



Photos by 1st Lt. Darrick Lee

# Vandenberg fog adds stealth to PK launch

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Public Affairs

Warren, the Wyoming Air National Guard, and members of the military affairs committee were given a once-in a lifetime opportunity to view the launching of a Peacekeeper Missile at Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif., Wednesday.

With air travel provided by a C-130 from the guard's 153rd Airlift Wing, more than 56 Airmen, Guardsmen and honorary squadron commanders from the Cheyenne area took the two-day trip. The tour included a trip to a Titan Space Launch Center, a visit to a launch facility, and concluded with what was rumored to be the last launch of a Peacekeeper missile in history.

The missile was extracted from Wyoming launch facility P-09 of the 400th Missile Squadron in February, and underwent launch preparations at Vandenberg. Two weeks prior to launch, the Black Pirates of the 400 MS were on alert around the clock at Vandenberg, monitoring the status of the missile. Capt. Jason Briggs, 1st Lts. Tim Morgan, Lisa Lopez, Andrew Swickle and James Madis earned the honor of performing the key-turns that would send the missile into space.

"These key-turners have distinguished themselves among their peers," said Captain Briggs, the mission's Task Force deputy. "This is a great chance for them to actually do what they're trained to do."

"The excitement is building," said Lieutenant Madis. "As we get closer to T-0 (a term used for the time of launch), my heart starts going!"

It wasn't just the operators who were excited. Warren's visiting group included representatives from across the 90th Space Wing. Airmen from mission support, security forces, and the medical group looked forward to seeing the fruits of their labor come to light.

Col. Jodie Bliss, 90th Maintenance Group commander, was proud to represent the wing during the trip.

"It's important to expose people of various AFSC's to our mission, not just the operators and maintainers," Colonel Bliss said. "There are many Airmen who support our ICBMs, but don't get the chance to see up-close just how their actions further the mission. Allowing people such as our chefs and security forces to witness a launch is a great way to get all disciplines involved."

The evening was foggy, so visibility was extremely limited. A public address system echoed

the preparatory commands of the crew underground as the spectators sat in bleachers looking at nothing but darkness.

"T-2 ... missile lift-off," the PA system echoed into the darkness.

At 1:01 a.m. Wednesday, a loud rumble shook the ground, and the fog seemed to get brighter for a few seconds. Unfortunately, it was not enough to allow the spectators a clear view of the launch. The fog prevented anyone from getting a glimpse of the ICBM, leaving folks wondering exactly where it was in the sky.

Many were heartbroken, fearing that the rumor might be true; this might be their last chance to see the mighty weapon system. Col. William Hughes, deputy group commander of the 595th Space Group, eased their fears.

"This will not be the last Peacekeeper launch," he reassured the crowd. "We're working toward having the next one next summer."

Regardless of the limited launch experience, many still enjoyed the excursion. Mary Schwem, honorary 321st Missile Squadron commander, says the missile launch isn't the only reason for the trip.

"We had a great flight on a



(Above) A C-130 waits for the fog to lift before take-off.

(Left) Servicemembers listen to a safety brief before heading to Vandenberg.

(Bottom) With only four hours of sleep during a two-day trip, Tech. Sgt. Jeff Sams and Airman 1st Class Emily Allen catch 40 winks on the ride home.



C-130, saw a space launch center, and most importantly, I got to learn more about Warren and the Guard, and what they do for our country," she said.

Despite the emotional letdown of not seeing the ICBM take flight, the trip served many purposes. It gave distin-

guished civilian members and Airmen alike the opportunity to see their nation's defense in action. Most importantly is the clear demonstration our weapon system was proven yet again to be safe, reliable and able to perform when called upon.