

My Time with NIKE



The latter part of the 1950s saw an increased military build-up within the NATO alliance due to the Cold War and the Russian military and space advance. When the three first grenadiers arrived at Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama in mid-January 1958 from Norway, and started school, there were only American students at the Ordnance Guided Missile School (OGMS). We attended the school's Nike-Hercules/Ajax Track Radar Repair Education. During spring, summer and fall of that year many other NATO students arrived from all over Europe and Turkey. The three first NATO students sent from Norway to the OGMS were Knut Hagen, Hans Helmersen and I, none of us legal adults at the time. The Americans managed to launch its first orbiter, called Moon, just a week after we got there. Huntsville made that happen! Russians had sent a dog into space well before that.

Professors from the Wernher von Braun team and Western Electric's field engineers taught us electronics and told us that Norway was of the highest priority. We came from a strategically important NATO country. Turkey was listed in the same category. This happened during the McCarthy era in the U.S. when America saw communists everywhere. Information from open sources led to the general understanding that the Soviet Union was ahead in the arms' race, and also with regard to conventional ground forces and the development of powerful rockets. With the Sputnik I shock in 1957, America also learned that the Soviet Union was ahead in the space race.

At Redstone Arsenal, we all knew that Russian space rockets were stronger than their American counterparts. Redstone Arsenal had the largest rockets in the United States, built on the design of the V2. The enormous roar from Wernher von Braun's night testing of rocket engines in the static test tower on the base often woke us up. The entire barrack shook, and the sky had a bright red glow in the direction of the static test tower. The build-up of a rocket and missile arsenal was an important issue in 1958. We were educated on the higher echelon maintenance of the new Nike Hercules surface to air missile, and responsible for that they could fly and hit the target. After one year we moved to Fort Bliss, Texas for further training on radars and missiles until May 1959.

The new Nike Hercules system Norway received in the spring of 1959 was developed and assembled in the same speedy manner as our military campus and education. The upgrading of the NIKE Ajax-system to handle the much bigger and more advanced Hercules missile was not fully completed. We soon got the feeling that the system was in its early stages, plagued by bugs. After we arrived back in Norway with one of the first Hercules-systems to be deployed, we got proof that this was a correct assumption. Several field engineers came and worked alongside us three petty officers. There were constant modifications. We upgraded components and units all the time. In addition to this, we often burned secret documents in a special oven by the river as new ones arrived.

Sometimes, coming or going on the roads leading up to the remote IFC-areas, we observed Russian Volga-cars with diplomatic (CD) license plates on the new deserted forest roads close to the Nike-batteries, and understood that the Russians monitored the placement of rockets in Norway. It was no coincidence, but a result of the arms' race and perhaps the deployment of rockets in Norway, that the Soviets after the "U2-affair" when the plane landed in Bodø, Norway, chose to send rockets to Cuba. No wonder this strategic move scared the Americans and led President Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev to almost starting a nuclear war during the Cuba Missile Crisis. Three years prior, Nike guided missiles were placed in Norway. It is more likely than not that Nikita Khrushchev knew about it.

This is the background against which young conscribed and signed military personnel were "sacrificed" as they were over-exposed to radiation. Many died young or are struggling with health issues and serious diseases or disabilities from underdeveloped and unsafe components in the radar systems. Cysts on the thyroid gland, bladder and prostate cancer and severe cataract before turning 40 are all strong indications of exposure to radioactive isotopes inside the eight tracking antennae and test masts that we climbed to replace radioactive Klystron transmitting tubes and other defect components. The fact is that the tubes and cells we handled on a daily basis contained radioactive material. It is indicative of the total lack of concern for safety that the yellow radiation labels on the boxes either were painted over or removed, or that the designed container was missing after the components had arrived in Norway. We even had a cardboard box at our workshop labeled Radioactive Waste where we would dump defective radioactive components and old vacuum-tubes containing radioactive material. We had no safety manuals or training in how to handle radioactive material.

As soon as our enlistment ended in 1962 after five long years, all three of us left the military, but we remained in the reserves. Every year for more than 30 years I would receive a green card from my Norwegian military unit that I still belonged to. I was promoted to officer after I finished my graduate degree in the 1970s. By the late 1980's I had become a two-star lieutenant in the Royal Norwegian Air Force. Norway kept me available for service during 40 years of Cold War. I in the 1990s, I applied for a discharge. I finally received a letter that I had served my 18 months of military duty as a soldier.

In 1957 I was assigned to the Royal Norwegian Navy for a short time, since I had been a sailor, but was not cleared for deck duty because of eyesight problems. I was then signed over to the Royal Norwegian Army Anti-Aircraft Artillery. This branch was transferred to the Air Force while I was on the 18 month NATO training in the US. I have been in the Norwegian forces first as a sailor with a blue collar, then in the Army's uniform while in the US with King Haakon's insignia on my cap long after he had passed away. I ended up with the uniform of the Royal Norwegian Air Force. Not bad for an American citizen born and raised in Norway!