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Camp Ibis near Needles hosted tank divisions

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NEEDLES - For years, schoolkids in Needles have been taught the "3 R's": Reading - 'Riting - 'Rithmetic, but this past week they learned some new ones: Recognize - Retreat - Report.

It's all part of an educational campaign coordinated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to inform the community about dangers in the nearby desert.

The former military Camp Ibis is about 20 miles northwest of Needles, off U.S. Highway 95. It was one of 10 major camps in the California and Arizona deserts set up by Gen. George S. Patton in 1942 to train troops and test equipment, ammunition and weapons.

Armored tank divisions trained there from 1942-44. As was often the case, they left behind some unexploded munitions.

The Department of Defense designated the Army Corps of Engineers to clean up thousands of sites used by the military after two 8-year-old boys were killed in their San Diego neighborhood in 1983.

Their cul-de-sac stood on the former Camp Elliott. The boys found a 37-millimeter shell, which exploded while they played with it.

A "FUDS" program was established. FUDS stands for Formerly Used Defense Sites. There are 10,000 of them across the country, according to Tawny Tran, project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers' Los Angeles district.

Of those 10,000, there are 1,300 in Tran's territory, which includes Southern California, Southern Nevada and all of Arizona. About 1,000 of Tran's sites involve munitions. The remainder pose a threat due to toxic or radioactive materials, Tran said.

Sites receiving a higher priority are those close to where humans live and the Camp Ibis site qualifies, due to its proximity to Needles and a major highway.

The corps started gearing up in 1996, identifying and studying sites, according to Tran.

They had a community meeting in Needles three years ago "... where we announced to the public that we're out here to do this investigation," Tran said.

When combing over the site, the corps found one highly explosive projectile at Camp Ibis. They also found 93 "practice," or fake, land mines, five of which had to be detonated, according to Tran.

The practice mines would send up "... a white puff of smoke and the individuals (training) in the tank would know they were out of commission (in the war games) because they just ran over a mine," according to Mike Short, Director of Technology for MEC - Munitions and Explosives of Concern.

The fake mines were set off by a "spotting charge" that simulated a real bomb when run over by a truck or tank.

The threat they pose to humans varies, according to Short. "Walking on them, none at all because it takes a tremendous amount of weight to set one of these off," Short said.

“But if they were to remove the fuse from it - the spotting charge - then it could present some hazard,” according to Short.

What kind of hazard? “Taking off fingers,” Short said.

Short, employed by private contractor Parsons Infrastructure and Technology Group, Inc., of Pasadena, Calif., erected 34 signs on the 13,000-acre site of Camp Ibis.

Short and his team use detective devices to make sure they don't hit a mine when digging holes for the signposts.

The signs warn of the danger and give two phone numbers to call in the event that someone finds one of the munitions.

The easiest thing to do is to call 911, Tran said.

While posting signs in the desert, the corps simultaneously fanned out across Needles, staging a community meeting and then holding six meetings at area schools and Head Start on Wednesday and Thursday.

Those meetings were coordinated by Project Manager Joni Jorgensen-Risk and lead by Community Coordinator Carlton Holte, both employed by private contractor Innovative Technical Solutions, Inc., of Sacramento.

They brought with them a glass-encased display of ordnance found at Camp Ibis, as well as 60-year-old empty soft drink bottles discarded by the trainees.

A video was shown, followed by a question-and-answer period.

The lesson was simple. Those in the audience were taught the 3 previously-referenced R's:

- ① Recognize - be able to identify ordnance.
- ① Retreat - don't touch it and get away from it.
- ① Report - try to mark the spot where it was found and then report it to authorities.

When speaking to 3- to 5-year-old youngsters at Needles Head Start, Holte altered his message a little, recognizing his audience was not yet able to read.

He told them not to touch it, remember where they found it and call 911.

Word spread quickly in Needles about the presentations, with stories getting back to Jorgensen-Risk and Holte about kids coming home from school, excitedly telling their families about the presentation.

Holte found it “... so good to hear.”

Jorgensen-Risk and Holte also distributed posters to Needles businesses, as well as public buildings like the post office.

Some 2,500 inserts regarding Camp Ibis were mailed out with utility bills, and there will be thousands of newspaper inserts, according to Jorgensen-Risk.

The Needles library has been designated as the major source of information about Camp Ibis, with “historical documents” about what was used at the site in the early 1940s, Tran said.

In addition, the Army Corps of Engineers has a Web site dedicated to Camp Ibis: www.campibis-fuds.com.