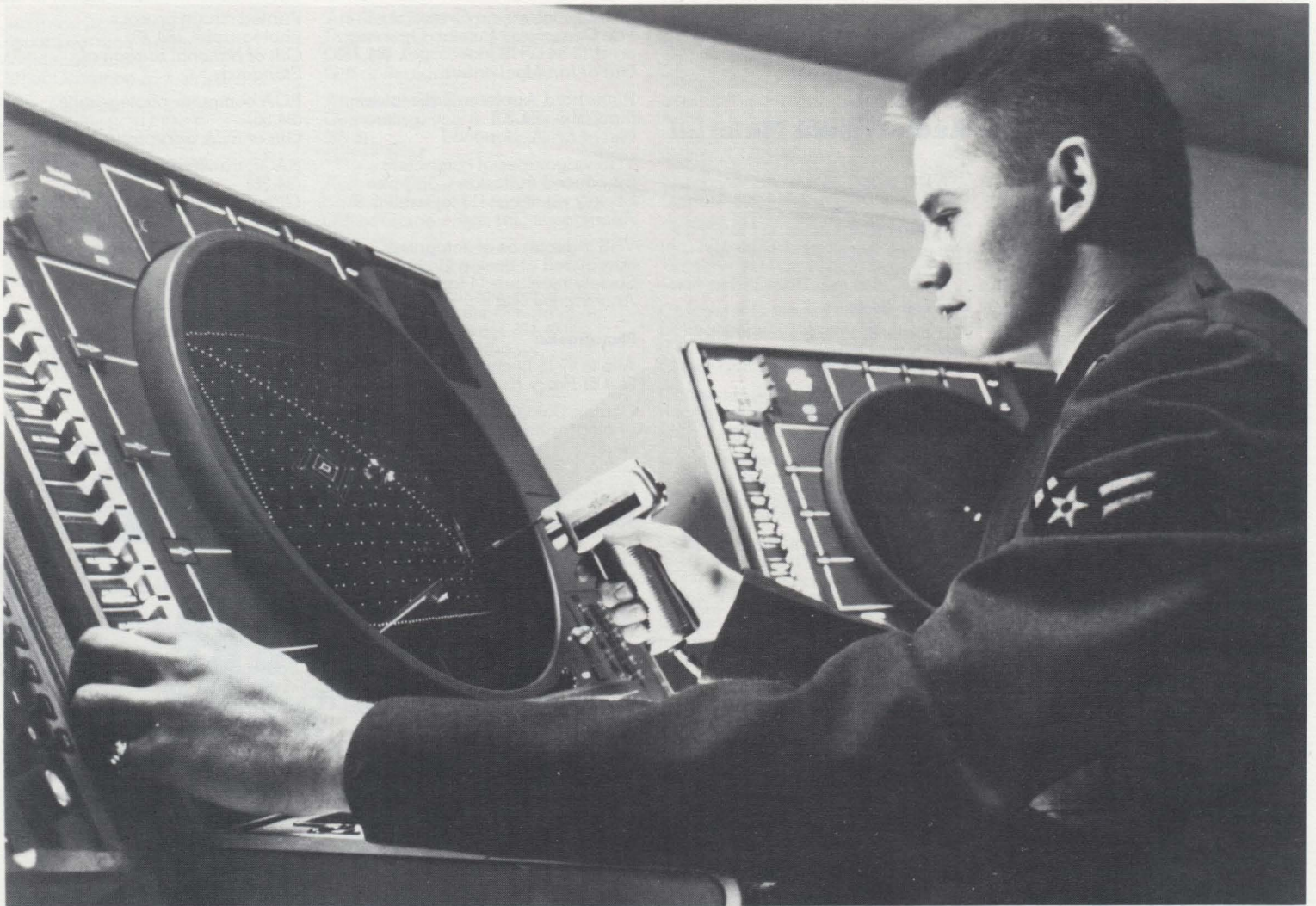


Blue Room Blues



Imagine you worked down a two-mile-long tunnel half a mile underground. There you were expected to sit for eight hours a day studying the blinking yellow screen of a spotless grey machine in a cement room devoid of decoration and lit only dimly by blue lights. Once you arrived you were not allowed to leave until the end of your shift, when you took a bus back to the barracks you called home, miles from civilization.

This environment was the workplace for radar operators of the Air Force's North Bay, Canada SAGE installation. Here operators monitored the atmosphere of the northern hemisphere, on the lookout for Russian bombers and missiles. "The Blue Room," as the radar center was called, was studiously designed to minimize the fatigue of the operators: the lighting was indirect blue fluorescent, to cut down on eye strain from the blinking yellow radar scopes; electric light-

ers and ash trays were built into the consoles; and the color of the equipment was a neutral battleship grey. To ensure efficiency, personnel were required to keep their consoles clear of clutter. In fact, the only extraneous object visible in the room was a large cardboard vampire bat attached to the ceiling, in deference to the room's cave-like qualities. However, as the Museum later discovered, this was not the only individual expression the operators allowed themselves.

When the equipment from the North Bay SAGE installation arrived at The Computer Museum, cleaning revealed interesting evidence of how the operators viewed their job. Each console has several knobs covering recessed switches. When these knobs were unscrewed the backs were found to be covered with graffiti written by the operators. The hidden messages ranged from the banal to the unpublishable. While ostensibly observing the

rigid regulations regarding a spotless work area, the operators still managed to express themselves clandestinely.

Here is a selection of the messages left by the operators hidden in their consoles:

- "Put this back"
- "HELP"
- "Art Clark 1979"
- "Bravo Crew is the pits"
- "Look on the other knob"
- "Superbowl XXII"
- "Send the Cowboys to the superbowl"
- "Don't you feel useless"
- "\$25"
- "Hi Jack"
- "Help I'm trapped in here"
- "No step take off Hey"
- "1 May '79"
- "I can't stand it"