

MOUNTAIN HOME AIR FORCE BASE 1958 SENIOR OFFICERS'
HOUSING
Mountain Home vicinity
Elmore County
Idaho

HABS ID-118-B
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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Oakland, CA 94607

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MOUNTAIN HOME AIR FORCE BASE 1958 SENIOR OFFICERS' HOUSING

HABS No. ID-118-B

Location: Mountain Home Air Force Base, Elmore County, Idaho *118-B*

Present Owner: United States Air Force *open*

Present Occupant: Variable

Present Use: Military Family Housing

Significance: The three senior officers' houses at Mountain Home Air Force Base (AFB) were constructed as part of the 270-unit Armed Services Housing Project, a collaboration between the architectural firms of Richard J. Neutra & Robert E. Alexander of Los Angeles and Hummel, Hummel & Jones of Boise, Idaho. Prominent architect Richard Neutra designed the three officers' housing units in 1958 and construction was completed in 1959. The housing reflects elements of the International Style, of which Neutra is considered a master, and is the only example of his work in Idaho.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1958 – 1959
2. Architect: Richard J. Neutra & Robert E. Alexander (Los Angeles) and Hummel, Hummel & Jones (Boise)
3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses: The United States Air Force has owned the buildings at Mountain Home AFB since their construction and has utilized them as officers' housing since that time.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The contractor for the 270-unit Armed Services Housing Project was Sheriden, Inc. of Pasadena, California. The landscape architecture firm was Baldwin, Eriksson & Peters of Los Angeles.
5. Original plans and construction: The three homes are on a single square block with a northwest-southeast orientation. The general's residence (Building 4473) is situated on the southeastern half of the block, with its front elevation facing southeast. The

residences of the commander (Building 4478) and the colonel (Building 4476) share the northwestern half of the block, with their front elevations facing northwest. The commander's residence is southwest of the colonel's residence. Original plans called for one-story houses with a rectangular floor plan and a linear arrangement of rooms. The houses all feature four bedrooms, three bathrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen, breakfast nook, and garage. Walls between the living room and fourth bedroom were originally folding accordion dividers that allowed the two rooms to become one as needed. Exteriors are clad in a combination of brick block, wood siding on sheathing, plastic-coated plywood, and redwood. Garage doors are clad in wood siding to complement the wood siding on the façades of the houses. Each home was designed with a walled service yard at the front elevation and an open concrete terrace at the rear elevation.

B. Historic Context:

I. Mountain Home Air Force Base

Mountain Home AFB was originally established during World War II under the Army Air Forces as Mountain Home Army Air Field. Mountain Home was one of two airfields built in Idaho during 1942–1943, and one of six constructed in the Northwest during that time period (Weitze et al. 2006:6). The airfield opened on August 7, 1943, and was used throughout the war for heavy bombardment combat training, primarily on B-17s and B-24s (Mountain Home Air Force Base [MHAFB] History 2007; Weitze et al. 2006:14). Following the end of World War II and throughout the mid-1940s, use of Mountain Home Army Air Field was sporadic. The base became inactive in October 1945, was in use briefly in 1946, and then inactive once again from October 1946 to December 1948 (Weitze et al. 2006:16). The establishment of the independent United States Air Force in 1947 brought more regular use to the base, which reopened in December 1948 as Mountain Home Air Force Base (Air Force History Overview 2007).

Strategic Air Command (SAC) served as the first host command for the base, beginning in 1948. During that time, the base was used for geodetic and reconnaissance photography training (Weitze et al. 2006). The base closed in April 1950 and remained inactive until January 1951, a few months after the Korean War began. In January 1951, Mountain Home AFB reopened and was home to the 580th, 581st, and 582nd Air Resupply and Communications (ARC) Wings. Throughout the Korean War, the resupply units, airborne materiel assembly squadrons, and a balloon-launching squadron assigned to the base flew C-119, B-29, and SA-16 aircraft and “trained to support what we know today as covert and special operations” run by the Central Intelligence Agency (MHAFB History 2007). Following the end of the Korean War in 1953, Mountain Home AFB remained open and SAC returned as the host command where it continued bombardment and special weapons training.

SAC remained the host command until 1966, and Mountain Home AFB experienced substantial growth under its command from 1953 to 1966, largely due to the construction of three Titan missile sites in southern Idaho and the resultant assignment of additional personnel to prepare for this new missile capability. After the closure of the missile sites had begun in 1964–1965, SAC's mission at Mountain Home came to

an end. In January 1966, Tactical Air Command (TAC) assumed control, focusing on a variety of reconnaissance missions using first RF-4C aircraft, then F-4D Phantoms. Upon its return from Vietnam, the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing became host command in 1972 (MHAFB History 2007; Weitze et al. 2006). Now known as the 366th Fighter Wing, the group remains as the base command at Mountain Home AFB (MHAFB History 2007).

II. Wherry and Capehart Housing

Prior to and during World War II, on-base housing for military personnel was limited and often inadequate, even uninhabitable in some instances (United States Army Environmental Center [USAEC] n.d.:17). Before passage of the Servicemen's Dependents Allowance Act of 1942, the military was required to make few provisions for the families of its personnel, with only officers' families having access to scarce housing opportunities on any of its bases. The Dependents Allowance Act was the first step in the process of acknowledging the issue that an increasing number of military personnel were married with families. For a number of reasons, the U.S. Armed Forces had to remediate the situation quickly with the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s. The threat of war with the Soviet Union meant that all branches of the military needed to retain a significant number of their World War II personnel, including the "older" and married men who had enlisted or been drafted. New technologies demanded educated, experienced personnel who were typically older than the traditional soldier from prior wars. These new soldiers were much more likely to be married and have families. In 1948, there were 1,445,910 military personnel, and approximately 75 percent were married (USAEC n.d.:14). In an effort to retain trained personnel with war experience and to encourage those who were thinking about a long-term career in the military, all of the U.S. Armed Forces had to improve and greatly increase their on-base housing capabilities to accommodate not only the increasing numbers of military personnel, but their families as well.

When problems with military housing were eventually made public, the ensuing outcries led Senator Kenneth Wherry of Nebraska to introduce a bill for construction of military housing "on or around military installations" (USAEC n.d.:31). Introduced on March 3, 1949, the bill provided for collaboration between the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), the military, and private developers. Under the Wherry plan, the FHA insured mortgages to developers on land leased from the military. The military in turn assured developers that the installation upon which the investor was constructing housing on or near would be designated a permanent base, guaranteed to be in operation for at least 30 years (USAEC n.d.:31). The Wherry housing program ran from 1949 to 1955 (Weitze et al. 2006). Though the Wherry initiative was an improvement and the philosophy behind it well received, problems arose as soon as the program was implemented. The per-unit costs designated by the military resulted in the use of cheaper building materials and sometimes shoddy construction. Developers retained ownership of the housing projects built under the Wherry initiative and often charged exorbitant rents to military personnel (USAEC n.d.:52-56).

By August 1955, consternation over the shortcomings of the Wherry initiative prompted Senator Homer Capehart of Indiana to introduce new legislation that sought to correct some of the problems that arose under the Wherry program. Under the Capehart legislation, once construction was complete, the military would own and

maintain each housing project. Per-unit costs were also raised under the Capehart program, which enabled better quality housing to be built (USAEC n.d.:57–59). The Capehart program also included funds for the acquisition and renovation of housing built under the Wherry Act.

Both Wherry and Capehart housing projects were implemented at Mountain Home AFB. During World War II, the majority of structures on base were temporary structures (Weitze et al. 2006:8). In September 1953, Mountain Home AFB formalized its Wherry housing project, and in December of that year, the Wherry housing design contract was awarded jointly to the firms of Neutra & Alexander and Hummel, Hummel & Jones. The contract called for 500 family housing units to be constructed on base (Weitze et al. 2006:24). The Mountain Home Wherry housing project was the first collaboration between Neutra & Alexander and Hummel, Hummel & Jones

Hummel, Hummel & Jones, based in Boise, Idaho, achieved renown in the early twentieth century for its designs for the Idaho State Capitol, St. John's Cathedral in Boise, and the administration buildings at the University of Idaho and Idaho State University. The firm was founded by John E. Tourtellotte and Charles F. Hummel in 1910. Around that time, Frederick (Fritz) Hummel and Frank Hummel, two of Charles Hummel's sons who both trained at the University of Pennsylvania, joined the firm. After World War II, the firm resumed a full work schedule and added Jed Jones III as a partner. The firm's name changed in 1946 from Tourtellotte & Hummel (Tourtellotte retired in 1929 and Charles Hummel died in 1939) to Hummel, Hummel & Jones. The firm's major commissions included work for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Air Force among other local, state, and federal entities (Hummel 2007a:1–3, 2007b). The firm's location in Boise and its prominence in the state of Idaho contributed to its selection for projects at Mountain Home AFB.

Neutra & Alexander and Hummel, Hummel & Jones collaborated again in 1958 on the design of 270 units of Capehart housing for Mountain Home AFB. Approval for the \$4,300,000 Capehart housing project came in June 1958. The government awarded the contract for construction of the 270 Capehart units to Sheriden, Inc., of Pasadena, California (*Mountain Home News* 1958a). The 1958 commission was for 270 units of housing, consisting of 108 officers' quarters and 162 enlisted men's duplex apartments (*Mountain Home News* 1958b). The three units of senior officers' housing documented for this project were built during this phase.

III. Richard Neutra

Born in Vienna in 1892, Richard Neutra received much of his architectural training in Austria prior to immigrating to America in 1923. From 1911–1914 and 1917–1918, Neutra studied at the Technische Hochschule in Vienna, his service in World War I having caused the delay in the completion of his degree. At the Technische Hochschule, Neutra completed coursework in foundational subjects including building mechanics, design theory, architectural history, and drawing. While a student in Vienna, Neutra made many acquaintances in the art and architectural communities, among the most influential being his association with the modernist architect Adolf Loos. Loos emphasized unornamented design and the use of materials such as concrete, wood, metal, and marble and had a strong interest in the work of American architect Louis Sullivan. Loos fostered Neutra's interest in the work of American

architects such as Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and elements of both of those architects' design philosophies helped shape Neutra's own architectural ethos (Hines 1982:Genesis, 1892–1914). One of Neutra's first jobs after completing his studies was with another titan of Modernist architecture, Erich Mendelsohn. Working in Berlin from 1921 to 1923, Neutra also was able to attend a number of influential Bauhaus exhibitions (Bahr 2007:152).

Neutra immigrated to the United States in 1923, briefly living in New York and then settling in Chicago. In Chicago, Neutra was able to meet Louis Sullivan shortly before Sullivan's death. At Sullivan's funeral, Neutra met Sullivan's former student Frank Lloyd Wright, who had been a tremendous influence on Neutra since his time at the Technische Hochschule. Neutra worked as a draftsman for Holabird & Roche while in Chicago, in the intervals between his work for Wright at Taliesin, Wright's self-designed home and studio in Wisconsin (Allaback 2000; Roth 2001:394).

Neutra moved from Chicago to Southern California in 1925. He and his wife lived with another former Wright employee and Loos student, fellow Austrian Rudolf Schindler. After a brief professional partnership with Schindler, Neutra began working independently and established himself as one of the most highly regarded architects in a new school of modern, experimental design (Allaback 2000). Among his most well-known designs is the Dr. Phillip Lovell house in the Hollywood Hills of Los Angeles. Constructed in 1926-1927, the Lovell house was one of the first private houses with a steel frame (Roth 2001:394). In the Lovell house, Neutra implemented many elements of design that would come to define his brand of "California Modern" architecture, specifically, repetitive bands of windows, cantilevered projections, flat roof surfaces, and the marriage of man-made form with the natural landscape. During the next three decades, Neutra continued to build his reputation as an innovative and modern designer with commissions ranging from single-family housing to apartment and office buildings.

Neutra maintained an interest in community and urban design throughout his career. By the late 1940s, already established as an icon of modern architecture, Neutra was looking for a partner with whom to expand the scope of his work to include more planning and public architecture commissions (Allaback 2000; Hines 1982:223). Appointed to the Los Angeles City Planning Commission in 1945 and serving as president in 1948, Robert Alexander had significant experience with urban planning, having designed several residential communities as a partner in the firm of Wilson, Merrill and Alexander. Neutra and Alexander became acquainted in the 1940s, and their partnership was formed in 1949 when Alexander invited Neutra to work on a Public Housing Authority project in Los Angeles known as Elysian Park Heights (Hines 1982:224). Ultimately, the Elysian Park project never came to fruition, but the partners secured other commissions during its planning, including the redevelopment of Sacramento and a plan for the redevelopment of Guam, which had sustained serious damage during World War II. The Neutra and Alexander partnership was awarded commissions that included a number of schools, the campus of Orange Coast College in California, chapels, motels, and community centers.

Neutra and Alexander won several large-scale commissions in the 1950s. The Mountain Home AFB and Lemoore Naval Air Base housing projects were among the largest government commissions awarded to the firm (Hines 1982:243). Neutra and

Alexander designed housing at Mountain Home AFB under both the Wherry and Capehart housing initiatives. The houses employ Neutra's trademark flat planes, rectilinear volumes, cantilevered projections, and walls of windows that create a relationship between interior and exterior spaces. All of these elements had become hallmarks of Neutra's designs and the International Style. The housing at Mountain Home AFB incorporated these aspects in modest and practical applications, paring down even further Neutra's already simple and unornamented aesthetic.

The commission for the Mountain Home Capehart housing project came near the end of the partnership between Neutra and Alexander. In 1958, the partnership officially dissolved, but their final joint commissions were not completed until 1960. Both Neutra and Alexander continued working independently after 1960 (Hines 1982:249).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The 1958 senior officers' housing units at Mountain Home AFB are each one-story houses with rectangular footprints. Designed by architect Richard J. Neutra, the houses exemplify the California interpretation of the International Style with their rectangular plan, limited ornamentation, raised ribbon windows, and cantilevered projections. Each house features four bedrooms, three bathrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen, and breakfast nook arranged within a rectangular plan. The exteriors are a mix of vertical wood siding, brick block, and glass, with the relationship between the building materials, rather than traditional applied ornamentation, providing visual interest.
2. Condition of fabric: Structurally, each of the senior officers' residences is in good condition. The floor plans have not been altered since construction of the houses. Updates include the replacement of appliances, flooring, cabinetry, exterior doors, and garage doors.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: Hummel Architects PLLC in Boise, Idaho, provided certified as-built architectural drawings for the three senior officers' residences. Additional copies of drawings were procured from the drawings vault at Mountain Home AFB.
- B. Early views: Early views of the 1958 Capehart housing project, including photos of construction, were provided by Mountain Home AFB.
- C. Interviews: During the course of research, interviews took place with Yancy Mailes, Historian, Mountain Home AFB; Sheri Mattoon-Bowden, Cultural Resources Manager, Mountain Home AFB; and Kimberly Gilbertson, Marketing Coordinator for Hummel Architects PLLC. Each of these individuals contributed essential materials and information used in the preparation of this HABS documentation.

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) Level III documentation, including large format photographs, of the Mountain Home AFB 1958 senior officers' housing was accomplished from August 2007 to October 2008. This documentation serves as mitigation for the demolition of the houses. Mikel Travisano and Michelle Wurtz visited Mountain Home AFB in August 2007 and completed site visits and photographic documentation of the three senior officers' housing units. At that time, Mr. Travisano and Ms. Wurtz also conducted research at Hummel Architects PLLC and the Idaho State Historical Society in Boise and met with Sheri Mattoon-Bowden, the Cultural Resources Manager at Mountain Home AFB. Jessica Forbes prepared architectural descriptions of the buildings and wrote the historical and descriptive data. Ann M. Keen performed additional research and incorporated comments and revisions for inclusion in the final report. Marsha Prior, Ph.D., supervised project development.

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