

Homeland Security

How well does the military safeguard priceless archaeological sites on land controlled by the Defense Department? BY TERRY GREENE STERLING

ON A HOT OCTOBER MORNING, I sit in the back seat of a four-wheel-drive truck as it rumbles down a ribbon of asphalt slicing through a desert landscape of yellow daisies, waist-high creosote bushes, and palo verde trees with twisted green trunks. The truck, which belongs to the Air Force, passes one of several bombing target areas on the Barry M. Goldwater Range, a 1.7-million-acre tract of southwest Arizona desert. Only 13 percent of the range is used for bombing practice, but the military needs the remaining acreage to reserve the vast skies above for air combat maneuvers.

On many days, supersonic F-16s pierce the sky, dropping bombs onto old tanks or vans centered in circles of tires, or sturdy A-10 Warthogs swoop out of the clouds and in less than a second pump 29 rounds into a target. When the sorties end, the Sonoran desert is still. Today, a butterfly hovers over a creosote blossom near the ruins of a prehistoric Native American village called Lago Seco ("dry lake" in Spanish).

Lago Seco is one of more than 56,300 archaeological sites on the public lands owned or rented by the U.S. Department of Defense, and there are many yet to be discovered. This is because the total acreage controlled by the department is vast—25 million acres, nearly the size of Kentucky. The land is used, among other things, for troop housing, for bombing practice, for weapons testing, for massive war games, for tank maneuvers—in short, for preparing the armed forces to protect and defend our nation. But the military's land also holds secrets of the first people who ever lived in

America, and if the sites are lost, so is part of America's story.

Inspired in part by the distant war in Iraq, I have come to the range to see how the military is treating the archaeological remains in its care. The controversy over reported losses last year of priceless artifacts from the National Museum in Baghdad led to accusations that the military had failed to properly guard those treasures, and this gave rise to the question, how does the military deal with our own archaeological resources at home?

The truck stops and Capt. Stephanie Dawley, the chief of environmental sciences management for the Air Force's 56th Range Management Office, takes me on a tour of Lago Seco. Headquartered at Luke Air Force Base in Glendale, the 56th RMO oversees all activities, including bombing sorties and historic preservation, on most of the Goldwater Range. (A small portion falls under the jurisdiction of the Marines.) Two civilian archaeologists advise Dawley on how to ensure that the 56th RMO follows the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, which requires all federal agencies to assess archaeological sites on their lands and consider any adverse impact that might befall them as a result of agency activities.

Although live bombs have been dropped on the Goldwater Range since World War II, most of the range has not been affected. Thus far archaeologists have surveyed 170,000 acres and recorded more than 1,100 historic properties, including World War II-era buildings, cattle ranches, and nearly 900 Native American sites dating as far back as 12,000 B.C. Lago Seco, which spans more than 20 acres, was inhabited from about A.D. 900 to



Tanks have damaged more than 400 sites at Fort Hood, Tex., top. A test pit reveals intermittent human occupation for thousands of years.



A tank trail at Fort Hood passes within a few feet of archaeologists excavating a campsite that dates back to 500 B.C.

1350. To the untrained eye, the site looks like desert flatland punctuated by ground squirrel burrows and an occasional creosote bush. The Lago Seco people most likely lived in underground pit houses, long buried beneath silt. But the desert floor is littered with artifacts—hammer stones, scraping tools, hearthstones, arrowheads, and shards of cinnamon-hued pottery made hundreds of miles away.

From A.D. 200 to about 1450, the Hohokam people, superb farmers and water engineers who constructed hundreds of miles of irrigation canals, flourished in large villages in what is now central Arizona. These prosperous inland farmers prized sea salt and shells from the Gulf of California, and to get there they had to travel through what is now the Goldwater Range. Lago Seco sits on this prehistoric travel corridor, the same route used today by illegal immigrants hiking into Arizona from Sonora, Mexico.

Lago Seco's role in the ancient seashell and salt trade has yet to be determined, but its people may have made weapons used in a highly organized and successful Hohokam revolt about A.D. 1300, when the rulers of large farming communities were overthrown. Obsidian arrowheads discovered in the Phoenix area, where the revolt took place, came from mountains on the Goldwater Range.

The site raises other questions: Was the village also a trading post? Were the Lago Seco people Hohokam? How did the villagers survive in this driest part of the Sonoran desert, with routine summer temperatures of 115 degrees? The 56th RMO has no plans to excavate Lago Seco to find the answers—it would cost millions of dollars, and such an undertaking would destroy the site. It might also offend modern Indian tribes who claim affiliation with the Hohokam.

The 56th RMO guards Lago Seco and other ruins as though they are military secrets, protecting them from pot hunters and, in a small section of the range that is open to the public, engaging the aid of civilians trained by Arizona's State Historic Preservation Office to keep an eye out for looters. After walking with me through the Lago Seco site, Capt. Dawley is satisfied that all is well—no bombs, no looters. We have a quick picnic lunch on the tailgate and climb back into the truck for the long trip to Glendale. In the oceanic skies overhead, F-16 fighter pilots prepare for their afternoon sorties.

TO GAUGE THE QUALITY of the Defense Department's stewardship of archaeological sites, I interviewed Defense Department officials, national and state preservationists, archaeologists, and legal experts and examined public records, including the military's own documents. According to these sources, the Defense Department is generally recognized as a leader among federal agencies in its efforts to comply with the Historic Preservation Act. But at the base level, adherence is sometimes spotty.

In spring 2001, the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that the Defense Department lacked "complete and reliable data" on its historic properties. (The definition of a historic property is broad and applies to sites that range in age from 50 to 12,000 years.) The act requires all federal landowners to tally and document their historic properties and to consult with state historic preservation officers about any potential impacts on them.

In its response, the Defense Department acknowledged that its data were unreliable and pledged to "account for all properties" that fall within the Historic Preservation Act. Disputes between this federal landowner and state preservation offices

occasionally make their way to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C., for amicable settlements, because the council has only an advisory function. The preservation act "is more a moral imperative than a penalty," explains Bruce Milhans, a spokesman for the council.

Several months after the GAO report was published, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked. But even with the added responsibilities of homeland security, the Defense Department has continued to improve its historic properties databases. In cooperation with the National Trust, it also published a commander's cultural resources guidebook. The department requires base commanders to file a plan for handling cultural resources and orients them to special laws pertaining to Native American sites. Most military installations hire cultural resource managers and archaeologists, who generally stay on staff and thus provide continuity as commanders rotate in and out. As a result, stewardship at the Goldwater Range seems to be more the rule than the exception.

IN THE GREEN ROLLING HILLS of south-central Texas, the response of the military to the concerns of archaeologists has been markedly different than that at the Goldwater Range. About 13,500 years ago, families lived beneath limestone overhangs that resemble shallow caves, drank from freshwater springs, and hunted game. They dried meat and scraped hides in the shade of cedar and oak trees and taught their children to gather pecans and acorns. They roasted hyacinth bulbs and wild onions in earth ovens lined with limestone rocks.

"There are few places in America that have a longer and richer record of hunting and gathering life than does central Texas," says Steve Black, an archaeologist at the University of Texas at Austin. "In humanity's history, 99 percent of our time on earth has been spent as hunter-gatherers, so a place with this record could have a lot to say about humankind."

Today, 330 square miles of this ancient Texas landscape belongs to an Army installation called Fort Hood. Large tracts of public land are scarce in Texas, which makes its archaeological sites especially valuable. "What Fort Hood has that no other place [in Texas] has is a large chunk of land so you can look at patterning—how people settled, group sizes and structure, how they made a living, their religion, beliefs, health and nutrition, and social organization," Black says.

Pottery shards have been found in the ruins of an 1,100-year-old Native American village on Arizona's Barry M. Goldwater Range.



Black, who has specialized in the area's prehistory for 27 years, says Fort Hood began inventorying its abundant archaeological sites in the 1970s. By the early 1990s, he says, the sites had been "mapped out" and could be protected. But the mapping did little good. Among other things, Fort Hood's soldiers practice tank maneuvers on the sandy areas where prehistoric people once lived.

"Fort Hood has intensive tank training, and periodically they will blow through a site," says Jim Zeidler, associate director for cultural resources for the Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands at Colorado State University, which works with Fort Hood. "The treads really burrow in and there will be damage that is irreversible."

Jim Bruseth, director of the archaeology division of the Texas Historical Commission, says the soldiers who train at Fort Hood "are just kids doing the best they can. When you train, you make mistakes; that is how you learn. But those mistakes can be at the cost of important archaeological information."

No one disputes the fact that archaeological sites will be destroyed by Fort Hood's tanks. But for at least four years, archaeologists at the Texas Historical Commission have tried to persuade Fort Hood officials to study valuable sites before they are lost forever. "At Fort Hood, we are experiencing a fairly dramatic loss," says Lawrence Oaks, state historic preservation officer. He wants to study a few sites that are still intact "because there is nothing to assure they will survive, given the mortality rate on the base."

Four years ago, Oaks wrote to Fort Hood about the ongoing destruction of archaeological sites. "Since 1990, reports ... have documented definitive, moderate to severe, recent damages at 23.5 percent of sites ... via training maneuvers, unregulated mechanical excavations, unregulated road construction, motocross racing, park construction, golf course construction, firebreak construction, improperly regulated landscape maintenance, and the vandalism and theft of public property, graves, and human remains as well as much undifferentiated bulldozing and blading. Extrapolation implies that over 400 sites given protected status [under cultural resource management plans] have been moderately to severely damaged or destroyed."

But Fort Hood's garrison commander, Col. David B. Hall, disputed Oaks' findings. "Fort Hood is committed to improving protection of our

historical sites," he wrote; "however, it is important for us to come to a common understanding of existing data before we can address what has been done and what still needs to be. ... Fort Hood is also interested in Central Texas archaeology, but we must balance our interests with management needs if we are to preserve for, and, most importantly, learn from archaeological sites in the future."

Fort Hood officials did not respond to several requests for interviews on the subject. Despite the seriousness of the damage, the long-standing dispute between Fort Hood and the Texas Commission has never been subject to an official review at the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. But David Berwick, Army program manager for the council, recently told me that some things are going to happen at Fort Hood that could "change how historic preservation has been done." This might include using alternative procedures under the Historic Preservation Act that allow switching from a case-by-case review to a plan examining the overall management of resources, including protection from tanks and looters. Meanwhile, the Fort Hood experience is not reassuring to some Texas archaeologists, who say that looted artifacts from Fort Hood can be found on eBay.

AFTER EXAMINING FOUR OTHER western states known for abundant archaeological sites—New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and Colorado—I found no problem as serious as that at Fort Hood. "In general, the military does a great job, and I was really surprised by that," says Elizabeth Oster, a staff archaeologist and compliance officer for the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office. "I thought it was going to be a battle to get them to pay attention to [cultural resource] issues. ... I actually found it refreshing to work with military folks."

In Nevada, three large installations—Fallon Naval Air Station, Nellis Air Force Base, and Hawthorne Army Depot—have numerous archaeological sites. According to Ronald James, the state historic preservation officer, most military commanders now follow the law as it pertains to those sites. But in a letter to Hawthorne Army Depot officials last May, Alice Baldrica, deputy preservation officer, said Hawthorne was not consulting with her office about cultural resources management, in accordance with the preservation act. She also said that Hawthorne had not followed through in an 11-year effort to

nominate Mount Grant, a Native American sacred site, for the National Register of Historic Places.

The commander of Hawthorne, Lt. Col. David W. Dornblaser, addressed the subject by writing that "because of the events of September 11, 2001, access to military installations is becoming more difficult for security reasons and may impact decision-makers on the status of nominations."

THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT'S justifiable concern over the safety of bases today has some preservationists alarmed. One fear is that base commanders will use homeland security issues as an excuse not to follow, or to get exempted from, the preservation act. Phil Grone, an assistant deputy undersecretary in charge of installations, says such worries are unfounded: "We have no intention of vacating our obligations to the National Historic Preservation Act."

Last March, President George W. Bush issued an executive order that required all federal agencies to comply fully with the preservation act. But there was an exception: The order exempted agencies from taking actions

or disclosing information that would "conflict with or compromise national and homeland security goals, policies, programs, or activities."

And the U.S. Senate last year approved a \$400.5 billion Defense authorization bill that exempted some military bases from following the Endangered Species and Marine Mammal Protection acts. The military's exemption from the environmental law is "a horrible precedent," says Susan West Montgomery, president of the Washington, D.C., lobbying group Preservation Action. "It's very scary for us, a red flag. ... If military officials feel they should be exempt from the Endangered Species Act, do they also feel they should be exempt from historic preservation? And if so, how will this manifest itself? By executive order? We don't know.

"The mood in Congress is to streamline and expedite what they see as the burden of environmental review, including the preservation act," Montgomery says. "We don't see it as a burden. We look at it as a mandate that they should be stewards of archaeological and historical treasures." □

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The Air Force is charged with protecting nearly 900 Native American sites on the Goldwater Range's 1.7 million acres from looters.