





Missile crews  
stand prepared  
with the ultimate  
deterrent.

# THE WARREN MISSILEERS

Photographs by Guy Aceto, Art Director

**A**s vigilant as they were at the height of the Cold War, a maintenance crew (at right) completes work on a Minuteman III LGM-30G missile, while 2d Lt. Mike Kleppe (left) and 1st Lt. Mark McDonald work their shift inside a launch control center, capable of launching an intercontinental ballistic missile rapidly.







One of the oldest military installations in the Air Force, F. E. Warren AFB, Wyo., began as an Army post, Fort D. A. Russell, on guard in the "high frontier." Today, as home of the 90th Missile Wing and 20th Air Force headquarters, it guards a good deal more, in operating and maintaining 150 Minuteman III and 50 Peacekeeper missiles. Spread across parts of three states—Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska—missile fields under F. E. Warren AFB's control cover more than 12,600 square miles. On the base, 90th MW missileers gather for a morning pre-departure briefing (left) before heading out to their outlying missile alert facilities. The status of maintenance and other work being done in the wing, classified data, and even information on road conditions for their long commute ahead are covered in this briefing with the attention to detail that missileers are known for.

Though bristling with antennas and surrounded by fences, most missile alert facilities appear innocuous and have a low profile in the surrounding landscape. The actual launch control center, manned by two officers, is located 50 feet to 100 feet underground. A support crew is located "topside." Weather permitting, the support and security personnel stay on site for three days, with capsule crews changing out every 24 hours. The mission comes first, however, and everyone has anecdotes about much longer stretches of duty.



Sometimes the missile alert facility is the only structure for miles around and, as such, needs to be self-sufficient. The sites can seem isolated and desolate, so important lines of communication include more than just those carrying official business: At left, SSgt. Brian Posten, facility manager, checks the area surrounding a missile alert facility, including a television satellite dish.





At the heart of the missile systems are two people who, for at least 24 hours straight, must carefully account for every detail of their workday. Lieutenants Kleppe and McDonald (above) might be isolated below ground in their control capsule, but they are by no means out of touch. They keep in contact with national command authorities as well as the security personnel topside, other capsule crews, and the missiles themselves.

From the launch facilities, they receive sensor information about the missile and the systems protecting the hardened silo. Minuteman III missile alert facilities recently completed an important systems improvement program. The Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting program was the first major upgrade to the command, control, and communications systems since the missile's development in the 1960s. New side-by-side consoles integrate communications and monitoring systems at a central location, allowing crew members to react more quickly to process message traffic and carry out execution orders.



Aboveground, some of the best Security Police in the Air Force guard the missiles and crews. Above right, Amn. Brian Wahlstedt checks a security code with his supervisor, SrA. Leonard T. Lewis II.

The SPs take little for granted and, like everyone involved in this mission, they are well aware of their responsibilities.





*A missile can't just sit untended in its silo until it is launched. Like any weapon, it requires attention. When a maintenance crew heads out for the distant silos, it must take everything its members might need, sometimes including food and sleeping bags. At right, MSgt. Charles Salisbury (on right) shows some of his newer troops what to look for as they check every piece of equipment while packing for an assignment.*



*Once at the site, the large maintenance trailer is parked right over the silo opening, both for convenience and to provide a sheltered environment. No elevators here: Technicians get into the silo by climbing down a ladder in an entry tube parallel to the missile. SrA. Justin Workman then lowers tools and other equipment to them by hand.*

*Inside the launch tube during a recent readiness test, SrA. Dennis Sasser (left) works off the "diving board," as SrA. Christopher Pierson works from the "cage," a platform that allows the technicians to be raised and lowered. They can thus inspect every inch of the 59-foot-tall Minuteman III. Safety is paramount. Tools are attached by cords to the technicians, and the crew is harnessed and wears hard hats for the job.*



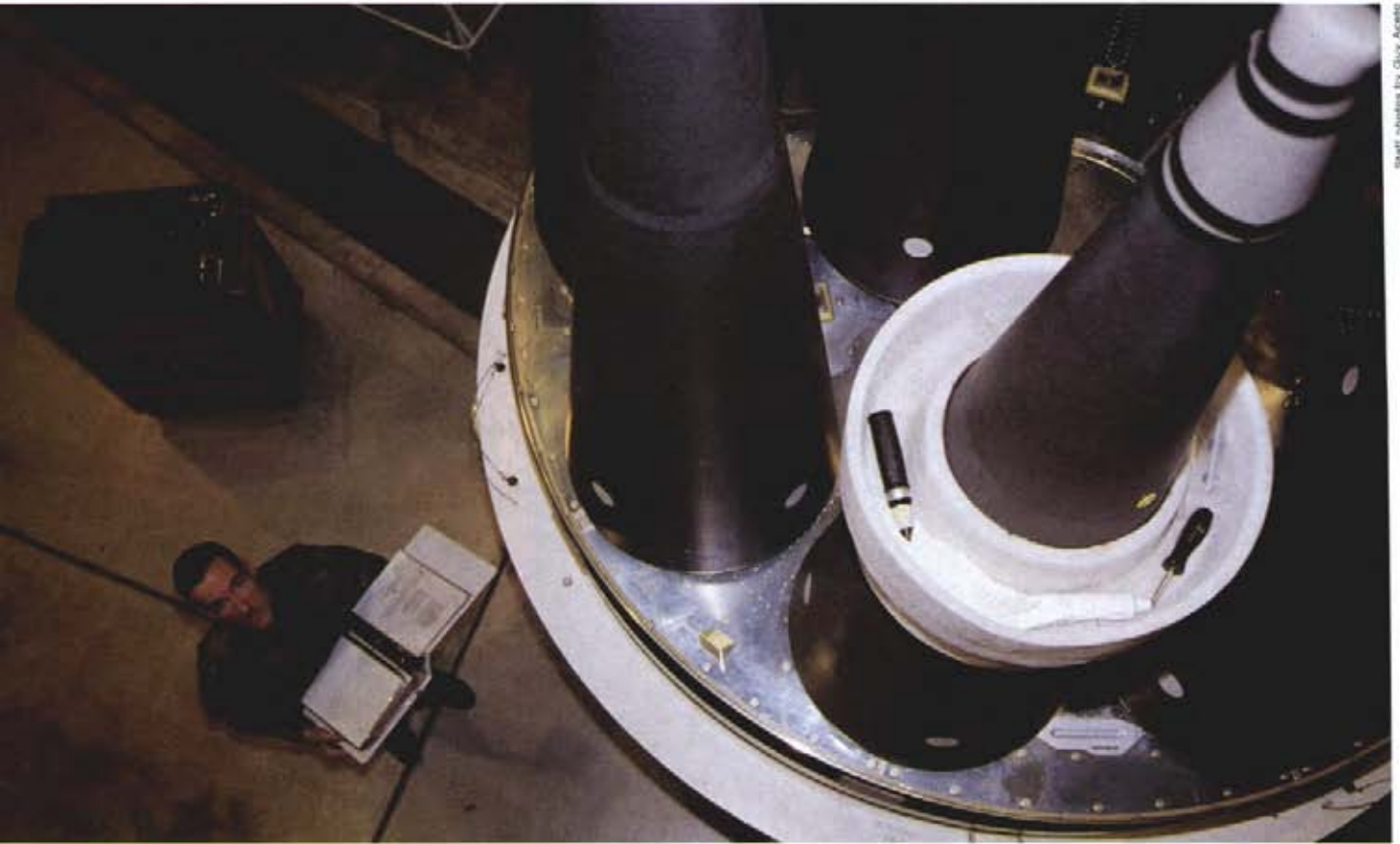


*In the maintenance trailer, crew members have lifted the final stage off the missile in order to replace a tested section. At left, SrA. Sisto M. Ortiz and A1C Shane A. Mazur (right) prepare to lower the reentry vehicle back onto the missile. A winch built into the maintenance trailer helps them with this stage of reassembly. All told, the reassembled missile weighs 78,000 pounds. Above, the winch slowly lowers the missile section into the silo. From this vantage point, the need for safety cords and harnesses is apparent.*



*At bottom left is a missile shroud. Inside it are up to three reentry vehicles. If the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II is fully implemented, every Minuteman III missile will have a single warhead.*





Like the rest of the missile, the warheads themselves are periodically checked and maintained. At F. E. Warren, SSgt. Gary J. Skowronek, reentry vehicle maintenance team chief, goes by the book in overseeing the replacement of the last of up to 10 independently targetable reentry vehicles for the business end of an LGM-118A Peacekeeper missile. The Peacekeeper, fully operational since 1988, is larger, heavier, and more accurate than the Minuteman. The Styrofoam ring around one of the reentry vehicles protects it and also serves as a place for technicians to place their tools temporarily. At right, SrA. Kelly Summerfield and SrA. Mark Poani (right) carefully replace the cap on a reentry vehicle. Below, on the Minuteman III side of the base's weapons facility, SrA. Corey LaRock and SrA. James Callari (right) check the forward component of the reentry system.





At left, a crew member in one of two training silos at F. E. Warren monitors the movement of a Peacekeeper missile's section into a transporter-erector-launcher vehicle. Though the three stages of the huge missile can be lifted right out of the silo, facilitating maintenance, reattaching the sections is a slow, exacting process. Practicing this procedure at a training silo is a good way to refine these skills.

The cycle of maintenance, testing, and training continues: Another missile crew meets for the morning "pre-D" and preparation for the drive out to the missile alert facility. At right, Capt. Scott W. Smith, from the 320th Missile Squadron, and his deputy for the day, 1st Lt. Chris Pearson (right), from the 321st MS, check the vehicle they will be driving out to the MAF. This is partly a security check, but they will also make sure everything they need for their shift is on the truck, including emergency supplies in case bad weather should delay them en route to the site.



The 90th MW is supported by the 37th Rescue Flight. Its UH-1N helicopters can provide rapid security response, medical assistance, or transportation for the missile crews. They also support the Security Police during transport of missile components. Such teamwork helps missileers like Lieutenants Kleppe and McDonald (at left) perform their unique mission of providing a combat-ready ICBM force for America's defense. In considering this role, Col. Robert P. Summers, 90th MW commander, commented, "I've been told by [four-star generals] overseas, 'We watch what you folks do every day, because you are keeping the stability and the peace at a level that allows us to deal with this transition . . . of the world from nondemocratic states to democratic states.'" ■