

ABSTRACT

UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE: CURRENT AND FORMERLY USED DEFENSE SITES IN THE CALIFORNIA DESERT

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The California Desert is nearly 45,000 square miles (or about 25 million acres) and about one-fourth the State of California. Public land in this area that is administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) includes nearly eleven million acres. The military has been involved in this area for more than two-hundred years - initially for exploration and mapping and later for peace-keeping and training. Current military bases include: Fort Irwin Army Base, five Navy installations: China Lake, Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range, 29 Palms Marine Corps Base, Barstow Marine Corps Logistics Center, and El Centro Naval Air Station. There are currently forty-six formerly used defense sites (FUDS) and four closed military facilities that have been identified in the California Desert. Many of these sites are suspected to contain unexploded ordnance (UXO), exploded ordnance residue, underground storage tanks, or other military materiel resulting from military operations and training exercises from the World War II era until the present.

The most extensive training was during World War II. The United States Army established the Desert Training Center (DTC) on April 30, 1942 with Major General George S. Patton, Jr. as the first commander. It was redesignated as the California-Arizona Maneuver Area (CAMA) after the mission to train for desert environs was modified in late 1943. The DTC was closed in late 1944. It consisted for fourteen camps total: eleven in California. And three in Arizona. It covered about 35 million acres in California, Nevada, and Arizona - but was mostly located in California. There is a large amount of unexploded ordnance remaining from this training. The U.S. Army sent explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams into the area between 1951 and 1954. They primarily removed ordnance scattered on the surface. In some areas of concentrated ordnance, they posted signs that remain today. The California Desert has also been used for additional training exercises - the largest was Operation Desert Strike in 1964.

Several emergency response incidents are reported annually. U.S. Army EOD Teams or supporting installation EOD teams respond to these incidents. The type of ordnance varies from World War II practice mines and artillery projectiles to modern aerial ordnance. In addition, the California Desert have been used as a base of operations for illegal scrapping/metal recovery activities where components from military ordnance and military material used as targets are removed from Department of Defense facilities and are transported and processed on remote rural areas of public lands. These sites which often include wire burning, are discovered, characterized and cleaned up by the responsible land management agency.

The public lands of the California Desert have been used quite extensively for the past two hundred years to support military operations. UXO, closed military facilities, and FUDS offer many challenges for public land management in the California Desert.

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