
Brief Story of the Radar Sites of Iceland

By Jerry Tonnell

As WW II began, the nation of Iceland became strategically important to the war effort. Located at the center of the shipping lanes between Europe and America, control of the island became a critical factor for the nations fighting against Nazi Germany. *"It has been said,"* wrote Winston Churchill, *"whoever possesses Iceland holds a pistol firmly pointed at England, America, and Canada."* From 1941 to 1945, several radar stations were built on the island and were used to detect, intercept, and destroy German aircraft. When the war ended, all of the sites were closed.

A new threat emerged when the Cold War broke out in the late 1940s. The bomber route between the Soviet Union and the United States passed directly over Iceland. With the cooperation of Iceland, the US built four radar sites – one on each corner of the island. The first of these sites began operation in 1952. By 1958, all four radar squadrons were operational and began providing round-the-clock surveillance which extended into the 21st century as the threat widened to include land-based and sea-launched ballistic missiles. Through the years, thousands of American troops were assigned to these remote locations– each for a minimum of a 12-month tour of duty. The vast majority were separated from their families. Because of the unwelcome climate and sparse living conditions, life at the radar sites was considered a hardship tour. In addition, a few lost their lives – almost all because of the extreme weather conditions that made life, at times, a matter of survival. During these years, the radar sites detected and helped intercept well over 3,000 Soviet strategic bombers – a world-wide record among radar stations. The squadrons completed their duties in such an exceptional manner that, through the years, they were collectively presented a total of 22 USAF Outstanding Unit Awards. A summary of their life & accomplishments was recorded in the *Radar Sites of Iceland 50th Anniversary Reunion History*.

The veterans of the Radar Sites of Iceland are honored to be present at this unveiling and dedication ceremony. The Plaque honors the memory of the service rendered by the thousands of men and women who served on the far edges of the defensive front which helped keep the United States at peace and free from the eminent threat of war.

Note: Special thanks go to Craig Hackett and his Radar Plaque Committee for their efforts to make this ceremony possible.