

# ABM Dead... But Many Questions Unanswered

FF 3-7-76

B1

By HAL SIMONS  
Staff Writer

NEKOMA, N.D. — Squatting like a tomb against the stark prairie background, the sawed-off pyramid stands lifeless, holding only sophisticated mummies wrapped in concrete, steel, plastic and wire.

The nation's only anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense site, the U.S. Army Stanley R. Mickelson Safeguard Complex, is dead.

A congressional coroner's report listed the cause of death for the ABM system, which died Feb. 10, as fiscal strangulation.

Funeral arrangements for the site, five months old, Nekoma, N.D., are pending.

Surviving, although shaken by the death of ABM, are communities in Cavalier, Walsh, Ramsey and Pembina counties.

Immediate survivors include the Perimeter Acquisition (PAR) site, Concrete, N.D. However, ABM's death will drastically alter PAR's complexion.

A number of potential survivors also exist at the Ne-

## See B-2; Towns Hurting But Not Ready to Die

koma site itself, although none have been conclusively identified.

And, until they are, the total impact of the death in northeastern North Dakota cannot be fully determined.

"The defense operations here are dead," explained Glen Robertson, public affairs officer at Safeguard's Missile Site Radar (MSR) complex, the command post and hub of ABM's operations, at Nekoma.

"We shut off all of our ballistic missile defense operations at 2:58 p.m. Feb. 10. We pulled the plug on the data processor."

The data processor, a giant and sophisticated computer system which scanned defense operations and controlled the radar responsible for firing of the system's defensive missiles, was the key to ABM operations.

When it was "unplugged," deactivation and termination of the ABM site began, as ordered by congressional mandate which became law when President Ford signed the defense appropriations bill Feb. 10.

With that, ABM's controversial struggle to survive began a slow death march. Designed mainly to protect the offensive Minuteman missiles located in northeastern North Dakota and the offensive bombers at the Grand Forks, N.D., Air Base, construction on the ABM site in Cavalier County began in 1970.

By 1971, populations of small communities throughout the ABM area burgeoned and the economies blossomed. According to most estimates, as many as 4,000 persons were employed in ABM-related activities, including military, government and construction, during peak years of construction.

"Back as early as 1968-69, this was to be the first of 12 Safeguard sites in the nation and it was to be staffed by an operational staff and it was also to be used as a training site," Robertson commented. "Plans then called for 1,600 to 1,800 on site staffers, both Army and government civilians but not including contractor strength or trainees."

But the outlook had changed by 1972, when construction of the site was essentially completed and the Army began installation and testing. A series of agreements in strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) with the Soviet Union limited the United States to one ABM site, that at Nekoma.

"With those agreements, there was no longer a requirement to train people so that by the time the Army took over the site in 1974, many of the duties would be referred to contractor operations," Robertson said. "At that time, the idea was for about 600 Army and federal personnel plus about 1,800 to 1,900 contractor personnel."

Now, the ABM picture in North Dakota was apparently clear. ABM would be a prime factor here, both economically and socially. Communities could count on a steady influx of people moving into the area to work in ABM-related activities. From most estimates, at least 2,500 persons would be constantly employed in ABM work. Few would be natives of the area. Many would bring families.

But in the final months of 1975, Congress began changing ABM's tune. By the time the site reached full operational capacity on Oct. 1, the House had already voted to deactivate the site. Several months later, the Senate begrudgingly followed suit.

When Ford signed the defense bill, the burial of ABM began. But its death has no certainty. Right now, it carries more questions than answers.

The defense appropriations bill signed into law calls for the MSR site to be completely shut down by Oct. 1; the Sprint and Spartan missiles at the 100 launchers located at the four remote launching facilities and at the MSR to be deactivated by Oct. 1; and staff at the MSR to be eliminated by Oct. 1.

The PAR will continue, although its role will change. Rather than an ABM defense operation, the PAR will become part of the nation's missile attack warning and assessment system.

Past that, nothing is certain right now. What procedures must be followed in dismantling the missiles in accordance with SALT provisions? What will become of the missile silos? What will become of the buildings at the site itself? What does the death of ABM mean, a project which has cost \$5.7 billion in research, development and construction, of which \$900 million was spent in North Dakota?

"Nobody knows. Nobody's ducking the questions, the answers just have not surfaced."

Staff reductions at the site have already begun. When the ABM site went fully operational in October, it was staffed by 447 military personnel, 135 government civilians and about 1,200 contractor employees. By Oct. 1 of this year, military personnel will be cut to about 25 while government and contractor staffs will drop to about 27 and 490, respectively, according to the latest estimates. Those that remain after Oct. 1 will be employed in PAR-related activities.

Some of the military personnel at the MSR site at Nekoma have already left, having been reassigned to duties elsewhere. Those who remain, nobody's sure just how many, are "sorting through equipment and supplies, deciding what must be retained for PAR operations and what will be turned back into supply channels," according to Robertson.

"Work has begun on removing the missile components," Robertson added. "It will be done by Oct. 1, and it may be done much in advance of that."

The missile components themselves will be shipped to other defense installations for storage. The missile silos are another question. Perhaps, they will be left open for six months for Russian surveillance or, perhaps, they will be filled with dirt and left forever. No one knows. Robertson said members of the international negotiating committee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have already visited the MSR and remote facilities "to look at the facilities to enable them to better be able to do whatever they're going to do."

The real center of mystery, however, is what will happen to the buildings at the MSR site. Will they be torn down or will they be retained for reuse under other functions?

"We just flat don't know what will happen to them," Robertson, who has been the public affairs officer at the site for six years, commented. "It's like an old boss of mine once said: 'Us ditchdiggers are ready to start digging just as soon as you tell us where and how deep and how wide.'"

Some of the buildings on the site, such as the 100 duplexes used to house Army personnel and their families, are "relocatable." Perhaps the Army will move those buildings to other installations.

But that depends on what use can be found for the total site, including its "immovable objects" such as the headquarters building, the community center, the dining hall, the universal missile building, the power plant and the missile control building, which houses the computer radar and computer systems.

The Department of Defense Office of Economic Adjustment is currently studying the area in an effort to formulate an initial plan for possible reuse of base facilities.

Eldon Erickson, director of the Economic Adjustment Office, said "the facilities will hopefully be retained for community purposes. Right now, we're attempting to identify community needs in view of reuse of base facilities. We're looking at the possibilities."

There is a priority basis for reuse of the facilities with Army needs coming first, then federal agencies, and then state and local entities. If those entities can formulate a qualified program for reuse of the site's facilities, the title to the site's facilities will be transferred to them at no cost.

"We'll be working with the communities over a year or two," Erickson said. "There are certain actions which can be acted on immediately but other actions will take time. Total use of the facilities could conceivably be completed in a year or two."

But right now plans for reuse of the facilities are indefinite. Nothing substantial has yet emerged. Options are being considered but they are only options. Among the options under investigation are reuse of the radar and computer system for weather modification purposes. But the costs of reprogramming the system and then maintaining it are likely to be insurmountable.

Other considerations for the site are reuse of the facilities for a malting plant, a pasta plant or possibly using the missile silos for grain storage. Further study is likely to find those options' unfeasible, however. Also being considered is using the site as a vocational-education school complex, a plan which will also require much more investigation.

"We're looking for long-range recovery and growth," Erickson said. "The prime goal is job generation and replacement, mostly in the private sector in order to help build a healthy economy despite deactivation of the site."

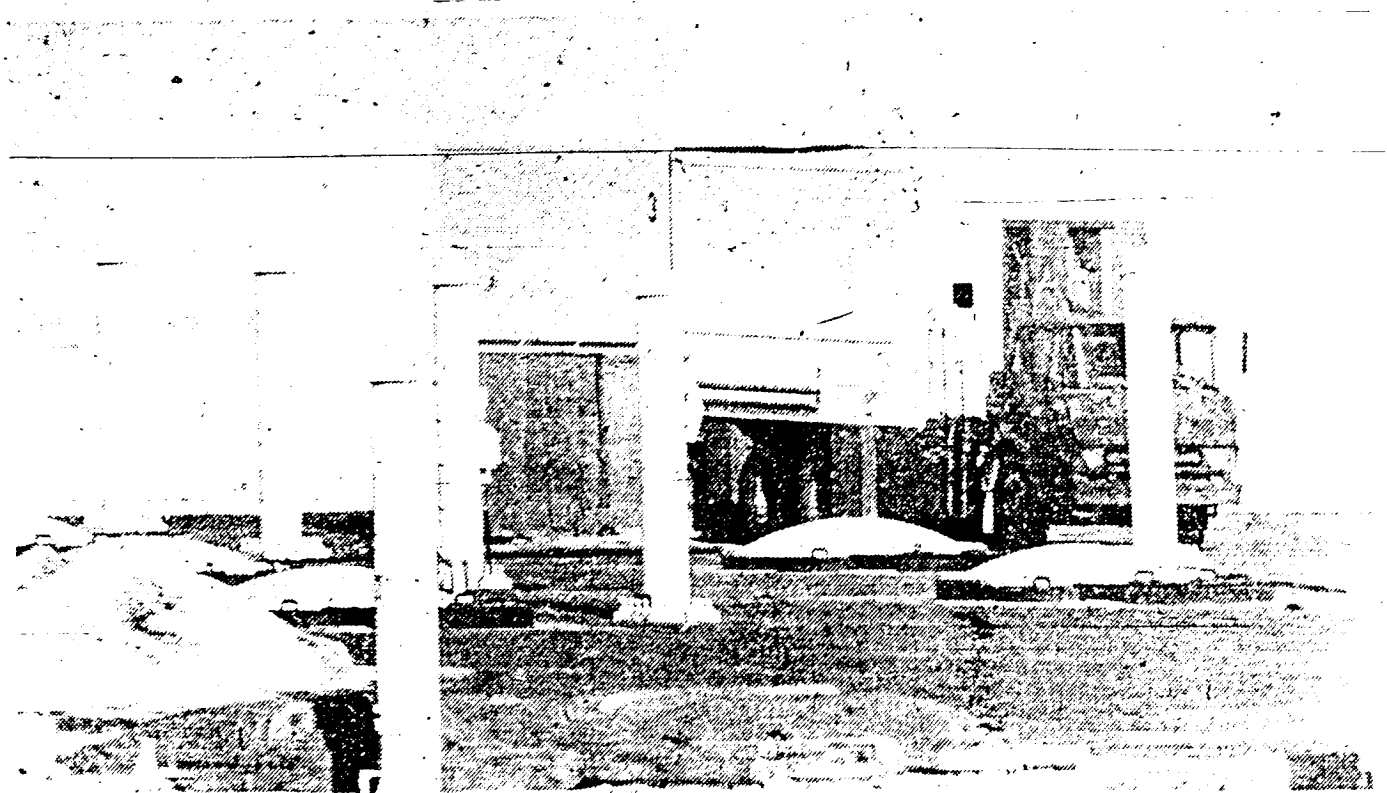
In the end, the only thing certain about the termination of the ABM site is just that — the defense program at the Nekoma complex has been eliminated.

And it is that single-certainty which Robertson finds both disturbing and sad.

"I think that in the area of man's knowledge, his experience, in what he could have learned, we've lost something here," Robertson said.

"I saw a lot of sweat and hard work and tears go into building this," he said, as he walked through the pyramid of the missile control building. "My feeling is that there's a lot of things we could have learned — little bits and pieces we could have picked up. Even if we discount the defense mission, there are other things we could have learned."

"Would it have been worth it? Well... who knows?"



A semi-trailer truck sits over a launching site for an ABM missile. Missile components will be put into the truck as the missile is disassembled.

FF 3-7-68 b1

A light on the control board tells the story of ABM: Readiness level not attainable.

