

## Operation desert cleanup

### The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plan to collect WWII practice ordnance left in Anza-Borrego

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**BORREGO SPRINGS** – More than 60 years ago, thousands of young American soldiers, under the command of Gen. George S. Patton, trained in the desert east of this town in anticipation of coming battles against the Nazis in North Africa.

Now it's finally time to clean up what was left behind.

Within the coming year, the Army Corps of Engineers is planning a major effort to locate and destroy bombs, rockets and artillery shells left by troops between 1942 and 1944.

On average of about once a week, the Corps says, the Sheriff's Department or Anza-Borrego Desert State Park rangers receive a report from someone who has discovered ordnance in the area.

Only once has a bomb been live, and there has never been a reported injury in what they call the old Borrego Maneuver Area.

Nevertheless, the Corps is certain thousands of potentially dangerous items remain in the desert and have designated several of the target cleanup sites as "critical" areas – the second highest assignment in a five-level classification system.

All of the areas, unlike the Carrizo Impact Area farther south, are open to the public.

The Corps has grouped eight areas where it expects the majority of munitions to be found into one site for the purpose of record-keeping and funding. The site lies mostly within the boundaries of the park and the Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area. Portions of it are on private and other public lands, most of it undeveloped.

The northern boundary of the 400-square-mile area is the Riverside County-San Diego County line. State Route 86



Associated Press Archives  
 Soldiers under the command of Maj. Gen. George S. Patton, who was taking a compass reading in the 1942 Associated Press photo above, trained in the desert east of Borrego Springs before World War II to prepare for combat against the Nazis in North Africa.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

in Imperial County is the eastern boundary, state Route 78 is the southern boundary and a line running north-south through Borrego Springs is the western boundary.

State Park Ranger Frederick Jee (right) walked among sand verbena flowers in the Borrego Valley near Peg Leg Road. The Santa Rosa Mountains loom in the distance. During World War II, soldiers trained in the desert to prepare them for combat in North Africa.

Larry Sievers, a program manager overseeing formerly used defense sites in Army Corps' Los Angeles District, said the cleanup will focus first on the eight areas where they know things will be found.

Several weeks ago, the Corps held a meeting in Borrego Springs to notify the public of its plans. Maybe it was because the meeting was held the same night as the "American Idol" and "Lost" television series finales, or perhaps because there just isn't that much interest, that only a handful of the public attended, along with a couple dozen Corps experts.

One woman who attended was concerned that a map showed a spot in bright red right where she lived. It was explained that the red parts of the infrared map indicated plant life, not bombs.

Two others had practical reasons for attending.

Joe Raffetto owns and operates California Overland, a desert tour service that includes excursions to a couple of the places where the Corps will be searching for bombs.

"I'm not really worried about it," Raffetto said. "I just wanted to see what they thought was out there and find out a little bit of history."

Another attendee was John Stewart, director of environmental affairs for United Four Wheel Drive Associations Inc., an advocacy group for off-road enthusiasts.

"I don't think a lot of our members understand what's out there," Stewart said. He said he has found two small, intact practice bombs while driving around the site.



General Patton Memorial Museum  
Trainees lined up for chow at the Camp Coxcomb desert training site during World War II, in the photo above from the General Patton Memorial Museum.

Sievers said the vast majority of what the Corps expects to find will be remnants of practice bombs dropped by airplanes onto targets. The bombs contained a small amount of explosive, enough to send up smoke when they hit the ground, allowing observers to gauge the bombers' accuracy.

But he said live ordnance was also used, especially in a huge artillery practice area.

The first part of the project will involve dozens of Corps workers, walking in a line, visually scanning the ground for munitions. When a bomb, artillery shell or whatever else is found, it will be evaluated and detonated if deemed dangerous.

The next step will employ digital geophysical mapping technology that uses highly sensitive metal detectors to look for ordnance buried under sand or rock. Again, when something is found, it will be removed or destroyed.

The project, which still has some bureaucratic hoops to clear before it begins, should take about one year to complete, Sievers said.

Specifically, the eight locations of most interest are:

The Mechanized Artillery Practice Fire Impact Area, 25,937 acres used as an Army artillery practice range. Sievers said they expect to find most of the shells in a flat "impact" area, which is where the gunners were aiming. "But remember, they were practicing," he said. The chance that shells could be found outside the target area is high. Expected ordnance: 40 mm and 90 mm projectiles.

The Clark Dry Lake Target Area, 5,580 acres used by the Navy for bombing. The Navy and Army also used the site for aircraft gunnery practice. Expected ordnance: 3-, 100- and 500-pound practice bombs, 20 mm and .50-caliber projectiles and 2 3/4-inch rockets.

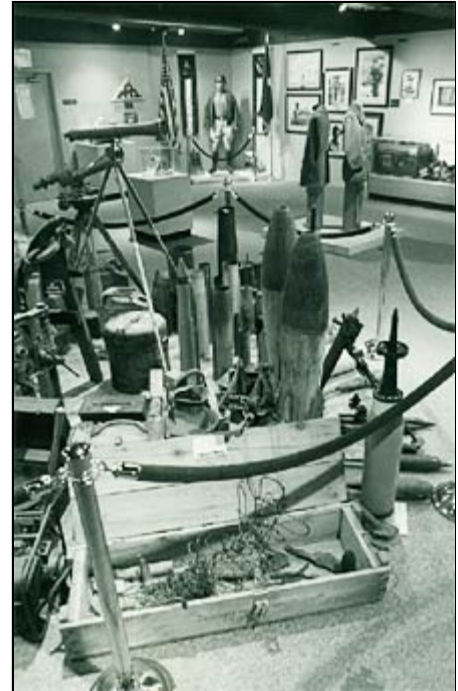
The Borrego Hotel Target Area and Emergency Landing Strip, 222 acres used by the Navy to practice high-altitude bombing, dive bombing, strafing and emergency landings. Expected ordnance: practice bombs.

The Military Wash Targets, within the state park and the Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area. Targets cover more than 7,300 acres. The Navy used the target areas to train pilots and crew in bombing, gunnery and rocketry. Expected ordnance: 2 1/4-inch practice rockets, 5-inch high-explosive rockets, 20 mm armor-piercing projectiles, three-pound practice bombs, 100-pound practice bombs and 100-pound photo-flash bombs.

The Benson Dry Lake Practice Bomb Target, 353 acres just north of Ocotillo Wells. Explosives experiments and practice bombing took place north of a landing field used by the Navy until 1947. Expected ordnance: 200 mm armor-piercing projectiles, 3-, 4 1/2- and 100-pound practice bombs.

Winona Targets 1 & 2, 640 acres used by the Navy as bombing targets. A 750-square-foot portion of Winona Target 1 is part of the Imperial County landfill. Expected ordnance: practice bombs of all sizes up to 100 pounds.

Camp Ensign, 1,920 acres used by both the Marines and Army at separate times for training in desert driving and maneuvers. Expected ordnance: none.



General Patton Memorial Museum  
A display in the General Patton Memorial Museum shows relics and equipment from the Army's training exercises in the Anza-Borrego Desert in 1942.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune  
A dry riverbed cuts through the Borrego Badlands region of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.