

Danger exists in old neglected missile silo

By Sarah Samson

From 1961 to 1965, 12 missile silos around Lincoln housed Atlas-F ICBM missiles. If fired, the 82 foot missiles would have been aimed at the Soviet Union with 389,000 pounds of thrust, at a speed of 18,000 mph.

Now, nearly 20 years later, an abandoned silo is like a "graveyard," said Ray Mulder, partial owner of the missile silo near Firth.

A graveyard is not an exaggeration. Twenty-four year old Dan Spencer died in the missile silo near Elmwood. Spencer drowned in the 140-foot deep silo scuba diving in 1979. *Journal-Star* stories on the incident report he became snagged and tore his suit which drew air from his tank. John Olsson, who was asked by the Lincoln Fire Department to aid the search in recovering Spencer's body, said Spencer started diving with only half a tank of air, and simply "ran out." Conflicting reports make it uncertain to the actual cause of Spencer's death.

There are 12 missile silos around Lincoln, according to Major Chuck Manker of the Strategic Air Command in Bellevue. Some of the more notable ones are in or near Eagle, Firth, Elmwood, and Crete. Out of the 12, some can be entered, either the silos have never been cemented shut, or if they have been, people have broken in. All of the silos, previously owned by the federal government, are constructed similarly.

Firth Silo

The missile silo in Firth, owned by the Firth Co-op Elevator, seems to be one of the more well known, among the silos. From on top of the ground, the Firth silo looks like a cement shack covered with graffiti. However, there is much more to it than that. Once one enters the silo head first through the jagged hole on the side of the wall, total darkness surrounds him. One could not survive in the silo without a flashlight. Shine the flashlight around, and graffiti can be seen everywhere along with possibly dead chicken parts (if one has been sacrificed recently) and beer cans.

The damp silo is filled with many rooms, cat walks, elevators (out-of-use), and staircases. A spiral staircase must be taken to get to the bottom of the silo, where water makes it impossible to go any further. Throughout the silo, there are holes in the floor that one could easily step in and fall seven stories down. In one portion of the silo, to go on, one must be braced between a bar and a wall, and take a four-foot step down and over 70 feet of nothingness onto an unsteady floor.

Saying the silos are dangerous is an understatement. Words cannot describe how unsafe and terrifying it feels to have been in the abandoned silo.

"I've only been there once (to the Firth silo), and I don't plan on going back," Linda Helmink of Hickman said. "It's something

to do. There's lots of parties there because there's tons of beer cans all over and I've heard strange stories about drug dealing going on there," she said.

Senior Kevin Cowan has been to the Firth silo twice. "It's sort of exciting, sort of eerie down there," he said. Cowan said he knew of a boy falling in the silo and breaking his neck, but would not reveal the name.

Jim Brinkman, 18, of Hickman, admitted that he was one of those who tore apart chickens at the silo. Brinkman said that there was a drug ring out there this summer, that devil worshippers go there often, and he had heard rumors about people dying there. "It's pretty well known," he said.

Silo a Nuisance

Captain Priblya of the Pentagon said, "There haven't been any missile silos around Lincoln in use for quite a number of years." This statement is probably not accurate according to Mulder, "Sure, co-op doesn't use it, but other people do," he quipped. The Atlas missiles were deactivated in 1965 because they became obsolete.

"It's a nuisance," said Dick Osterhaus of the Firth Co-op Elevator. "We had intended to make use out of it in the future, but we never did. There's nothing good about it. We've had problems with people being in there. We put up no trespassing signs; they tear them down. We cemented it shut; they break in. The state patrol and police are well aware of it," he added.

If the state patrol is "well aware" of the Firth silo, or any silo, they disclaim any knowledge. Various officers at the state patrol headquarters said they "hadn't heard anything" about the Firth silo, and have never been given reason to patrol the area.

"I've been here nine years, and it's been closed all that time," said Firth Sheriff John Bruns. Bruns said he knew of no vandalism at the silo and "wouldn't know" whether people entered the silo.

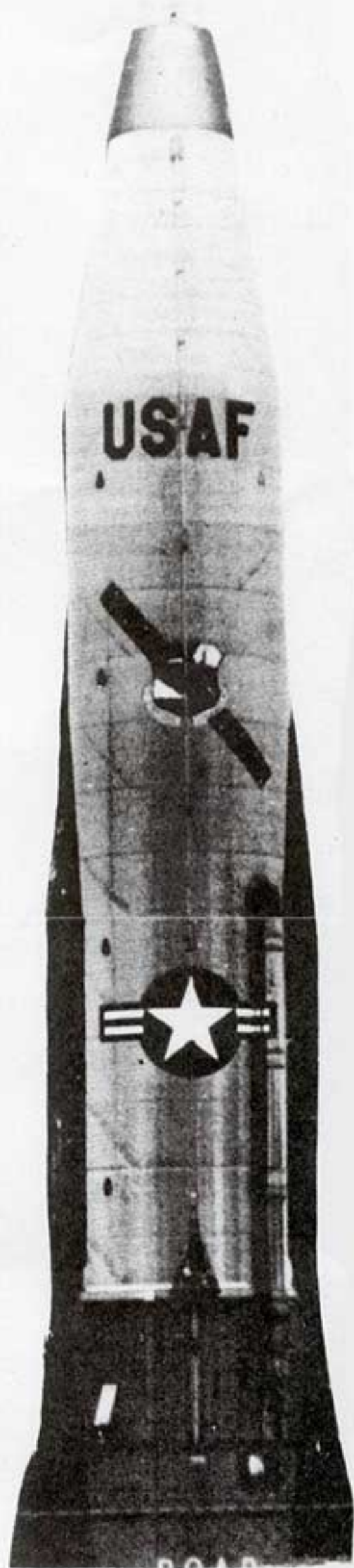
Station Manager of the Firth Co-op Elevator, Jim Loschen refused to comment on the silo, saying "I don't feel I can discuss this over the phone."

Prettier in heyday

Still the silo seems to attract sightseers. "It's got to be more than natural curiosity," said Mulder. "People keep breaking in who've been there before, and we don't know why."

Though the Firth missile silo was only officially used for four years, it is apparently still used by the curious today. But ironically, it may have been a prettier site in 1961 when the nuclear warhead was still in it. Mulder remembers how it was back then: "It was a beautiful missile. They'd haul it out on a truck, and you could stand out on the road and watch shift changes. It was heavily guarded with dogs and fences. It was a heyday," he paused. "Now it's like a graveyard."

VIEWED AT SAC in Bellevue, this missile is similar to the one that was housed at the silo near Firth.



UNEXCITING AND DESOLATE the silo looks like a cement shack covered with graffiti.

Pits of destruction