed.

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