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Posted on: Thursday, May 3, 2007

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Old post, revisited

 [Military bunker photo gallery](#)
 Video: [Military bunkers turned into self-storage](#)

By [William Cole](#)
 Advertiser Military Writer

WAIKELE — The guard towers are rusted now, and the big spotlights that swept the gulch below haven't worked for years.

But 40 years later, the memories are still sharp, the details still fresh.

Then again, duty in the 1960s at the once top secret Naval Ammunition Depot Waikele Branch, with its nuclear weapons storage and shoot-to-kill security, was hardly forgettable, veterans who served there said yesterday.

"This was flat-out nuclear warheads being assembled here, like you'd assemble regular artillery," said Mike Wise, who was 17 when he served on a Marine security detail at the Waikele branch in 1967.

In the late 1960s, both the Vietnam and Cold Wars were raging, and conventional and nuclear weapons storage and transfer was in full swing on the 520-acre base at the juncture of three deep gulches.

A total of 130 ammunition storage tunnels were bored 250 feet deep into cliff faces on both sides of Waikele and Kipapa streams.

Many today are used commercially for storage. Waikele Self Storage, which has 22 of the tunnels and about 400



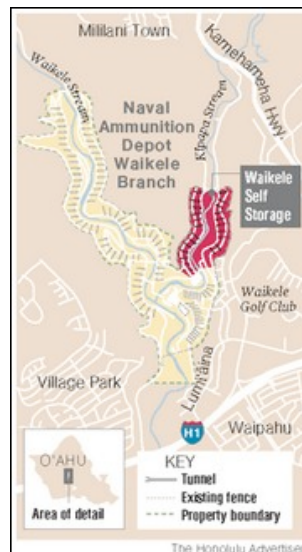
Former Marines Marting Spani, front, and Lawrence Helmer climbed the 50-foot tall Tower 6 yesterday, which stands as a reminder of the defunct Waikele Naval Ammunition Depot.

Photos by BRUCE ASATO | The Honolulu Advertiser

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customers, was contacted by six Marines and a sailor who served there. Yesterday, the company gave the men a tour and lunch.

It was the first time most had been allowed back inside the facility in four decades. The visit, which included a wine tasting at a tunnel rented by Diamond Head Cellars, was in sharp contrast to the deadly seriousness of years ago.

"Once you left this place, you left it. You weren't coming back for old home week," said Larry Ceres, 63, who came in from La Marque, Texas.

Wise, now 58 and living in Fontana, Calif., said Soviet trawlers off the coast tried to spy on the facility. According to the Navy, the ammo storage branch was used for weapons storage from 1940 until 1993.

"You didn't tell anybody you were here," said Wise, who was at Waikele from 1967 to 1969. "I would say 'I'm in the Marine Corps and I'm stationed above Waipahu,' and that was the end of it."

TIGHT SECURITY

Double rows of 8-foot-high fencing topped by barbed wire still ring the old base. Martin Spani, 64, who was a Marine sergeant of the guard from 1963 to 1966, remembers his orders on dealing with intruders.

"There was no 'Halt,'" he said. "It was shoot to kill if somebody was entering."

He also remembers going out on "nuclear convoys" to West Loch in Pearl Harbor and the former Barbers Point Naval Air Station.

A pickup truck with a flashing red light and siren would be in the lead and Marines guarded intersections.

Spani, who lives in Lynnwood, Wash., said a 2 1/2-ton truck positioned ahead of one or more flatbeds with nuclear weapons had orders to run any cars off the road that didn't get out of the way.

He remembers 8- to 10-foot nuclear bombs, and the veterans also recalled a maintenance building with overhead tracked hoists where weaponry was assembled. A guard tower still stands next to the building.

Only some of the Marines, who provided security, were allowed down in the valley, or "down in the hole," as it was



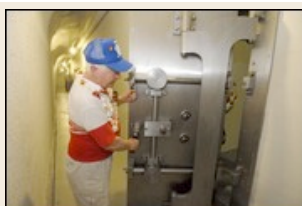
Former Marines Les Cofer and Mike Wise reminisce about their time spent guarding the depot in Waikele in the mid-1960s. Its bunkers, including the one behind them, once stored naval ordnance.



Former Marine guards, from left, Larry Ceres, Fred Grimm, Martin Spani and Lawrence Helmer, along with former sailor, Don Boyer.



Former sailor, Don Boyer, wearing cap and long pants, helps former Marines Larry Ceres, Lawrence Helmer and Martin Spani raise the flag at Waikele Self Storage, once home to the Waikele Naval Ammunition Depot. That's Mike Wise, Fred Grimm and Les Cofer at left.



Former Marine Martin Spani examines a bank-vaultlike door to one of several rooms in a bunker, now part of Waikele Self Storage.



The renovated bunkers at the former Waikele depot now hold people's personal belongings instead of naval ordnance.

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called. Barracks, housing for dependents and a football field were atop the bluff near the current entrance off Pakela Street.

Yesterday's tour let them see more of the facility than they ever had before, but still left a lot of questions. Among them was speculation as to what was stored behind a series of Mosler Safe bank-vaultlike doors. Rows of 3-foot-deep metal bins lined the wall inside. Some thought the rooms were for nuclear detonators, while Spani speculated they were used to store cryptological information.

CHOKED IN OVERGROWTH

According to Waikele Self Storage, the headquarters of what was U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot, O'ahu, was at Lualualei on the Wai'anae Coast. The ammunition depot and Navy communications center occupies 8,195 acres and has 255 above-ground magazines.

In 1929, the Navy purchased 8,184 acres for Lualualei from the McCandless Estate, which had been using the area as a cattle ranch. The West Loch branch was created later, and the land occupied by the Waikele branch was purchased from the Army.

Some reports say the Waikele ammo storage facility got its start in the early 1940s, but some of the veterans who visited yesterday believe it might have been in the late 1930s.

The Waikele branch, which still has a three-story barracks and mess hall, sat vacant for more than a decade. Weeds overtook bridges and roads, and goats and pigs roamed about. A separate Army section of tunnels abutting Kamehameha Highway remains choked in overgrowth.

As part of a Navy effort to re-develop Ford Island, the service used special legislation passed in 1999 allowing it to sell or lease outlying properties on O'ahu in exchange for \$84 million in infrastructure improvements by Fluor Hawai'i LLC.

One of the parcels Fluor ended up with was the Waikele naval magazine. The grounds and tunnels are now used for storage. Eight tunnels are used by fireworks vendors. The Tony Auto Group has cars bumper to bumper on 1 1/2 acres. Security guards watch over who comes and goes.

Peter Cannon, of Waikele Self Storage, has renovated 15 of the tunnels, with more on the way. The Marine veterans saw the company's Web site and contacted him about the mini reunion. Cannon was happy to oblige and yesterday gave the group and their spouses a bus tour of the Waikele complex and provided lunch.

"For us, it's a great wealth of knowledge and to be able to give back," Cannon said.

REMEMBERING FALLEN

The tour took the Marines past rickety and rusty Tower 6 on a bluff, which several of them promptly climbed. A 21-year-old Marine had positioned his M-14 rifle under his chin and killed himself in the tower in 1966 over a relationship that went bad.

Spani, 64, who found the Marine, was somewhat surprised he could still make it pretty quickly up the ladder.

Later, the group remembered the dead Marine, two who were killed in vehicle accidents at Waikele, and two more who died in Vietnam during a flag-raising and playing of taps.

Fred Grimm, 58, from Jefferson, Ohio, said the chance to get together with fellow veterans at Waikele was "tremendous."

"What a valuable thing," he said.

Added Wise: "Some of it's a little bit of closure for some of us."

Reach William Cole at wcole@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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