

HISTORY OF MALMSTROM AIR FORCE BASE

Malmstrom Air Force Base traces its beginnings back to 1939 when World War II broke out in Europe. Concern about the war caused the local Chamber of Commerce to contact two Montana senators, Burton K. Wheeler and James E. Murray and request they consider development of a military installation in Great Falls. Great Falls, along with ten other northern tier sparsely populated sites, was considered for a heavy bomber training base. Construction began on Great Falls Army Air Base on June 8, 1942. Its mission was to establish an air route between Great Falls and Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska, as part of the United States Lend-Lease Program that supplied the Soviet Union with aircraft and supplies needed to fight the German Army.

Great Falls Army Air Base was assigned to 2nd Air Force and the first B-17 Flying Fortress landed on November 30, 1942. Four Bombardment Groups trained at Great Falls. These bombardment groups went on to participate in decisive raids over Germany opening the door for Allied daylight precision bombing.

In October 1943, more buildings were constructed at the Army Air Base, including a consolidated mess, a Post Exchange, a theater, and a 400-bed hospital. With the Lend-Lease Program continuing, B-25 Mitchell Bombers either arrived by rail and were assembled on base, or were flown in by both military and Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs). These aircraft were later flown by U.S. pilots by way of the Alaskan-Siberian Route (ALSIB) through Canada, to Fairbanks, Alaska, and transferred to Russian pilots who in turn flew them into Siberia. A total of 1,717,712 pounds of cargo containing aircraft parts, tools miscellaneous equipment, explosives and medical supplies were shipped through Great Falls Army Air Base to Russia. Aircraft shipments to the Soviet Union stopped in September 1945, when World War II ended, with approximately 8,000 aircraft having been processed in a 21-month period.

Following WW II, Great Falls Army Air Base assumed a support mission for military personnel assigned to Alaskan military installations. In September of 1947, the United States Air Force became a separate service and the base's name changed to Great Falls Air Force Base. The "Cold War" heated up when the Soviet Union closed all land travel between West Germany and West Berlin. The United States and Britain vowed not to abandon West Berliners to the Berlin Blockade. On June 25, 1948 "Operation Vittles," the strategic airlift of supplies to Berlin's 2,000,000 inhabitants, was initiated. Great Falls AFB played a critical role in assuring the success of this vital operation. Using radio beacons, Great Falls AFB was transformed to resemble Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, Germany. Hundreds of pilots and Flight Engineers flew simulated airlift missions to train for the Berlin Airlift.

On Aug. 21, 1954, the 407th SFW Vice Commander, Col. Einar Axel Malmstrom, died when his T-33 crashed approximately one mile west of the airport at Gore Field. Although his tenure was short, he was well liked by the local community. It was the local civilian community that led the efforts to rename Great Falls AFB for Col. Malmstrom. On June 15th, 1956, the base was officially dedicated as Malmstrom AFB.

The 341st Strategic Missile Wing was activated at Malmstrom AFB on July 15, 1961. Construction of the wing's first launch facility began in March 1961 and was completed in December. The first Minuteman I ICBM arrived on base by rail July 23, 1962. Later that same year, the missiles assigned to the nation's first Minuteman ICBM wing would play a major role in the Cuban Missile Crisis. On October 26, at 11:16 am, the 10th SMS's launch facility Alpha-06 went on "strategic alert" after it was discovered the Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. After the completion of the missile squadrons in 1967, Malmstrom's missile field was the largest in the United States, covering 23,500 square miles.

In 1991, The 301st ARW deployed to Moon Island in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm. During this time period the 301st flew 443 Combat Sorties refueling 936 coalition aircraft, and transferring 33.5 Million pounds of fuel. The 341st Strategic Missile Wing deployed security, civil engineering, services and support personnel in support of the action. Also in 1991, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, was officially formalized. President Bush took all Minuteman II missiles, bombers and tankers off alert status on September 27. As Minuteman II missiles were removed, a new program called Rivet Add was launched, modifying the 150 Minuteman II launch facilities to accommodate the newer Minuteman III.

In 1995, the Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting, or REACT, signaled the first complete overhaul of the Minuteman III's command and control systems. In addition to REACT, the wing completed the transfer of 120 Minuteman III ICBMs from Grand Forks AFB's, 321st Missile Group to Malmstrom. This brought the wing strength to 200 Minuteman IIIs on alert status--the first time since 1991 it had a full complement of a single weapon system.

In 1997, the 819th RED HORSE Squadron arrived. It was the first AF squadron to consist of active duty, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reservists. The squadron provided a combat engineering force to military and humanitarian operations worldwide on short notice. The latest addition to Malmstrom's mission, the Network Operations Center, performed passive space surveillance and provided users with reliable tracking of near earth and deep space satellites.

The wing's Minuteman Missiles have also undergone improvements and upgrades. An extensive life extension program is under way to keep the missiles safe, secure, and reliable well into the 21st Century. These major programs include: replacement of the aging guidance system, remanufacture of the solid propellant rocket motors, replacement of standby power systems, repair of launch facilities, and installation of updated, survivable communications equipment. These efforts will extend the life of the Air Force's ICBM force to 2020 and beyond -guaranteeing Malmstrom AFB's future into the 21st century.

Adapted from the Official Website of Malmstrom Air Force Base: Malmstrom History (<http://www.malmstrom.af.mil/library/history/malmstromhistory.asp>)