



# Secrets of Fort Miles

During the Cold War, the Cape Henlopen installation played a vital security role.

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A Bumblebee rocket launched sometime in 1946 from Herring Point at Fort Miles leaves a trail of smoke and flame as it screams skyward at upwards of 1,500 mph.

The role of the iconic concrete towers along Delaware's coast and the artillery gun emplacements at Fort Miles on Cape Henlopen during World War II is well known to most residents of the area. Spotters in the towers helped direct gunners on the cape in aiming the giant cannons during firing exercises that kept them ready to protect the vital entrance to the Delaware Bay and River. (The guns were never fired in combat.)

But few residents and visitors know that Fort Miles continued to play an important role — though a more secret one — in the years after World War II, during what is called the Cold War.

Thanks to the Fort Miles Historical Association, and ongoing research by volunteers and Delaware State Parks historical staff, a smorgasbord of historical information is coming to light. Indeed, it turns out that the fort virtually embodied the Cold War in miniature.



**EDITOR'S NOTE** This is a shortened version of a story from our extensive archive that dates back to 2002, the year Delaware Beach Life was launched. Rather than updating archived stories to reflect what has changed since they were first published, we are letting each story stand as a snapshot in time under the "Best of Beach Life" heading, so please keep this "time capsule" factor in mind.

## "Bumblebee" UFOS

The Cape Henlopen area provided a military-maritime defense dating back to the 1700s, but Fort Miles, as such, started life at the beginning of World War II. Its mission: to protect the entrance to the Delaware Bay and access to Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley's chemical industries so vital to the war effort. By late 1943, however, the War Department had determined that a German invasion wasn't coming to America and several months later began transferring hundreds of artillerymen to the European and Pacific Theaters. The fort's coastal defense mission remained, but it also took on a new role as a research and development proving ground for all kinds of secret weaponry and military technology.

During the war, the Navy's Bureau of Ships established a Naval Test Station at Fort Miles, conducting classified experiments with infrared voice communications and night-vision devices. Two ships, the USS *Callao* and *PCR-852*, were specially modified for this testing and assigned to the station, where the experiments continued until the operation was moved to New London, Conn., in September 1947.

In the early days of the Cold War, a Naval Ordnance Test Station was established at the fort. Johns Hopkins University's famed Applied Physics Laboratory, working for the Navy, began testing ramjet-powered rockets, eventually developing guided missiles for use in fleet defense. Dubbed "Operation Bumblebee," the research had begun in New Jersey, but that location lacked sufficient infrastructure, so officials decided to relocate the program to Topsail Island, N.C. While constructing facilities there, a temporary launch site was established at Fort Miles' Herring Point in December 1945. For the next 13 months, at least 83 ramjet rockets — capable of speeds of 1,500 mph — were launched, establishing several important advances. This testing ultimately resulted in the

development of the Talos and Terrier missiles, progenitors of today's Aegis Standard missile system and also instrumental in the development of engines for the XB-70 experimental bomber and the famed SR-71 reconnaissance aircraft. (One of the Bumblebee test rockets was actually reported as a UFO and investigated by Project Blue Book, the Air Force's investigation in the 1950s and '60s of aviation anomalies.)

## VIPs and spies

President Harry S. Truman visited the shores of Fort Miles twice aboard the presidential yacht *Williamsburg*, once in 1946 and again in 1948. On one occasion he swam to shore and rested. A Truman Library photo shows the commander in chief taking a dip, surrounded by protective escorts.

Cold War spies came to the installation, too. When the Soviet Union returned the World War II lend-lease

cruiser *Milwaukee* to the U.S. in March 1949 — the first such warship to be repatriated — the handover took place at Cape Henlopen, with a special delegation from the Soviet Embassy there to effect the

transfer. It included Gen. Ivan Alekseevich Bolshakov, a "military attaché" who in reality was chief of Soviet army military intelligence operations in North America. (Bolshakov stayed at the Hotel Rodney in Lewes.) The Soviet naval officer in charge of the transfer was Rear Adm. Evgeni Glinkov, who may have been Bolshakov's naval intelligence counterpart at the time. Both went to Fort Miles several times, and on at least one occasion ate at the Officers' Club.

In 1958, the fort gave use of its mine casemate — a concrete bunker that had housed control systems for offshore minefields — to the Sussex County Office of Civil Defense to use as its headquarters. By autumn of that year, Sussex was one of only five U.S. counties chosen to carry out a civil defense pilot program

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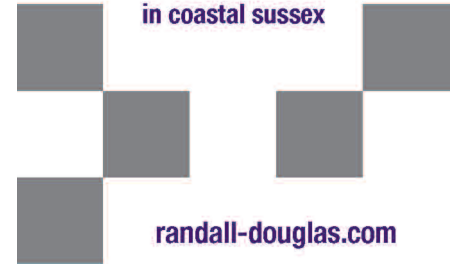


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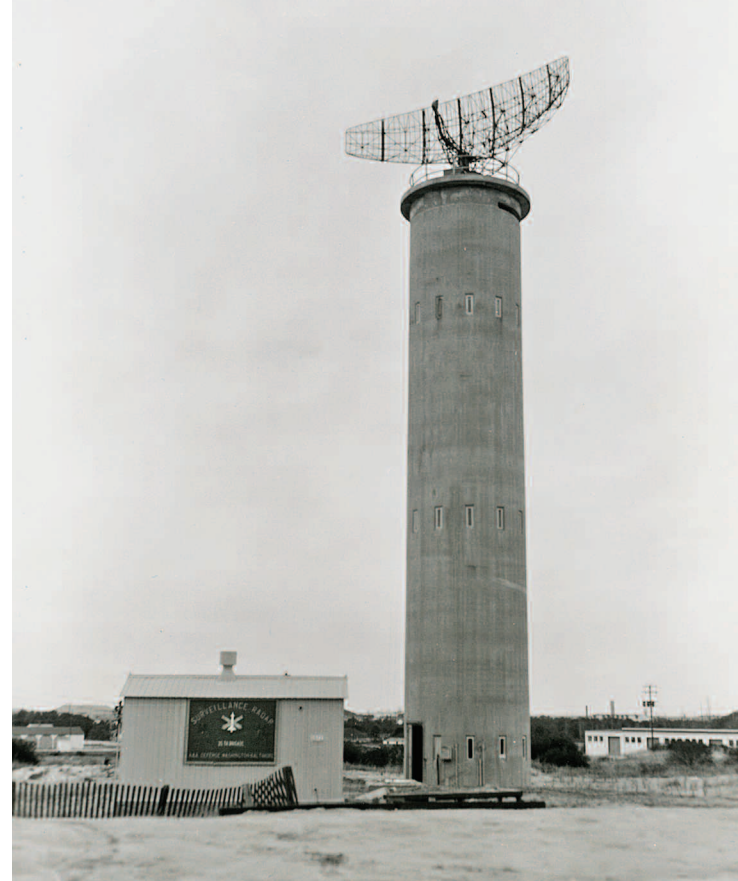
## Best of Beach Life

on home preparedness. Such readiness was demonstrated at the fort, where the public could learn how to prepare for emergencies. The old bunker also served as the alternate State Emergency Operations Center in case the main facility at Fort DuPont went out of action.

### 'Bear' hunters

Fort Miles also played a vital part in the nation's early Cold War air defense system. By the mid-1950s, the Army set up an experimental radar dish atop a fire-control tower. By 1959, a Missile Master radar, known as Radar-1, was placed atop another tower. It was then moved to the top of Battery 519 (a bunker that housed two 12-inch guns during World War II), possibly the first Army "Gap-Filler" radar to scan the skies for Soviet bombers. If it detected enemy aircraft, the crew would send tracking data to a command center at Fort Meade, Md., which would then pass it on to the 35th Air Defense Artillery's Nike-Hercules and Hawk missile batteries. Radar-1 operated at Fort Miles until November 1963.

Personnel at the fort were not just watching for "Bears," as Soviet aircraft were called, but listening for their naval counterparts. In 1955, the Navy established a SOSUS (Sound Surveillance System) facility at Cape May. Publicly referred to as a Naval Facility (or NAVFAC), its purported



U.S. Army experimental radar sits atop Fire Control Tower 12 at Fort Miles in the 1950s. The sign on the building reads, "Surveillance Radar, 35th AA Brigade, AAA Defense Experimental Facility."

purpose was "oceanographic research," but the actual mission was to detect and track Soviet submarines using secret technology developed by Bell Laboratories. Within several years, it was clear that beach erosion would force the relocation of the Cape May operation, and Herring Point at Cape Henlopen was deemed the successor site. The infamous Great Storm of 1962, which wreaked havoc on Mid-Atlantic shorelines, hastened the move. Once NAVFAC Lewes was established, Fort Miles was the only site in the world that was simultaneously scanning the skies for Soviet bombers and the ocean for Soviet submarines. In 1977, another distinction occurred: Lt. Cmdr. Peggy Frederick took charge of the operation, becoming the first female NAVFAC commander. Four years later, the facility was decommissioned.

In the early 1960s, defense planners were giving additional thought to "continuity of government" protections in the event of a nuclear war. Along with evacuating the president and key staff to underground bunkers or taking to the skies aboard Air Force One, a third option was added: moving them to sea. Known as National Emergency Command Post Afloat, the heavy cruiser USS *Northampton* and the light aircraft carrier USS *Wright* were


converted to contain state-of-the-art communications equipment and thus became presidential command ships. At first, the vessels alternately cruised the Chesapeake Bay and along the East Coast, always prepared to receive their most important passengers. They

were known by several monikers, including the "Ghost Ships," the "Floating White House" and the "Doomsday Ships." In order to track and exchange message traffic between them and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Naval Radio Station Lewes was established at Fort Miles in June 1963. For years, the public would marvel at the two gigantic tropospheric-scatter communications dishes atop Battery 519, which the media and public assumed were just giant radar antennas.

In fact, these dishes were used to facilitate communication between the Pentagon and the ships, wherever they went.

Today, the Fort Miles Historical Association and the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation [has established] a museum inside Battery 519 to preserve and interpret the military past outlined here. ■

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 **ONLINE** For an overview of the Fort Miles Museum and Historic Area, as well as museum events and other info, visit [fortmiles.org](http://fortmiles.org).

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