

It is just about a 30 minute flight, via my little Highlander, from the Custer County Airport to the municipal field at Rapid City, SD. From there a 7 mile drive via the FBO's courtesy car will take you to the Ellsworth Air Force Base and its interesting and informative Air & Space Museum. On a beautiful Saturday morning in July I decided to make that trip over to view not only the large assortment of military aircraft on display, but to tour the underground Minuteman II missile silo that is our country's first line of defense against attack. What made this especially interesting to me is that my first job, after completing college and my military obligation back in the 60's, was for the Bendix Corporation. I worked at their Eclipse-Pioneer Division in Teterboro, NJ which provided the inertial guidance systems for the earlier version of the Minuteman, as well as for the Pershing and Saturn rockets as well. I had seen both of these latter two missiles on static displays at various air museums in the past, so it was only fitting that I would now have the chance to visit a nearby military base which displayed that last delivery vehicle which took up so much of my early work experience.

The [SD Air and Space Museum](#) is a free attraction located just before the security gate at Ellsworth, and features such aircraft as a WW-2 B-29 Super Fortress, the Korean War B-52 (which are still in use today and slated to be decommissioned in 2040), as well as a myriad of fighter aircraft and Air Force civilian transport planes, all of which are on display outside. The museum itself has a large assortment of military equipment and attractions inside of its two wings.

However the most impressive, to me at least, part of the optional \$7.00 base tour was the chance to actually go inside of a 90 foot deep below ground launch silo and to walk around and view the 60 foot long Minuteman capable of delivering a 1.2 kilo-ton nuclear warhead some 6,000 miles down range with pinpoint accuracy. Since this particular silo was a training facility we did not have to climb down the 30 foot vertical ladder at the entrance hatch, but was able to use a bunker stairwell to reach the mezzanine viewing level. As originally designed the large 30 ton concrete and steel door covering the missile could be slid away in just 5 seconds, by a compressed air blast that would allow the missile to launch just a few seconds thereafter. There are still almost 400 of these silos functional today, A mutually assured destruction deterrent of the first magnitude.



The 60 foot Minuteman II



Me at the entrance of the SD Air Museum



The B-1B Bomber is the main stay aircraft operated at the Ellsworth Air Force Base



Maintenance access to the Silos is via a hatchway and a 30 foot vertical ladder. The Missile is actually launched remotely.



This 30 ton silo door blows away in 5 secs.