

The procedure,

COL. PENNEY'S

RED BALL SYSTEM, kept the Atlas ICBM project at Altus moving ahead on schedule. The rush basis of the project prompted Settle to call it “the most challenging military construction project ever given to the Tulsa District.”⁷

The mission was immense: 12 silos were to be built underground, each 19 to 40 miles from Altus Air Force Base, and all interconnected with the project’s masterminding communication and control system. The \$20.9 million contract called for completion in one year.⁸

The Tulsa District responded in April 1960 by letting its largest construction contract to that date. Sharing the joint venture in constructing the Atlas silos were Morrison-Knudson and Hardeman & Associates Companies.

The Chief of Engineers was reviewing construction progress daily,⁹ and the schedule called for issuing the first construction contract before the ICBM design was complete. This led to what Col. Penney called a problem of “concurrency.” As the design changed, plans were constantly revised, costs constantly re-estimated, and contracts constantly renegotiated. The colonel devised a “red ball system” of expediting paperwork, so that every piece of paper that related to the Atlas project was stamped with a red ball, always hand-carried, and always placed on the top of work stacks.¹⁰

But the red ball system, effective as it was, would not prevail. Although the Tulsa work was on schedule, other contracts were behind. Missile construction responsibility was transferred — six months into the Altus job — to a special Los Angeles district in a move to get the entire country’s missile base construction on schedule.

Missile silo construction experience prompted the Corps in 1961 to realign military responsibilities and boundaries, restricting military construction to 17 districts.¹¹ About 160 Tulsa employees were transferred with the work.

For the coming two decades, this ended major military construction work in the Tulsa District. But it also marked the beginning of a new era in civil works. Maj. Gen. Robert J. Fleming, Jr., Southwestern Division Engineer, discussed the realignment in a March 30, 1961, letter to Senator Bob Kerr:

“The expanding civil works program in the Southwestern Division will to a considerable extent compensate for the decline in the military construction program,” Fleming wrote. “This is certainly the case in the Tulsa District where the civil works programs for the next few years will be of an unprecedented magnitude.”¹²

The gentlemen of the Corps, at the close of the 1950s decade, included seasoned officers who conducted the complex military work of the Tulsa District.

