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WEEKEND BREAK



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REMEMBERING AIR STATION NASELLE

Revisiting a historic Cold War-era site

By **RON BALDWIN**
For The Astorian

It is a foreboding winter night on Washington's isolated southern coastline. The wind's eerie howl and torrents of rain have pummeled the iconic domes of Air Station Naselle for days.

An airman has been at his post for nine hours and he's questioning his eyes. A screen shows a low altitude blip representing an object approaching the coast, just north of Willapa Bay, so the newly arrived officer sets in motion a chain of events, sending four Convair F-102A Delta Dagger jets from McChord Air Force Base toward the bay. In a flash, the jets pass over the coastline when an order comes over the radio. The blip the officer saw was, in fact, a large concentration of birds. More sophisticated radars would later be installed at Naselle, but these early models had some quirks.

The early 1950s were a scary time for Americans. Soviet Union dictator Joseph Stalin led his country into the nuclear age, threatening any country that opposed him. Congress authorized nuclear weapons programs, missiles and detection technology to deter any possible attack.

U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy accused the Truman administration of allowing Soviet spies to take over the State Department.

One Academy Award winning 1966 Norman Jewison film, "The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming," alludes to Paul Revere's ride while mocking the military-industrial complex and an outsized fear of the Russian menace. It became highly influential in the late 1960s peace movement. The nuclear threat itself was in everyone's mind.

It was in these times that Air Station Naselle and others like it were built. Construction began in early 1950s and the station came online in December 1951. At first, it had two missions; to detect and track aircraft entering its airspace and to direct interceptor aircraft to those suspected enemy planes.

Fast-forward to October 1962. The nuclear-armed ballistic missile had become the weapon of the day, capable of destroying entire regions with many millions of people. In the summer of 1962, American intelligence discovered that Nikita Khrushchev ordered nuclear-armed missiles installed in its client state, Cuba, 90 miles off the southern United States coastline. Later that year, President John F. Kennedy implemented a complete naval blockade of the island nation. After a full-force threat from Kennedy, Khrushchev agreed to dismantle the missiles and sites in Cuba.

In 1960, Air Station Naselle, now known by the military radio sign Ground Photo Timothy, became a vital part of the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment network. This network of stations throughout the Pacific Northwest and beyond were uniquely connected through an early computer network. Items they used,



Photos by Ron Baldwin

TOP: The narrow road to Radar Ridge in Naselle gains nearly 800 feet in just 2.5 miles. The Naselle Youth Camp is the site of what was once Air Station Naselle. ABOVE: Eagle Lodge is one the last remaining barracks from the Air Station Naselle era.

like modems and teleprinters, were then still unknown to most Americans.

Then 18-year-old Bob Davis was typical of the installation's enlisted men. Fresh out of high school when he arrived in October 1962, smack in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis, his rank was Airman 3rd class.

His job description was civil engineering, which meant that he was in maintenance. Security at the base was very strict because everything was so top secret.

"I did not have the proper clearance to enter any of the radar facilities. These guys in radar were very intelligent. They were dealing with computers way before Gates and Allen discovered Microsoft," Davis said.

He would remain at Naselle for a year before transferring to Portland Air Base.

"We played a lot of cards in our spare time and on our days off, most of us headed to Portland," Davis said. "But a lot of guys liked to hunt and fish so they stayed there as long as they could."

Advances in technology were fast and bold.

By 1966, detection and deterrence were accomplished by satellite imagery and the need for the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment network and its bases were deemed less

vital. The Department of Defense then chose to decommission the Naselle Air Station along with most others in the state, transferring ownership to the state, as it remains today.

The air station's facilities are now the site of the Naselle Youth Camp, a medium security residential rehabilitation facility. The radar domes and equipment at the top of what airmen called Mt. Timothy have been removed over the years, and the old radar domes are mingled in with modern communications towers. On clear days, a spectacular valley view is available.

These sites and their surrounding forests are now accessible to the public as part of the Washington Department of Natural Resources. Two small lakes, stocked with cutthroat trout, are surrounded by developed campgrounds situated just down the mountain, open for fishing and camping year-round. The area provides a plethora of recreation opportunities including hunting, fishing, gathering, hiking and camping.

A few of the remaining barracks from the site's Air Force days are still there. These barracks, along with the former officers' apartments, are the only structures left from the site's military days, when upwards of 150 men were assigned there.

THESE SITES AND THEIR SURROUNDING FORESTS ARE NOW ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC AS PART OF THE WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES. TWO SMALL LAKES, STOCKED WITH CUTTHROAT TROUT, ARE SURROUNDED BY DEVELOPED CAMPGROUNDS SITUATED JUST DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, OPEN FOR FISHING AND CAMPING YEAR-ROUND. THE AREA PROVIDES A PLETHORA OF RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDING HUNTING, FISHING, GATHERING, HIKING AND CAMPING.