

Cold War History

North Truro Air Force Station

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

Highlands Center
at Cape Cod National Seashore



Caught up in the excitement of transforming the Highlands Center at Cape Cod National Seashore into a thriving community for the arts, science and education, it's hard to think of a time when the site housed the United States' first line of defense against potential enemy bombers. But look closely, and you'll notice clues that point to a time when the Highlands Center site had a very different mission.



North Truro Air Force Station and the remaining radar dome.

Station Mission: Detect, Identify, Intercept and Destroy

The Highlands Center sits on the site of the former North Truro Air Force Station. From 1951 to 1985, radars positioned at the station provided vital data to our nation's air defense system. The radars were positioned to scan the airspace around the Cape and to detect Soviet bombers moving across the Arctic Circle. Anyone who remembers schoolyard "Duck and Cover" drills also remembers the pervasive fear that the Soviets would send an atomic bomb our way. One nation's reaction to this fear was the establishment of bases like North Truro, whose mission was to "Detect, Identify, Intercept and Destroy" hostile aircraft.

Early Military Uses

The site's military history began during World War II, when the Army used it to train artillery crews. The same features that made the site suitable for artillery training made it ideal for a radar station. Fairly remote, with no tall buildings or natural features to obstruct or impair the range of radar technology, the coastal site was the perfect space for one of the Air Force's first radar squadrons to occupy in 1948.

The Cold War Heats Up

President Truman's announcement in September of 1949 that the Soviet Union had detonated an atomic bomb kicked the North Truro Air Force Station's role into high gear. The station became home to one of the first radar squadrons in the nation's newly developed air defense system. The 762nd Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron was activated in 1950, and in December of that year the first fifty airmen arrived in North Truro.

Two radars were installed on the site in spring, 1951. As the radars gathered information, the data was transmitted to the Air Defense Command Headquarters in Colorado and to the Ground Control Intercept at Otis Air Force base in Falmouth, MA. In the age before satellites and desktop computers, the information was transmitted overland via three dedicated land lines. Operators used so much telephone switching equipment that it took an entire building to house it all!

Texas Towers: Extending Defenses Seaward

The North Truro station's defense system wasn't limited to land and air. In December 1955, the station became the support base for the Georges Shoal Tower Annex, located 110 miles off the coast of Cape Cod. The tower was the first of three towers built off the Atlantic seaboard and equipped with long-range search radars. These towers were nicknamed "Texas Towers" for their similarities to offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. The towers extended east-west radar coverage 300 to 500 miles seaward. This extra coverage gave the Air Force at least thirty more minutes of warning and preparation time in the event of an incoming bomber attack.

During their 30 day rotations onboard the tower, airmen and officers would read "Tower Topics," the Tower's newsletter, enjoy Sunday newspapers dropped from low flying Navy blimps and barter the tower's ice cream for fresh lobster brought by fishing boats. The men were also subjected to constant vibrations and the sounds of radios, grinding gears, fog horns and even ping pong balls echoing through the steel corridors.

The North Truro station staged supplies, spare parts, and replacement crews for the towers. Helicopters ferrying loads to and from the tower took off from and landed on the station's helipad, which remains on the site's southeast corner today. While supporting the tower, civilian and military personnel at North Truro swelled to over 500 people.

North Truro AFS in the Post-Cold War Era

Things have changed dramatically at the Highlands Center site since the days of missile warning systems and fears of a nuclear attack. Reflecting a national shift away from cold war fears, the Air Force deactivated the station in 1985. A portion of the land was transferred to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which now operates the long-range search radar as part of the FAA/Air Force Joint Surveillance System. The FAA uses this radar as the primary tracking radar for international flights flying into Boston's Logan airport and New York's Kennedy airport. The Air Force continues to use the radar to identify and track civilian and military aircraft.

The remainder of the Air Force station property was transferred from the Air Force to the National Park Service in 1994. Through roundtable discussions and focus groups a variety of reuse options were discussed for the site. The concept of the Highlands Center was presented in the Cape Cod National Seashore's 1998 *General Management Plan* and further investigated in 1999. Today the exciting task of transforming the former Air Force station into a center for science, arts and education continues.