



Launch Complex 33



The Tularosa Basin has been a place with a truly specialized combination of discoveries and events. Not only does it host the largest gypsum dunefield in the world, but it has been a witness to great scientific discoveries that somehow tie into “the bigger picture” of national and even world history. Launch Complex 33 is an example of this. In October of 1985, Launch Complex 33 was declared a National Historic Landmark due to its significance as the country’s first major rocket launch facility.

Dating back to 1945, the blockhouse and V-2 assembly building are among the original buildings constructed at White Sands Missile Range. Part of operation ‘Paper-clip’, LC-33 was used to test the newly captured German V-2 rocket. Launch Complex 33 started a chain of events that led to orbiting satellites, manned space flight, and even trips to the moon!

The blockhouse was designed by Dr. Del Sasso from CalTech. It had ten-foot thick, reinforced walls and a 24-foot pyramid-shaped roof to protect the men inside from falling and exploding V-2 rockets. The windows looking out of the blockhouse had a very narrow field of view because the walls were so thick. Two periscopes poking out of the blockhouse made it possible to ensure the area was clear before proceeding with a launch.

Over 100 V-2 missiles were launched from the site that broke speed and altitude records, bringing us ever closer to freeing ourselves from the pull of Earth’s gravity.

The knowledge gained through the tests performed here are responsible for our first generation of rockets. These include the Corporal, Atlas, Redstone, Nike, and Aerobee. The Redstone and Atlas rockets went on to carry our first astronauts to outer space in the Mercury and Gemini programs.

Recognizing the importance of our first major foray into rocketry, the National Park Service designated LC-33 as a National Historical Landmark in 1985. Today the blockhouse is no longer used for testing missiles but the site still remains part of an active test complex. As a result, LC-33 is

closed to the public. However, many of the missiles launched from LC- 33 and more are on display at the Missile Park and Museum located inside White Sands Missile Range.

—Adam Ewert, Student-Intern



Rocket Launch