

Basin Missile Sites Curious Cold War Relics

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BATUM - Deep beneath the fertile Columbia Basin soil, Bob Echols treks through the skeletal remains of a fortress built in anticipation of a war never fought.

The farming region is home to three mammoth underground labyrinths that once housed intercontinental ballistic missiles and their nuclear warheads.

And Echols, a Warden real estate broker, is trying to sell two of them for \$300,000 each.

"It's not every foolish broker who would put this on the market," he said. "I enjoy the challenge."

The missile complexes were built during the Cold War, when fear of a nuclear attack from the Soviet Union had the American people in a state of perpetual panic.

School children practiced atomic bomb drills, parents stocked up on canned goods for the bomb shelter and everyone tuned into black and white television sets for the latest news from JFK.

Today, the aging steel and concrete tunnels beneath the basin attract curious explorers and vandals who nonchalantly - and perhaps stupidly - ignore the "no trespassing" signs posted by private owners.

Several years ago, an 18-year-old boy used a rope to lower himself in through an air vent at the same missile site where Echols led a tour earlier this month. The boy fell to his death trying to climb back out.

The owner has since opened the main entrance - a stairway that leads to the passageways and rooms 50 feet below ground - in hope that future accidents can be prevented. Still, anyone caught snooping near the complex will be cited for trespassing, Echols warned.

The site is surrounded by rolling wheat fields near Batum, a tiny town in north Adams County. Echols is careful not to advertise the exact location. But judging from the graffiti - a jumble of names, dates and profanities - many thrill-seekers have found their way inside.

Some evidently decided the steel and concrete walls, now marred by rust and peeling gray paint, were a canvas upon which to share their philosophical

wisdom. "Carp eat acid" and "Napalm sucks" are among the spray-painted bons mots.

A Kennewick scuba diving outfit called UnderSea Adventures leads monthly tours through a similar missile site near Royal City. Water from an underground table has leaked through the walls and flooded several of the tunnels. For \$70, divers can explore one of the three 155-foot-deep missile silos.

Fascination with the sites stems partly from their history and partly from their architecture.

Complexes like these and a third near Warden were built throughout the country during the late 1950s to house Titan I missiles. There were 18 sites altogether, with squadrons stationed at Air Force bases in Moses Lake, California, South Dakota, Colorado and Idaho.

The Titan I complexes were the largest of all U.S. missile bases. Each sprawled across 40 to 60 acres and cost an estimated \$135 million to build, said Al Ash, owner of the Batum and Warden sites.

Local workers were hired to excavate the land and help build the complexes.

"My understanding is they had concrete trucks coming and going 24 hours a day," Echols said.

Once completed, the complexes were buried.

They were manned in 24-hour shifts by a squadron of more than 300 men stationed at the Larsen Air Force Base in Moses Lake.

Col. Robert Mullin was the squadron commander at the time the sites closed in 1965. Now retired, he lives in Spokane.

Six men worked in each site at any one time, he said. At least two had to be awake. Complete living accommodations, including a kitchen, dining area, sleeping quarters, running water and electricity were in each site.

"The Titan, in particular, was roomy and really the ambience and environment was not that bad. Of course, many of the men would disagree with me," Mullin said.

"It wasn't like flying. Most people who flew military aircraft loved it. ... There wasn't anything particularly romantic or thrilling about being in the missile bases. But it was a job that had to be done," he added.

Like most of the Titan I complexes, the Larsen sites were only in use for a short time. They became operational in April 1962 and were deactivated in June 1965, a year before the base closed. Technology changed so quickly that by the time they were constructed, newer improved missiles already were being designed.

Franklin County planner Dick German lived near the Warden site while it was used by the military.

"They would run a drill, and all these lights would come on. It just lit up like you wouldn't believe," he recalled.

Clyde Owen was commander at Larsen from 1963 until it closed. Now retired, he lives in Moses Lake.

Maintaining the missiles was routine military work, he said. "They were there. We knew they were there and what they could do."

The missiles were 98 feet tall and 10 feet in diameter. Each cost \$1.5 million to build. They were fueled by liquid oxygen and kerosene and were capable of traveling 620 miles above the Earth at speeds up to 15,000 miles per hour, according to the U.S. Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio.

"They would go above the atmosphere and come in so quickly that the only thing you could knock them out with would be another nuclear warhead. All you could do was hope you'd get close. There was just no defense to them. That's why nobody ever pushed the button, I guess," German said.

Rumor has it the U.S. government allowed the sites to be penetrated by Soviet spies, Ash said. "The idea was to let the Soviets know we have the machinery and it's pretty big and can withstand a nuclear blast."

The Soviets duplicated the weaponry, said Lanni Wright, founding trustee of the National Aerospace Trust. The organization has collected more than 250,000 historic photographs of missile complexes throughout the country and is preparing to sell them to the public.

"By the time they caught up with us, we were far ahead. ... The Russians didn't realize they'd been set up. They wasted all that money on a horrendous, expensive, useless weapons system," he said.

In order to launch the missiles, 104-ton concrete doors at the top of the silos had to be opened perpendicular to the ground. Unlike modern missiles, which

launch from within their silos, the Titan I had to be elevated to ground level before blast off.

That made them extremely vulnerable, Wright said. A single rifle shot would have caused the missile to explode, but not the warhead.

"It was impossible for those nuclear warheads to detonate. They didn't begin the arming sequence until it was 600 miles in the air," he explained.

The silo doors are open at the Warden site. Peering over the edge into the dark holes is enough to make any acrophobe murmur a prayer.

But to experience the sites from within is more unnerving. The lack of sunlight is so complete that human eyes can't adjust to the darkness.

After the Titans were retired, the missile complexes were sold for scrap. Salvagers removed most of the steel panels that made up the tunnel floors as well as anything else of value. Explorers have to be careful where they step, lest they fall between the floor panels and break an ankle - or worse.

The rooms maintain a constant temperature (chilly) and humidity level.

Echols shined his flashlight against the walls of the power house, the largest room in the complex. The 11,304-square-foot dome stored the diesel generators that provided electricity to the compound. An open mezzanine around the perimeter of the room has since been removed.

The floor was suspended several feet above the actual bottom of the site, which prevented noise produced by the generators from echoing through the complex.

Another dome housed the computers that operated the missiles.

Walls were curved to add structural strength in case of an enemy bombing. "Everything was shock-mounted, lights, toilets, everything," Wright said.

At the far end of the complex, opposite the launch silos, is the antenna terminal. Powerful antennas were designed to guide the missiles for the first five minutes after launching, Wright said. After that, they were locked on target.

Since their closure, the sites have been used and considered for a variety of purposes, some practical and some controversial.

The U.S. Forest Service stored 10,000 gallons of a concoction of diesel and DDT, a toxic pesticide, inside the Batum site. It was sprayed on trees to control

infestations. Once the toxicity of DDT became known, the department stopped using the chemical and stored the surplus.

After a few years, it decided it was never going to use it again. The pesticide was pumped out, and in doing so about a barrel full was lost, Ash said.

Before it was cleaned up, some teen-agers sneaked inside the site, lit the pool on fire and caused a substantial explosion. Apparently, no one was injured but the culprits were never caught.

A company bought the Batum and Warden sites during the mid-1960s with the idea of using them for liquid propane storage. "They never could get them sealed properly. There's no good reason why they couldn't. They just had poor engineering advice," Ash said.

So poor, in fact, that several workers died during construction. One man suffocated from inhaling propane fumes. Another was welding when the sparks from his torch ignited the vapors. The blast killed him and a young man standing 30 feet from the silo.

Ash and a former business partner, Marvin Lennington, bought the Warden and Batum sites from the company in the late 1960s to use for liquid chlorine storage. But that never happened, and Lennington died of a heart attack a few years ago. Ash, who lives in Gig Harbor, now owns a chemical company and hopes to retire this year.

They rented the Warden site to a company that stored liquid fertilizer in it during the 1970s.

While getting the Warden silos ready for the fertilizer, workers discovered a skeleton wrapped in a chain locked to a heavy pulley. The remains were identified as an Othello woman who had been missing for four years.

The woman's husband was later convicted of her murder. Former Othello Police Chief Lew Johnson still remembers the case.

"I was looking for her for four years. I firmly believed he killed her but we didn't have a body," he said.

An Idaho man offered \$1 million for the Batum site in 1983 so he could use it to store hazardous chemicals. The man received all the necessary federal and state permits, but local farmers protested so strongly that county commissioners said no, Ash said.

Others have studied the sites for storing grain and valuable documents, growing organic produce and use as a recording studio. B&G Farms, which owns the Royal City missile complex, reportedly tried to convert it for potato storage but was unsuccessful.

Echols has one buyer interested in the Batum site, he said. But in keeping with the mystery and mythology of the Titan I complexes, the buyer hasn't revealed his plans.