

AIR FORCE SPECIAL WEAPONS CENTER



LINEAGE

Established as Special Weapons Command, 1 Dec 1949
Redesignated Air Force Special Weapons Center, 1 Apr 1952
Inactivated, 1 Apr 1976

STATIONS

Kirtland AFB, NM

ASSIGNMENTS

Air Research and Development Command, 1 Apr 1952

COMMANDERS

MG C. M. McCorkle, #1961
Col A. G. Swan, #1971

EMBLEM

EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE

OPERATIONS

The Special Weapons Command was created to direct specialized organizations dealing with atomic and other unconventional weapons. Because much of the work involved research and development, the command was eventually absorbed by the Air Research and Development Command.

In Dec 1949, Kirtland AFB became headquarters for the newly created Special Weapons Command. The nucleus of this organization was composed of pioneering Air Force agencies that had located here to determine future employment of special weapons.

The command became the Air Force Special Weapons Center on 1 Apr 1952, and was a unit of

the Air Research and Development Command. During the 1950s, Center people and aircraft participated in atmospheric nuclear tests in Nevada and the far Pacific. The first Air Force scientific capabilities at the base were created during the mid 1950s. Biophysicists deliberately flew through nuclear clouds to determine radiation hazards. And engineers launched sounding rockets so physicists could study the effects of high-altitude nuclear explosions and the nature of the recently discovered Van Allen radiation belts around the Earth. During that period, air defense, weather and atomic test squadrons operated from Kirtland AFB, and people from both bases took part in the 12 nuclear test series conducted in Nevada and the Pacific. Special Weapons Center pilots flew through nuclear clouds to determine radiation hazards, and its engineers launched sounding rockets to study the effects of high altitude nuclear explosions and to investigate the upper atmosphere in preparation for future space missions.

Armed Forces Special Weapons Command also constructed two operational sites. One of these sites was known as Site Able, located in the foothills of the Manzano Mountains, just east of Sandia Base. On February 22, 1952, Site Able was renamed Manzano Base, and operated by the Air Force.

From the early years of Cold War, the need to test and evaluate supersonic aircraft technologies, associated munitions, and eventually space systems, required the Air Force to build specialized ground test facilities. As nuclear weapons and electronics became more a part of air power, two new locations for Test and Evaluation (T&E) were created. The Special Weapons Center (SWC) at Kirtland AFB, NM concentrated on the technologies supporting nuclear weapons development. Hanscom Field, MA concentrated on new levels of sophistication in electronics and avionics development. However, both locations were closed for testing in the late 1970s because the Air Force felt that limited R&D dollars were better spent on technology than on infrastructure.

One aspect of the testing environment involves the features a particular location might offer that could help or hinder testing of weapons such as supersonic aircraft technologies, associated munitions, and space systems. For example, the Special Weapons Center was established at Kirtland AFB, NM because of the concentration of technologies and industries supporting nuclear weapons development in the region.

In 1958 Special Weapons Center scientists began to simulate the effects of nuclear explosions in order to strengthen our missiles, missile sites and aircraft against possible enemy attack. It was in 1958 that a nuclear effects simulator was first constructed in an abandoned dining hall at Kirtland.

In 1958, efforts were underway between the United States and Soviet Union to agree on a moratorium for atmospheric nuclear testing. The anticipated limitations on determining weapons effects inspired efforts by the Special Weapons Center and Sandia Corporation to develop methods of simulating nuclear effects with non-nuclear techniques. In 1962, Kirtland AFB and Sandia personnel participated in Operation DOMINIC, a series of atmospheric and subsurface tests in the Pacific. They were the last such tests conducted before the existing Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed with the Soviet Union in late 1962, prohibiting testing in the atmosphere, in space and under water.

In the wake of the signing of the test ban treaty, in 1963 the Air Force Weapons Laboratory was created from the Research Directorate elements of the Special Weapons Center. The Special Weapons Center gave up much of its research and development work to the newly created Air Force Weapons Laboratory. The Center continued with its test and evaluation mission and as Kirtland's host organization. The Weapons Laboratory built facilities during the 1960s to simulate nuclear effects such as transient radiation, X-rays, and electromagnetic pulse.

The Special Weapons Center assumed management of Air Force Systems Command's test and evaluation facilities at Holloman AFB NM, during the summer of 1970. And, just one year later on 1 Jul 1971, Kirtland merged with Manzano and Sandia Base, its neighbors to the east, creating the sprawling military complex known as Kirtland AFB.

Early in 1974, the Air Force Test and Evaluation Center was organized at Kirtland AFB to direct and oversee operational testing of emerging aircraft and systems.

Because of budget restrictions and the need to save money, the Air Force Special Weapons Center was disestablished on 1 Apr 1976. In 1976 AFSWC was closed and OPR functions came to the AFWL. Special Weapons Center's responsibilities as Kirtland's "landlord" were also transferred to the Air Force Contract Management Division on the same day

COMMAND ACTIVATED 1 DEC 49 AT KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE NM.
COMMANDED BY BRIG GEN JOHN S. MILLS.

MISSION TO MAINTAIN TECHNICAL SUPERVISION OVER FACILITIES, PERSONNEL, AIRCRAFT, EQUIPMENT, AND INSTRUMENTATION REQUIRED FOR DEVELOPMENT TESTING OF ATOMIC WEAPONS AND DELIVERY SYSTEMS. MISSION EXPANDED IN DEC 51 TO INCLUDE SUPPORT OF NUCLEAR TESTS (INCLUDING FURNISHING OF AIRCRAFT AND CREWS) AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR OPERATIONAL SUITABILITY TESTING OF ATOMIC WEAPONS.

COMMAND PARTICIPATED IN RANGER OPERATION (FIRST OF SERIES OF NUCLEAR TESTS WITHIN CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES) AT NEVADA TEST SITE DURING JAN AND FEB 51.



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Sources

AFHRA.

Air Force Magazine Almanacs. Air Force Association. Arlington, VA. Various years.