



Left: An unarmed Minuteman III ICBM is successfully launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California on August 19, 2015. The 45-year-old missile was launched to test its performance and reliability. (Photo: U.S. Air Force)

Below: On March 22, 2016, all the missile crews on alert at all three U.S. ICBM bases consisted solely of women—a first for the Air Force. To commemorate the occasion, the women wore special patches with the likeness of Rosie the Riveter. (Photo: U.S. Air Force)

SMELLS LIKE ALERT



Missileers are highly trained members of the United States Air Force who must be ready, willing, and able to launch nuclear-warhead-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) at a moment's notice. No pressure.

Oscar-01 Missile Alert Facility, Malmstrom Air Force Base, Great Falls, Montana

I take a deep breath and pick up the pen, not anticipating the swell of emotion in my stomach. The magnitude of my actions—or inactions—suddenly becomes very real, and I sign my name to the paper. I am officially on my first 24-hour alert as a Deputy Missile Combat Crew Commander—a missileer. I am 23 years old.

My signature ensures that I will care for and, if ordered by the president, launch any or all of the 10 nuclear ICBMs now in my custody. I know that from this moment forward, I have to follow ICBM launch protocol to a T. The public, my family, my peers, base leadership, the commander of U.S. Strategic Command, and ultimately the President of the United States depend on me to launch these weapons, should I ever be ordered to do so.

Launching a weapon means I'm not only destroying a military target but also the lives of thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of people. Launching a weapon means world events have gone so far south that it's only a matter of time—minutes, probably—before the enemy's missiles kill me in a similar attack. As a missileer about to go on alert, I'm supporting my daily deterrence mission—but by pledging to defend my country, I'm also effectively signing my name to a suicide mission. And I've accepted that.

I exhale.

One hour earlier

I arrived here, at the Oscar-01 Missile Alert Facility (MAF) in central Montana. Traveling 55 mph in a government-issued van, the drive took nearly three hours. The MAF is 139 miles from my main post at Malmstrom Air Force Base, 147 miles from the closest Starbucks, and I don't even know how far from the nearest Chipotle. In other words, this California girl is in the middle of nowhere. And there's snow on the ground—in April.



The eight-ton steel-and-concrete door of an LCC is hand-painted like a Domino's Pizza box. The "next one" referred to here is a Minuteman ICBM. (Photo: Open Source)

After a topside (aboveground) greeting from the facility manager and members of the security force, I walk into a scissor-gated elevator alongside another, more experienced, missileer named Tom, who will join me on this alert. We descend approximately 60 feet below ground to the Launch Control Center (LCC). A giant American flag mural, painted by other Air Force members, stretches down the length of the elevator shaft—a timely reminder of my duty to our country and the importance of my job.

“World-wide delivery in 30 minutes or less—or your next one is free.”

We step out of the elevator and open a massive eight-ton concrete-and-steel blast door that’s hand-painted with a Domino’s Pizza logo, the silhouette of a Minuteman missile,



and the words “World-wide delivery in 30 minutes or less—or your next one is free.”

On the other side of the door, which is more than six feet high and two feet thick, is the LCC—and its off-going two-person crew. After a 45-minute changeover, during which we discuss the status of weapons, procedures, and other classified information, Tom and I sign for our 24-hour alert. We’re officially on the clock.

The capsule: womb? . . .

The LCC, our home for the next day, is a 10-by-22-foot steel capsule that’s suspended within a larger vessel shaped like a giant aspirin bottle lying on its side. This suspension system allows for the capsule to sway in the event of a nuclear attack, supposedly increasing the survivability of the equipment and people inside. I feel the capsule waver, ever so slightly, as I move around the space. I thank my lucky stars that I am not susceptible to motion sickness or claustrophobia.

The walls of the capsule are lined with mint-green-colored racks that house circuit breakers, communication equipment, air conditioning, and air-regeneration equipment—all of which contribute to a constant humming sound and a briny, stale, electrical odor.

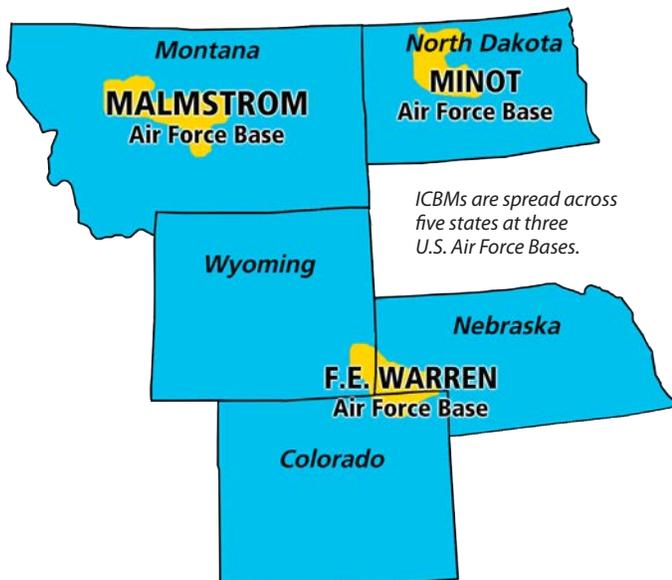
“Smells like alert,” says Tom as he settles into one of two red chairs. “Back in the day, we didn’t have shredders in here, so we had to burn certain classified documents. Some say that’s where the smell comes from. Well, that, and the ancient electrical equipment. And the constant, confined human occupation.”

I’ve heard from others that “the alert smell” will permeate my clothes and hair before my shift is up. Knowing that the scent will never really wash out of my uniform, I’ve already designated the T-shirt and sweatpants I’m wearing as my “alert outfit.” Although I don’t plan on doing any vigorous physical activity while I’m down here, I’ve packed some wet wipes and face wash to freshen up.

A cramped bathroom, smaller than one you might use in an airplane, is built into one corner of the capsule. A “sink” sits atop the tank of a prison-style stainless steel metal toilet and drains directly into the toilet bowl. Somehow, some missileers wash their hair in the tiny sink—but I think I’d rather just endure a bad hair day.

At my fingertips are 10 of America’s Minuteman III missiles.

The capsule floor is covered with well-worn, commercial-grade, earth-toned carpet squares that can be quickly removed to gain access to the emergency batteries and motor generator below. Carpet also covers the ceiling, which helps absorb the electrical and ventilation noise and insulates the usually 68-degree space. I try not to think about all the dead skin cells and food crumbs that this carpet has collected over time.



Missile maintenance crew members work on a Minuteman III ICBM in its silo. (Photo: U.S. Air Force)

A bed frame, with a sagging mattress and a heavy hospital-style curtain hung around it, sits along the short wall opposite the door. That’s where I’ll try to take a nap for a few hours during this alert.

About three feet from the bed is the focal point of the capsule: a cream-colored console, which is the main computer and communications work area. At my fingertips are 10 of America’s Minuteman III missiles, housed in silos below ground, approximately five miles from the MAF. If launched, each 60-foot-long, 80,000-pound weapon can carry up to three nuclear warheads more than 6,000 miles in any direction to a predetermined target in about 30 minutes—the same amount of time it takes to have a pizza delivered.

If directed by the president (who, by the way, is the *only* person who can command a missile launch), a missileer such as myself can directly influence world events by delivering widespread devastation to anywhere on the planet. We do not take this responsibility lightly.

... or tomb?

But our mission isn’t just about launching missiles in retaliation. In the event of a nuclear war, the missileers on alert would expect to be hit with incoming enemy missiles. You see, the enemy must destroy all of America’s 400-plus dispersed missiles or risk being attacked by those missiles in retaliation.

In other words, missileers are “the sponge”—the buffer between the enemy and American civilians. Every warhead that’s aimed at us is one that isn’t aimed at someone else. Take away the ICBM bases, and hundreds of the enemy’s missiles would certainly find new targets.

The hardest part about being the sponge in such an attack would be never seeing my family again. Even if I were to survive a missile attack, the likelihood of actually getting out of the capsule alive is slim to none.

There’s an escape plan, sure, but if it were implemented, the resulting scenario would probably play out like this:

The two missileers climb out of the capsule and, using a built-in ladder, climb on top of it. One of them opens a heavy steel hatch in the ceiling of the surrounding vessel. This hatch, which covers an escape shaft, not only weighs more than a person but also holds up a column of sand that’s two feet in diameter and more than 60 feet high. The hatch will most likely smash into and kill whoever opens it. So, not only is one missileer dead at this point but also buried by the ton of sand that falls down the shaft into the vessel.

The surviving missileer now climbs over this burial mound and up a ladder into the shaft. Using a small shovel, this person removes what remains of the shaft’s decades-old, compacted sand. Should the missileer succeed in making it to the top, he or she must then knock away the railroad-tie-size wooden beams

near the surface. And if that works, well, best of luck to this person actually getting out: Years ago, the Air Force laid down new asphalt parking lots at some of the MAFs—including one right on top of our escape shaft.

It’s a suicide mission in more ways than one.

But we missileers accept that risk.

Nuclear nanny—or not

At any given moment, 90 missileers are on alert at 45 MAFs spread across Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming.

I don’t know whether the average American has heard of a missileer, knows what we do, or appreciates the risks associated with our job. I don’t think most people realize that missileers are constantly on alert, every day of the year.

Being a missileer can be a monotonous, thankless job, and we perform it with pride.

Being a missileer is not sexy or well-publicized. In fact, I became aware of the job only once I joined the Air Force. Intrigued by the position, I pursued a career as a missileer



Two missile combat crew commanders run through the morning hand-over briefing. The LCC bed is behind the red curtain. (Photo by Jay Olivier/PBS News Hour)

and began highly specialized training that involves everything from reading classified launch-protocol manuals to performing hands-on launch simulations.

Many of my fellow missileers, however, didn't choose this career path. They were assigned to become missileers by the Air Force, and they do it because that's how the military works. Being a missileer can be a monotonous, thankless job, and we perform it with pride.

Outside the Air Force, however, some people think that the relevance of the missileer mission has declined since the end of the Cold War and that present-day missileers are simply sitting in underground bunkers babysitting nuclear weapons.

Babysitting. Ouch. I turn to Tom. "Do you ever feel like the red-headed stepchild of the Air Force?" I ask. "Like nobody really understands what we do?"

"Sure," he says. "Especially because it seems like the only press we get is bad press."

I grit my teeth and struggle to think of recent positive media coverage we've received. Nothing comes to mind.

Tom gives me a sideways glance. "What's the big deal?" he says. "If you wanted prestige, you should have become a fighter pilot."

I sit quietly for a moment before I return to my task at hand, which involves completing our daily LCC and communications equipment inspections. Tom cracks open a textbook. He's halfway through a master's program, and downtime during an alert is ideal for studying. Later we'll perform several more hours of necessary tasks, such as targeting, monitoring for missile and LCC anomalies, and reviewing operational procedures.

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Eating is also on the to-do list, and that happens when the MAF cook delivers food to the LCC. I've ordered a grilled chicken salad for lunch, even though I know Tom's burger and fries will make my mouth water. The food, although not exactly gourmet, is welcome—I am hungry. I close my eyes and dream about which restaurant I'm going to treat myself to once I'm back in civilization.

Not that I will be home for that long. A day and a half will be just enough time to catch up with my family, Air Force training, and on sleep—before I'm back on alert again.

I wonder whether I'll miss my daughter's upcoming school play or her gymnastics recital because of this crazy schedule. As if he can read my mind, Tom says, "So I was able to go to my high school reunion last weekend."

"Oh yeah?" I grin. "Did everyone dress like they'd 'made it?'"

Tom rolls his eyes. "I wore my dress uniform," he says. "And when I told my classmates that I have been entrusted to defend them with nuclear weapons—well, no one else's career seemed quite as cool."

I smile and nod in agreement. "No kidding," I say. "I wouldn't trade this job for the world." ✨

~Whitney J. Spivey

A Missileer in New Mexico

This article was written largely from the perspective of Air Force Lt. Col. Cynthia Gunderson, who has served in the Air Force for 19 years and pulled 164 alerts as a missileer.

Lt. Col. Gunderson came to Los Alamos National Laboratory in July 2015 on a one-year Air Force Fellowship, which is considered part of her professional military education. "My goal while here is to learn as much as I can about nuclear weapons, Lab capabilities, and the Department of Energy's nuclear weapons complex," she says. "This will allow me to be a better steward for the nuclear enterprise—both military and civilian sides."



"I absolutely love it here," Lt. Col. Gunderson says of living and working in Los Alamos. "The technology and science here are awesome, and the people are amazing."