

Guardians of a continent

COLORADO SPRINGS — As we entered the long tunnel leading into the heart of Cheyenne Mountain, I half expected to see a vast cavern filled, a la James Bond, with giant screens and hundreds of bustling technicians. For here, under hundreds of feet of granite, is the nerve centre of NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defence Command.

Instead of Dr. No, we found a series of small steel buildings nestled on giant springs in the hollowed-out heart of the mountain. Inside the modest-sized battle management centre a few American and Canadian officers quietly monitored the green faces of their radar displays. It wasn't the air conditioning that gave me a chill when I looked at the phone that links NORAD's commander to the Pentagon and White House.

One day the commander may have to pick up that phone and warn Washington that his radars and satellites have identified a Soviet attack on North America. But before this grim message goes out, it will have to be confirmed and reconfirmed by numerous, redundant computer analyses and reports from other sensors. Then the decision to call Washington will have to be made by the NORAD commander and his senior staff.

The men who hold this awesome responsibility are as cool and unflappable as you could hope to find. I was much impressed by the two senior officers that I met, U.S. four-star Gen. John Piotrowski and Canada's Maj.-Gen. Lionel Bourgeois.

My companions from the Atlantic Council spent a good deal of time talking with them. And I don't think that better men could be found for the awesome task of deciding if a real attack is under way. No uniformed bureaucrats here — these were real fighting soldiers with brains and common sense.

Next stop was North Bay where we descended 600 feet below ground through a steep, narrow tunnel. Canada's air defence headquarters was almost as impressive as Cheyenne Mountain.

I watched a radar scope with fascination as U.S. F-15s, tankers and an AWACS took up position over Alaska's North Slope, waiting to intercept an incoming flight of Soviet Bear heavy bombers. The

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Bears, which have become increasingly active of late, fly recon missions and practise launching the armed cruise missiles that they carry at U.S. and Canadian targets. The Mackenzie River delta is a favored launch point for the Soviet terrain-following missiles.

Sitting down in Toronto and listening to the inanities of our assorted disarmament advocates ("peace" groups) and NDP socialists, it's often easy to forget the 24-hour threat to North America from Soviet missiles and bombers. Too bad they can't watch the missile-armed Bears skirt our airspace. And too bad our academics don't spend more time trying to learn and understand military affairs.

As I observed on our trip, the academic "security experts" who droned the most about "the arms control process" and fretted over Star Wars were woefully ignorant of the basics of military science. They might just as well pontificate on agriculture.

Two things struck me forcefully on this trip.

First, the vulnerability of North America to missile and air attack. We may have adequate warning systems, but once an attack is launched, there is little we can do. Missiles cannot now be stopped and we don't have enough interceptors to block a sustained Soviet bomber attack. Even the once impregnable underground command posts at Cheyenne Mountain and North Bay can now be crushed by blockbuster Soviet SS-18 missiles.

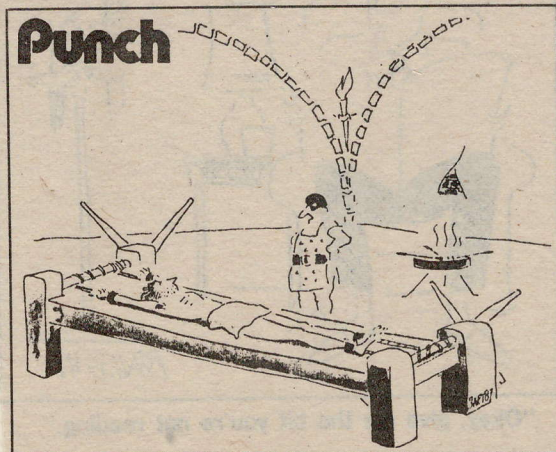
Second, I was most impressed by the warm, close cooperation in NORAD between Canadian and U.S. personnel and by the high degree of Canadian input in all levels of decision making.

When we arrived in Colorado, we were met by Canadians; in North Bay, we were greeted by Americans. NORAD, it should be noted, reports equally to Washington and to Ottawa. Canada has a say in NORAD that far exceeds its contribution of men and material.

Most important, NORAD is living proof of the community of interests and values between the U.S. and Canada. In time of war, North America will sink or swim as one.

Those, like the NDP, who think Canada can go it alone in a world of nuclear-armed wolves are preaching dangerous nonsense. Canada's vital self-interest is to ensure that war never happens: you can't be neutral or safe when nuclear weapons are exploding just 50 miles away on the other side of the border.

NORAD helps ensure that such an attack will not happen. It's a shame more Canadians are not aware of their important contribution to defending North America. What I saw in Colorado and North Bay made me proud of Canada's armed forces.



"I won't advise it, but you do have the right to remain silent."