

10News.com

10News Investigates Backyard Bombs

POSTED: 2:59 pm PDT April 24, 2008
UPDATED: 11:59 am PDT April 25, 2008

SAN DIEGO -- Old bombs from World War II and earlier were found buried under a brand-new, master-planned community built atop North County farmland.

"Nobody had any clue that this existed," said environmental attorney Bob Howard.

What existed was a military bombing range, within 500 feet of a new school in what is now known as Del Sur.

Navy pilots honed their targeting skills at this range before shipping out for World War II.

"This is one of the many 3 pound target rounds that we found," said Howard.

It's a history not documented by the military, by the state or even the land-use managers in the city or county.

"It wasn't on any state lists, it wasn't on any formerly used defense site lists used by the military," said John Scandura of the California Department of Toxic Substance Control.

Nobody had a clue until workers unearthed the bombs during grading. In all, 22,000 pieces of bomb debris and 113 live rounds were found.

Related To Story



Backyard Bombs

- **Video:** Are Old Munitions Buried In Your Backyard?
- **Video:** Officials Looking To Identify FUDS
- **Video:** Protect Your Family From Dangerous Munitions
- **Blog:** Share Your Thoughts
- **Interactive Map:** FUDS In SD County
- **Link:** USACE Los Angeles District (includes San Diego County)
- **Link:** Dept. Of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC)
- **Link:** DTSC Database For Searching Cleanup Properties, including FUDS
- **Link:** Center for Public Environmental Oversight
- **Link:** San Diego Military History
- **Link:** Teaching Children About Unexploded Ordnance
- **Link:** DOD 2007 Annual Report To Congress (Includes FUDS Management)



***Interactive map of known Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS) in San Diego County (click to enlarge).**

"They're called practice bombs," said Bill Jache of the Sheriff Bomb-Arson Unit.

Jache said the live rounds carried a charge so pilots could see how close to the target they hit.

"A big burst of phosphorus comes out of the front, so you can be burned severely," said Jache.

Given that danger, it might seem surprising that no one cleaned up the old bombs, or even documented them.

But that's a common problem across the U.S. and San Diego.

"People are living, working, going to school, playing on sites that contain contamination, particularly unexploded ordnance and unexploded chemical munitions," said Lenny Siegel of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight.

In the case of Del Sur, the developer, Black Mountain Ranch, contacted the Army Corps of Engineers.

"They (Black Mountain Ranch) contacted us and said, 'You know we found some bombs on the site. Can you do anything for us?'" said Lloyd Godard of the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Corps said it could get to the bombs, if the developer was willing to wait for several years.

Instead, Black Mountain Ranch hired a contractor experienced in removing old munitions and cleaned it up in five months. The total for the cleanup was \$2 million.

Homebuyers are told about the military history in the disclosures, but what about the rest of the San Diego region?

The 10News I-Team came across roughly 61 other former military sites, from the North County to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Where are they and why are the bombs still in the ground?

The I-Team spent six months sifting through documents from the Army Corps of Engineers and state regulators to pinpoint the danger areas.

Identifying FUDS

The sights and sounds of war were seen and heard on a middle school campus last year in Orlando, Fla.



***2008: Old munitions that are too dangerous to remove are destroyed by “detonating in place” in Orlando, Florida. Since Aug. 2007, hundreds of WWII-era munitions have been found on the former Pinecastle Jeep Range property, which includes a middle school and homes. The investigation and clean-up is ongoing (click to enlarge).**

In 2005, it happened in Arlington, Texas.

"I never imagined I'd find a bomb in my backyard," said Arlington homeowner Angela King.

100 live and still deadly bombs, plus 14 tons of bomb debris, caused fear and panic in a new housing community built on an old bombing range.

"I heard sirens ... and I knew at that moment something bad had happened," said one resident.

In 1983, two 8-year-old boys went out to play in a canyon in Tierrasanta and never came home.

"There are millions of acres all over the country where this can occur," said Lenny Siegel of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight.

Thousands of acres in San Diego County spread over 61 different areas are formerly used defense sites, or FUDS. Once-remote land used as bombing ranges or military camps during World War I and II and the Korean War are now areas filled with houses, schools and shopping centers.



***Military training for WWI, WWII and the Korean War took place on sites throughout San Diego County (click to enlarge).**

The wars are decades old, but the wastes of war still pile up at the San Diego Sheriff Bomb-Arson Unit's storage.



***The San Diego Sheriff's Bomb/Arson unit finds old munitions all over the county (click to enlarge).**

Bomb technician expert Conrad Grayson said, "This is the bone yard here, excess stuff we pick up year in and year out."

Such items found at the yard are hand grenades and a practice bomb picked up just last month.

"A couple gardeners were on the lawn, found it buried in a guy's lawn as they were cleaning out the weeds," said Bill Jache of the Sheriff's Bomb-Arson Unit.

Tierrasanta, a part of Camp Elliot, is probably the best known of the 61 former defense sites in San Diego County.



***Tierrasanta was built on top of the former Camp Elliot. The military site was 30,500 acres and also includes Mission Trails Regional Park and other surrounding areas (click to enlarge).**

What is on the old sites, how much and how dangerous, is not clear.

"The military just took over a lot of property in a hurry, we were in a national crisis," said Siegel.

When the wars ended, the military returned the land. Back then, there was no great concern about what was left behind, unlike the recent base closures where the government took great care to make sure bombs or contaminants were removed.

In the past, little was done and the record keeping was poor or non-existent.

"We have a saying in our profession: 'The last victim of every war is a child,'" said Grayson.

Joanne Peake-McCollough said, "I remember that day like it was yesterday."

On December 10, 1983, it was an accident in Tierrasanta that first triggered the federal government to take any action or responsibility for FUDS.

Peake-McCollough's 8-year-old son, Cory, and his older brother, Carl, and an 8-year-old friend asked to play outside.

"They went into the canyon just playing," said Peake-McCollough.

The kids found a live World War II-era, 37 mm shell, and it exploded.



***A World War II-era shell like this one killed two boys and injured another in Tierrasanta in 1983 (click to enlarge).**

"This is what killed the boys in Tierrasanta 25 years ago. This is what we find all over the county," said Grayson.

The blast instantly killed the two 8-year-old boys and injured 12-year-old Carl. The incident still brings Peake-McCollough to tears.

"It's devastating. I have nothing against the military. I love the military, but my son didn't volunteer for Iraq ... he went out to play," said Peake-McCollough.

Since tracking began, 37 deaths nationwide have been blamed on old bombs, grenades and explosives found on FUDS.



***The visitor center at Mission Trails Regional Park includes an ordnance display (click to enlarge).**

In 1986, three years after the Tierrasanta incident, the Army Corps of Engineers began tracking and prioritizing the sites.



***The Department of Defense put the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in charge of the FUDS (formerly used defense sites) program. USACE evaluates and manages FUDS (click to enlarge).**

The more potential for danger, the sooner the cleanup.

Lt. Col. Glen Reed of the Army Corps of Engineers said, "Right now, we have identified almost 10,000 different sites that are FUDS (nationally)."

In terms of local sites, for six months the 10News I-Team searched public records from the Army Corps of Engineers and California's Dept. of Toxic Substance Control and focused on sites that might still have military munitions. The areas included Vista, Anza Borrego, La Mesa, Mira Mesa, Campo, Otay Mesa and La Jolla.



***Click to enlarge map**

On the Camp Mathews site, now the home of the University of California, San Diego, ordnance still pops up during construction projects.

"They found a cache, if you want to call it, for lack of a better word, a cache of 300 rocket projectiles, 3.5 inches," said John Scandura of the California Dept. of Toxic Substance Control. That was in 1999.

Another former defense site, called Linda Vista Landing Field, is now underneath Miramar College, two mobile home parks and two schools.

Lloyd Godard of the Army Corps of Engineers said, "They had a practice bombing target on it."

In the South Bay, just northeast of Brown Field, is a World War II bombing range. There have been plans to put a commercial development in the area, but it is going to be probably 20 years before the Army Corps clears it of any risks.

Removing this ordnance is a low priority. Washington, D.C., is willing to spend \$250 million a year nationwide for cleanup, or roughly the cost of one day of war in Iraq.

Reed added, "We think it's going to take till 2085 to clean all this up ... you know in a way that's unacceptable."

"The irony is, this is the place where people are most likely to encounter munitions are most likely to be exposed," said Siegel.

That is a devastating thought for McCollough, who does not want any other family to suffer the same loss.

"Until somebody dies, we don't do anything ... I don't understand that," said McCollough.

10News contacted city, county and state leaders to come up with at least a warning system for people living in or near FUDS and will report on any progress being made.

Protecting Yourself, Learning More

The 10News I-Team spent six months investigating the dangers of military munitions, much of it decades old, that could be buried anywhere.

Experts said cleaning up the problem is going to be a long, challenging project, but there are ways to help protect and warn people.

Old munitions might be scattered throughout San Diego County, left over from long-closed military training camps and practice ranges.

"These are all pieces of inert ordnance that we have picked up throughout the county," said Sheriff's Bomb-Arson Unit Deputy Bill Jache.

The 10news I-Team tracked 30 of the known local sites.

Former Sheriff's Bomb Squad head, Conrad Grayson, talked with 10News about old unexploded mortar shells like those that have been found here.

"Eventually, it will pop up, and when it pops up, it's just as deadly as the day it was manufactured," Grayson said.

In California, The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the California Department of Toxic Substance Control work together to clean up old military munitions.

But some say it's not happening fast enough.

"... If somebody digs a hole, putting in a swimming pool, post in the ground, new construction, then it is a risk," said Lenny Siegel with the Center for Public Environmental Oversight.

That risk is why Monterey County passed a special law to protect its residents from old munitions. Parts of the county were built on an old army base.

"If someone comes in to build a pool, say, or grades a property, they get a notice that this was a formerly-used defense site. Munitions have been recovered from it," said Jim Austreng, an officials with the California Department of Toxic Substance Control.

That special law about munitions was Austreng's idea. He's the department's unexploded ordnance coordinator.

Some said San Diego would seem to be a good candidate for a similar law with all of its former defense sites, but there is nothing on the books.

Experts said what people can do in the meantime is research their property.

10News has created an interactive map on 10News.com using information from the Department of Toxic Substance Control and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Authorities said teaching yourself and your children how to recognize munitions, and what to do when you find any, is another way people can protect themselves.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is supposed to finish scoring all the formerly used defense sites with munitions concerns by 2010.

Army officials said this will help them prioritize clean-up projects.

Copyright 2008 by 10News.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.