

He's the ABM commanding officer, but..

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NEKOMA, N.D. — At first glance, Maj. A. R. Wegner seems like he might be the U.S. Army's answer to the famous "lonely Maytag repairman." But Wegner says he isn't lonely and he's got plenty to do.

Wegner is the commanding officer at the Stanley R. Mickelson Safeguard Complex here. His formal title is "chief of the MSR (Safeguard's Missile Site Radar) inactivation

branch." That's kind of like being named manager of a store which just went out of business.

The Safeguard Complex, housing the nation's only anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense system, was deactivated Feb. 10. The process of removing and dispensing site materials and equipment is ongoing, under Wegner's supervision.

Wegner is now the only commissioned military officer on the base, which in October 1975, when the site became fully operational, had about 120 military officers.

"It feels good," Wegner, who has been stationed at the Nekoma site for nearly five years, explained. "I'm my own boss, you know. No, I'm not lonely. Hell, I'm like a native now."

Wegner is the boss, but at times he might have trouble finding subordinates on the base. He commands a military staff of one, an Army warrant officer. Wegner also directs about 19 government civilians assisting in the "inactivation process."

He also monitors the work of the private contractor employees, who are "involved in the packing and shipping and maintenance of the site." In early December, contractor staff at the Nekoma site totaled more than 120 but that figure is expected to be pared significantly by the end of the month.

"We are providing the background for inactivation, shipment of materiel and equipment off site and monitoring contractors," Wegner commented. "What we have left on the site right now is the tactical equipment which was used to operate the radar, all of which is in various stages of being shipped."

The missiles and sophisticated computer equipment were removed long ago. What is left is tactical hardware.

"We're busy," Wegner, who expects to remain at the site until September, when he retires, continued. "We're busy deactivating the site and taking requests for what's here. We got trucks coming in every day, shipping tons and tons of stuff out. But we still got tons of stuff left."

Wegner remembers when the base hummed with activity. When the site was fully operational last year, it was staffed by 447 military personnel, 135 government civilians and 1,200 contractor employees.

According to the mandate of Congress, deactivation of the MSR site would mean elimination of the MSR staff by Oct. 1, 1976. But Wegner said the Army beat the schedule. By the end of August, the military staff had nearly vanished.

"That's when everybody left and I stayed," he said. "There were about 14 of us then."

As he drives through the base, what Wegner remembers and what he sees present a vivid contrast. West of the command headquarters are 197 units of military housing. The wind whips snow across deserted streets. The housing complex is abandoned.

"I came on five years ago, you know, and I'll tell you this, it gives you a real spooky feeling to drive through here now," Wegner said. "It's kind of a ghost-town feeling. I guess."



Maj. A.R. Wegner is the only military officer stationed at the Nekoma Safeguard Missile Site. (Forum Photo by Leo Kim)