

Building an Air Force base

Master plan to build the huge base was set in motion in 1954

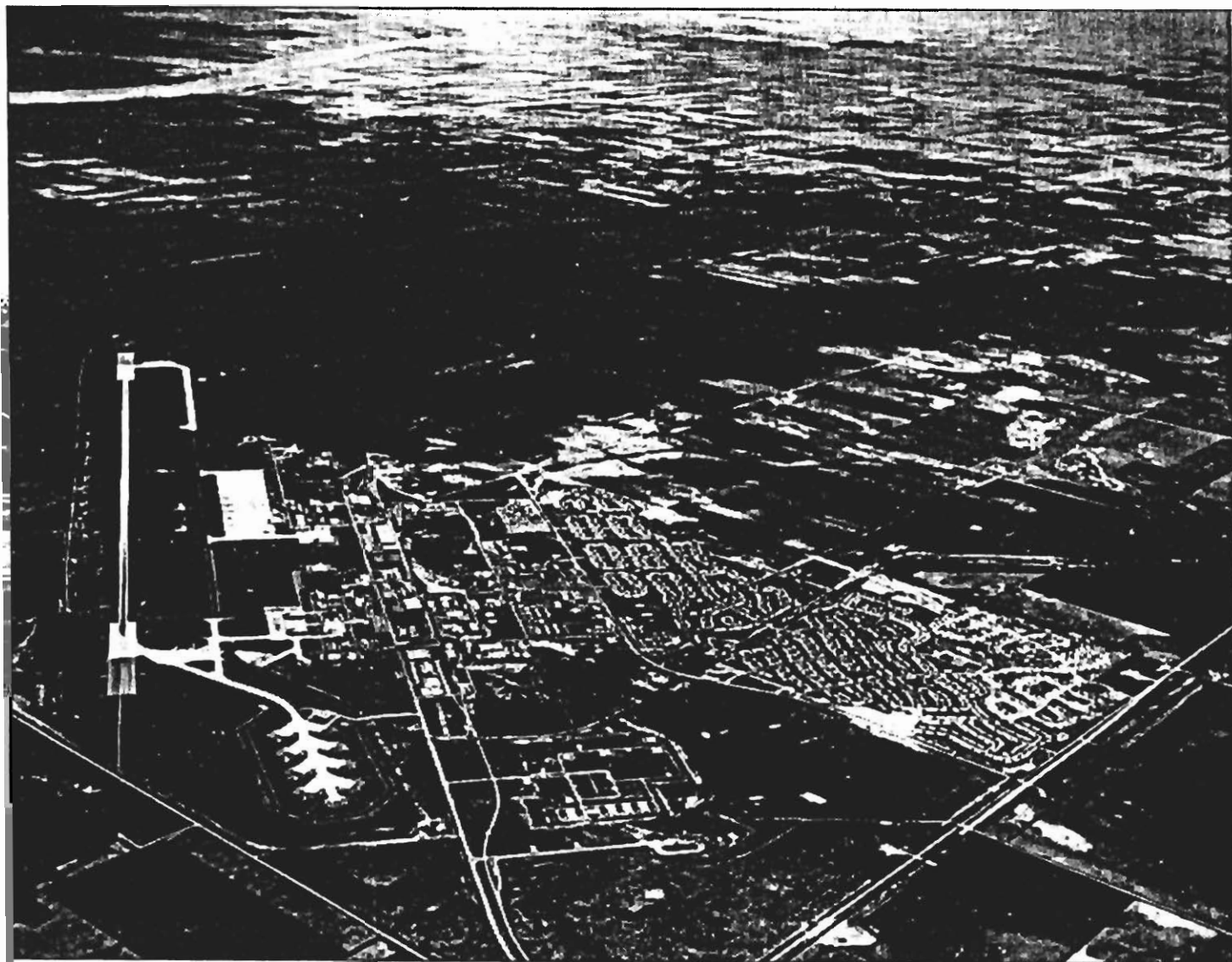
Engineer David Von Niederhausen has a funny story about doing a master plan for the Minot Air Force Base in the 1960s.

The way Von Niederhausen tells it, the base commander at the time was set on the idea of putting the base jail along the flight line.


"Well, the noise would be just excruciating for any prisoners and for any one who works there," he laughed during a phone interview.

Von Niederhausen, from Wilson and Co. Engineering in Selina, Kan., said he stressed to the commander that placing the jail near the flight line would be inhumane, that those who were detained and those who worked there would have to wear ear plugs.

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"I told him that I understand that he may want to punish people, but that he was going a little too far and that it was not a solution," he said.

The debate persisted for a while, but the commander eventually agreed that the jail was better off in a more central location, away from the flight line, Von Niederhausen said.

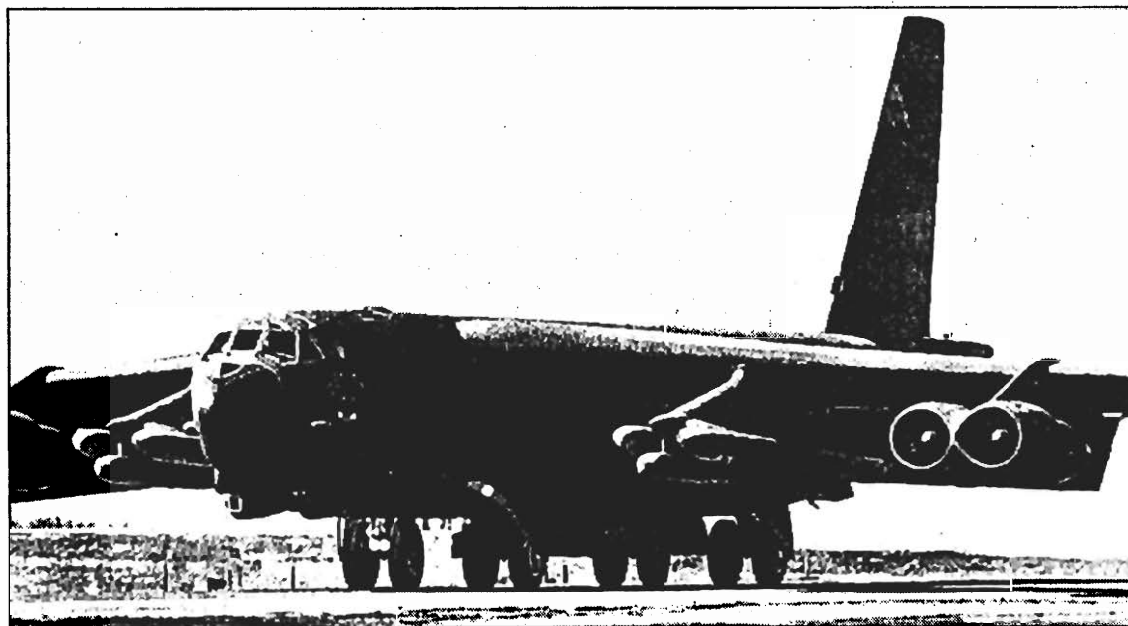
From there, Von Niederhausen's project to design a master plan for Minot AFB project moved on.

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Personnel moved into the completed Minot Air Force Base in March of 1957.

The B-52 Stratofortress has been part of Minot Air Force Base's mission since 1961.



STORIES BY BAIRD HELGESON

Hometown History - Minot Daily News Supp

Paving the way for Minot AFB

Vou could say that Minot civic boosters greased the skids a little by kicking the government some cash to woo the Air Force to build a base in Minot.

Minot civic boosters, bent on bringing a base to Minot, gave a \$50,000 donation to the government — a donation the government “very gratefully accepted,” according to a 1987 report in the Minot Daily News.

However, there is no mention of the \$50,000 donation as being influential in the Air Force’s decision to bring the base to Minot. The official view is that Minot was chosen for strategic reasons.

What is known, said Staff Sgt. Keith Strom, is that about 288 local businesses and people chipped in to raise the \$50,000 that was forked over to the government in 1955.

“We don’t know who was contacted for pledges,” Strom said. “But what we do know is that not all of the people who said they would pledge did.”

Strom is the base historian at Minot Air Force Base.

Minot was not the only city in

the area to flip the government a little cash in an effort to lure a base its way.

“The Grand Forks Chamber of Commerce raised about \$30,000 or \$40,000 that it donated to the government,” City Finance Director John Schmisck said. “It was the same sort of deal as in Minot.”

Grand Forks Air Force Base historian Senior Airman David Williams, however, said he has no records of such a transaction.

“If it did happen, it wouldn’t be something that we would keep records of,” Williams said. “They’d probably keep it pretty hush, hush.”

The 1987 Daily News report indicates that the Army Corps of Engineers, who headed the construction of the base, used the \$50,000 to purchase about 1,500 acres of land for Minot’s base.

“There were about 27 different land owners who sold their land for the base,” Strom said. “Some had very small parcels, while others gave up quite a bit of land.”

Strom said the main base is about 5,500 acres. The 150 Minuteman missile complexes and launch facilities occupy nearly 20,000 more acres.

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Berthold is located just 25 miles west of Minot and was settled in neighboring Carpio. By the early 1900s Frederick C. Walther, known as the town’s first store and assisted in establishing the first school. Walther also donated land to the town for a city park that still bears his name. Carpio, a Spanish word for tent, seems an odd name for a town in North Dakota as this small North Dakota community. Settled by Norwegian immigrants, Carpio quickly grew. By 1905, over 40 thriving businesses were operating. The tradition lives on in Carpio today.

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Minot's base — along with several other bases on the country's northern border, including Grand Forks AFB — was approved by the government in 1954 and built in response to the development of atomic weapons by the Soviet Union at the time, said Staff Sgt. Keith Strom, Minot AFB's historian.

Minot began as an Air Defense Command radar base, Strom said. The radar posts continually watched for surprise attacks from long-range Soviet bombers potentially armed with atomic weapons.

On March 4, 1957, airmen moved onto the completed base and began to prepare it for its defense missions, Strom said.

By 1960 the base was home to 18 F-106 Delta Darts, a jet fighter that could intercept enemy aircraft and shoot them down.

Wilson and Co. picked up the planning job for the base in the mid-1960s, Von Niederhausen said.

Along with promoting the base's mission of being able to protect our country during a surprise attack, the planners also were trying to make the base fit in peacefully with the Minot community, Von Niederhausen said.

"One of the main considerations was noise," he said. "We planted shelter belts and shrubs near the

golf course," he said. "So we tried to find a place where land was available. One of the major issues that we faced was trying to make the base as livable as possible for the airmen."

A result of their efforts is the base golf course, which Von Niederhausen described as one of the most awkwardly located and oddly designed golf courses he's ever seen.

"It's sort of a strange mixture of several left-over pieces of land that we made into a golf course," he said.

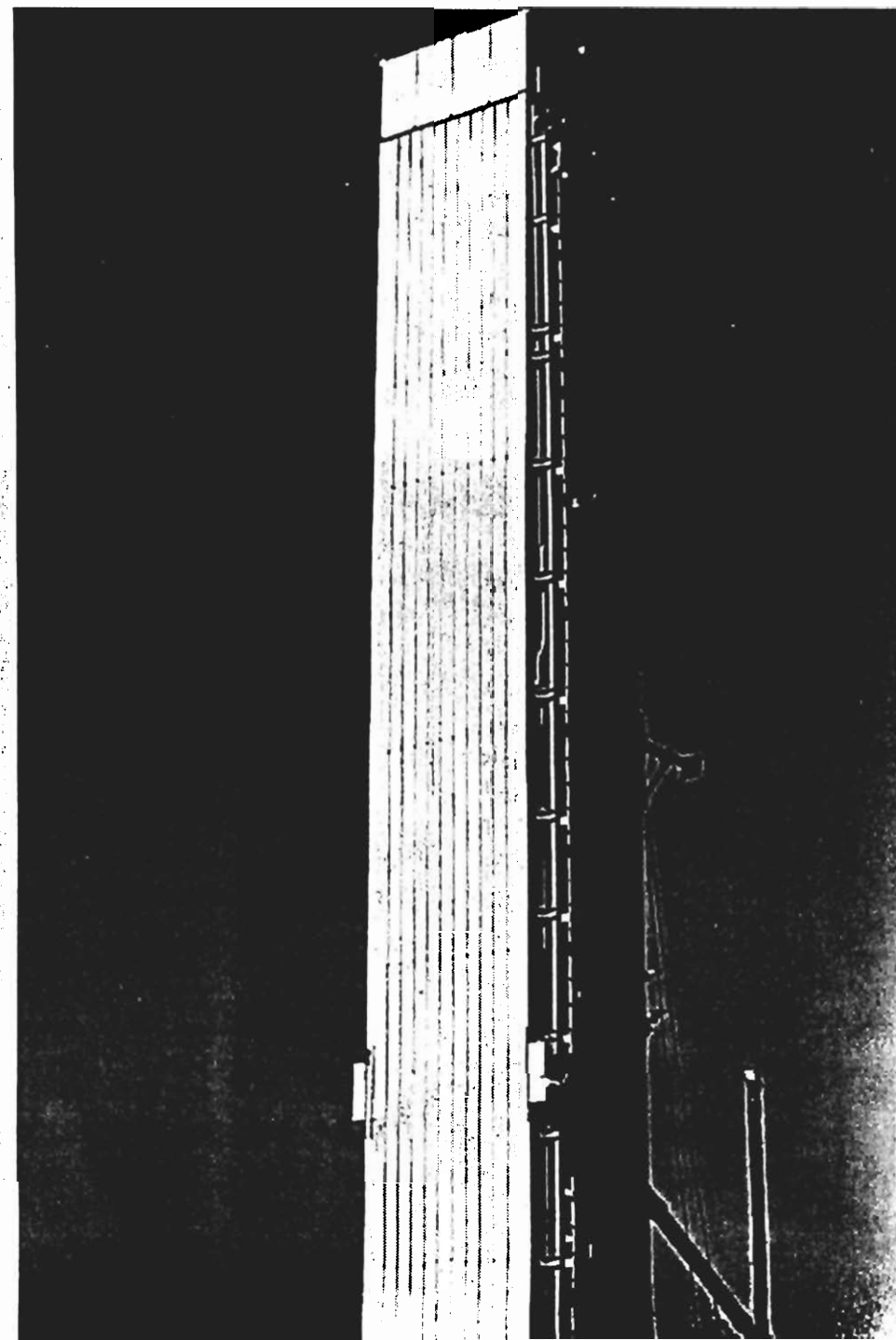
Changing plans

Soon after the base's opening, the emphasis of the base switched from primarily being a jet fighter base, to being a bomber base, Strom said. "Our runway was then extended to be able to land B-52 bombers."

Plans for the base changed again in 1957 when the Soviets launched the Sputnik satellite and the race for space began, Strom said.

With the new emphasis on the space race, the U.S. put heavy emphasis on missile technology over bomber bases because while intercepting jets could knock down Soviet bombers, jets had no chance against missiles.

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Part of that job, and one that they found difficult when it was 30 below, was to inventory all existing trees and shrubs on the base and figure out if they should be removed, moved or left in tact, Von Niederhausen said.

He added that mostly young trees and shrubs were used to buffer the noise and that with 40 years of growth, the shelter belts should now be most effective.

Von Niederhausen said several peculiarities made the Minot AFB project fun and memorable.

"The base officials were very clear that they wanted an 18-hole

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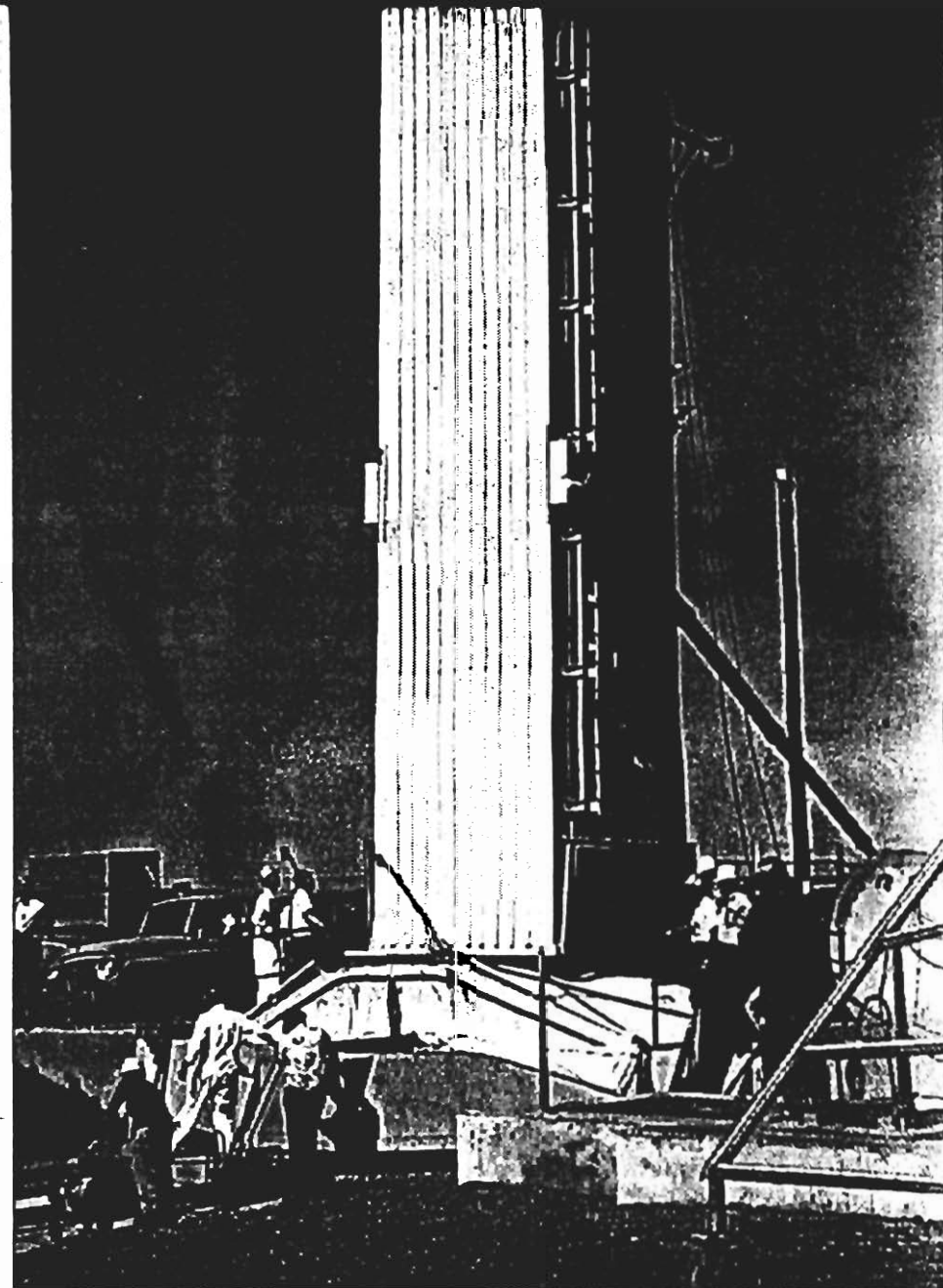
While Wilson and Co. officials had done master plans for 18 other bases, Minot AFB was their largest project, Von Niederhausen said.

In 1958 the Air Force temporarily added high-altitude surveillance to the base's resume.

The Air Force assigned one U-2 surveillance aircraft to Minot, Strom said. The U-2 was capable of flying at 70,000 feet and collecting data at those elevations.

From September 1958 through May 1960, the surveillance plane gathered samples of radioactive debris from U.S. nuclear tests in Nevada and from Soviet bomb tests.

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Minot Air Force Base's 150 Minuteman missiles are rarely seen because they rest in 80-foot deep silos covered with huge concrete hatches. The missiles are spread over eight counties. The above photograph was taken when the first of the missiles, enclosed in a transport erector vehicle, was eased into its complete silo.

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In 1961 the first B-52Hs, called "Peace Persuaders," and the most sophisticated bombers, found their way to Minot AFB, Strom said.

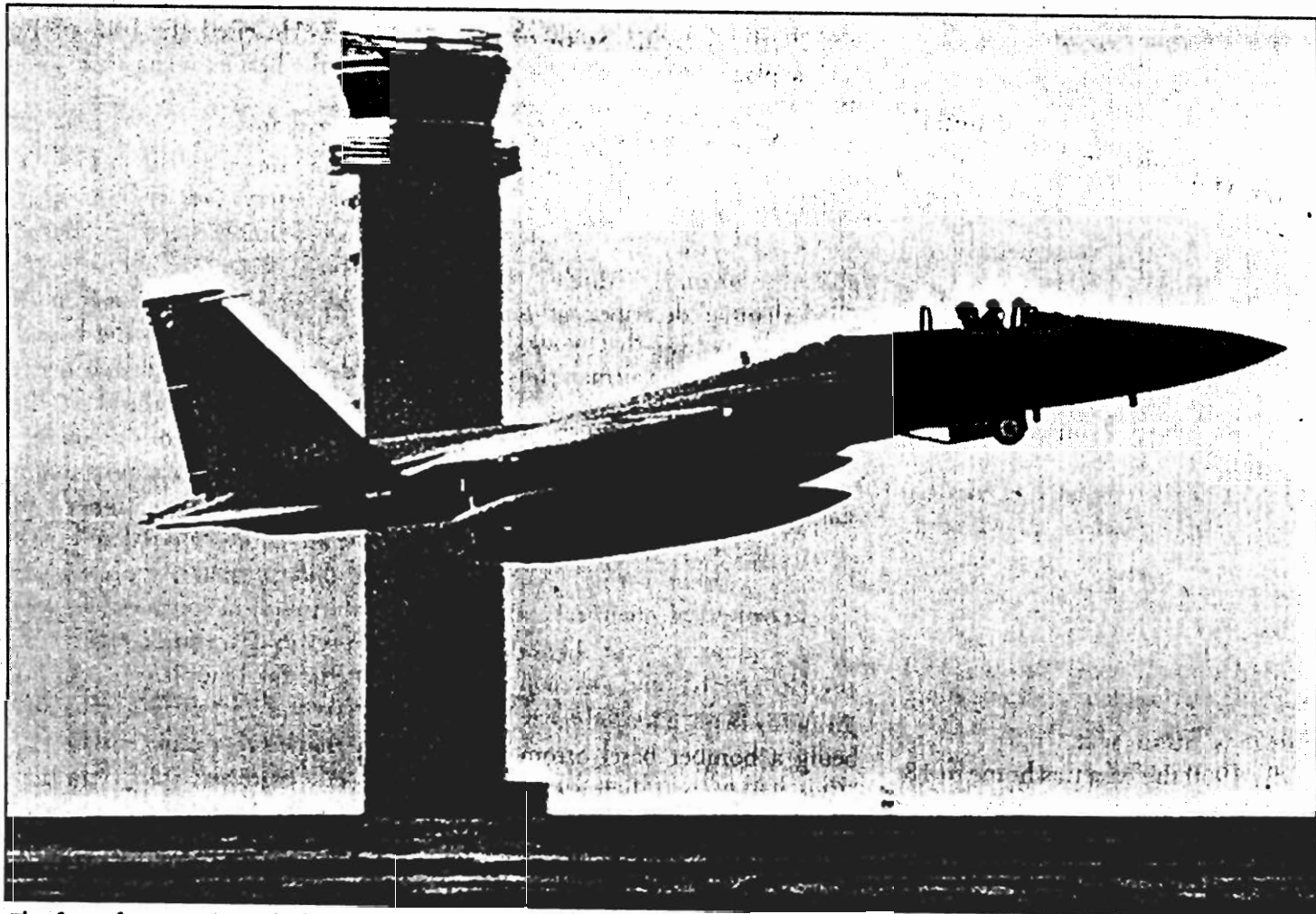
"At this point, the base's mission grew in size and scope," Strom said.

Col. Harold Radetsky, commander of the Minot's 525th Bomb Squadron, said at the time that the B-52 was the "most devastating offensive weapon in our country's arsenal."

Strom said that still may be true today. There are 32 B-52s still stationed at Minot AFB.

Then in 1961, with its new focus on missile technology, the Air Force decided to give Minot a new missile wing. Soon, construction of silos for 150 Minuteman missiles began.

Strom said Air Force officials thought Minot would be a good location for the missiles because of its central location in the country, giving missile launchers a little



The first of two F-15 Eagle fighters leaves Minot Air Force Base on Jan. 7, 1988. The 5th Fighter Interceptor Squadron was deactivated and the 18 fighter planes were transferred to Otis National Guard Air Base in Massachusetts.

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more time to respond in the event of a nuclear strike in the country.

Missile silos built

Construction of the missile silos began in January 1962, with 4,500 Boeing workers digging into the frozen ground, Strom said. The 15 launch control facilities and 150 missiles were in place and operational Feb. 26, 1963.

Strom said the plan was to space the missiles far enough apart so that even a large nuclear attack could not destroy all the missiles. This would give the missile operators a chance to fire back.

The key to keeping the base capable of completing its mission is good base planning, Von Niederhausen said.

"We were in charge of developing a master plan," said Jack Beebe, who was also a planner with Wilson and Co. while the base plan was being developed. "We were to

design a base that could handle bombers, refuelers, missiles and fighters."

North Dakota's extremely cold and dry weather was a shock to planners, Beebe said.

"We all had cars without plug-ins," he said. "At one point, there were about 36 of us up at the base, and only one car that would start. We had one of the airman shuttle us between downtown and the base. It was quite an experience."

Von Niederhausen said all the engineers were spending a lot of their time trying to find ways to beat the weather.

"The physical, chemical and electrical engineers were all working together to try and overcome the weather challenges we faced when building the base," he said. "We really had no idea how cold it could get."

Strom said people on the base now take pride in their ability to withstand the brutal North Dakota

climate. He cited the base motto: "Only the best come north."

A major role

Strom said the base has played and will always play a major role in the community, the state and the defense of the nation.

A Minot AFB statement from the 1960s says the role of the base is: "To deter and resist physical aggression by other governments that would seize control of our planet." And that "airmen are a most important part of the formation of the shield protecting and defending the 10.5 million square miles of the North American continent on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis, never letting up for a moment as they prepare for an eventuality that they hope may never occur."

While readiness is the ultimate mission of Minot AFB and its airman, for Von Niederhausen, it was also important to be respectful of its neighbors and be a comfortable

place for airmen and their families.

"It's amazing all the things that needed consideration," Von Niederhausen said, who spent several, month-long visits when developing the base's master plan. "The problems made the Minot project special. The cold and the severe climate made it a challenge."

'Big presentations'

Von Niederhausen also said that the Minot AFB project came about during the heyday of military spending.

"Bases were a fun type of program," he said. "They were massive, detailed plans. There were big presentations and lots of people involved, flying out there and thinking about how we could make the base better. It was a good time."

Said Von Niederhausen: "We indicated what needed to be built to support the base's mission. And it was our job to support it's mission."



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