

The History and Heritage of Vandenberg Air Force Base and the 30th Space Wing

The advent of the missile age in the 1950s ushered in great change to the former Camp Cooke, located on the Central Coast of California, about 150 miles northwest of Los Angeles. About 64,000 acres of the former Army Infantry and Armorer training post were transferred to the Air Force in 1957 for use as a missile launch and training installation. The remote location and proximity to the coast offered the perfect setting for safely launching intermediate range ballistic missiles and intercontinental ballistic missiles (IRBMs/ICBMs) to targets located in the Pacific Ocean. These same geographic features proved ideal for launching satellites into polar orbit without overflight of populated areas during launch liftoff.

Ground breaking for the future missile base, named Cooke Air Force Base (AFB), began on 9 May 1957, five months before Russia successfully launched the satellite *Sputnik* into orbit. This launch was the starting pistol for the “Space Race” between the United States and Russia that continued unabated until the end of the Cold War in 1989.

In response to the *Sputnik* launch, the Air Force accelerated the development of the fledgling missile program. It also transferred management responsibilities for Cooke AFB from Air Research and Development Command (ARDC) to the Strategic Air Command (SAC) on 1 January 1958. SAC assumed responsibility for attaining the initial operational capability (IOC) of the flourishing U.S. missile force, as well as, conducting training for missile launch crews. ARDC retained responsibility for facility construction and the research and development of launch vehicles, establishing a field office was established at Cooke AFB in July 1958. Its space mission is carried on by the 30th Space Wing.

On 4 October 1958, Cooke AFB was redesignated Vandenberg AFB in honor of the late General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the Air Force’s second Chief of Staff. Just two months later, launches began to roar into the skies over the base. The first launch was a Thor IRBM on 16 December 1958. The second, a Thor/Agena booster that lifted the world’s first polar orbiting satellite, *Discoverer I*, into orbit on 28 February 1959 and the Atlas began launching from the West Coast on 9 September 1959. On 15 May 1964, Headquarters, Air Force Western Test Range (AFWTR) activated at Vandenberg and two months later, the Navy’s 20,000 acre Point Arguello Launch Facility, located just south of Vandenberg, was transferred to the Air Force, adding to Vandenberg’s acreage. A network of instrumentation sites were quickly constructed along the California coast and downrange on islands in the Pacific to support the ballistic, space, and aeronautical operations conducted on the AFWTR.

By the end of 2015, 1,942 orbital and ballistic missiles, representing more than 60 different configurations, had lifted off from Vandenberg AFB. Adding to familiar names of Nike, Scout, Peacekeeper, Minotaur, Titan, and Minuteman were Falcon 9 and the landing of the X-37B.

With the mission at Vandenberg playing an ever increasing role in national defense, additional land was required to safely operate new variants of launch vehicles. In July 1964, the nearly

20,000 acres of the southern portion of Camp Cooke was added to the base. Two years later, an additional 15,000 acres of land was acquired, increasing the total acreage of the base to 98,400 acres.

Mission growth led to an organizational expansion as well. In 1961, ARDC was redesignated Air Force Systems Command (AFSC). Eighteen years and several reorganizations later, in October 1979, the launch mission of the ARDC field office at Vandenberg had evolved into the Western Space and Missile Center (WSMC).

Beginning in 1990 and continuing throughout the next three years, a series of major realignments, redesignations, and organizational activations occurred at Vandenberg. On 1 October 1990, WSMC and virtually all of its elements moved from AFSC to Air Force Space Command (AFSPC). On 15 January 1991, just three months later, the management and operation of Vandenberg transferred from SAC to AFSPC. As a result of this shift, most of the former SAC organizations at Vandenberg were realigned under WSMC.

On 19 November 1991, WSMC was redesignated the 30th Space Wing. In actuality, the Operations Group assumed the lineage and honors of the 30th Bombardment Group (BG) (Heavy) and shared the number designation with the wing. The 30th BG originally activated in January 1941 and flew combat missions in the Pacific during World War II before being inactivated in June 1946. At the same time, the Western Test Range was renamed Western Range to emphasize the operational role of the Range. On 1 July 1993, the 30th Space Wing was reassigned from HQ, AFSPC to the newly activated HQ, 14th Air Force co-located at Vandenberg.

Today, Vandenberg Air Force Base is operated by the 30th Space Wing with a mission to, “provide indispensable launch, landing, and range capabilities to the nation,” and remains the only military installation in the United States from which unmanned government and commercial satellites are launched into polar orbit. It also remains the only land-based site in the United States from which intercontinental ballistic missiles are test fired and flown to target areas in the Pacific Ocean. Finally, Vandenberg remains the only site capable of receiving and processing the Boeing X-37 Orbital Test Vehicle.