

NAVAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS

JUNE 1949 - DECEMBER 1998

~ AN IMPORTANT MISSION WELL DONE ~

Fifty-four years ago in June 1949, a small U. S. Naval Air Detachment and some time later a Naval Administrative Unit were established at Kirtland Air Force Base (AFB) in the scenic high desert country of Albuquerque, New Mexico. This was the beginning of the *Río Grande Navy*. Serving as the focal point of Navy Nuclear Weapons Development in the aftermath of World War II, this Detachment, with requirements fueled by the intensifying nuclear fervor of the Cold War, quickly grew and with the transfer of 11 aircraft from the Naval Administrative Unit became the Naval Air Special Weapons Facility (NASWF) in August 1952.

The Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) requested that the Bureau of Ordnance (BUORD) establish an Acceptance Program for Nuclear Weapons and Associated Materials and in July 1955, the task was assigned to the Naval Ordnance Test Station (NOTS), China Lake (later to become Naval Weapons Center China Lake).

The NOTS set up a separate group, the Special Weapons Evaluation Branch that later evolved into the Nuclear Weapons Evaluation Division, and at Albuquerque during 1957, Civilian Engineers conducted Acceptance Tests and Vulnerability Studies. In 1958, the NOTS Branch/Division was re-designated as the Naval Nuclear Ordnance Evaluation Unit (NNOEU) and placed under the command of NASWF.

In March 1961 NASWF and NNOEU were combined and the Naval Weapons Evaluation Facility (NWEF) was born.

Over the years, NWEF flew and tested virtually every type of Nuclear-Capable Fighter and Attack aircraft in the Navy inventory and has been directly involved in the Nuclear Compatibility and Safety Certification of over 76 versions of 32 different aircraft types. When NWEF ceased Flight Test Operations in September 1992, the last F/A-18 and A-7E aircraft were finally transferred to other organizations. The Navy Hot-Air Ballooning Team, a popular and successful recruiting support program conceived and established by NWEF in 1975, was also transferred to the Naval Recruiting Command, which continued to operate this program at Kirtland AFB for a short time and then the program was terminated.

One program that NWEF was not originally chartered to perform was Aviation Conventional Weapons Safety. However, we would be remiss if we did not state that the CNO came to the right place for help in the Navy and Marine Corps Aviation Conventional Weapons/Ordnance area after some Carrier Catastrophic Incidents in the 1960's:

USS Oriskany (CVA 34) on 26 October 1966 was operating off Vietnam at the time of the fire. Two Sailors were storing flares in a space at the starboard forward corner of

the hangar deck. One of the flares lit accidentally, and the Sailor threw it into the locker and closed the hatch. The locker contained 650 other flares, which quickly lit. The resulting fire caused extensive damage to the ship and killed 44 Sailors. The entire forward section of the ship from the hangar deck up was gutted;

USS Forrestal (CVA 59) on 29 July 1967 was operating off Vietnam at the time of the fire. A Zuni rocket was accidentally launched on deck (due to an electrical problem), hitting a parked A-4, and igniting its drop fuel tank. The fire then spread to other aircraft, and bombs began to explode on deck. The fire burned for 13 hours, killing 134 Sailors and caused the loss of 21 aircraft, some of which were pushed overboard before the fire reached them. Seven holes were blown in the flight deck. Repairs took seven months, requiring complete removal and reconstruction of the aft section of the ship down to the hangar deck. This was the worst carrier fire in postwar years;

USS Enterprise (CVAN 65) on 14 January 1969 was operating off Hawaii at the time. The sequence of events was similar to the Forrestal fire, starting with a rocket overheating due to exhaust from an engine starter, was less extensive than that caused by deck vehicle and "cooking off". The rocket hit another aircraft, which ignited and touched off a flight deck disaster. The fire was put out within four hours. Damage, although severe, was less extensive than that caused by the Forrestal fire. The nuclear "frigate" USS Bainbridge was one of Enterprise's escorts, and according to one of her Sailors she vastly surpassed her rated speed of "30+" knots while racing to the carrier's aid. The next day the frigate escorted the carrier into Pearl Harbor, and the atmosphere was said to be like when the previous USS Enterprise (CV 6) returned to Pearl Harbor the day after the Japanese attack.

NWEF developed procedures to safely stow, handle, transport, assemble, disassemble, preload, load, unload, arm, dearm, rearm, and deliver Aviation Ordnance-Bombs, Destructors, Torpedoes, Mines, Pyrotechnics, and Missiles-and numerous other conventional stores from ADSIDs (McNamara's Electronic Ears) to Sonobuoys and Jet Engine Starters. NWEF did a Superb Job. The CNO called on the BEST in 1967 and NWEF PERFORMED until 1993. There have been no Carrier Catastrophic Incidents since the USS Enterprise (CVAN 65) fire on 14 January 1969. The JOB continues in China Lake Today.

NWEF also provided important Weapons Evaluation and Safety Support to other program offices and became the mainstay of the Navy's Surface Ship, Submarine and Artillery Launched Nuclear Weapons Programs. Mission tasks involved every facet of Nuclear Weapons Research, Development, Test and Evaluation and covered the entire Stockpile-to-Target Sequence including Logistic Movement, storage, Handling, Loading, Unloading and Delivery.

NWEF faithfully and successfully completed these crucial tasks and significantly contributed to the Navy's FOUR DECADES OF ACCIDENT FREE-NUCLEAR WEAPONS OPERATIONS in spite of the high volume production and fielding and deployment of Nuclear Delivery Systems during times of fluctuating world tensions. There can be no doubt that the People of NWEF made a Vital Contribution to the Defense of the United States and the Free World.

As an integral supporting element of our Nuclear Capability, NWEF has followed the course determined by the Navy's role in Strategic Deterrence. Under several names and organizational structures, NWEF continually evolved in response to our National Policy and the nature of the threat. The changed Global Political climate has now reduced the need for this type of work and NWEF is once again evolving. As a result of restructuring, NWEF was Disestablished on 4 June 1993 and the Albuquerque Detachment of the Naval Air Warfare Center, Weapons Division, was immediately established (Stood-Up). NWEF has returned to a similar size and function as the first Detachment.

Although much reduced, some limited level of Nuclear Deterrence will be needed by the United States in the coming years and so there is still a small but vital job to be done. NWEF will live as the Naval Air Warfare Center Detachment Albuquerque (NAWC DET ABQ) to continue to support critical Nuclear Safety Requirements for Navy Systems. NAWC DET ABQ met the challenge and continued this important work to support our Nation's Defense and helped to maintain continued World Peace. NAWC DET ABQ provided the critical Nuclear Safety Requirements for Navy Systems until 1998. NAWC DET ABQ was disestablished on 18 December 1998. A small cadre finally closed the *Río Grande Navy* doors for the last time in March/April 1999.