

War dogs of Palos Verdes part of local legend

By Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto | Posted: Wednesday, March 30, 2016 12:58 pm

Their names were Ace and Fury, and they were taught by the U.S. Army to be very aggressive and obey just one man: their handler. Nearby soldiers knew to scramble to a safe place if one of these dogs got loose.

Ace and Fury were two members of the sentry dog program that trained at and helped protect the Army's Nike air defense site in Palos Verdes during the Cold War.

This site was one of a group of Nike missile bases that formed a defensive "ring of supersonic steel" around the Los Angeles Basin from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s.

The Nike sites near Los Angeles and other key areas of the country housed surface-to-air missiles designed to knock Russian bombers out of the sky. They were manned 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To help protect these bases, the Army's Air Defense Command instituted a sentry dog program in 1958. This helped augment security when the Nike Ajax missiles were upgraded to the more powerful and nuclear capable Nike Hercules system.

The Army purchased about 500 dogs for the program, mainly German Shepherds. This dog's ability to be changed from good-natured canine into vicious animal that would attack without hesitation was a key factor in choosing this breed.

Usually four dogs were assigned to each site, with one constantly on duty. The armed handler and his dog patrolled between the inner and outer fences that surrounded the launching area.

Each dog weighed close to 90 pounds and had to pass obstacle course tests and be able to react quickly. This toughening-up and confidence-building process also encouraged the dogs to strike and bite into padded suits worn by soldiers.

The dogs were taught guard tactics, were able to detect movement several hundred yards away in darkness and fog, and could smell an unseen intruder 200 yards away, according to General John T. Honeycutt who commanded 47th Artillery Brigade headquartered nearby.

The dogs were used mainly at night. If an intruder was detected, the dog was unleashed and attacked on the order "GET HIM." The dog attacked without command if the handler was incapacitated.

The dogs reportedly ate a pound and a half of horse meat and cereal daily. They were groomed each day and underwent occasional veterinary checks.



Canine Corps dog training

Army men Willie Booder and Gerald Bradley training Canine Corps dog in 1966

The devotion between the soldier-dog team worked well, but could be disadvantageous when a handler was transferred or discharged.

While some sentry dogs had to be put down because they wouldn't accept a new handler, those that would accept someone new had to be completely retrained.

By the mid-1960s, when any Los Angeles-area Nike dog handler was transferred or discharged, the dog was immediately sent to what was then called the Nike "Marineland" site in Palos Verdes for retraining.

The dog was isolated and given a 30-day cooling off period upon transfer to Palos Verdes. The only person the dog would see during the isolation period was the new handler who would feed it each day.

Once the handler received a "moderate amount of acceptance" from the dog, the formal eight-week retraining course began. The dogs would relearn all the orders they learned during their initial recruit training.

Dogs that were too old to work would be put down, according to the Nike Historical Society. By the mid-1970s, the Nike missile system was obsolete and the sites were deactivated. The local sentry dogs were euthanized at nearby Fort MacArthur.

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