

1957-2007 — SMDC/ARSTRAT Celebrates

The road to Kwajalein

SMDC/ARSTRAT Historical Office

In 1957, with the feasibility studies completed, plans were moving forward for a new defense system the NIKE-ZEUS, which would address the threat posed by an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Projects had barely begun when the Soviet Union announced, on Aug. 26, 1957, that they had successfully tested an ICBM. The NIKE-ZEUS was given the highest priority and the search was on for a suitable test facility.

The road to Kwajalein was decided in February 1959, when the Department of Defense approved the proposed test plan for the NIKE-ZEUS system. Existing ranges and test facilities provided some support. A tracking station was constructed on Ascension Island, part of the Atlantic Test Range, to study ICBMs launched by the Air Force from Cape Canaveral, Fla. Components and subsystem tests were to be conducted at White Sands Missile Range, N.M., as were short-range atmospheric capabilities tests. Point Mugu, Calif., provided a site for more rigorous testing of long-range and extra atmospheric capabilities. None of these sites however was suitable for a full test of the NIKE-ZEUS system. A new facility was needed — Site X.

Following months of research, planners for the Army Rocket and Guided Missile Agency focused upon the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Unlike options reviewed in the Atlantic Test Range and

elsewhere, Kwajalein was part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands and was administered by the United States Government. In fact, Kwajalein Island, within a day's flight from Hawaii, was the site of an active U.S. Navy installation, with an existing infrastructure (airstrip, harbor, housing, schools, hospital, etc.) and supply routes. In addition, the weather was relatively stable, and the islands, at 4,800 miles from the West Coast, were a perfect distance from Camp Cook, Calif., now Vandenberg Air Force Base, to test the system against ICBMs. Although the islands were small, it was determined that with proper planning, Kwajalein could support the technical facilities and contractor personnel needed to operate the full-scale NIKE-ZEUS system.

Within a few years, the Army's missile defense program held a significant position on the island. The Kwajalein Test Center was officially established in October 1960, and two years later NIKE-ZEUS testing began in the Marshalls. By 1964, the Army's presence on Kwajalein was significant. Most of the available acreage was devoted to the missile defense program, and almost all of the 3,500 residents of the island were affiliated with the program. Officials argued that the administration of the islands would be better served by a single organization. In November 1963, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara agreed, observing that: the "support provided to the Pacific Missile Range is an



Courtesy photo

Brig. Gen. (then Col.) I. O. Drewry and Kwajalein officials review island facilities following transfer ceremony July 1, 1964. The vehicles in background are U.S. Navy.

unnecessary expense to the Navy and a drain on Navy personnel. It is appropriate to place this burden on the consumers of range services and to enable them to control the resources essential to support their own operations."¹

With this directive, responsibility for Kwajalein and eight other islands would transfer from the U.S. Navy to the U.S. Army NIKE-X Project Office. In a 30-minute ceremony conducted in front of the chapel, on July 1, 1964, Capt. H.D. Allen, the island's 18th Naval commander, relinquished command to Col. Glenn Crane, NIKE-X Field Office project chief and first Army commander of the island. At the same time the Pacific Missile Range Facility — Kwajalein became Kwajalein Test Site.

Since this time, the Test Site and its missions have continued to grow. A series of landfills have literally increased the island by over 100 acres. The mission and responsibility of the KTS, now known as the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test

Site, increased almost immediately. The Advanced Research Project Agency's Project PRESS radars and equipment on Roi-Namur transferred to the Army in 1968. New islands were added to the test range as the complexities of remote launches were addressed in the SAFEGUARD era. Reentry measurement programs added a new feature to the Anti-Ballistic Missile program on Kwajalein. In addition to its original ICBM mission, the test range has also been developed to support mid and short range intercept testing and studies. In addition, under a 1961 memorandum, KTS was identified as a national missile range and as such has supported a variety of Air Force and Navy programs since 1964. Finally, from the earliest manned-space launches, Kwajalein has supported NASA's space program with deep space tracking and other efforts.

¹This directive which resulted from a special study conducted by Department of Defense also applied to installations other than Kwajalein.



Brig. Gen. (then Col.) I.O. Drewry, NIKE-X project manager (left), and Col. Glenn Crane, commanding officer, Kwajalein Test Site, look over the plaque commemorating the first time the U.S. Army took over Kwajalein Island, back in February 1944.

