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NORAD: Watching the Skies for 50 Years

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On May 12, 1958, the governments of the United States and Canada signed a historic agreement that created the North American Air Defense Command, or NORAD. During the past five decades, citizens of both nations have been protected from air attacks through the efforts of NORAD personnel using some of the most sophisticated technology in the world.

Every Christmas Eve for the last 50 years, NORAD has also done something else just as important. It has helped millions of children all over the world see where Santa Claus is at any moment during his [aerial sleigh ride](#) to deliver presents to boys and girls.

Deter. Detect. Defend

NORAD was created in response to the development of [long-range bombers](#) by the Soviet Union. While aerial attacks from the Atlantic or Pacific would have been detected by navy ships, early warning aircraft, or offshore radar platforms, [Arctic](#) radar coverage was virtually non-existent half a century ago.



In July 2006, the NORAD Command Center was transferred from its famous location deep within Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs, CO, to Peterson Air Force Base, also in Colorado. Credit: U.S. Air Force

To close the Arctic gap, dozens of radar stations were built during the 1950s, the majority in Canada. The most northerly 'chain,' the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, consisted of 58 radar stations along the 69th parallel. The DEW Line, which was completed in 1957, could detect bombers three hours before they reached any major population center.

Command and control of the radar stations was a major challenge due to their remote locations. The U.S. and Canadian governments decided the best way to address the issue was to create an integrated command — established on August 1, 1957 — involving the armed forces of both nations. On September 12, NORAD operations in Colorado commenced, with the official agreement signed on May 12 of the following year.

The commander of NORAD is appointed by and responsible to the U.S. president and the Canadian prime minister. The Commander is always American and simultaneously heads United States Northern Command; the Deputy Commander is always Canadian.

NORAD comes down from the mountain

For nearly 49 years, NORAD's day-to-day command operations took place in the Cheyenne Mountain Operations Center (CMOC) located 2,000 feet inside a mountain on the southwest side of Colorado Springs, Colo. The CMOC was built during the Cold War when the main concern was a nuclear attack.

Effective July 28, 2006, NORAD's main operations center was transferred to Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado. More than 200 personnel from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Canadian Forces work in support of the bi-national military command. The CMOC will be left on "warm standby" in case the mountain's protection is again required.

Three subordinate regional headquarters — Elmendorf Air Force Base in [Alaska](#), Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida, and the Canadian Forces Base in Winnipeg, Manitoba — receive direction from the commander and control air operations within their respective areas of responsibility: Alaskan NORAD Region, Continental NORAD Region, and Canadian NORAD Region.

NORAD's headquarters are administered by the U.S. Air Force under the command of the 721st Mission Support Group, part of the 21st Space Wing. In March 2007, the organization was re-named the North American Aerospace Defense Command.

NORAD has adapted to new threats, technologies and events during the past 50 years, including cruise missiles, surveillance satellites, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the 9/11 attacks.

9/11 changed NORAD

Before Sept. 11, 2001, NORAD was expected to defend the United States and Canada from airborne threats from other nations. After the attacks, the organization's mandate was expanded to include threats originating in the two countries.

NORAD conducted four major exercises a year prior to 9/11; most included a hijack scenario, but not every exercise involved planes as weapons. Since 9/11, NORAD has conducted more than 100 exercises, the majority involving mock hijackings of civilian aircraft.

On the 5th anniversary of 9/11, NORAD Commander Admiral Keating (U.S. Navy) said, "We are definitely better at aerospace defense than we were five years ago."

The NORAD Agreement was revised in early 2006 to include a maritime warning mission involving activities conducted in U.S. and Canadian oceanic areas, lakes and waterways.

Tracking Santa

In 1955, a Colorado Springs-based Sears store ran an advertisement encouraging children to call Santa Claus on a special telephone hotline. Due to a printing error, the published phone number was for the Continental Air Defense Director of Operations.

After the second call on Christmas Eve that year, Colonel Harry Shoup realized a mistake had been made and instructed his staff to give Santa's position to any child who called in. After NORAD was formed, the decision was made to continue the public relations tradition.

In 1997, NORAD's Santa tracking program was expanded to the Internet. Nine years later, NORAD volunteers answered half a million telephone calls and more than 12,500 e-mails from 210 territories; the site — www.noradsanta.org — received in excess of one billion hits.

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