

Cold War Artifacts – BOMARC: The Shadow of the Shield

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Since 1943, North Bay, Ontario has been central to the air defense of North America. Originally a ferry station for the movement of military aircraft to the European theatre during World War II, as the Cold War heated up in the early 1950s North Bay became a full-fledge Royal Canadian Air Force Station. In 1959, construction began on the underground SAGE (Semi-Automated Ground Environment) complex housing two massive mainframe computers (the largest ever built) that were an integral part of a continental system of air defense. North Bay became home to NORAD Region Headquarters, charged with the military control and defense of air space over northern North America.

As part of that defense system, a squadron of surface-to-air interceptor missiles equipped with nuclear warheads and proximity fuses was established just north of the city in 1961. Known as "BOMARC" (an acronym for *Boeing and Michigan Aeronautical Research Centre*), these nuclear-tipped missiles were jointly controlled by the American and Canadian military (the warheads themselves were the property of the US, the missiles Canadian). Owing to the presence of both the BOMARC installation and the SAGE complex, North Bay found itself high on the list of Soviet targets in the event of war.

By the early 1970s, BOMARC technology had become outdated, and in late 1972 the missile squadron was disbanded and the nuclear warheads returned to the United States. One of the missiles was presented as a gift to the city of North Bay, eventually installed on pedestals on the south side of the overpass connecting downtown North Bay with the suburb of West Ferris. Tellingly, it was aimed north.

Until its removal and transport back to the United States in the early fall of 2009, the BOMARC missile monument was an overlooked and neglected piece of North Bay culture. It was, however, also an important piece of local and national history. *Cold War Artifacts – BOMARC: The Shadow of the Shield* was an exhibition in part intended to reintroduce the BOMARC missile monument back into the community consciousness via a gallery installation based on the long metaphorical shadow the missile has cast upon both city and country.

A full 1:1 scale silhouette outline of the missile was transposed into the WKP Kennedy Gallery space in such a way that it splayed across the floor as well as climbed along one wall. The silhouette outline was infilled with pertinent material scavenged from within the arts centre complex that houses the gallery and from businesses across the city that was installed so as to proportionally reflect – akin to a three dimensional bar graph – the importance of various aspects of the local economy. As of the time of the installation, the economic impact and importance of the long-time military presence in the city had fallen considerably from its peak at the height of the Cold War.

A time line of signage vinyl and support artifacts was mounted on three walls of the gallery. It traced out the development of the BOMARC missile in the late 1940s to its appearance in North Bay along with nuclear weapons (an arrival coinciding with an earthquake in the city that many residents feared was a nuclear accident), to its final departure in 1972. Interwoven into this time line was the figure of Thomas Pynchon, the famous American avant-garde novelist. His most famous book, *Gravity's Rainbow*, is based on the trajectory of the German V-2 missile (the technology of which was instrumental in the development of the BOMARC). Pynchon was employed in the BOMARC missile program in the early 1960s.

The timeline culminated with a rare artifact: a BOMARC missile model kit, popular during the 1960s and reissued in the United States in the 1980s during the Reagan era at the height of the "Star Wars" missile defense controversy.