

656th AC&W - 'Eternal Vigilance'

Photos by Bob Mayette
Text by Phil Joyce

"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

This statement, although it was first made early in the 19th Century by a famed Irish orator, definitely describes the 20th Century mission of the Air Defense Command in general and its local counterpart—the 656th Aircraft Control Warning Squadron—in particular.

The primary purpose of the Air Force's vast radar network is vigilance. It is the watchdog of the nation's security. Every minute of every day, this vigilance is kept. And, of course, the work of the 656th AC&W, as part of this vast network, is also continuous.

AT 145 BASE high on a hill overlooking the Saratoga Lake area, a radar screen, encased by a huge rubber balloon, sweeps the sky. Below this "bubble" about a dozen men are always present in a semi-lighted room, intent watching radar scopes and studying a large circular plotting board, which pin-points every flying object within at least 100-mile radius.

Yet, just like everything else, the price of liberty has gone up. For the ADC's radar network alone, the cost is in the billions. Naturally, the taxpayer has to foot the bill, and if he is practical, he wants to see if this money is spent wisely.

At the Saratoga base tomorrow, the taxpayer will have an opportunity to see where some of his money is being spent.

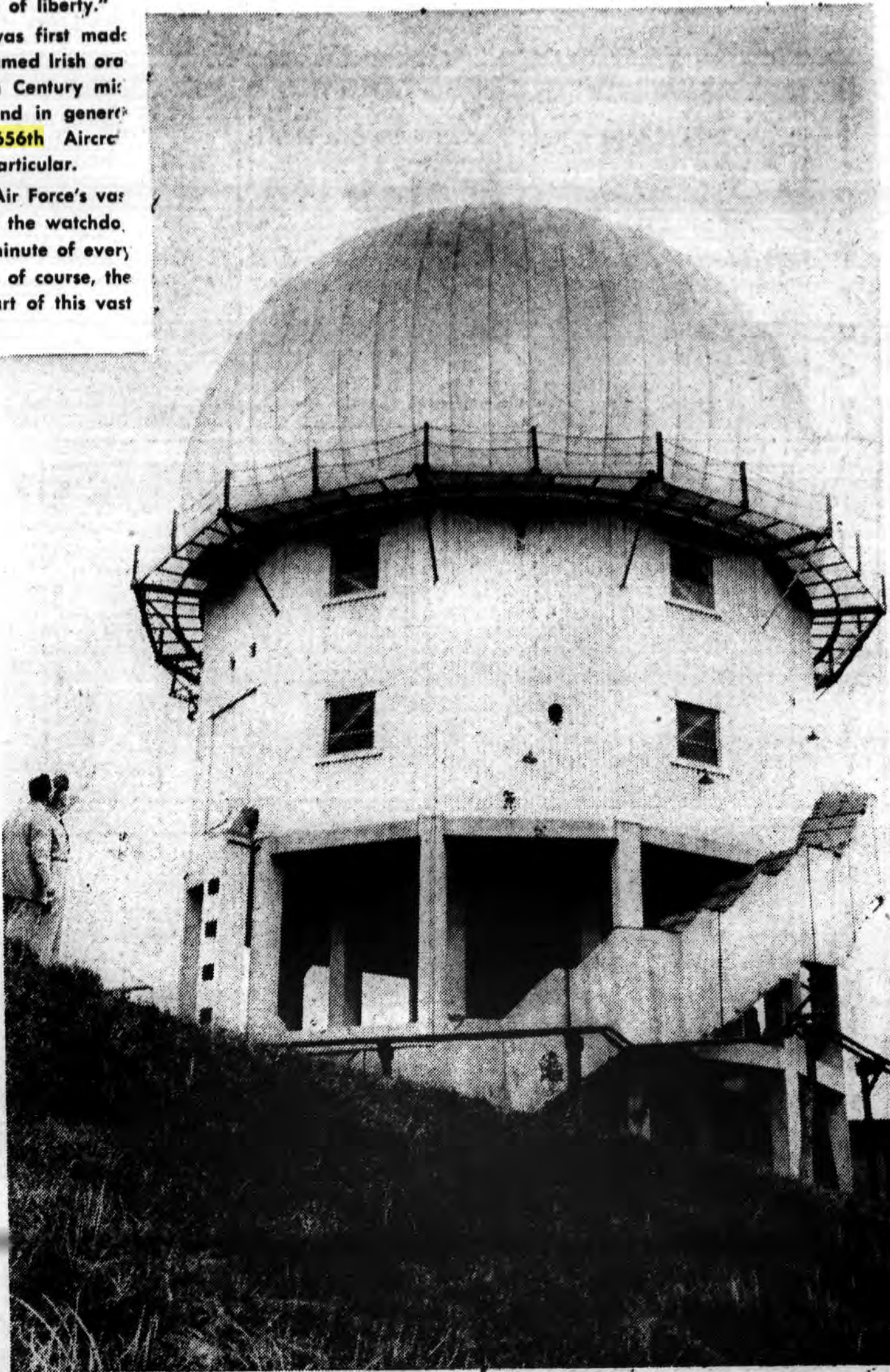
In conjunction with Armed Forces Day, the 656th AC&W will throw its doors open at 1:30 p.m. to familiarize the public with its vitally important work. Not only will the visitors be permitted to roam through the base's operation room, with its radar equipment, but they will see an aerial demonstration of the function of the squadron.

At 3 p.m. tomorrow, two jet planes from a national guard unit in Massachusetts will circle over the base. One will play the role of an unidentified and therefore potentially dangerous aircraft. The second will be the interceptor summoned by the controller in the base's operation room.

A loud speaker system will be set up so the spectators on the base will be able to hear the squadron's controller direct the pilot of the "friendly" jet, calling him in on the target.

Of course, the visitors will not be able to see all of the working at the airbase because some of it is restricted. But, they will be able to see enough to make the trip well worthwhile and to see the excellent job being done by the local airmen.

THERE ARE approximately 225 airmen and 17 officers in the squadron—which is about equivalent to an Army company. The proportionately large number of officers is necessary because one officer must be on duty at all times in the operations room. The squadron is under the command of Maj. Gen. James A. Hester, a friendly and efficient veteran of 30 combat missions in World War 2 and more recently, a B-29 pilot in North Africa. Maj. Hester's capable executive officer is Maj. Fred M. Larergren, who served in the Philippines and the Solomon Islands during World War 2.



THE BUBBLE—Giant rubber balloon shields radar screen at Ketchum's Corners Air Force Base.

The base is composed of several buildings are four barracks, an operations building, two communications buildings, a utilities building, headquarters, motor pool, radar tower and surrounded by a wire fence. Among the buildings are a cafeteria and power station. All buildings are serviced by a central heating system with the steam being fed through overhead pipes.

A second radar tower is being constructed as is a 200 by 21 feet recreation hall, which will house a small theater and other facilities for the personnel. Also, nine small one-family homes are being built outside the fence to house the families of four officers and five non-commissioned officers. The base also has its own reservoir. Although it uses commercial power, it has diesel engines kept in constant working order which could provide power in an emergency.

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THE OPERATIONS BUILDING is the focal point of the entire base. And, the hub of the operations building is the semi-lighted room—or "dark room" as it is called by the airmen—where the plotting board and radar scope are situated.

"Energy," or vibrations picked up by the radar screen within the huge rubber bubble, is recorded on equipment in the dark room.

The bubble, which is made of rubber material about three inches thick, is nothing more than a shield for the screen against the weather. It is supported by a pressure from within, because a metal framework would throw off the sensitive radar equipment.

The bubble is built to withstand heavy winds, which is an important factor because of its high windy location.

Impulses from the screen are picked up on the radar scope in the dark room. The scopes look like wayward T sets with a beam of light in the center sweeping circles around the screen.

Data received on the scopes is relayed by a unique telephone system to a marker on the plotting board and several other personnel in the dark room.

ON OUR RECENT TOUR of the installation, "C" crew under the command of 1st Lieut. William Shull was on duty in the dark room. Non-commissioned officer in charge was S/Sgt. Earl Jamison. There are three shifts in the dark room and four crews, with one of the crews available for relief duty at all times.

The tour was made early in the afternoon when air traffic is at its heaviest. The marker on the plotting board was on the move continuously, drawing arrows to indicate the direction of the flight and its location, writing the time of each recording and letters to identify the flight.

The marker must stand in back of the glass board so as not to block it from the view of others in the room. Therefore, it is necessary that he write all the figures backwards with a grease pencil so they can be read properly in front.

Because the data must be recorded swiftly, the markers become very proficient at writing backwards. Sgt. Jamison said one boy became so good at it that he often had trouble writing frontwards.

Sitting in front of the board are the surveillance and control sections. The personnel of these sections are in direct communication with the air force control center, the ground observer corps and adjoining radar sites.

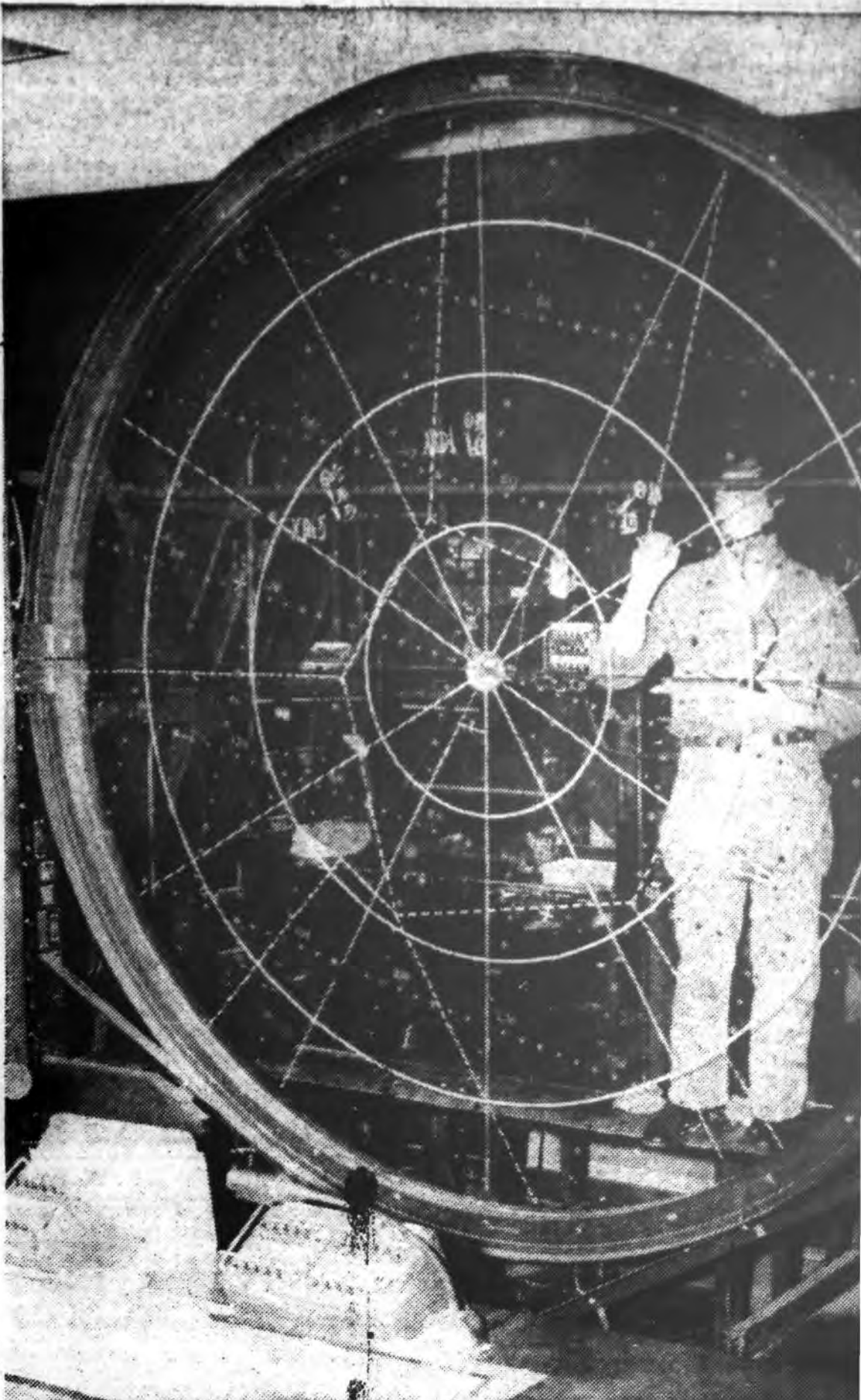
THE AIRMEN have special praise for the ground observer corps and speak glowingly of their great assistance to the Air Force.

Besides supervising the men in the room, the officer in charge is also the controller. When an unknown aircraft shows up on the screen, the controller using radio and radar guides interceptors to the intruder.

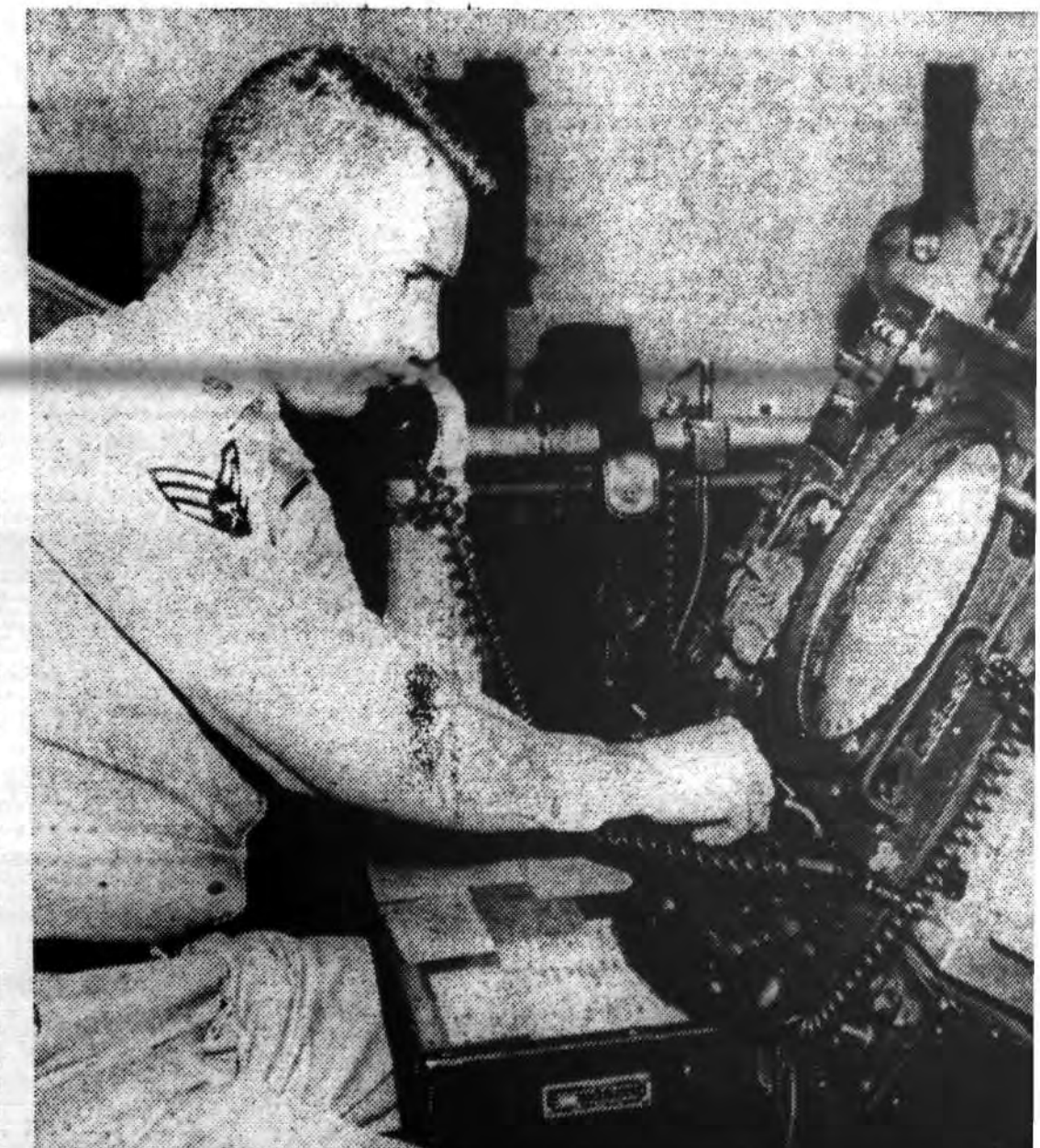
This job is vitally important because the controller's speed and precision in performing his duties could save countless lives and millions of dollars worth of property if enemy bombers should attack. More than half of the base's officers act as controllers.

However, the event of such a decision being made at the base is remote since an enemy bomber attack may never happen, and if it does ever occur, we can only hope that it is recognized and destroyed long before it reaches here. The air force is presently building a huge radar network north of Canada, which should give sufficient warning to stop an attack, before it reaches here.

But, it is necessary to throw a "blanket of security" over the nation's skies. And, the radar net-



MARKING FLIGHTS—Airmen at 656th AC&W glass board in the base's operations room. The plotting board locates aircraft in the area on plotting board. Each circle represents a 50-mile radius.



RADAR'S TV—Airmen locates aircraft on radar scope before relaying info to the plotting board.

work must be interlocking to be efficient for an air attack.

An added service by the dispatch center at the Saratoga base is to aid military and commercial aircraft. The controller can, and often does, contact airliners on the radio to advise the pilots of weather conditions. The controller also trains each man to take over in an emergency.

ALTHOUGH THE DARK ROOM is the nerve center of the base, it could not function without the necessary services of the other men in the squadron. These services range from the technical to recreational for security.

THE CHIEF ENEMY of the radar men is boredom. They must be constantly on the alert for something which may never happen. The job isn't too tiresome in the day when air traffic is at its greatest. But, the work is particularly monotonous at night—which just a few of the highly skilled men live.

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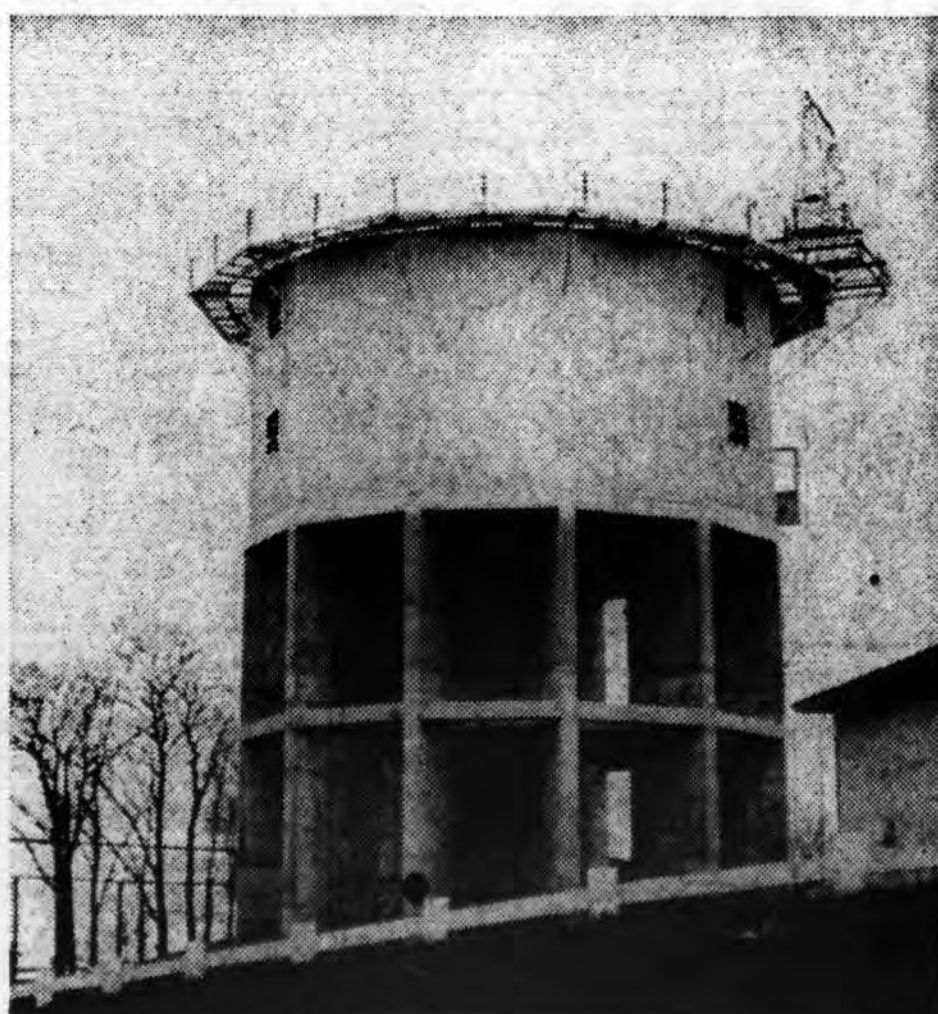
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NEW TOWER—This tower being built on the base is almost ready for the radar screen and protective bubble. It will supplement the present tower.



RADIO REPAIR—Radio system is kept in order by A/1c Kenneth Mitchell, center, and Sgt. Gerard T. Dress, right, under guidance of Philco technician W. M. Ritter.



UTILITIES WORK—A. Lloyd Ballston Spe, building and grounds foreman points



go A. Lloyd Ballston Spe, building and grounds foreman for carpenter Frank Kopf Jr. of Schuylerville.



IDENTIFICATION PLEASE—Air policeman A/1c Richard John Walzeth check a visitor's credentials