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## Bombs away! But the memories remain at Sahuarita bombing range

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Posted: Wednesday, September 24, 2014 11:00 am

By Susan E. Swanberg Special to the Sahuarita Sun | 0 comments



Susan E. Swanberg

### Remains of Sahuarita Bombing and Gunnery Range Airstrip

A paved road marks the remnants of the Sahuarita Bombing and Gunnery Range airstrip.



The desert north of the Santa Rita Experimental Range and east of Sahuarita harbors military mysteries dating back more than a generation.

The remains of a WWII auxiliary airstrip, now Sahuarita Park Road, stretch from Sahuarita District Park toward the southeast. Northeast of the airstrip, not far from Walden Grove High School, military trainees once practiced ground-to-air gunnery skills.

Empty shell casings, remnants of gunnery practice, still litter the ground in some spots. Other casings, and a few live rounds, hide just beneath the surface, waiting to be exposed by the monsoon rains.

Who knows what else lays beneath the sands of the former Sahuarita Bombing and Gunnery Range, also known as the Sahuarita Air Force Range, a military training site from 1942 into the 1970s.

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## Still a mystery

Ralph Be Vard, formerly with the U.S. Army Security Agency, lives with his daughter in Sahuarita. In the 1960s, Be Vard worked security on Southern Arizona's Titan missile sites.

"I'm surprised, I didn't know," he said of the range. "Even back in '60, I didn't hear about it."

Rosa Olivas lives with her husband at the end of Lutz Road east of Sahuarita – near two old bombing targets. She'd never heard about the range, either.

Not far from Olivas' home lives the Petersen family.

"I've been out here all my life and I didn't know," Shelly Petersen said.

In about 2004, Petersen's daughter, Megan Petersen, now 18, found two or three pointed shells, each four to five inches long, sticking out of the sand at Dawson and Country Club roads, an area that falls within the boundaries of the old range.

"They were loaded and rusty," Megan said. "I was scared. I really wanted to touch them, but my mom said no."

Shelly Petersen called the authorities and Pima County sheriff's deputies came out and collected the shells.

Brothers Dito and Mario Gonzalez and their two friends, brothers Sergio and Sati Santa Cruz, are high school students now. The four young men grew up knowing about portions of the old airstrip and gunnery range near the site where Walden Grove High School opened in 2011.

When they were 9 and 10 years old, the two Gonzalez brothers attended daycare at the Joan M. Swetland Community Center, just to the north of the old airfield.

"We'd go out for walks and find bullets and stuff," Sergio said. "Some were four to five inches long and pointy. They had gold rings around them and were rusty. They're scattered all over the place."

When they were older, the Gonzalez brothers went to the old airfield with the two Santa Cruz boys. The friends weren't afraid the shells would explode.

"We were young and reckless," Dito said.

## Early years

Southern Arizona was already on the map as an aviation-friendly region long before the range was built. The Davis-Monthan Landing Field, originally on what is now the Tucson Rodeo site, was the first municipally owned airfield in the United States.

Established in 1919, the municipal airport was soon moved to a site large enough to accommodate increased air traffic. The new airfield was completed in February 1927, just in time for a famous visitor to land his Spirit of Saint Louis on the new runway.

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“Lindberg landed at Davis-Monthan,” says Larry D. “Doug” Herndon, Chief of History, 355th Fighter Wing at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.

Lindberg, the first aviator to cross the Atlantic Ocean solo, visited Tucson in 1927 as part of a three-month tour of the United States, a tour meant to generate interest in building airstrips and other infrastructure for the burgeoning aviation industry.

On Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked by air. American aviation would play a major role in WWII. Soon another new facility, the Sahuarita Bombing and Gunnery Range, became an important supporting player on the war’s aerial stage.

### **Desert to bombing range**

Bombardiers, aerial gunners and anti-aircraft gunners must be trained, and places to practice the essential skills were critical to the war effort. The deserts of the American Southwest soon became some of the best proving grounds for the trainees.

“The war was expanding every day. We have this open desert that can be used as an airfield,” Herndon said.

According to Herndon, during WWII, Arizona had more primary and auxiliary airfields than Texas.

Parcel by parcel, the U.S. Army Air Corps, forerunner of the U.S. Air Force, accumulated land south of Tucson for the bombing and gunnery range until the Air Corps had 27,046 acres.

The range eventually included circular bombing targets made of stone (remnants of which were still visible from the air as recently as 2005), 12 buildings, observation towers, utilities, a radio-controlled range, four bomb targets and air to ground targets. Most of the bombardiers in training came from Davis-Monthan Field, but military personnel from other locations also used the range.

The 5540-foot airstrip was completed in 1943, and the air-to-ground gunnery range was closed shortly thereafter because the range was too close to the runway.

According to Paul Freeman, author of “Abandoned and Little-Known Airfields: Arizona – Southeastern Tucson Area,” the runway was used after WWII for emergency landings and bombing practice.

### **Cold War**

The engines of the large white bird are quiet now. The old B-47, a photo opportunity for history buffs, rests on the grounds of the Pima Air and Space Museum in Tucson. Once this powerful bomber, or others of its era, might have soared over the desert south of the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, dropping explosive cargo on the Sahuarita Bombing and Gunnery Range below.

Tom Bohan, docent at the Pima Air and Space Museum and former pilot with the 303rd Bomb Wing at Davis-Monthan, remembers another use for the range.

In the early 1960s, Bohan flew B-47s, very heavy aircraft — especially when they carried a large payload. To have enough thrust to get off the ground, these airplanes sometimes needed an extra boost, called a “rocket-assisted

take-off," or RATO.

According to Bohan, small thrusters that looked like pods or bottles were attached to a U-shaped collar underneath the aircraft and behind the rear wheels. The added boost made for a dramatic and efficient take off. Once a rocket-assisted bomber lifted off, the RATO rack and pods were ejected to reduce drag on the aircraft.

Bohan recalls that during B-47 training runs, he would take off from Davis-Monthan toward the northwest, circle back around south of Tucson and drop the RATO rack and pods onto the range.

The discarded racks and pods, along with artillery shells, cigarette cases and other objects left on the range, became collector's items for aviation enthusiasts.

### **No longer a priority**

After the Cold War ended and Sahuarita began developing and expanding, enthusiasm for the old range and airstrip diminished. Although much of the facility was in mothballs, portions of the installation were still used as a training site for Tucson's 650-man 8th Battalion, 40th Armor U.S. Army Reserve.

Tucson Daily Citizen archives reveal that the dust raised during tank maneuvers by reservists was a continuing problem for Sahuarita's residents.

In 1972, the 8th Battalion, 40th Armor decided to move its operation to Fort Huachaca. The glory days of the bombing and gunnery range were over.

As a Formerly Used Defense Site (FUDS) the range is eligible for Defense Environmental Restoration Program (DERP) funds to clean up and rehabilitate the site.

In a fact sheet dated December 2005, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said that debris found at the range during a preliminary assessment made it "... likely that high explosive (HE) bombs, practice bombs with spotting charges, JATO [similar to RATO] bottles and several types of small arms were used on the site, thus the ranges may contain munitions debris and potentially MEC [munitions and explosives of concern] as well as MC [munitions constituents]."

An earlier sweep of the range produced one 750-pound practice bomb and 71 JATO bottles.

Richard M. Byrd, Environmental Management Program Coordinator for the City of Tucson's Environmental Services, Engineering and Technical Support departments, has an interest in the range because Tucson maintains nine wells within the footprint of the range, wells that provide some of the city's water.

According to Byrd, while the range is "on the radar" for further inspection and cleanup by the Corps, other sites within Arizona have a higher priority. With more than 200 eligible FUDS throughout Arizona, the Corps has a lot of work to do.

One of those high priority sites is Williams Field Bomb Target Range No. 6. Located in Florence, the Williams Field site is a one-square-mile area used for bombing practice during WWII. According to the Corps, a five-year review of the Williams Field site is underway and a report on the results is scheduled for completion by Sept. 30.

# In the meantime, further inspection of the Sahuarita Bombing and Gunnery Range appears to be on hold.

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