

USAF 656th Radar Squadron Will Celebrate 60-25-35 in 2012

by Sandy McBride

With the devastation wrought on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs dropped by United States Air Force planes in 1945 effectively ending World War II, the world was made painfully aware of the danger of nuclear weapons and fearful of the ability of military aircraft of the day to carry those weapons anywhere in the world. Atomic warfare meant massive civilian casualties.

In the post-war era, tensions were high between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, two nations which had been allies in the war. Both were in possession of nuclear bombs and long-range bomber planes. It was an era known as the Cold War, a time period wherein defenses against aerial attack were put in place and our military was on high alert at all times to protect us from the threat of nuclear war.

There were no spy satellites orbiting the earth back then. It was up to the watchful eyes of men and the scanning of the skies with radar to give warning of impending attack.

In 1948, the US Air Force authorized the Air Defense Command to establish thirteen radar stations in the Northeastern United States to do that job, and these were soon put into operation. With the entry of our nation into the Korean conflict in July, 1950, even more stations were approved and constructed. There would be four such facilities in New York State.

One of those additional radar stations was built high on a hill in the northern reaches of the Town of Stillwater in a rural area near Ketchum's Corners. Before the station was completed, the 656th Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron was put into service at the old Schenectady Army Depot. In February of 1952, 60 years ago, with the new station operational, Air Force personnel were moved into the base in Stillwater.

For the next 25 years that station was on round-the-clock watch for the threat of attack, manned by well-trained and dedicated but largely unheralded Air

Force personnel. It was a small base, usually staffed by no more than 150 servicemen. Housing was provided at the base, with barracks for the unmarried troops and some family housing just outside the gate for those who were married and able to bring their families with them.

The 656th was initially a Ground Control Intercept and warning station charged with guiding interceptor aircraft toward any unidentified intruders picked up by the unit's radar scopes. On December 1, 1953, the station was redesignated as Saratoga Springs AFS.

Over the years, the station's equipment was regularly upgraded as technology improved. In 1958, with the original radars gone and more modern and efficient radars in place, the 656th was able to join the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment system (SAGE), feeding data to Stewart Air Force Base, providing 24/7 information to that central facility.

By the late 1970's, with the easing of Cold War tensions and further advances in technology, the radar station in Stillwater was no longer needed. In 1977, after 25 years of service, the 656th Radar Squadron was disbanded and the facility closed up.

They were called the Air Force's "cold warriors" and 35 years have passed since the last of those guardians of the skies left their hilltop base at Ketchum's Corners. On September 9, the veterans who served in this rural outpost at a time when the Cold War dominated world politics will gather at the Holiday Inn in Saratoga Springs to reminisce, reconnect and enjoy each other's company in a variety of events scheduled over five days. Vets and their spouses will play golf, cruise Lake George, enjoy the races at Saratoga Race Track, and partake of an assortment of fine dining opportunities. They will also be able to take a tour of the old radar station site.

The site today is privately owned and lies mostly unused, a sparse reminder of great measures taken by a few to protect many. Ironically, just a few miles east of this site are the battlefields at Freeman's Farm and Bemis Heights where great measures taken by

a few gave rise to this great country of ours exactly 200 years prior to the closing of the 656th Radar Squadron's Saratoga Springs AFS.

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