

## A Family Friendly Force: Providing a Family Visitation Option for SAC Alert Crews

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On January 16, 1974, commanders at McConnell Air Force Base near Wichita, Kansas, and members of the local media ate a lunch of steak and baked potatoes. A photograph in the official base newspaper shows a woman in a beehive hairdo about to hand a plate over cafeteria glass to one of the honored guests. The occasion was the opening of a new alert center, ready to house up to twenty-four member crews of KC-135 airplanes. The base paper called it “the newest and finest alert facility in all the Strategic Air Command” (SAC) and a “vast improvement over old alert facilities.”<sup>1</sup> The *Wichita Eagle* was more objective in its description but did call the center “a one-of-a-kind alert facility.”<sup>2</sup>

Having pleasant living conditions and quality amenities mattered to the flight crews. They served twenty-four hours a day for a week at a time, restricted to the alert facility itself and to nearby destinations on the base equipped with alert signals. Being “on alert” kept the crews close to their airplanes and away from their homes and families. The new volleyball, basketball, and handball courts that were part of the \$1 million facilities at McConnell, under construction since late 1972, were a welcome distraction. The flights crews now also had their own dining hall, removing the need to leave and eat at the fire department building; this allowed dignitaries to share their steak dinner at the opening. The two-person rooms had individual heating and air conditioning units. Perhaps most important, the facility was new above-ground construction right on the flight line, rather than a converted dormitory or an underground bunker like the alert facilities on most other SAC bases. New construction meant better living conditions. Proximity to the flight line increased crews’ ability to get bombers and refueling planes, also known as tankers, into the air, ready to strike.<sup>3</sup>

A year later, another amenity was added near the alert facility: a family visitation center. This was a nondescript building with a swing set in the yard. It was arranged and furnished to be somewhat homelike, with tables for eating, a television and furniture in the great room: “Ranch oak,”

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<sup>1</sup> *Contrails* (McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas), January 18, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> “SAC Opens All-New Alert Dorm,” *The Wichita Eagle*, January 17, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; *Contrails*, January 18, 1974.

recalled one crew member. “Seems to be the only kind of furniture the Air Force ever bought.”<sup>4</sup> Pam Landin, who was in elementary school when her father served alert duty, also remembered “those big, heavy wood chairs with the huge, dark brown pleather cushions.”<sup>5</sup> There was a kitchen in which families could prepare meals, separately or together. It “was basically a three-bedroom home with a large living room and an open kitchen both with west-facing windows. All the bedrooms were open, no beds, but somewhat private space for gatherings,” said Susie Wickiser, who took her sons to the center to visit her husband, Jim. “I thought the setting was pleasant with the lawn, trees and playground. I guess we mostly sat and chatted while the kids played outside,” said Landin’s mother, Berta. Stephen Bate said, “It was never like home, but it was a decent way to spend a little family time.”<sup>6</sup>

Constructing and operating a family center was a small part of the larger effort to make alert duty tolerable. The family center was only one of the amenities available at the alert center, and the alert center itself was only used by a small percentage of active duty personnel at McConnell. Even so, this small effort represents the way the Air Force was thinking about its service members and their families in the 1970s and 1980s, when “it was crucial that the services become ‘family friendly.’” The Strategic Air Command was in place to deter nuclear attacks on the United States through its ability to strike or counterstrike with nuclear missiles and bombs. This mission required getting and keeping qualified, motivated personnel.<sup>7</sup>

With the establishment of the all-volunteer force, the United States Air Force (USAF) had to recruit differently, and it had the welcome problem of an increased percentage of service members who reenlisted or stayed for a career. In particular, the Air Force had to consider the particular demands and anxieties associated with alert duty, including the families of crew members who were on alert. In a related shift, military

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<sup>4</sup> *McConnell 1983 building 976 area*, photograph, 22nd Air Refueling Wing Archives; Stephen Bate to author, email, March 18, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Pam Landin to author, email, May 4, 2015. Air Force furniture memories were discussed in several emails from crew members and their families. “Still to this day when I see ‘old’ military furniture, it takes me back not only to alert visitation, but with the gray and (olive drab) green chairs, big old metal desks, and old air maps, the squadron office,” Landin continued.

<sup>6</sup> Susie Wickiser to author, email, March 19, 2015; Berta Landin to author, email, May 3, 2015; Stephen Bate to author, email, March 18, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Rostker, “The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force,” Rand Corp., last modified 2006, accessed March 14, 2015, [rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9195.html](http://rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9195.html).

bases in this era were increasingly “suburbanized,” offering the kinds of activities and facilities middle-class Americans increasingly expected to access without traveling into a city. There was a trend toward informal entertaining and recreation; such family-oriented recreation also reflected the family-and-flag nostalgia that emerged in the 1970s, a touchstone for families in a tumultuous time of changing social norms and Cold War anxieties. Providing a family visitation center for alert crews such as the ones who were stationed at McConnell was a small but natural response to these trends and pressures.

That the family visitation center was constructed after the alert center is typical of the military, which appropriately establishes the resources necessary for its critical missions first, then turns to other considerations. In some ways this calls to mind the old saw that “if the military had wanted you to have a family, it would have issued you one”; families perceived some truth in this bit of humor. A sociologist asked by the Navy to study Navy wives in 1978 found that they felt disconnected and unsupported. Her study urged the military to address the wives’ sense that that “they are an unwelcome byproduct of active duty participation in the system; to accord them legitimacy in the system, not for altruistic reasons, but because they are in fact a keystone to the continued survival of the system.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly some families of people who serve today would relate to this wish for agency within the military system. Families’ needs are complex, ever-changing, adaptive, and resource-intensive. Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s, it appears that the military increasingly viewed consideration of military families’ needs as a tactic for recruiting and retaining active duty service members. Offering alert crews at McConnell Air Force Base a place to see their families was one such consideration.

Of course, the real audience for the family center and volleyball court and TV viewing room (with an ashtray next to each row of its theater-style seats) was far from Kansas in Moscow. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Air Force, along with the White House and Congress, was managing a Cold War with the Soviet Union. Policy makers, military personnel, and the public experienced anxiety over the very real possibility that a nuclear exchange could happen. Though preoccupied with both expanding and trying to end the war in Vietnam, the Richard Nixon White

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<sup>8</sup> Sabra Woolley, “Study of a Navy Housing Area,” in *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force*, ed. Bernard Rostker (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), CD-ROM, 11.

House in the 1970s aimed to contain the Soviet Union's expansion through what historian John Lewis Gaddis calls "asymmetrical response," applying the strengths of the United States where the Soviet Union was vulnerable and avoiding conflicts in territory chosen by the enemy. This meant being ready to negotiate with the Soviets when Nixon and Henry Kissinger deemed that they were being reasonable while at the same time maintaining military strength to resist when the Soviets were not. The Jimmy Carter administration essentially maintained this policy "of distinguishing between levels of threat and of keeping responses commensurate with means," while adding an emphasis on modifying Soviet behavior to better match Carter's views on international human rights. Under Ronald Reagan, the response to the Soviet Union became more symmetrical, but it also employed a wider range of approaches: an increase in both conventional and nuclear arms, a focus on human rights, fiscal pressure, and clandestine support for efforts to oppose or depose Communist governments in countries around the world. Reagan intended to overpower the Soviet Union, which also put him in a position to negotiate an end to the Cold War as the Soviet economy and political will fizzled.<sup>9</sup>

An assumption of all of these administrations was that nuclear weapons were fundamental to the defense strategy of the United States. It could be argued that in wars throughout the twentieth century, the U.S. relied on technology and money to reduce its dependence on conventional weapons and the ground forces needed to deploy them. With the United States National Security Council document 16/2, known as NSC 162/2, in October 1953, that approach became policy. "From this point on, U.S. strategy—and NATO strategy as well—was to compensate for manpower deficiencies by making credible the prospect of escalation to nuclear war if the Soviet Union attacked."

The Strategic Air Command was formed in 1947 as a central part of the effort, with a mission of nuclear deterrence and global strike capability. Two years later, the secretary of the Air Force claimed "Existence of this strategic atomic striking force is the greatest deterrent in the world today to the start of another global war." In 1973, when U.S. bombing in Cambodia ended, SAC fielded 622 B-52 Stratofortress bombers assigned to 20 Heavy Bomb Wings, responsible for carrying enormous firepower, and one Strategic Wing, with more emphasis on

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<sup>9</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 302-356.

reconnaissance.<sup>10</sup> A *New York Times* article about the retirement of the B-52s in 1991 described “their swept wings, 185 feet from tip to tip, sitting atop hulking fuselages and cavernous bomb bays, (which) spoke volumes about American nuclear invincibility at the outset of the cold war.”<sup>11</sup> A flight mechanic who worked on them in the late 1960s was less poetic; Marvin T. Broyhill and his fellow mechanics referred to the B-52 as the BUFF (Figure 1), which stood for “Big Ugly Fat Fuckler.” But even he was captivated by the bombers: “I loved to watch a B-52 take off...As it gained speed, the wings would begin to rise, then they would fall...The plane looked like some enormous prehistoric bird running and flapping its wings. Finally, the wings stayed up.”<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1. A B-52 Stratofortress takes off from Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, to participate in an exercise scenario. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Master Sgt. Mahmoud Rasouliyan, accessed March 17, 2016, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AB-52\\_Stratofortress\\_Takeoff.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AB-52_Stratofortress_Takeoff.jpg).

These bombers were supported by 670 EC/KC-135 tankers in 38 Heavy Air Refueling Squadrons, which could refuel other planes in midair,

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<sup>10</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 165-166; David A. Anderton, *Strategic Air Command: Two-thirds of the Triad* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 37-39; Norman Polmar, ed., *Strategic Air Command: People, Aircraft, and Missiles* (Annapolis, MD: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co. of America, 1979), 130-132.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, “And for the B-52’s, the Alert is Finally Over,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1991. Tyler perhaps stretched a point about the bomber’s profile, alleging it “has come to symbolize the threat of nuclear war as much as the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima demonstrated its impact.” Certainly cultural historian Paul Boyer would disagree that the two images carried similar weight.

<sup>12</sup> Martin J. Broyhill III, “A Peaceful Profession,” (unpublished manuscript, April 3, 2001, Microsoft Word file), 69.

prolonging their flight times. For the nuclear program, this meant an extended range for B-52s and, in the event of a Soviet first strike, an increased likelihood of U.S. nuclear bombs reaching their targets. Some KC-135s were modified to operate as airborne command centers or radio relay centers. On a typical day in the 1970s, about half of the USAF complement of tankers was in the air. The KC-135 (Figure 2) looks like a silver airliner, which makes sense, as it was built by Boeing. Only its function changes the way it looks. “Back snuggled underneath the rear fuselage is a windowed blister, and further aft is the refueling boom, retracted to lie against the fuselage belly line during normal cruise flight.” When refueling takes place, the boom is lowered and connected to the recipient aircraft.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 2. A plaque offers best wishes to a departing member of a KC-135 tanker crew member at Kincheloe Air Force Base, Michigan. Photograph courtesy of Stephen Bate, March 1977.

Bombers and tankers were inextricably linked in their task to get off the ground immediately in the event of a nuclear strike. Broyhill recounted the description his Air Force instructor provided:

It took an (intercontinental ballistic missile) only twenty-eight minutes to travel from the Soviet Union to the United States. At best, the U.S. would have fifteen minutes notice that an attack was in progress. The command centers had three minutes to decide to issue an attack order. That left twelve minutes. Thus it was essential that our planes be off

<sup>13</sup> Polmar, *Strategic Air Command*, 130-132; Anderton, *Strategic Air Command*, 187-192.

the ground as quickly as possible. The plan called for the bombers to take off on both the runway and parallel taxiway, followed by the tankers. The planes were supposed to take off in an extremely tight formation, one breathing up the tail of the one in front of it, so that one was off the ground every fifteen seconds.<sup>14</sup>

Preparation and drilling for this eventuality required flight crews to stay near their planes. In the 1970s and 1980s this was accomplished by each SAC base always having crews “on alert.” These crews lived near the flight line and had to stay in the range of the Klaxon alarm’s call.<sup>15</sup> When the Klaxon sounded, alert crews stopped whatever they were doing to get to their planes. In its annual reports from the major commands, the magazine published by an organization that advocates for the Air Force and its members called SAC’s drilling and preparation program “the most realistic ever devised for a modern military force.” It is hard to evaluate such a claim, given that the United States has fortunately been spared the necessity of nuclear conflict, but it is clear that SAC made a significant investment in simulations and education. The ability of alert crews to respond effectively was a key part of the mission of deterrence.<sup>16</sup>

Beginning July 3, 1973, McConnell became an all-SAC base, housing the 384<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Wing in addition to the 381<sup>st</sup> Strategic Missile Wing. The United States increasingly recognized the threat of Soviet nuclear submarines, and in the years before the change of mission at McConnell, Congress appropriated nearly \$21 million for the “satellite basing program,” dispersing bombers and tankers and basing them at locations that, like McConnell, were closer to the center of the country. “The location of alert forces as far as possible from submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) firing areas off our coasts allows the maximum amount of time for aircraft to be successfully launched,” said a committee report. Satellite basing required additional runways and related construction, including the alert center and family visitation facility at McConnell. This was an even higher priority for Congress than it was for Air Force brass; the House Committee on Appropriations was annoyed at

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<sup>14</sup> Broyhill, 39-40; “Strategic Air Command: A Major Command,” *Air Force Magazine* 59, no. 5 (May 1996): 74.

<sup>15</sup> “Klaxon” is a proprietary eponym. Though it is a brand name for one type of alert siren, it is commonly used to mean alert siren.

<sup>16</sup> Broyhill, 39-40; “Strategic Air Command: A Major Command,” *Air Force Magazine* 59, no. 5 (May 1996): 74.

the rate of response to its investment: “The Committee is distressed and disappointed at the conflicts, inconsistencies, and delays which have hampered the planning and the construction program of facilities for strategic aircraft. The Committee’s hearings show that the Air Force’s fiscal year 1973 military construction program does not realistically reflect an effort to come to grips with the changes required in aircraft deployments which result from an increasing threat from SLBMs.” The report notes that the USAF actually accepted less money than was initially provided, certainly a rarity, then had what Congress viewed as the gall to request more. The request was denied, as it included funds for construction on bases near oceans. Appropriations asked for a study of the need for coastal bases in 1972—and said it would not consider future funding requests until the report was delivered. “The Committee is convinced that increased emphasis on inland basing is necessary in the very near future if manned bombers are to remain a viable part of our strategic force.”<sup>17</sup>

The continued need for alert operations on SAC bases, particularly as they moved inland in the 1970s, meant the Air Force had to think about the needs of alert crew members. Many of these airmen had families. Often the families lived minutes away in base housing or in one of the towns near the base. Certainly there were altruistic reasons for the Air Force to care about military families. After all, “how many civilian families are called upon to uproot their families involuntarily every few years...to endure twenty-four-hour alert duty assignments...to work overtime without additional compensation ...?”<sup>18</sup> It was also true that at times in the 1970s and 1980s both Congress and the White House cared about the plight of military families. As with the move to satellite basing, such pressure could shift Air Force policy and practice. The most pressing reason for the Air Force to concern itself with satisfying military families in the 1970s and 1980s, however, was the transition to the all-volunteer military force.

At first, this seems counterintuitive. From the time it was established as a separate branch of the United States military, the Air Force was effectively a volunteer force. In the Vietnam era, the Air Force and Navy had enough volunteers that they did not rely on conscription. With the Army draft ending, however, the Air Force would no longer have the stream of men who enlisted because they viewed the Air Force as a more prestigious, easier, or safer alternative. One way to view the end of the

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<sup>17</sup> Comm. on Appropriations, H.R. Rep. No. 92-1424, at 8, 13 (1972).

<sup>18</sup> Joe Shoshid, “AFA Goes to Bat for Military Commissaries,” *Air Force Magazine* 58, no. 7 (July 1975): 84-85.



draft was as a free market decision during the rise of the free market thinking in the 1970s; the USAF now had to compete for qualified personnel on a more even open market.<sup>19</sup>

The draft was a fact of life for American men for much of the twentieth century, about 35 years. Beginning in 1969 President Richard Nixon requested that a task force study the efficacy of ending the draft. It was not long before conversations shifted from if the draft should end to how. A White House memo to Ken Cole, assistant to the President for domestic affairs, at the beginning of 1970 tipped him off about the likely recommendations of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force, that "an all-volunteer military is both desirable and feasible, and that we should move in that direction as quickly as possible." Perhaps the committee moved quickly because the President wanted an outcome that would prove politically popular even if there was opposition from some military strategists. Nixon signed a law pausing the selective service system in January 1971, and the draft formally ended two years later.<sup>20</sup>

For some military thinkers and Washington politicians, the option of reinstating the draft was on the table throughout the Cold War. "The all-volunteer concept, under which the Air Force has operated since its inception, is currently working in all the services," noted an Air Force Association editorial in 1976, wondering, "how heavily one can depend on the continued effectiveness of the all-volunteer concept. As the economy swings upward and civilian jobs become more plentiful, enlistment quotas may not be met so easily." In his confirmation hearing for the post of Director of Selective Service in 1979, Bernard Rostker had to reassure Senator Strom Thurmond that if directed by Congress he would implement a return to conscription. The question returned to the news cycle in 1980 when President Jimmy Carter made Selective Service registration mandatory again, a requirement intended to make the logistics easier in the event of reinstatement of the draft. The White House watched a series of Gallup polls in 1980 and 1981 that initially showed support for Carter and even for the concept of returning to the draft by nearly a 2-1 margin. By the end of the polls, support for and opposition to the draft were nearly even. Whatever people thought of the policy, young men in the 1970s and 1980s were well aware that they were not required to serve.

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Anderson to Ken Cole, memo, January 10, 1970, in *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force*, ed. Bernard Rostker (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), CD-ROM.

They would only enter the military if it appealed as a professional option, and if they enlisted, they would only remain if military service continued to make sense for them.<sup>21</sup>

Even with the pay increase that accompanied the change to the all-volunteer force, military recruitment in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to be daunting work. The war in Southeast Asia was unpopular and, in the minds of most Americans, unsuccessful. Though later thinking questioned its reality, there was a perception of a “hollow force,” a military power stronger on paper than in practice because of underfunding, missing equipment, drug abuse, apathy, and inequality. The failed Desert One response to the Iranian hostage crisis and the so-called malaise of the late 1970s created another chance for people to wonder about the strength and effectiveness of the United States and its military. Baby Boomers might not want to join up with “the most vocal of their peers” badmouthing the military and military objectives. Generational change would not improve these factors. In 1978 and 1979, “USAF missed its recruitment goal for the first time in a decade—in the very first full year the new Xer generation began to flow into the force.” Recruitment and retention were “the cornerstone for supporting an all-volunteer force” and “supply the lifeblood of our readiness.” That did not make it an easy task.<sup>22</sup>

There was widespread agreement that “improving the recruitment and utilization of military personnel” was needed even before the end of the draft was announced. The military needed to sign more recruits of a higher quality and keep them longer. Approaches included placing a higher emphasis on candidates who had completed high school, using standardized tests to determine aptitude and influence assignments, recruiting more women, and establishing more comfortable and contemporary living and recreation facilities. (Apparently there was still an aversion to making military life too cushy, however. The House Appropriations Committee rejected a number of quality of life requests, including an appeal to air condition dining halls at George Air Force Base

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<sup>21</sup> John Loosbrock, “The Selective Service Stretch-Out,” *Air Force Magazine* 59, no. 4 (April 1976): 2; Statement of Bernard Rostker, *The Nomination of Bernard D. Rostker to be Director of Selective Service, Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*, 69<sup>th</sup> Cong., November 16, 1979; Martin Anderson to John McLaughry, memo, October 1981, in *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force*, ed. Bernard Rostker (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), CD-ROM.

<sup>22</sup> Russell Rumbaugh, “The Myth Behind the Hollow Force,” March 14, 2014, accessed May 2, 2015, [defenseone.com/management/2014/03/myth-behind-hollow-force/81133/](http://defenseone.com/management/2014/03/myth-behind-hollow-force/81133/); Robert A. McCrory Jr., “Recruitment & Retention: Targeting the Right Generations” (thesis, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2002), 3-6.

in California and Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma). In the Air Force, results were acceptable through much of the 1970s. "After bottoming out in 1979 at 60 percent, second-term reenlistment progressed upward to the low 80s percentage range until steadying in the upper 70s percentage range by the mid-1980s." This increase in reenlistment and a related increase of the percentage of enlistees who served for an entire career was an unanticipated win the military wished to encourage.<sup>23</sup> An unintended consequence was that careerists tended to have the complicated appendage of family. When possible, wives and children would want to spend time with their active duty husbands and fathers.<sup>24</sup>

It would be going too far to say that in the 1970s and 1980s, instead of families serving in the military, the military served families. As with satellite basing, however, Congress put pressure on the USAF to address the needs of families, particularly housing. The House Appropriations Committee noted with approval in 1972 that the Military Services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense had instituted the practice of consulting with military wives regarding how on-base housing should be designed. The committee was particularly concerned by reports that standard bedrooms were too small to be flexible. "The Committee is very concerned that housing be built of a type which will be an inducement for people to enter and stay in the military service and which will stand the test of time," said the following year's more stern report, which accused the Air Force of operating a construction program in which contractors were the only advocates for the needs of wives and families. "Often desirable features, such as garages, sidewalks, etc., are left out of the original construction. These will only have to be added back some years later under the improvement program." The committee charged that it had repeatedly asked for a survey of military wives that could be used to set housing standards, and the request had been ignored. "The Committee ranks adequate family housing along with pay and job satisfaction as one of the

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<sup>23</sup> Anderson to Cole, January 10, 1970; Nancy Goldman, "The Changing Role of Women in the Armed Forces," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 4 (January 1973): 892; Rostker, "The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force"; Comm. on Appropriations, H.R. Rep. No. 92-1424, at 22 (1972); McCrory, "Recruitment & Retention: Targeting the Right Generations," 5.

<sup>24</sup> The changing force led to other, less comfortable, complications. In one White House meeting of the Military Manpower Task Force working group, Vermont's John McClaughry reported to Martin Anderson that Secretary of the Navy John Lehman "questioned the acceptability of a military with 'so many blacks' in it." John McClaughry to Martin Anderson, memo, July 1, 1981, in *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force*, ed. Bernard Rostker (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), CD-ROM.

primary factors influencing the retention of qualified married military personnel in the services.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite the apparent foot-dragging on housing, and the Congressional scolding that resulted, the Air Force clearly liked the capabilities and attributes it associated with married, career airmen; a study in 1973 said that “particularly in the Strategic Air Command with its responsibility for nuclear weapons, married men are thought of as being more safe and sane and having a sense of responsibility.” It followed that the Air Force would evaluate and attempt to improve its family friendliness through “benefits such as good housing, child care, health benefits, family advocacy programs, and military stores.” Almost 30 percent of its fiscal year 1973 appropriations request was for “housing, community facilities, and medical and dental facilities.”<sup>26</sup>

It made particular sense for SAC to be thinking of its alert crews, with their frequent but unpredictable moments of high stress against the backdrop of low-level anxiety that came with being continually aware of the threat of nuclear war. While carrying out SAC’s deterrence slogan, “Peace is Our Profession,” crews were aware that a political blink or a computer blurb might trigger orders to engage in a nuclear attack. As historian Paul Boyer demonstrates, heat around the issues of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy cycled up and down throughout the second half of the twentieth century, but it was high in the early 1980s. “The accession of Ronald Reagan, with his bellicose rhetoric, his vast military buildup, his elaborate and heavily publicized civil defense programs . . . revived cultural awareness.” The comic strip *Bloom County* lampooned the civil defense effort, with the character Milo Bloom informing his friends, “Okay citizens, I’ve got Reagan’s new five-step civil defense program here. Let’s have a drill!” The drill ends with the near rhyme “‘And here we are at number five!’ ‘Everyone kiss their tush bye-bye!’” It is easy to imagine that such black humor, and the uncertainty that was beneath it, was alive and well in the alert facilities, and it could follow an airman home, too. “It’s difficult to leave your responsibilities at work. Men would watch their curtain-crawlers scoot around on the floor and wonder if they would live to become adults. Love-making was often intense, because a couple never knew when it would be their last. Many guys found it difficult to sleep as

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<sup>25</sup> Comm. on Appropriations, H.R. Rep. No. 92-1424, at 10, 23 (1972); Comm. on Appropriations, H.R. Rep. No. 93-637, at 42-44 (1973).

<sup>26</sup> Goldman, “The Changing Role of Women in the Armed Forces,” 907; Rostker, “The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force”; Comm. on Appropriations, H.R. Rep. No. 92-1424, at 23 (1972).

all sorts of dreadful nightmares would invade their dreams. SAC was very hard on marriages.”<sup>27</sup>

“Nobody looked forward to alert,” said Stephen Bate, who was stationed at McConnell. “Alert was so confining, with a constant tension that any moment day or night you might have to respond to an alert.” Boredom was an issue. Crew members on duty had hours to fill with limited company, mostly not of their own choosing. They could only go certain places. Official parties were at the Officers’ Club or Non Commissioned Officers’ Club, which were fair game. “At Minot [Air Force Base, North Dakota], we belonged to a couples’ bridge group, which always met in a room at the Officers’ Club so the members on alert could play,” remembered one wife of a crew member. On many bases, alert crews were assigned light blue pickup trucks, and those were what they drove to the destinations that were in bounds. Airmen—only men were assigned to alert duty in that era—were also in a peculiar limbo of being neither at home nor gone. Overseas assignments brought with them some sense of anonymity or permission for activities like drinking, shopping, and pursuing sex that were not available when on alert. Indeed, a study in 1970 identified the opportunity for sexual promiscuity as the most significant difference between overseas and domestic assignments in the eyes of service members. Occasional chances to see a family while on alert could make the experience seem more like being home, or at least break up the monotony.<sup>28</sup>

Without diminishing the difficulty of alert life, SAC missile crew members had it even worse. An investigation of McConnell’s Lt. Christopher Cooke, who admitted to providing information on Titan II missiles to the Soviet Union, revealed that missile crews spent nearly a quarter of their service time in an underground silo. A Wichita State University study found that missile crew members experienced alienation and anxiety as well as low job satisfaction. “Basically, the only real job of the deputy commander is to turn the other key,” said an industrial

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Boyer, “From the H-Bomb to Star Wars: The Continuing Cycles of Activism and Apathy,” in *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 358-361; Berkely Breathed, *Bloom County: Loose Tails* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1983), 76; Broynhill, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Bate to author, email, March 18, 2015; Berta Landin to author, email, May 3, 2015; Goldman, “The Changing Role of Women in the Armed Forces,” 906.

psychologist. “Their job is boring, and they end up suffering a real lack of self-importance.”<sup>29</sup>

For different reasons than missile crew members, the wives of men serving alert had it worse than the alert crews. “Alert duty was a hardship, especially for families with small children. It was stressful and challenging to be on one’s own with the kids and the household problems day and night for seven days,” said Berta Landin. “The husbands’ (no female crewmembers yet then) absences from home were hard on marriages and created other morale issues.” Alert was not paused for celebrations or holidays, so airmen missed them or Air Force families celebrated on alternative days. Landin noted that there was some manipulation of the schedule so that, for instance, a crew that had alert on Thanksgiving would typically be off for Christmas. Also, the crew that worked Christmas Eve was typically relieved on Christmas morning (Figure 3). “I recall spending one Christmas Eve visiting (husband) Dave at the Minot alert facility, then staying up much of the night assembling a play kitchen for Pam and Kathy after going home and putting the kids to bed.” Preparing for new family members, a common part of a young couple’s life, could be complicated. “It was always interesting setting up a contingency plan for going into labor while the husband was on alert. As due dates approached, husbands scheduled for alert arranged for a substitute to be on call to replace them if the expectant wife went into labor.” Even when children could see their fathers during alert week, it could cause stress. “Sometimes it would get interrupted by a klaxon or a recall alert on our radios, and then all the alert members would have to run back to the alert facility or to the airplanes, which would have been disturbing for the young children there.” A family visitation center was not a cure for all of the challenges that SAC wives faced while their husbands were on alert, but it did mitigate them somewhat.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Goldman, “The Changing Role of Women in the Armed Forces,” 906; William E. Schmidt, “Some Near Titan Base Cite Strains in Crewman’s Life,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1981.

<sup>30</sup> Berta Landin to author, email, May 3, 2015; Stephen Bate to author, email, March 18, 2015.



Figure 3. Stephen Bate, dressed as an elf, watches the author visit Santa Claus at a Kincheloe Air Force Base, Michigan, holiday event. Photograph courtesy of Stephen Bate, December 1974.

To be fair, alert duty was not so difficult for every family member. “I was oblivious to the plights and hardships of my parents. So alert for me was kinda fun and gave me a sense of pride for my father,” said Pam Landin. “I guess it’s a testament to my mom that I never experienced the stress she was under during my dad’s absence. It was just life as usual for us: Dad gone at work, Mom the Keeper of the House and Disciplinarian.” Another upside of the alert week was the extended break that followed it. Berta Landin said, “Changeover was on Thursday mornings, then the relieved crews were off duty until the following Monday morning. It was very refreshing and a great opportunity for some local camping once we had our trailer.”<sup>31</sup>

The recruiting challenge after the transition to an all-volunteer force was the most important impetus for the military’s family-friendly decisions, such as the provision of a family visitation center at McConnell. There were other influences as well, such as a correction for the ways

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<sup>31</sup> Pam Landin to author, email, May 4, 2015; Berta Landin to author, email, May 3, 2015.

resources were used during the war in Southeast Asia; the suburbanization of bases; and changes in social behavior.

While the Vietnam War was conducted, the military got behind on construction and maintenance of housing and other aspects of the on-base built environment that mattered to military families. The House Committee on Appropriations used this to justify a hike in such spending in FY 1973: “If we are to rely on recruitment versus conscription, which is the policy of the Administration; if the rising expectations for a better life which our military personnel and their families share with the rest of our society are to be met rather than frustrated; and if our military forces are to be supported, maintained, and trained in an effective and efficient manner, the necessary construction of facilities in which to live, work, and train must be provided. This requires that a major construction program be carried on during the next ten years rather than the start-and-stop type of effort which has characterized the past decade.”<sup>32</sup>

Automobile suburbs began appearing almost as soon as the automobile began influencing the environment. A construction boom following the end of World War II spurred “suburbanization.” This trend fed itself; as more people grew to expect access to goods, services, and amenities without driving into an urban center, more supermarkets, grocery stores, and modern houses of worship were constructed, leading to still more demand. Military installations were influenced by this trend during the Cold War. “[T]he military accepted, and in some ways even embraced, the married career soldier, airman, and sailor with family. Installations transitioned from collections of barracks for single men to mini-suburbs complete with ranch-style houses, schools, stores, and theaters. Religious facilities were very much part of the plan as well.” Military parents of the 1970s and 1980s likely grew up in increasingly suburban environments—or at least saw them idealized in popular culture—and wanted to live in similar environments. Interestingly, a staple of base life, the military commissary, was under threat because of suburbanization. In the 1970s, some members of Congress moved to reduce the funding that subsidized commissaries, figuring that most bases were near modern supermarkets and most military families had cars. Organizations that advocated for service members opposed this effort strongly and publicly.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Comm. on Appropriations, H.R. Rep. No. 92-1424, at 3 (1972).

<sup>33</sup> Jay M. Price, *Temples for a Modern God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9-10, 61; Comm. on Appropriations, H.R. Rep. No. 93-637, at 21-22 (1973); “AFA Goes to Bat for Military Commissaries,” *Air Force Magazine* 58, no. 7 (July 1975): 84-85.



Providing a family visitation center at an alert facility was consistent with changing social behavior, especially a growing informality in recreation and social interaction. Military culture, with its intricate formal and unofficial protocols, will likely never abandon its customs. Similarly, military rank has an ever-present influence on who is accorded privilege and respect, even among military families. Also, there are regular organized parties, dinners, and dances at the squadron, group, wing, and division level that service members and their spouses may view as enjoyable and/or obligatory. That said, in the 1970s and 1980s, social rules in general relaxed in the United States. On Air Force bases, there was somewhat less emphasis on the military wife as “the silent partner, militarily speaking” whose “devotion to duty sustains” her husband in his service. Air Force wives’ groups were likely to gather in coffee klatches and gameplaying clubs which carried less responsibility for the nuances of etiquette and reciprocation, in addition to more formal luncheons in which niceties were more carefully observed. Some military husbands discouraged their wives from getting too involved in established organizations. “Wives’ clubs were perceived to consist of senior enlisted personnel’s rank-conscious and gossipy wives; young women were told by their husbands not to join in order to protect their family’s privacy.” Two-family and multifamily gatherings were often potlucks, picnics, or backyard barbecues (or common-yard barbecues, depending on the arrangement of military housing). This trend toward relaxed social behavior lent itself to the “home away from home” flavor the family visitation center tried to provide. In particular, it meant that families could navigate the common space in the moment, working with or around whomever else was there to make sure the rooms and the equipment at the facility were shared equitably. Often this meant that families imported the potlucks and barbecues common on bases and in other suburbanized communities to the visitation center (Figure 4).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ester Wier, *What Every Air Force Wife Should Know*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1963), preface, 118; Woolley, “Study of a Navy Housing Area,” 8.



Figure 4. David Landin cooks on a grill in the yard nearby the Minot Air Force Base, Minnesota, alert facility. Photograph courtesy of Berta Landin, July 1973.

Another shift in the American social fabric that made the availability of a family visitation center natural was the new “nostalgic rhetoric of family, flag, neighborhood, and work.” In the 1970s, there was a meeting of right and left perspectives in a nostalgic view of the centrality of family life, symbolized in television shows such as “The Waltons” and “Little House on the Prairie” and acted on by parents preparing natural honey-sweetened, carob chip cookies for their children. The bicentennial in 1976 both drove and promoted this nostalgia by emphasizing “folk culture, such as genealogy, quilting, bluegrass music, and local history.” The optimism and belief in the country demonstrated by Reagan further fueled it. In many ways, though, the family-and-flag nostalgia was less a move toward a new ideal than a reaction against the perception that the American family had splintered in the 1960s and 1970s. If the culture was increasingly holding up family and the flag rallying points, then it made sense for the Air Force to provide literal places to rally, such as the visitation center.<sup>35</sup>

Offering a family visitation facility was a small intervention in the larger recruiting and reenlistment effort. Without access to reenlistment rates of SAC alert crews who did and did not have access to such a facility, it would be very difficult to surmise whether the effort had its intended effect. Two pieces of evidence suggest that it helped. There is a general sense in a sociological study of a Navy base produced in 1978 that the neighboring Air Force base’s concern for its families was superior to the

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<sup>35</sup> Arlene Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 134; Seth Bate, “No Alcohol Please! It’s a Family Affair: Building Community Support for a Bluegrass Festival Through Family Friendliness,” *Fairmount Folio* 16 (2015): 50-53; Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 8.

Navy's. Sociologist Sabra Woolley called it a constant theme, with the fence that separated the two bases both literal and symbolic. "It's like we're living in a ghetto, and those are the people on the other side of the tracks," said one Navy wife quoted in Woolley's study. The wives' ire does not target the Air Force; instead, the wives were angry at a "Navy system that does not take care of its people the way the Air Force does." This account should be viewed with the recognition that the grass always seems greener on the other side of the fence, but it does suggest that by the late 1970s, the Air Force was growing its reputation for family friendliness.<sup>36</sup>

More specifically, Air Force wives and "brats" who shared their memories of alert duty had positive feelings for the McConnell AFB family visitation facility, particularly in comparison to a base that did not have an equivalent facility. "To me, alert visitation was just another fun, cool aspect of being a military brat. I have special memories of it, and I like the shared experience I have with other military brats because of it," Pam Landin said. "I liked visiting Dad at the visitation facility. Especially when we got to hang out with kids we knew. Made it like a backyard BBQ." Berta Landin shared a story of a moment when relatives visited from out of town while her husband was still on alert. They picked up Church's fried chicken and met up at the visitation center. At other times, she and her husband participated in crew or family cookouts at the center. "They were casual and relaxing, and because it was not in a high security area, we could show up without going through a security check-in." Being at the McConnell family center was a lot like being at home, she said. "I appreciated the fact that it was a place we could get together any time the crews were not restricted to the alert facility." Landin also experienced alert at Minot AFB, where there was no visitation facility. Families were permitted to visit the alert center there on Sunday afternoons. She took three children, including an infant and a toddler. "We had to check in at the entrance guard shack, which was basically only large enough for a guard. The alert crews provided lists of expected visitors, and we were checked off against the list when we arrived. In the winter, it was brutal to stand in the bitter cold, battered by the bitter wind, holding babies and toddlers, waiting one's turn if others were arriving at the same time. Often the guard would mercifully cram us into the shack while checking us in, although it was against regulations. This, more than anything, made me really appreciate the visitation center

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<sup>36</sup> Woolley, "Study of a Navy Housing Area," 7.

at McConnell...Comparing my Minot experience to my McConnell experience, I have to say a visitation center really boosts morale.”<sup>37</sup>

McConnell weathered its share of challenges and changes as the 1980s continued. A study in 1981 determined that a pesticide designed to kill termites was in the ventilations systems of a quarter of the base’s family houses; this inspired a national review of Air Force housing that found more than 1,500 similar cases. The announcement in 1983 that the Titan II missiles overseen by the 381st Strategic Missile Wing would be removed caused consternation among business and government officials in the Wichita area. McConnell’s aircraft would be diversified in 1988 with the addition of ten B-1 bombers, planes that were alternately billed as smaller and harder to detect than the BUFFs and as an unnecessary expense. In 1991, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney ordered the B-52s to stand down and their nuclear bombs to be stored. The order also affected B-1s, which had become known for their technical glitches and general fussiness. The order also meant the end of alert duty as it had been practiced from the beginning of the all-volunteer force to the end of the Cold War. The McConnell alert facility was demolished in late 2014. Building 976, the former family visitation center, is now used as a Petroleum, Oils, and Lubricants (POL) center overseeing aircraft fueling needs.<sup>38</sup>

To fulfill its deterrence mission in the 1970s and 1980s, the USAF needed to identify, recruit, and retain quality personnel. For high-stress duty such as alert, the need was even more acute. The Nixon Administration’s decision to implement the all-volunteer force complicated recruitment efforts. The military in general and the Air Force in particular grew more family friendly, even if it sometimes happened because of pressure from Washington. One small but important intervention to promote family friendliness was an alert visitation center on base at McConnell. For at least some family members of men who served there, the visitation center contributed to an overall pride in alert duty. “In spite of the inconveniences and occasional difficulties,” ’Berta

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<sup>37</sup> Pam Landin to author, email, May 4, 2015; ’Berta Landin to author, email, May 3, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> “Chlordane Problems in Houses on Slabs,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1982; “End of Titan 2 Missiles Spurs Local Concern,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1983; Richard Halloran, “After More Than 10 Years the B-1 Bomber is Coming of Age,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1987; Tyler, *New York Times*, September 29, 1991; Daniel P. Williams to author, email, March 18, 2015.

Landin said, “I was proud to be a part of it and enjoyed all the people I met and things I experienced.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Berta Landin to author, email, May 3, 2015.