

Camp Desert Rock, Nevada



By Lieutenant Colonel Danny M. Johnson, USA-Ret.

Built in 1951, Camp Desert Rock was named for Exercise Desert Rock, a series of atmospheric nuclear tests conducted at the Nevada Test Site (NTS). The camp was used by the Army in the 1950s to house troops participating in tests at the site. (National Archives)

On 18 December 1950, President Harry S. Truman gave his approval to use a portion of the U.S. Air Force's Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range in southeastern Nevada for atomic tests. Construction of the Nevada Test Site (NTS), originally known as the Nevada Proving Ground (NPG), began in January 1951. Construction of what became known as Camp Desert Rock did not start until September 1951. The camp was named for Exercise Desert Rock, a series of atmospheric nuclear tests first conducted at NTS in 1951. This site included Yucca and Frenchman Flats, Paiute and Rainer Mesas, and the Camp Desert Rock area, which was used by the Sixth Army in the 1950s to house troops participating in atmospheric tests at the site.

Designed as a military support facility for NTS, Camp Desert Rock began as a temporary camp originally part of NPG. It was located twenty-three miles west of Indian Springs, Nevada, in Nye County on Highway 95 and assigned to Sixth Army effective 12 September 1951. Headquarters, III Corps, Sixth Army, chose an area just outside NTS about two miles southwest of the Atomic Energy Commission's (AEC) Camp Mercury. The site, in the center



TOP: Camp Desert Rock came under the administrative control of Sixth Army (Sixth Army shoulder patch). (U.S. Army Center of Military History)

of Mercury Valley, was bordered by the Spring Mountains and the Spotted Range towards the north and east and the Specter Range to the west. The Army acquired 23,058 acres for Camp Desert Rock from the Department of the Interior on 5 September 1951.

The Army established Camp Desert Rock to stage and house troops involved in training exercises associated with nuclear weapons testing by the AEC. Personnel from all four services were deployed to observe the detonations from trenches, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. After the completion of exercises, the camp adhered to radiological safety measures throughout its use. In 1951, the Army, working closely with the AEC, carried out the Desert Rock exercises to “dispel much of the fear and uncertainty surrounding atomic radiation and the effects of gamma and x-rays.”

The initial construction for Camp Desert Rock was accomplished by the 231st Engineer Combat Battalion, a North Dakota Army National Guard unit mobilized in September 1950 for the Korean War and based out of Fort Lewis, Washington. The battalion’s mission was to establish, build, and maintain the camp, and construct field fortifications at the atomic test sites. The 90th Engineer Water Supply Company handled the camp’s water supply, to include running water from a 190,000 gallon water tank, and several permanent type latrines with showers, flush toilets, and wash bowls. Temporary sumps for garbage disposal were built by the 597th Engineer Light Equipment Company.

Within the first six months of existence, Camp Desert Rock had grown from a few tents to a relatively comfortable, semi-permanent tent camp with many modern amenities. It had two permanent

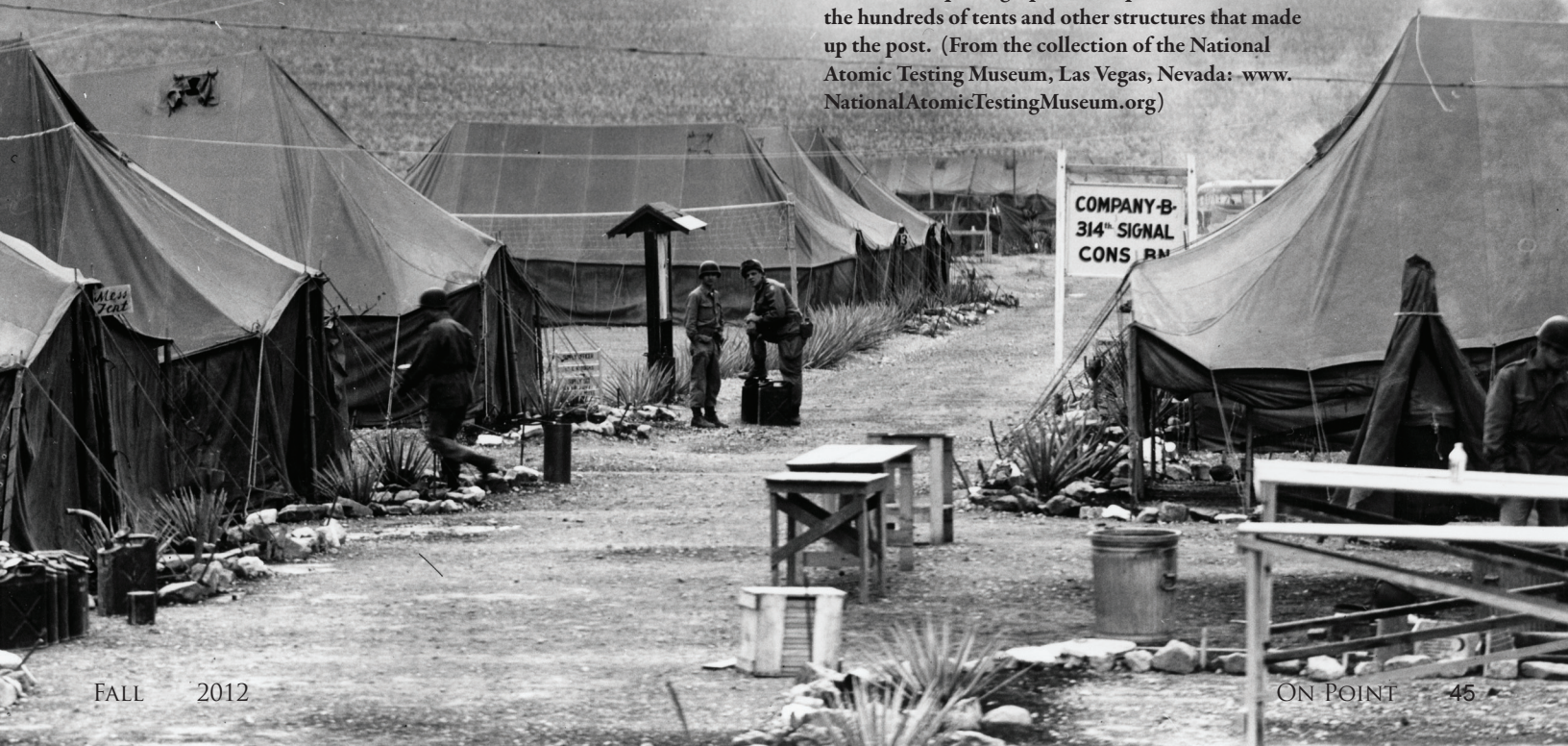
buildings for mess halls, each of which could accommodate 500 soldiers, electricity to all parts of the camp from nearby AEC Camp Mercury, and telephone, telegraph, and teletype facilities. A sewage system ran throughout the permanent part of the camp. In addition, the camp featured a permanent training auditorium with seating for 400, a post exchange housed in a Quonset hut, and framed and floored tents to house soldiers.

Later improvements consisted of a 5,000-foot airstrip, an upgraded sewer system, dozens of semi-permanent buildings, including Quonset-and Butler-type steel buildings, over 500 concrete tent pads, and trailers for housing, administration, storage, and other uses. There were chapels, an open-air-theater with wooden bleachers and an elevated stage, a barber shop, and a beer tent. The open-air theater hosted entertainers from Las Vegas who came to Camp Desert Rock to perform for the troops. The camp had its own telephone system nicknamed the “Camp Desert Rock Telephone Company.” By the time Exercise Desert Rock VI had started in 1954, the camp had grown to 133 semi-permanent buildings and more than 500 framed squad tents. Large prefabricated buildings were built to serve as Signal and Quartermaster warehouses. The ordnance yard gained a pair of prefabricated storage buildings. A helicopter



A 1952 aerial photograph of Camp Desert Rock shows the hundreds of tents and other structures that made up the post. (From the collection of the National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada: www.NationalAtomicTestingMuseum.org)

Soldiers from Company B, 314th Signal Construction Battalion, enjoy some down time at Camp Desert Rock in 1951. (From the collection of the National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada: www.NationalAtomicTestingMuseum.org)

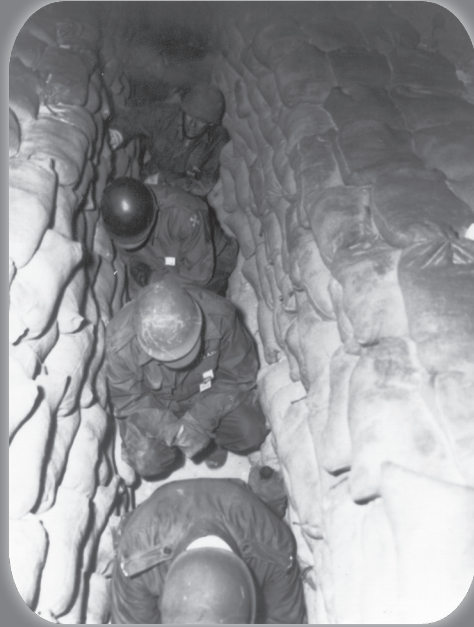


landing area next to the airstrip was added for storing, maintaining, and refueling helicopters prior to exercises. Many of these later improvements to Camp Desert Rock were carried out by the Shore Battalion, 369th Engineer Amphibious Support Regiment, 95th Engineer Construction, 412th Engineer Construction, and 314th Signal Construction Battalions.

In October 1951, as part of Operation Buster-Jangle, the Army and the AEC prepared to test the ability of men and machines to move through ground zero within minutes after the detonation of an atomic bomb. The first shot did not involve live troops. Instead, various types of military equipment including Jeeps, trucks, tanks, personnel carriers, and halftracks were to be used. Some were buried to various depths at distances ranging from two hundred yards to three miles from ground zero, while others were completely exposed. Heat, blast, and radiation sensors monitored the effects on each vehicle.

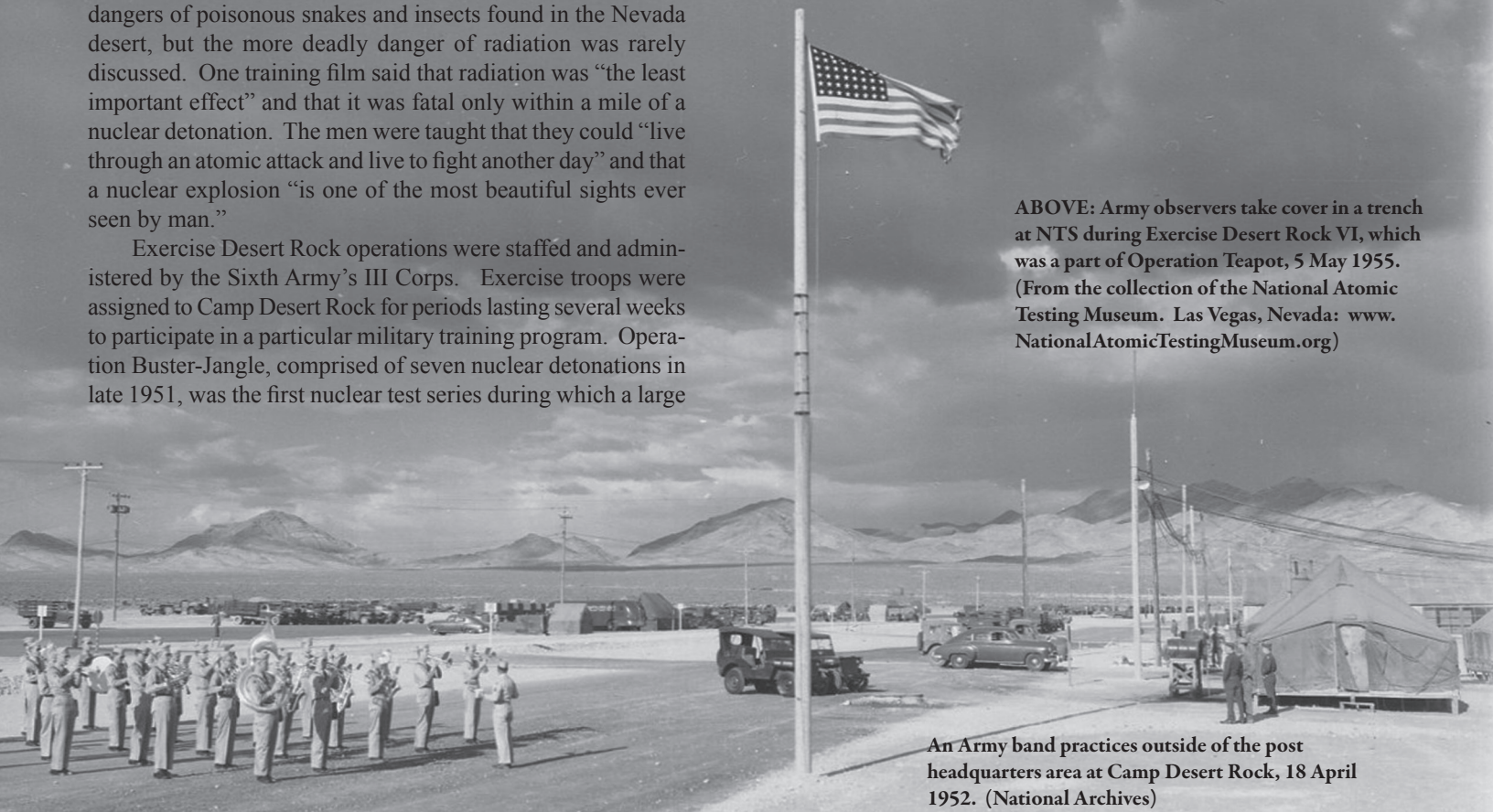
In addition to observing nuclear detonations, troops received training in radiation and nuclear weapons effects. Personnel assigned to the camp were provided booklets that explained the importance of secrecy. They were prohibited from discussing nuclear tests, military maneuvers, or any effects they felt from the tests. They were also warned about the dangers of poisonous snakes and insects found in the Nevada desert, but the more deadly danger of radiation was rarely discussed. One training film said that radiation was “the least important effect” and that it was fatal only within a mile of a nuclear detonation. The men were taught that they could “live through an atomic attack and live to fight another day” and that a nuclear explosion “is one of the most beautiful sights ever seen by man.”

Exercise Desert Rock operations were staffed and administered by the Sixth Army’s III Corps. Exercise troops were assigned to Camp Desert Rock for periods lasting several weeks to participate in a particular military training program. Operation Buster-Jangle, comprised of seven nuclear detonations in late 1951, was the first nuclear test series during which a large



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ABOVE: Army observers take cover in a trench at NTS during Exercise Desert Rock VI, which was a part of Operation Teapot, 5 May 1955. (From the collection of the National Atomic Testing Museum. Las Vegas, Nevada: www.NationalAtomicTestingMuseum.org)



An Army band practices outside of the post headquarters area at Camp Desert Rock, 18 April 1952. (National Archives)

number of troops assigned to Camp Desert Rock received realistic training in the tactical aspects of nuclear warfare. Over 6,500 troops, including those from the Army's Atomic Maneuver Battalion, took part in the operation. Additional tests that took place over the years measured the blast and radiation effects on buildings, vehicles, various weapon systems, and animals.


Original plans called for the Army to dismantle Camp Desert Rock following Buster-Jangle and return all support units to their home stations. Instead, the Army ultimately chose to keep the camp open as a permanent installation to support additional nuclear tests. Immediately after Operation Plumbbob's Galileo shot on 7 October 1957, the camp reverted to standby status, with a small caretaker staff remaining at the post. After the suspension of aboveground testing in 1957, the camp ceased operation as an Army subinstallation effective 18 June 1964. Many of the camp's structures were moved to other parts of the NTS.



Buddy Robinson, an entertainer from Las Vegas, performs a show at Camp Desert Rock's open-air theater for soldiers participating in Operation Plumbbob, 2 June 1957. (From the collection of the National Atomic Testing Museum. Las Vegas, Nevada: www.NationalAtomicTestingMuseum.org)

Soldiers from the 11th Airborne Division's 188th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 127th Engineer Battalion, and the 546th Field Artillery Battalion observe a nuclear detonation called Buster Dog during Operation Buster-Jangle, six miles from ground zero at NTS, October 1951. Soldiers taking part in exercises at NTS were housed at Camp Desert Rock. (From the collection of the National Atomic Testing Museum. Las Vegas, Nevada: www.NationalAtomicTestingMuseum.org)

The AEC resurfaced and enlarged the Desert Rock airstrip in 1969, extending the runway to a length of 7,500 feet. Although this airstrip was originally built to serve the NTS, it is currently an emergency landing site for any aircraft. Later additions included a National Weather Service facility and a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Surface Radiation (SURFRAD) station.

In August 2010, the NTS was renamed the Nevada National Security Site. Most of the remaining Camp Desert Rock facilities except the airstrip were dismantled and salvaged for scrap. Today, the camp's remains are located on Department of Energy property. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel Danny M. Johnson, USA-Ret., is a private military scholar who has previously contributed to On Point and a number of other military publications. He specializes in World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, and historic posts. He authored Military Communications Supporting Peacekeeping Operations in the Balkans (2000) and served as an editor of The European Signal Corps Order of Battle (2001). He also wrote ten articles for The Oxford Companion to Military History (2001). He retired from the federal government in 2004 and the U.S. Army in 2006. He currently resides in Sacramento, California.