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Herhold: The closing of the legendary Blue Cube

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Before a color guard and the wife of a hero, they said goodbye Wednesday to a famous artifact of space and the Cold War — Sunnyvale’s “Blue Cube,” the windowless blue box that housed secret operations for four decades.

Formally, it was the closure of the Onizuka Air Force Station, whose operations are being moved to Vandenberg Air Force Base in Southern California.

Informally, it was a reunion for hundreds who monitored satellites at the Cube in the days when the difference between good guys

and bad guys was a lot clearer to most of us.

“It was pretty darn exciting,” said Air Force Lt. General Tom Sheridan, who began at the Cube as a captain in 1982. “It was hard to do this business, and we succeeded.”

The future of the Onizuka station — named for pioneering Asian-American astronaut Ellison Onizuka, who was killed in the 1986 Challenger crash — remains unclear. Even gentle and gracious words from Onizuka’s widow, Lorna, could not change that.

The city of Sunnyvale, which will inherit the bulk of the property after the Air Force vacates it next year, has talked about converting the land into a cluster of auto dealerships, save for one building claimed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. If that happens, the Cube would probably be demolished. But the auto dealership idea seems unlikely in the recession. And just how a fortresslike building from the 1960s could be reused perplexes Sunnyvale officials.

“There’s been talk about saving it,” Sunnyvale Mayor Melinda Hamilton says. “I don’t know of anyone with the deep pockets to do it.”

Wednesday was a day for looking back fondly at what was once called the Air Force Satellite Test Center, or STC, which was opened in July 1960, almost exactly a half-century ago.

Critical work

Particularly in its first 25 years, the people at the center did critical work as a global antenna for military and civil satellites.

One of the center’s first missions was helping with Project Corona, a cadre of military reconnaissance satellites run by the

CIA.

Early in the 1970s, the satellite center commanded insectlike “Vela” satellites, designed to monitor other countries’ compliance with the nuclear test ban treaty.

And in the ceremonies Wednesday, the Air Force brass was careful to note that the Blue Cube has “supported” — the verb is deliberately vague — all 132 space shuttle missions.

The center’s signature windowless building, which was built between 1967 and 1969, contains a warren of offices and computer rooms spread over four stories.

In many ways, it is a monument to technology long since supplanted. The Cube was built to house big mainframe computers, which demanded temperatures in the 60s.

To the local public, the Cube was memorable primarily because of its opaqueness: Whatever was happening in the big blue box next to Highway 237 had to be super-secret: The mystery only burnished the legend.

“It’s a maze,” says Linda Lavigne, who began working as a secretary at the Cube in 1984. “When I first started working there, I had to get someone to show me around. All the doors look the same.”

Fond stories

Even now, the rules of classification forbid the Cube’s veterans from talking about most of what they did. But they can tell a few fond stories of how they did it.

There was, for instance, the matter of butcher paper. In the early

days, the Cube's engineers would use butcher paper marked by felt pens to predict the timing for when the tracking station would have to dedicate its full resources to monitoring a satellite.

And more than a few remember the affair of the manhole covers. To emphasize security, supervisors at the Cube warned employees that the Russians, the bad guys of the time, could photograph a manhole cover from space.

The Cube's pranksters responded one day by wearing hats bearing an unusual adornment. On each was a picture of a manhole cover. No word about the reaction of the Russians.

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1960: The Air Force Satellite Test Center, or STC, opens in Sunnyvale.

1967-69: The Blue Cube, the key structure on the site, is constructed.

1960 to present: The center tracks military and civilian satellites, including the Corona and Vela missions, NATO III Skynet and the GPS satellite system.

1981: The center provides support for launch of space shuttle Columbia, the first of 132 shuttle missions it helps.

1986: Renamed the Onizuka Air Force Base after astronaut Ellison Onizuka, who died in the Challenger shuttle explosion in 1986.

2005: Base closure commission recommends closure of Onizuka.

2010: Air Force closes Onizuka, with operations moving in coming months to Vandenberg Air Force Base.

Source: U.S. Air Force

Onizuka Air Force station

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“This violent crime, committed by an armed suspect, was a very dangerous situation for everyone involved. It easily could have ended in tragedy,” San Leandro police Lt. Robert McManus said.

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