

What happened to the Cold War air raid sirens in San Bernardino, Riverside counties?

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An air raid siren still stands at G and Base Line streets near Riley Elementary School in San Bernardino on Tuesday, May 24, 2022. (Photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

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A 40-plus-foot-tall Cold War relic casts a long shadow onto the grass field at Riley Elementary School in San Bernardino.

Seeing how this particular 1950s artifact now camouflages in with the mature palm trees and street lights at Base Line and G streets, passersby can be forgiven for missing what was designed some 70 years ago to be unmissable.

An air raid siren.











FEDERAL OUTDOOR WARNING SIREN -- Model 2 --

GENERAL.

The Federal Model 2 Outdoor Warning Siren was an omni directional siren that was capable of producing high intensity warning signals over a large



area. Federal provided mounting hardware that enabled the user to install a siren on a utility pole or on the roof of a building. As a result, the siren could be installed in almost any situation. The high efficiency of this siren enabled it to produce a high sound level while making a moderate demand on the power source.

DESCRIPTION.

The Model 2 Siren is a 104dB siren that is available in single tone and dual tone Civil Defense Models. The Model 2 siren mechanism is enclosed in a sheet metal housing. A conical dome is mounted on top of the housing and two truncated conical cowls are attached to the housing, approximately one-third and two-thirds along the height of the housing. Screens are installed across the openings in the housing to prevent obstructions from entering the unit.

SIGNAL DESCRIPTION.

All of the vertical sirens are capable of providing a sustained signal. And a wailing signal. The steady signal is frequently used as a Civil Defense "Alert" signal. The wailing signal is often used as a Civil Defense "Attack". However, the signal can be used for any desired indication.



Norton AFB's Sentinel of the Cold War

Today there are two pre Cold War relics remaining at the former Norton AFB (now San Bernardino Int'l Airport) in San Bernardino CA. One has been relocated to the Norton AFB Museum's Veteran's Memorial exhibit area. Known as a civil defense air-raid siren, these two signaling devices were originally designed to warn the populous of Norton AFB of impending aerial attack after WW II. They were part of much greater national military and civilian civil defense system to alert of a pending attack throughout the United States. Some may remember the scheduled testing of the alert system when in school as you practiced getting under your desks (duck and cover) drills. However, after the War ended and the Cold War cooled, many of these sirens outside the military environment, became the signaling device for inclement weather (tornadoes), or they were just abandoned in place. Most if not all of the military sirens were also abandoned or are used today to augment the civilian inclement weather notification systems. In our continuing effort to capture the history of Norton AFB, we are excited to take position of this sentinel of Norton's history in May of 2016 and had it installed at its current location in March 2017. We removed about 12 feet of the original mast and in the effort to discourage climbing the mast, we have removed the climbing stirrups and work platform that was located at the top of mast. (March 2017)

USAF STANDARDIZED ATTACK WARNING SIGNALS FOR NBCC MEDIUM AND HIGH THREAT AREAS

| ALARM CONDITION | IF YOU | THIS INDICATES | GENERAL ACTIONS |
|-----------------|---|--|--|
| GREEN | HEAR: ALARM GREEN SEE: GREEN FLAG | ATTACK IS NOT PROBABLE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -STAY IN DOCK TIE DOWN -NORMAL WARTIME CONDITION -RESUME OPERATIONS -CONTINUE NORMAL ACTIONS |
| YELLOW | HEAR: ALARM YELLOW SEE: YELLOW FLAG | ATTACK IS PROBABLE IN LESS THAN 30 MINUTES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -STOP WORK AND EVACUATE ASSETS -GO TO PROTECTIVE SHELTER OR SEEK BEST PROTECTION WITH OVERHEAD COVER |
| RED | HEAR: ALARM RED, SIREN - WAVERING TONE SEE: RED FLAG | ATTACK BY AIR OR MISSILE IS IMMINENT OR IN PROGRESS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -MOVE IMMEDIATELY WITH OVERHEAD COVER -MOVE TO AS DIRECTED -KEEP HEAD AND BODY COVERED -REPORT ACTIVITY |
| BLACK | HEAR: GROUND ATTACK; BUGLE - CALL-TO-ARMS SEE: BLACK FLAG | ATTACK BY GROUND FORCES IS IMMINENT OR IN PROGRESS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION -MOVE TO AS DIRECTED -DEFEND SELF AND POSITION -REPORT ACTIVITY |
| | | ATTACK IS OVER AND NBC CONTAMINATION AND/OR HAZARDS ARE SUSPECTED OR PRESENT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -STOP FOR AS DIRECTED -PERFORM SELF-INSPECTION CARE -REMAIN UNDER OVERHEAD COVER OR SHELTER -SHELTER UNTIL DIRECTED OTHERWISE |

NOTES:
1. WHEN FULL CLEAR AND PREDICTABLE DANGER ELIMINATED WHEN DETERMINED OR WHEN DIRECTED.
2. SIRENS/ALARMS MAY NOT BE IN OPERATION DUE TO SYSTEMS TO CONVENT AT INCREASED RISK.
3. THIS ALARM CONDITION MAY BE APPLIED TO ANY TIME INSTALLATION OR ADVISED TO ONE OR MORE DEFENSE SECURITIES OR BASES.

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| GREEN | HEAR: ALARM GREEN SEE: GREEN FLAG | ATTACK IS NOT PROBABLE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -STAY IN DOOR TILL * -NORMAL WARTIME CONDITION -RESUME OPERATIONS -CONTINUE NORMAL ACTIONS |
| YELLOW | HEAR: ALARM YELLOW SEE: YELLOW FLAG | ATTACK IS PROBABLE IN LESS THAN 30 MINUTES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -HEPP 2 OR ALERTED¹ -PROTECT AND DEFEND ASSETS -GO TO PROTECTIVE SHELTER OR SEEK BEST PROTECTION WITH OVERHEAD COVER² |
| RED | HEAR: ALARM RED, SIREN - WAVERING TONE SEE: RED FLAG | ATTACK BY AIR OR MISSILE IS IMMINENT OR IN PROGRESS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -MOVE IMMEDIATELY³ -PROTECT AND DEFEND ASSETS -GO TO PROTECTIVE SHELTER OR SEEK BEST PROTECTION WITH OVERHEAD COVER² |
| BLACK | HEAR: GROUND ATTACK; BUGLE - CALL-TO-ARMS SEE: BLACK FLAG | ATTACK BY GROUND FORCES IS IMMINENT OR IN PROGRESS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION³ -PROTECT AND DEFEND ASSETS -DEFEND SELF AND POSITION -REPORT ACTIVITY |
| NOTES: | | | |
| 1. WHEN FULL CLEAR AND PREDICTABLE DANGER IS IDENTIFIED WHEN DETERMINED OR WHEN DIRECTED. | | | |
| 2. OVERHEAD COVERS MAY REQUIRE SHIELDED METAL TENTS, PARKED VEHICLES, OR STRUCTURES TO CONFER AT INCREASED RISK. | | | |
| 3. THIS ALARM CONDITION MAY BE APPLIED TO ANOTHER INSTALLATION OR ASSIGNED TO ONE OR MORE DEFENSE SECTORS OR BASES. | | | |

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The only Federal Model 2 Outdoor warning vertical siren left in the area is on display, since March 2017, at Norton Air Force Base Museum in San Bernardino on Friday May 20, 2022. (Photo by Milka Soko, Contributing Photographer)

"As far as historical value, these air raid sirens are extremely valuable," said Jeff Houlihan, longtime curator for the [March Field Air Base Museum](#) in Riverside. "There's not much out there that really gets you closer to the Cold War period and what it was like for the average person at that time."

"A lot of people from the LA Basin, natives from the area are intimately familiar with the siren," he added. "They're a part of SoCal culture forever."

Cities in the 1950s and '60s installed an assortment of sirens for civil defense purposes.

There were Mobil Directos, Model 5s and Scream Masters, to name a few.

Each distinct looking in shape, if not their uniformly bright colors.

Each responsible for alerting a whole city of a probable or imminent enemy air attack.

"You could not miss them," San Bernardino Councilman Fred Shorett recalled.

According to a May 1956 article in The Sun-Telegram, the civil defense system cost San Bernardino \$25,000 to install. Sirens were raised at City Hall, Base Line and G streets, 40th Street and Electric Avenue, 269 S. Mt. Vernon Ave., and 26th and E streets.

One stood at the old Holmes Ice on Third Street, and a pair oversaw Norton Air Force Base in its heyday.

Adults of a certain age still remember the ear-piercing sound the sirens made, because as children they occasionally practiced ducking for cover under their desks during scheduled tests.

“It was a whining, long siren,” Shorett said. “It wasn’t up and down like a fire truck. It would start low and wind up. Maybe for a minute or two. You could definitely hear them throughout the city.”

Jane Sneddon, treasurer for the Norton Air Force Base Museum, attended Catholic school as a child and recently recalled sitting under heavy oak pews during such tests.

“That was just part of the protection during the Cold War,” said Sneddon, 80. “I was born and raised here in San Bernardino and we had our duck-and-cover drills. All of us that are of a certain age, born in the ’40s, all of us did duck-and-cover drills as part of our schooling in the event you’d hear (the siren) go off.”

American families in the 1950s were encouraged to devise action plans to provide “the best chance of safety in an emergency,” Capt. Alfred L. Luce, director of civil defense for San Bernardino, is quoted as saying in a November 1956 Sun-Telegram article.

“The family must plan and act as a team in an emergency,” Luce continued.

In the same article, Luce cited several, what he called, “facts of life” every resident should know.

Among them, the local air raid warning signals.

“In San Bernardino,” the article read, “these signals consist of an alert signal in which sirens are sounded in a 3 to 5-minute steady blast and a take cover signal, 3-minute wailing tone or short blasts of sirens.”

Luce suggested families post the red-lettered civil defense air raid instructions card “in a prominent place in the home.”

Those cards were being distributed at the time by Boy Scouts to families as part of a civil defense package that included emergency first aid kits comprised, in part, of antiseptic solution for open wounds, aromatic spirits of ammonia for faintness, a box of table salt and a box of baking soda to treat shock, and four triangular bandages for use as a sling or as a dressing.

Decades later, many sirens were either used to alert residents of inclement weather or they were abandoned in place.

As far as when the siren system in San Bernardino was discontinued, city officials recently said no one recalls it being tested after 1995.

While most of the air raid sirens in town were removed in the ensuing years, the Norton museum accepted a Federal Model 2 Outdoor Warning Siren in May 2016 and had it installed outside the Third Street museum a year later.

About 12 feet of the original mast was removed, as well as the climbing stirrups and work platform.

Another air raid siren is on display at the [San Bernardino Depot Museum](#).

Officials at the [March Field Air Museum](#) received a call a few years ago gauging their interest in accepting an early-1950s Chrysler siren once mounted atop Cerro Negro Peak in the San Rafael Hills in Los Angeles County.

They accepted, and installed the tower in January 2019 alongside other Cold War relics used to “engage people and understand what the Cold War was like: the risks, what was at stake,” Houlihan said.

Presently, the bright red siren – which was tested through the ’70s and could be heard 26 miles away while in operation, Houlihan noted – stands alone atop the mast, as a volunteer rebuilds the engine.

John McLaughlin, a retired firefighter and president of the San Gorgonio Pass Historical Society, recalled the pair of air raid sirens in Beaumont being repurposed in the 1970s as alerts for volunteer firefighters in the event of an emergency and as a daily signal for the clock striking noon.

Repeated high and low wailing, McLaughlin said, “was enough to wake anybody in town up in the middle of the night.”

One day during a routine noon signal in the late ’70s, the siren at the former City Hall campus on Grace Street exploded while being sounded, blowing shrapnel all over the parking lot, McLaughlin said.

The thing was totaled.

“After that happened,” McLaughlin said, “there was no more noon siren.”

The other air raid siren in Beaumont was recently removed from Ninth Street and Orange Avenue as the city prepares to renovate Stewart Park.

The San Gorgonio Pass Historical Society took the siren off the pole and plans to add it to its museum in time.

Air raid sirens are “the very core and heart of why I became a historian,” said Justin Jampol, founder of Culver City’s Wende Museum of the Cold War.

Now 44, Jampol grew up down the block from the air raid siren that oversaw Cheviot Hills in West Los Angeles. Even then, as most sirens in the area were becoming obsolete and dysfunctional, as a boy he found the thing fascinating – during tests especially.

“This sound was connected with the end of the world,” Jampol said recently. “In other words, if it wasn’t just a training exercise and we heard the sound of the air raid siren, it would’ve signaled the beginning of an all-out nuclear war.

“That’s a terrifying discovery,” Jampol continued, “but it also was so intriguing and compelling.”

Started two decades ago, the Wende Museum accepted the birdhouse-style air raid siren that stood on the Claremont McKenna College campus as a donation in 2014.

Claremont had at least two others in town, and through the ’70s, they would be tested at 10 a.m. on the last Friday of each month “to meet federal government requirements on public outdoor warning systems,” according to a January 1970 Progress-Bulletin story.

The Wende Museum spent nine months restoring and retrofitting its 30-foot-tall siren, Jampol said, in order to use as much of the original system as possible.

A boat amplifier was added, and it’s been made Bluetooth-accessible.

Now, Jampol said, the Cold War apparatus known for signaling impending doom sounds a different tune.

Beatles songs.

“The thing is so effective at throwing sound to where a block away you can hear it loud and clear,” Jampol said. “We wanted to do all kinds of music, but the reality is, if you’re hearing music in your home blocks away, you better like the music.”

“And everyone likes the Beatles.”
