

The Cold War in Madison: Nuclear missiles assembled and stored at Truax Field

By Maria C. Powell

In the heart of the [Cold War](#), during the 1960s and 70s, if not longer, the U.S. military assembled and stored nuclear missiles at Truax Field—yes, right here in anti-war Madison, which was declared a “nuclear-free zone” by the [Madison City Council in 1983](#).

Now, in 2021, people play golf next to abandoned nuclear missile bunkers that are still lurking—half-underground—in the northwest corner of Bridges Golf Course. The Bridges Golf Course was built in 2000 on land leased from Dane County which has a complicated history of overlapping jurisdictions. Here, leftover Cold War detritus—concrete bunkers and dilapidated remnants of old military buildings— mixes with hazardous materials and refuse deposits of various origins dumped there over many decades by the city, UW, military, Oscar Mayer, and others in a confusing mishmash of informal cooperative agreements and formal leases.¹

Here’s what golfers see from the northwest side of the Bridges course (photos taken September 27, 2021):

¹ In 1973, the Truax landfill, previously owned by the City of Madison, was transferred to the county. Though not on the Air National Guard military base known as Truax Field, the former landfill area is still part of a broader area also called Truax Field. This area is currently owned by Dane County and managed by the Dane County Regional Airport. Bridges Golf Course leases the land from the county.



The bunkers were built in the early 1960s in a 25-acre area called “Camp Woodchuck” carved into the middle of the landfill, owned by the City of Madison at that point. The city leased the Camp Woodchuck land to the U.S. government (Air Force). City documents say “munitions,” “rockets” and/or “missiles” were stored in the bunkers, and “missile assembly” occurred in buildings adjacent to them.

A [“blast area” easement](#) ranging from 420 to 960 feet surrounded the bunkers, presumably to protect people if rockets exploded by accident during handling, or the bunkers were struck by enemy bombardment.

In June [1967](#), when the city was desperately looking for more places to put garbage, because its existing landfills were nearly full, it asked the military if it could use the blast area. The military told the city that *“Congregations of people (such as an office building, etc.) are not permitted in blast areas. Golf courses, landfill operations and parking lots, are all examples of permitted “open” uses that avoid congregations of people and that would be permitted in the blast area...”*

So the city was allowed to pile up berms of wastes within the blast area.² The refuse berms conveniently served—and still serve—to hide the bunkers from local roads, though golfers at Bridges can see them clearly.

In [October 1994](#), when the city was considering buying Camp Woodchuck for development, it mapped and assessed the bunkers. *“The main bunkers constitute a very expensive, special purpose structure” made of “reinforced concrete,”* it stated. The 36 bunkers, each 184 square feet and Quonset-shaped inside, *“were designed to protect missiles and munitions against enemy bombardment.”* They are covered with dirt and vegetation, so they cannot be seen on satellite images, and are strong enough that heavy equipment can drive on top of them.

The city document says a “major portion” of Camp Woodchuck was below the 100-year flood line, and bunkers were “lighted and dehumidified” when in use. In 1994, they were reportedly “unused, except to store some large items like large, off-road vehicle tires.”

Nuclear weapons at Truax Field were “common knowledge” among local and state government officials

² Paradoxically, the 1967 memo said the agreement between the City of Madison and the Air Force (U.S. government) placed very stringent requirements on the city’s landfill operation, including “prohibition of garbage disposal.” It proposed drawing up a new agreement; apparently this happened and the garbage prohibition was lifted, because the garbage in the landfill was piled up quite closely around the bunkers in subsequent years, well within the “blast zone,” as you can see from the photos.

Nuclear missiles were very likely stored in these bunkers during the 1960s and 1970s, and perhaps longer. The Truax military base was part of the country's "[anti-ballistic missile system](#)" and the bunkers were built during a period of ramping up of nuclear weapons systems.

As part of his "[flexible response](#)" Cold War strategy, President Kennedy got Congressional approval for significantly increased military funding and new weapons systems. From 1961 to 1964, the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. increased 50 percent and the number of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) rose from 63 to 424.

Madison media outlets were mum about the presence of nuclear missiles at Truax Field during the 1960s, but in the mid-1970s, public concerns about "radioactive materials" being flown in and out of Madison prompted news stories, as described in a [2018 story](#) commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday and reflecting on his views of militarism.

In early 1975, the Madison Fire Department reported to city officials that it was being instructed on "special precautions" in case large Chinook (CH-47) helicopters flying in and out of Truax went down—because they were carrying "radioactive materials." [The Capital Times](#) reported that the Army confirmed that the helicopters were transporting missile components for an anti-ballistic missile defense site based in North Dakota, but didn't explicitly confirm that they were nuclear explosives.

The next day, however, Airport Superintendent Robert Skuldt told the [Capital Times](#) that "*nuclear explosives are nothing new here. Nuclear weapons were stored at Truax Field during the early 1960s and their presence was common knowledge among city, county and state government officials.*" Nuclear weapons were carried by F-89 fighters stationed at Truax and flying air defense missions ranging up into Canada, he reported. Further, Skuldt said he had attended "countless" briefings for local and state government officials focused on the nuclear weapons at Truax.

If the rockets exploded, "it would not be a nuclear explosion," the Army assured

The controversies about whether or not the Chinook helicopters contained nuclear materials, explosive or not, continued for months.

In a March 6, 1975 [Wisconsin State Journal article](#), an Army spokesman admitted that certain components” carried on the flights were “of an explosive nature,” but if an explosion happened “it would not be nuclear explosion.” He added that “it is national policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence, at any location of nuclear weapons. This would also include the movement of nuclear weapons.”

Obviously these nuclear weapons were stored somewhere at Truax Field, and the most likely place would be in the bunkers in Camp Woodchuck “designed to protect missiles and munitions against enemy bombardment.”

Then Mayor Paul Soglin noted that “these flights should not be made into Truax because of the hazards posed to persons living in the flight paths and in close proximity to the airport.” None of the newspaper articles, however, mentioned the munitions bunkers, which obviously also posed risks to those living nearby if there were accidental explosions or they were attacked.

On [March 7, 1975](#), U.S. Representative Lee Aspin (D-Racine) called the nation’s anti-ballistic missile system “a wasteful and frankly most useless project” and said the use of Truax as a transfer point for shipments to anti-ballistic missile sites creates “a potentially serious safety hazard for the Madison community.” [A few days later](#), Soglin’s administrative aide James Rowen announced a plan to begin a class action lawsuit to halt the helicopter flights. The lawsuit would not involve the Mayor’s office; it would be privately funded. The Wisconsin Environmental Decade also planned to file a court intervention to stop the flights.

The planned lawsuits were based in part on the Army’s violation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Army did not complete an environmental impact statement, which is required before a federally licensed activity that can affect the environment is initiated. Federal code also required that military agencies “consult with area residents and local officials before beginning such an operation”—which they clearly had not done.

The lawsuit threats were effective. In May 1975 the Army said the helicopter flights would end and [the lawsuits were dropped.](#)”

Many unanswered questions

This brief snippet of history raises many questions.

The Army said the helicopter flights transporting nuclear materials would end in 1975. Did they? Further, even if they did stop at that time, were nuclear missiles or materials still stored at Truax Field and transported in and out of Madison via trucks and/or trains? Given that the Army told the city *“it is national policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence, at any location of nuclear weapons,”* how would anyone know?

The Cold War officially ended in 1991. In 1994, the Army told the city it planned to abandon the Camp Woodchuck bunkers some time in 1996, but it’s not clear whether or not they did so then.

How long were nuclear missiles assembled and stored in the landfill bunkers? What other kinds of munitions were stored in them, and for what time period? What is in the old bunkers now, and what are the plans for them?

Last but not least, the F-35 fighter jets coming to Truax Field soon are designed to carry nuclear missiles. The Air National Guard is currently building new munitions buildings at the base in preparation for the arrival of the jets. Will they store nuclear weapons in these buildings? Will the public and elected officials be provided with details about these facilities—and their potential risks to health and safety?

Sources:

1. Old City of Madison documents were obtained through an open records request and file review of all Truax Landfill files in the City of Madison Engineering Department in September, 2021.
2. Information and quotations from Madison newspaper stories in the 1970s were from [NewspaperArchives](#). All specific stories used for this story are linked in the text.
3. General information about the Cold War was from [Wikipedia](#).