A Look Back...

MUROC BOMBING AND GUNNERY RANGE (EAST CAMP)

Camp at edge of Muroc Dry Lake.

JAMES TUCKER
412TH TEST WING HISTORY OFFICE

MUROC BOMBING AND GUNNERY RANGE (EAST CAMP)

In 1933, the skies above Rodgers Dry Lakebed were quiet except for the ever-present wind. In September of that year, everything changed. A small contingent of Army personnel arrived to begin building the first military presence at the installation that would become synonymous with advancements in aeronautics and airspeed.

Lieutenant Colonel Henry "Hap" Arnold, acting as the interim commander of March Army Air Field in Riverside, CA (near Los Angeles), needed a location to train his aircrews in bombing and gunnery. Having heard about the large, flat surface of the dry lake, he figured he had found the ideal location for those efforts and sent a team of five soldiers into the Mojave Desert to lay out a bombing and gunnery range. They set it up in an area on the eastern shore of the dry lakebed. Called "Camp I" in early records, it consisted of tents and circular bombing targets in the desert. Though the aircrews would fly in and out from the lakebed, a small detachment was assigned to the semi-permanent camp on the eastern edge of the lakebed. Originally called "the Muroc Lake site," the official name of that little station became the Muroc Bombing and Gunnery Range in 1940.

The installation consisted of tents for over a year. The first building constructed was the combination barracks/messhall. A permanent headquarters was built by 1936. They also added a water tower for both drinking and firefighting. In 1937, Congress set aside funds for purchasing private lands around the lakebed to allow for bigger Army Air Corps operations at the Muroc site, which became more important as an increasing number of Air Corps units took advantage of the lakebed and training facilities at Muroc. It took until 1940 for the sales to take effect. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, the Army built a new training base named Muroc Army Air Field (present-day South Base) and the Bombing & Gunnery Range became known as East Camp until it was shut down after the war.

The initial establishment consisted of only a handful of men. Master Sergeant Harley J. "Fogie" Fogleman commanded the twenty men who built the first structures. The tents they erected relied on coal-fired stoves for heat and an old, frequently out-of-service generator for electricity. Some local residents took to calling the Range "The Foreign Legion of the Air Corps." In fact, Fogleman noted that they "couldn't get a commanding officer. Commissioned officers would come up from Los Angeles, take one look at the place, and take off for L.A. again without even shutting off the motors of their planes." Fogleman remained the Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge of the range until 1942.

Due to its location, all supplies "had to be brought in from March Field." When Arnold petitioned Congress for funds "to make this site fully effective," he listed the needs: "Railroad siding, Storage facilities for gasoline and oil, quarters for caretaking detachment (including water supply and sewage disposal), Improvements to land[ing] field, [and] Triangulation stations for the recording of bombs." Crucially, he requested these items in October of 1935, more than 2 full years after Fogleman established the site!

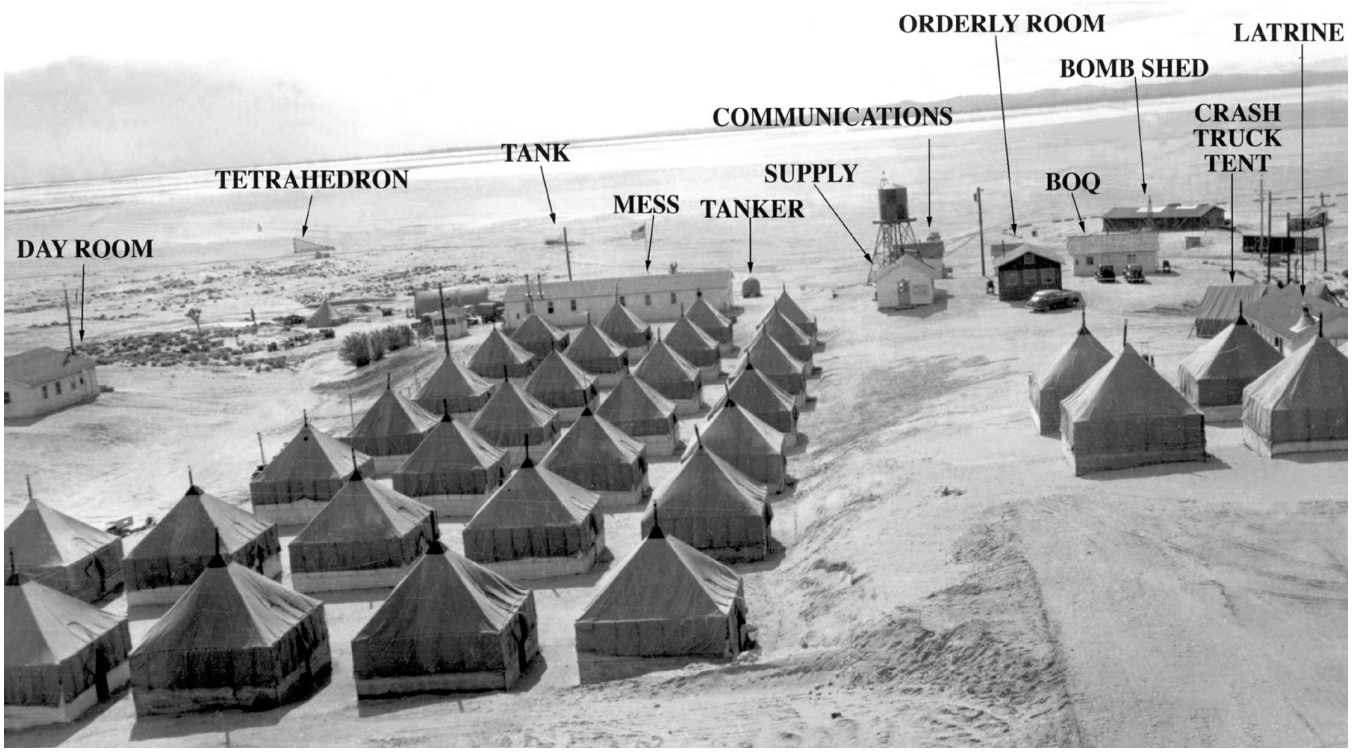
That petition to Congress spelled out the costs as follows: land owned by Southern Pacific Railroad and private citizens would add up to roughly $130,000 and the physical improvements would total roughly $50,000. Though Arnold wanted roughly 81,000 acres of land for the installation, the government already owned 38,720 of those acres. He described the land as "desert country, covered with scrub mesquite and sage and totally unfit for cultivation or habitation." Arnold told Congress each acre would cost about $3.00. When the War Department pursued the purchases in 1940, they brought in surveyors from Bakersfield area (whom the locals felt undervalued the land) and bought up much of the land through eminent domain.

MUROC BOMBING AND GUNNERY RANGE (EAST CAMP)

The most famous event at the gunnery camp occurred in 1937. In May of that year, the Muroc Lake site played host to a large-scale war game exercise for a large portion of the Army Air Corps in order to "test the full strength organization of the different type of units" in the Air Corps. The initial plan called for the participation of more than 2,000 active duty personnel and thirteen squadrons of bomber and pursuit aircraft. It also required the 63rd Coast Artillery Anti-Aircraft Division from San Pedro, CA, to defend the lakebed from the bombers. The Muroc portions of the exercise ended up involving more than 300 aircraft, which was "virtually the entire United States Army Air Corps."

In addition to its strategic and training value, the exercise caught the attention of the local community. As early as March, 1937, stories ran in the Antelope Valley Ledger-Gazette describing the upcoming event. The exercise began on 11 May after several days of transporting personnel and materiel in preparation. Major General Frank M. Andrews, the Chief of the Air Corps, designated Friday 14 May as a day for "the public to visit Muroc Bombing Range. The defending forces there will repel an air attack between the hours of 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. on that date." This effort differed from the normal exercise attacks that normally occurred in the early hours of the morning. Though not used in the public display, the simulated attacks included actual drops of tear gas to train both the attacking crews and the defending ground crews in using and responding to the gas. They also tried using smoke screens to interfere with the gunners' ability to shoot down attacking aircraft. This turned out to be a double-edged sword since it not only proved capable of blocking the defenders' aim but also kept the attacking bombers from achieving "a high degree of accuracy, stated observers." May 22nd marked the official end of the large-scale exercise when the Anti-Aircraft Division began packing up for its return to San Pedro.

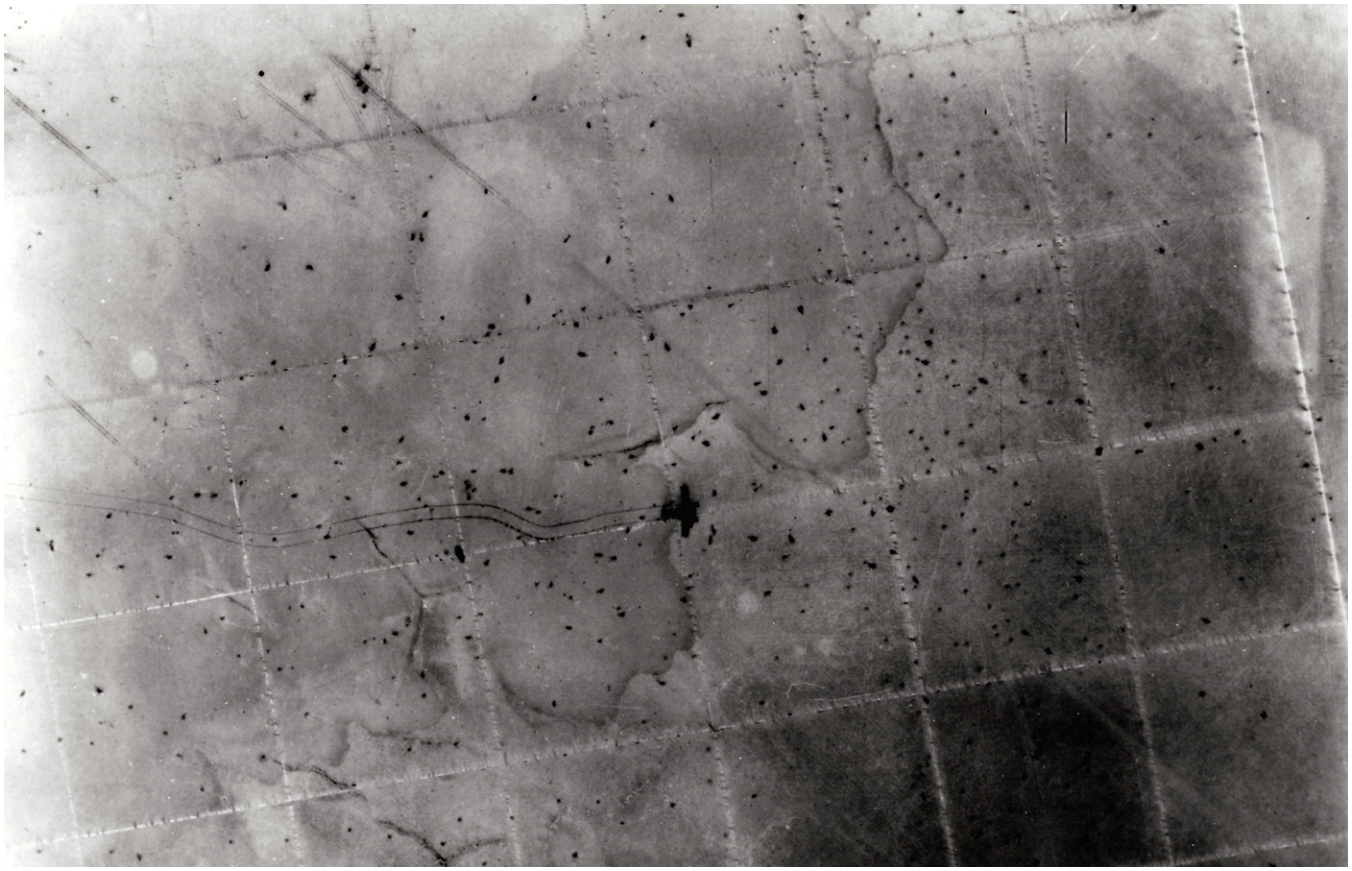
The nearly flat Rogers Dry Lakebed offered a natural landing field for the aircraft visiting for training. General Albert Boyd later called it "God's gift to the US Air Force."



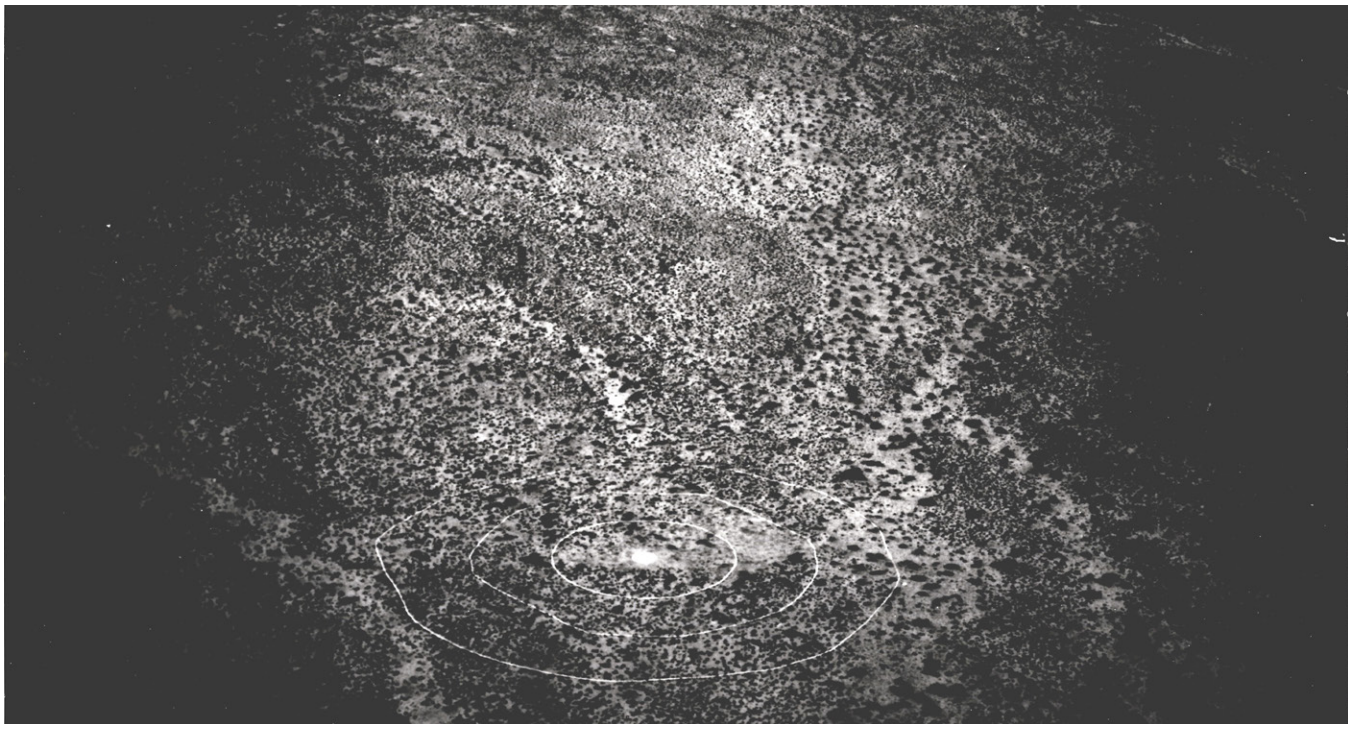
The tent city for the Muroc Bombing and Gunnery Range (shown here with labels for the tents' uses) grew over the years from 20 men to several hundred.

Troops attempting to cool off in the mess tent at Muroc Bombing and Gunnery Range (above). The site's resources were so limited that MSgt Fogleman had to have the site's truck and driver make a daily run for supplies. The first sand-proof building at the camp, a messhall, would not go up for over a year (below).

To meet the need of training gunnery crews to hit moving targets, Fogleman and his men built a gunnery track. Targets (both generic and man-shaped) were pulled along the track. Its shape, seen above shortly after completion and below in the modern day, provided different angles for gunners to lead and the berms provided cover for the tractor towing the targets.

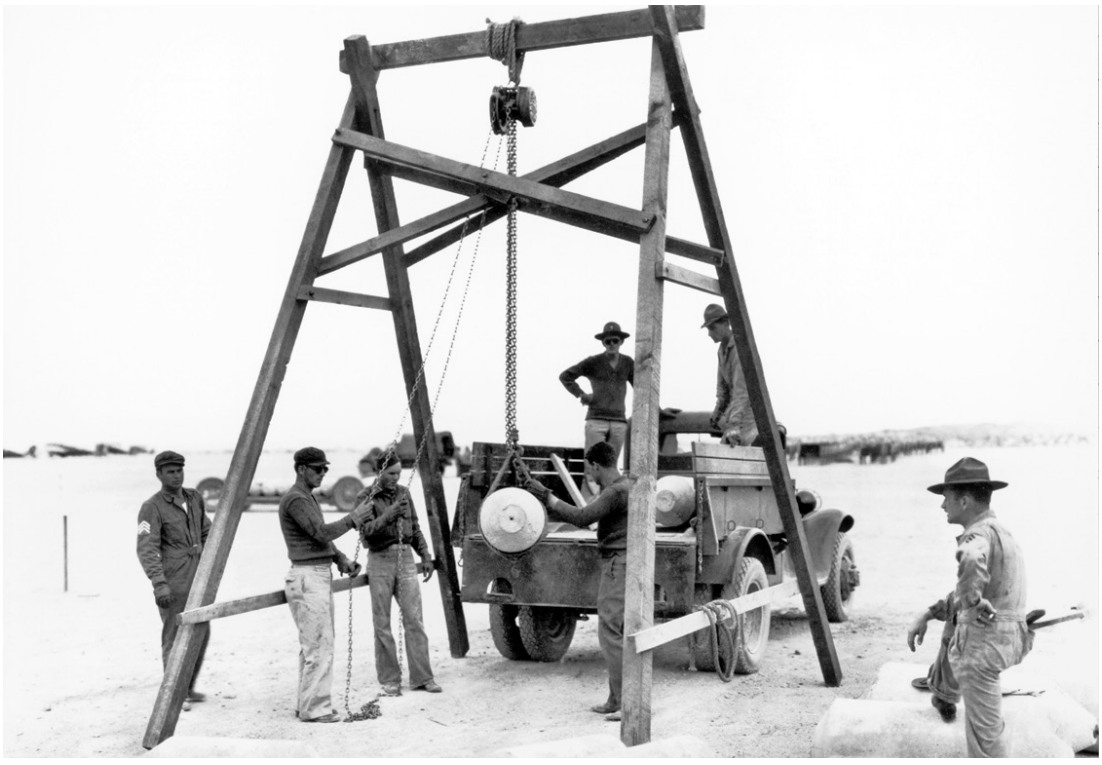


The bomber crews dropped a remarkable number of bombs during training runs. This photo shows the results of a training drill dropping bombs on a target grid.



The early training utilized rudimentary methods, like this bombing target drawn into the desert (complete with faulty lines and uncleared plant life).

During the period between the World Wars, the Army Air Corps faced major funding limitations. These eased in the years leading up to World War II, but that money also had to purchase a growing number of aircraft. To cut costs, bombers rarely used explosive ordinance for target practice. They used concrete poured into the shape of the bombs their craft dropped. Above, an NCO stands between a bomb-shape and a mold used to pour the bombs. Below, a team loads finished shapes into a truck for transport.



Above: a large concrete bomb-shape is loaded onto a B-12 for training use. Over the course of the Range's life, the detachment used bombs up to 2,000 pounds.

Below: A team of Airmen prepare a number of concrete bombs for use, including ensuring that the gripping handles (which mechanisms on the aircraft clamped onto) had set properly.

Water was a crucial resource for the men assigned to the Bombing and Gunnery Range. The photo above shows the pump installed at the camp's well. The photo at the left shows the water tower that was built sometime before 1937. The water tower was crucial both for drinking water and as the source of water for the site's fire brigade.

According to one recollection, this fire-fighting team consisted of all the men passing a total of 15 buckets back and forth from the water tower. This proved inconvenient and ineffective when the tower itself caught fire and the men could do nothing more than watch it burn.

At left: The 1937 exercise at Muroc brought in a massive amount of personnel. In fact, nearly every part of the Army Air Corps was involved. P-26 Peashooters fly over the lakebed as part of the exercise. The rows of aircraft offer a glimpse of just how many planes flew in to participate, which does not account for the nearly 450 Coastal Artillery personnel used for the anti-aircraft part of the drill.

Below: The exercises focused on simulating aerial attacks on targets and allowing the Coastal Artillery to practice defending against air raids. Several of the attacks included simulated gas strikes on the camp. This photo shows both the deployment of the tear gas and the ground crews practicing with their gas masks. For the public demonstration on Friday, May 14th, 1937, the simulated aerial attack did not use tear gas to avoid exposing the public to the gas.

AFMC History & Heritage Program

HQ AFMC/HO

4225 Logistics Ave., Room S133 • Wright-Patterson AFB 45433-5006
DSN: 713-1797 • Comm: (937) 713-1797

For inquiries, contact: R. Ray Ortensie • For heritage and exhibit questions, contact: Jack Waid

E-mail: *HQAFMC.HO@us.af.mil*


EDWARDS
AIR FORCE BASE