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CAVALIER AIR FORCE STATION

What does the future hold?

■ 'Uncertainty' is frequently heard word in many Cavalier-area circles

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CAVALIER, N.D. — As the end of the Cold War casts a shadow over the future of Grand Forks Air Force

Base, so too does it create a haze that surrounds the concrete mountain known as the Cavalier Air Force Station.

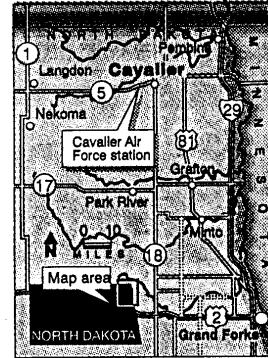
That's why people here have been reading with more than a passing interest about the possible closing of Grand Forks Air Force Base. They understand the situation, if not politically, at least economically.

They live with the same uncertainty about the Cavalier Air Force Station, a 20-year-old radar site used to track missiles in the Northern Hemisphere.

In many ways, Cavalier is a microcosm of Grand Forks, at least in terms of its relationship with a military facility.

The Grand Forks base, with about 5,300 military and civilian employees, is about 11 percent as big as the city of Grand Forks, 15 miles away.

The Cavalier station, with about 160 military and civilian personnel, also is about 11 percent as big as the city of Cavalier, the county seat in Pembina County, about 15 miles away.



have saved \$8 million annually. That's the estimated annual cost of operation.

But a couple of months later, the Pentagon reversed its decision, giving Cavalier at least one more year.

"They wanted to do a little more study, to see if it pays to keep it open," said Lt. Col. Ronald Hager, air station commander. "My job is to make things run so well that they can't close it."

Starting Jan. 1, a new private contractor — ITT Federal Services Corp. — took over operation and maintenance of the facility. The company's bid, \$4.2 million, is 25 percent lower than the previous contractor's contract. The government has an option to extend the contract annually for five years, according to Hager.

There are about 25 military personnel at Cavalier. Their main mission is to use radar equipment to monitor the skies north of the U.S.-Canadian border. But there are other duties at the 260-acre site. The Air Force has separate contracts to provide fire protection and a few other services on the site.

Even though the station didn't

Cavalier and other communities that surround the Cavalier Air Force Station already have lived through one base closing announcement.

Last summer, the Defense Department decided to close the radar missile-tracking facility at the end of September 1992. The plan would

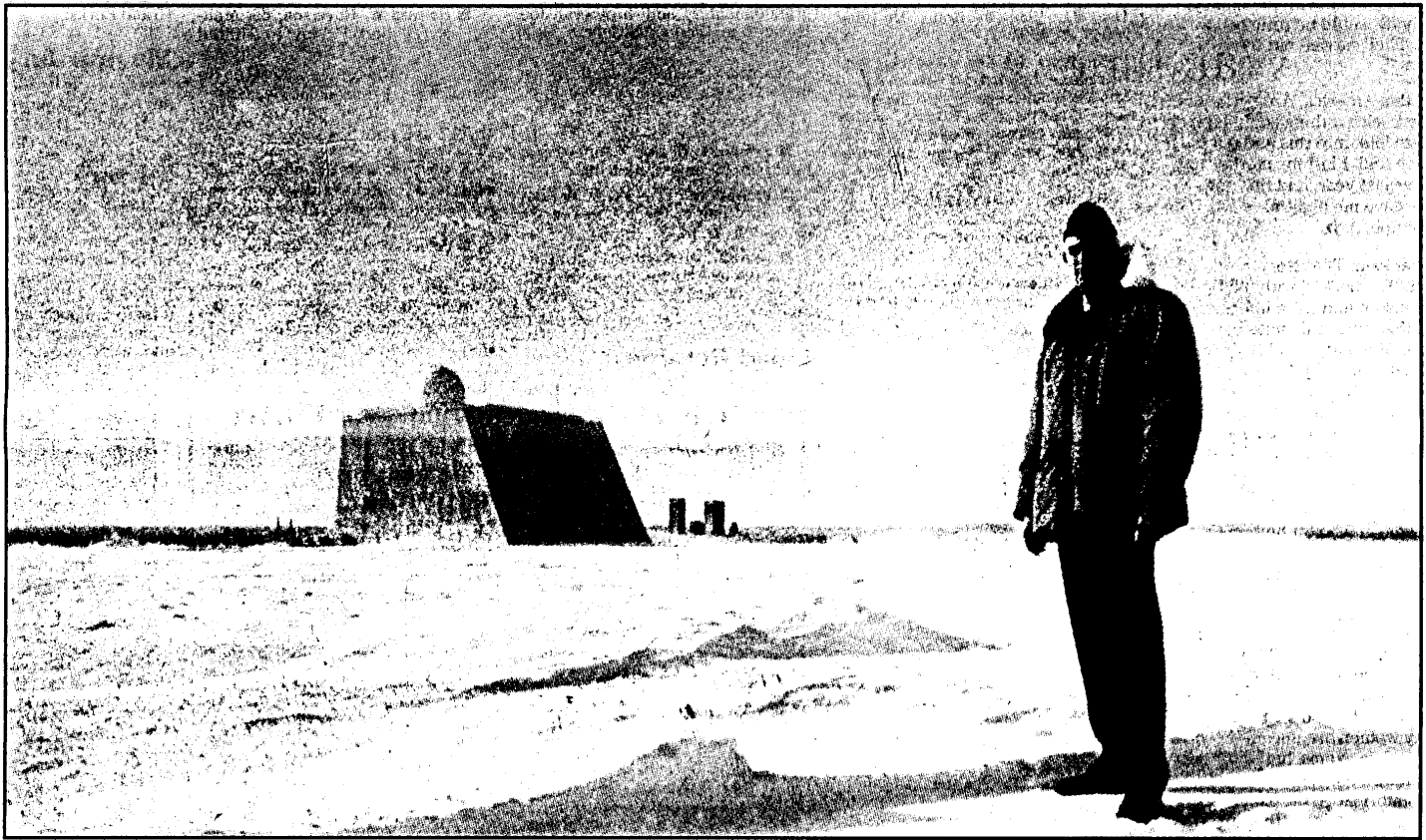


John Stennes, staff photographer

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▲ Without work and with a June wedding planned, Ron Gemmill ponders his future. Gemmill lost his job at the Cavalier Air Force Station Jan. 1, when a new private contractor took over operation and maintenance of the facility.

► Lt. Col. Ronald Hager, commander of the Cavalier Air Force Station, watches over the radar missile-tracking facility located 15 miles west of Cavalier, N.D.



John Stennes, staff photographer

CAVALIER/ Surrounding communities already have paid price with first air station closing announcement

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close, the communities around Cavalier already have paid a price. At least 20 people lost jobs there Jan. 1, when the new operations contract went into effect.

A few military personnel live on the site, in six duplex housing units that were moved about four years ago from the old Nekoma, N.D., antiballistic missile site after it closed in the mid-1970s. They've been refurbished. They're small, but comfortable, according to Hager.

Families with roots

The rest of the people working here live in or near surrounding communities. Cavalier Public Schools have 42 students who are children of military and civilian personnel at the Air Force station. Walhalla and Langdon schools each have 31. A few others attend school in other communities.

"We don't know what the future holds, especially with the new administration," Cavalier Mayor Webb Voorhees said. "We hope for the best, but we don't have much say in it. We've always enjoyed that relationship out there. But we were never sure how long it would last."

Mel Olson, Cavalier school superintendent, estimates that 60 percent to 75 percent of the families with Air Force station jobs might leave the area if it closes.

"Most of them are from local families who have been here for generations," he said.

Olson, who also serves as president of the Cavalier Area Chamber of Commerce, said it may be impossible to replace those highly technical, well-paying jobs in Cavalier, Langdon or Walhalla.

The people laid off earned between \$25,000 and \$35,000, with a few making as much as \$50,000, according to some of the former employees.

"Even with cutbacks, it's going to hurt businesses and the local economy," he said.

Making new plans

Ron Gemmill, who lost his job Jan. 1, is worried about his future. The 27-year-old Edinburg-area resident worked for five years as a radar maintenance technician.

"It's pretty bleak," he said after an interview Wednesday at Job Service. He's trained in electronics and could work in computer or television fields.

"If I do plan to stay in the area, there doesn't seem to be much to offer," he said. He said the best he can hope for is a job that pays \$5 or \$6 an hour. And that's less than half of the salary he just lost.

Gemmill owns a small house in Edinburg, but he moved back to his family's farm northwest of that town after the layoff. He's trying to save some money. Gemmill and Jeanette Paulson, who works at Citizens State Bank in Edinburg, are planning a wedding in June.

He plans to work on his father's cattle farm this spring. He also bought a small farmstead recently. He plans to have a home there by the time he marries, and he hopes to raise cattle there some day.

"But that's five or 10 years down the road," he said. "Right now, I'm just trying to figure out what I'm going to do in the next few months."

Hiring who's needed

Some people already have moved away.

Jeff Day didn't wait for the layoff notices. After the initial decision last summer to close the facility, the lead computer technician at Cavalier started looking for work. In September, he found a job with the state Department of Transportation in Bismarck.

Day and some of the 20 people who no longer are working there are upset about the transition from PRC Inc., the former operations contractor, to Federal Services Corp.

They claim people who were laid off were offered part-time jobs, at reduced hours and wages, with no guarantee of hours worked. And, if they accepted part-time work, they would lose severance pay.

But Federal Services officials say the issue is clear.

When PRC's contract ended Dec. 31, employment ended for all of its employees. Then, Federal Services hired as many employees as it needs to fulfill its contract with the Defense Department, according to Dennis Kurpius, vice president and director of administration for Federal Services Corp., based in Colorado Springs, Colo. The company now employs about 80 at Cavalier.

Federal Services had the contract at Cavalier from 1978 to 1981 and again from 1984 to 1987. The company has contracts at 40 worldwide locations, mostly dealing with radar communications or base support, Kurpius said.

He said the company plans to negotiate with Local 1426 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, but he declined to discuss wage and benefit issues.

"Most of those people, who were working for \$30,000, aren't going to be able to stay in the vicinity, and work for maybe \$500 or \$600 a month," Day said. "That's the sad part about it."

'Like an old Cadillac'

Ken Wilhelmi, a Langdon businessman and the town's mayor, said he's been talking to some of the employees since last summer.

"All along, I've been encouraging people working down there to get their ducks in order, to do a little proactive thinking, rather than reactive thinking," he said. "But's that's a little easier said than done. Next to losing a family member, losing a job might be the most traumatic experience in life."

People at the Air Force station believe an exodus from civilian jobs is the last thing the communities need.

The Air Force, which leases the station from the U.S. Army, has a lease that lasts until the end of September. Lt. Col. Hager's mission is to see that that lease is extended.

"We try to save a few bucks where we can, so we can continue to exist," he said. "We look at what we're going to do in the long term."

He admits officials in Washington are right when they say the radar facility has obsolete radar technology. But, he says, it still does the job.

"It's kind of like an old Cadillac," he said. "If you take care of it, it'll last a long time."

Quick facts about Cavalier Air Force Station

■ **What it does:** Tracks missiles in Northern Hemisphere.

■ **Who it reports to:** The North American Aerospace Defense Command in Cheyenne, Wyo., which provides radar information to a number of bases.

■ **Connection with Grand Forks Air Force Base:** Limited. Contracts with the base for security and for hospital services.