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Cleaning Up the Badlands Bombing Range

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During the Second World War, the U.S. Air Force needed a testing site. They found one on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the western state of South Dakota. More than 121,000 hectares of the reservation was used as an aerial bombing and gunnery range by the Air Force. When the war was over, unexploded ordnance and shrapnel lay scattered across more than 129,000 hectares of the Badlands, an arid area in the northwestern corner of the reservation. More than a half-century later, cleanup of the ordnance left behind by the military remains incomplete.

Called mako sica, literally 'land bad' by the Lakota tribe, the Badlands were cursed by white fur trappers as well as American Indians as a harsh environment that was nearly impossible to cross. It sweltered under oppressive heat in the summer and was whipped by bitter cold in the winter. Millions of years of erosion had left deep gullies, sheer 150-meter cliffs and little vegetation.

It's a location the U.S. Air Force felt was perfect to use as a practice bombing range, even though more than 125 families had established homes in the more livable regions. During the summer of 1942, the federal government advised them to pack their belongings and move.

"They felt that the lands on the Pine Ridge Reservation were something that they could acquire quickly, and they promised to return that land at the end of the hostilities," says Dale Peterson, Chief of Environmental Restoration at South Dakota's Ellsworth Air Force Base, the home base for the planes that dropped the thousands of kilos of bombs on the Badlands. "What ultimately happened was that the emphasis either wasn't there or the process was more complex than they originally anticipated, so it wasn't until the 1960's that they started returning the training range.," he says.

Actually, no land exchanged hands until after 1975. Since many Indians had moved away from the reservation during World War II, only about one-fourth of the land was re-purchased by the descendants of those families that had been affected by the initial order to evacuate.

In 1993, the Reservation's Oglala Sioux tribe established the Badlands Bombing Range Project with funding from the Department of Defense. Personnel are trained to locate and map ordinance that is later removed by contractors hired by the Army Corps of Engineers.

"Whenever we use these, this is Frank's metal detectorNow this thing...it turns on here." Frank Marshall is a Marine veteran and one of the Project's 27 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Trainees. He says the project has provided him with secure employment, but he doesn't approve of the reason for its existence the bombing of the Badlands. "It wasn't right. But the United States government is the law of the land," he says. "When they want something and you got it, or they need it, they're gonna come and get it and that's basically what they did here. It was mostly Indian families that were dislocated, but there were also some white families up there were treated the same way. 'Hey, you got thirty days to get out of here, guy.' Move, you know. And a lot of people lost cattle, horses, whatever... Thirty days to find somewhere else to live, you know. It wasn't right but that's how the government operates." "... Badlands Bombing Range..."

Project Director Emma Featherman-Sam says her staff holds public meetings to keep the reservation residents up to date about the cleanup's progress. "The people that were children back during that time are a lot of the elders now that attend our meetings. And the people come to our meetings, you know, some of those elders get up and they cry when they talk about what happened to them during that time," she says. "I believe it was August 10, 1942, and the order was issued to evacuate that area, and people were told they only had 10 days to get out of there. And so people, they just went back to their homes and they tried to load everything that they could into their wagons. Or if they had vehicles they loaded then up and a lot of people, it was August, so they had Victory Gardens. They had to gather up as much as they could. And they had chickens and they had stock horses and cows. And some people even talk about destroying their animals. They were afraid they were going to starve out there. They didn't know how long, you know, the Gunnery Range was going to be used."

Marvin Cuny was nine years old when bombs first started dropping on this part of the Badlands. His family didn't have to move, but lived less than 90 meters from the Bombing Range line. Over lunch at the Cuny Café, the only restaurant for an hour's drive in any direction, he remembers life during the war. "It was a little scary," he says. "You hear all the planes flying around shooting and stuff. I can remember one particular time we was up...they started a fire up there and we was fighting the fire and we had to take off and run because about eight or 12 fighter jets flew over and started shooting at them barrels." "It really was a sad time for these people that lost lands there. They feel that the government came in and took their lands without their permission," says Ms. Featherman-Sam. She says the experience was a tremendous emotional as well as economic drain on tribal members who were given the option of trading or selling their land for one to two cents a hectare. Those who refused to choose either option saw their property condemned and received nothing for their trouble.

"Okay, right here you're on the burn of the target. You can see the circle. And right next to us is one of the cross-hairs, on that roads across the fence, you see it going that way? It's Badlands, look at it, you know. What can you do to it, I think was the thought back then. Bomb the hell out of it and it's still going to look the same, you know."

Dozens of large circular targets, 150 meters in diameter, each marked with a cross, were made from soil layered a meter high to be easily visible from the air. Ironically, the design duplicated the Medicine Wheel, a sacred American Indian symbol. Practice bombs weighing more than 45 kilograms were dropped on targets scattered all over the Badlands.

Cleaning up every piece of ordnance would take a lifetime. Instead, the Project has divided the Bombing Range into 27 sectors and will clean up everything close to inhabited or traveled areas. The cost to clean the first three sectors will be \$22 million. The estimated completion time is at least 15 years.

Dale Peterson says that Ellsworth Air Force Base is working closely with the tribe during the cleanup. "Hopefully our work will be good enough that we can repatriate that land and make good on that more than fifty year old promise that's still out there for us," he says. The U.S. Air Force did not offer any reasons that would justify its decision to turn part of the Pine Ridge Reservation into a bombing range. Spokesman Allen Heritage was also unable to say whether or not the Air Force has ever offered an apology. According to Emma Featherman-Sam, they have not.


The tribe plans to develop the area as the clean-up effort continues. Ms. Featherman-Sam says a Lakota Heritage and Education Center will be located adjacent to the former Bombing Range within the next two years. "Even though it's not a cleanup of every single foot of the Bombing Range, it's still to me a really safe way of going about trying to get those areas cleared where people are going to be," she says. "People should recognize that the tribe has really done something here that hasn't been done anywhere else in Indian Country."

Frank Marshall agrees that the tribe is doing good work, but adds that there is a 'reality check' to all of their efforts. "This type of business is going to continue for years to come," he says. "As long as there's a conflict someplace, someone's going to have to come clean it up afterwards if you want to make it a safe place to live."

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