

Vets honored for defense service

BY MANDY BOLEN Citizen Staff KEY WEST _

The 22 veterans who stood at attention Friday morning at Boca Chica Naval Air Station had traded boots for worn sneakers, and fatigues for khaki pants and white golf shirts. Their hair was grayer and their midsections a little fuller than the last time they had widened their stance and clasped their hands behind their backs at the command of "parade rest." But they still measured the distance between them with an outstretched arm, and their eyes were fixed firmly at the nothingness in front of them as the National Anthem wafted across Boca Chica field. The men, members of the U.S. Army's 65th Missile Battalion, were in Key West as part of the HAWK missile reunion that brings Army soldiers back to the areas they once guarded from low-flying enemy aircraft. The HAWK missiles were in place in Key West from 1962 to 1979, prompted by the Cuban Missile Crisis that had an entire island, and nation, on edge as Communists had their own missiles pointed toward Key West from just 90 miles away. "This is an all-HAWK reunion," said Wes Guidry, a former fire control operator who manned the red fire-button at one of the four missile batteries in Key West. Guidry left Key West in 1970 and served in Korea for two years. "Some of us also served in Okinawa and Germany, but a lot of us went from here to Korea. It was the hottest then coldest I've ever been."

Army Col. Bob Nossov on Friday recognized those HAWK missile veterans who had served in Korea with the newly issued Korean Defense Service Medal, available for soldiers who served in Korea after the 1950s conflict there. The Defense Department announced in 2004 the creation of the new medal. Nossov reminded the veterans of their duty to protect the sky and pointed to a nearby fighter jet at Boca Chica field. He turned to Capt. Jim Scholl, commander of Naval Air Station Key West, and said, "Captain, you probably think that's an EA6, but to these guys it's a target of opportunity," Nossov said smiling. "If it flies, it dies." The colonel received an instant and enthusiastic "Hooah" from the older veterans assembled before him. "Your legacy is today's army," Nossov said, before pinning the Korea Defense Service medals onto 11 of the 22 saluting soldiers.

Col. Jerry Rhyne, the senior officer among the members of the 65th Missile Battalion, spoke to the crowd and to his fellow soldiers. "It has been a long time since many of us have stood in formation like this, and we may be a little rusty," Rhyne said. "But you won't find a prouder bunch of soldiers anywhere." Rhyne spoke of the HAWK missile days in Key West, when missiles were stationed at Fleming Key, Key West International Airport, Boca Chica and Geiger Key, and were manned by rotating groups of soldiers always at the ready to intercept and destroy any unidentified aircraft. No missiles were fired. He also spoke of climbing mud-slicked mountains in Korea to check the HAWK missiles stationed there. "But Korea was not Key West," Rhyne said. mbolen@keysnews.com