



# Hands Across History



A joint newsletter for the White Sands Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group.

Volume IX, Letter II

May 2013

## Be Sure & Save Aug. 23 For WSMR Reunion

Please save Friday, Aug. 23 as a day to visit White Sands Missile Range. Details are in short supply, as the date was just selected, but the range is planning to have some sort of reunion on the 23rd and you are invited.

The idea is to have some sort of get together at White Sands to include friends and former employees. Monte Marlin, WSMR Public Affairs Officer, said the day will probably include some tours, a luncheon where old-timers will be invited to share their memories of White Sands and other events to bring the past and present together.

In addition to it being too early for many details, the issue of furloughs for the current workforce is still an issue as this newsletter goes to press. So, for right now, we'll just say

Aug. 23 is tentative. We all remember what that means.

Since *Hands Across History* is too clumsy an instrument to provide timely information, we have other ways of getting the final details out to you. Once everything is finalized and set in relatively firm concrete, we'll send out postcards to everyone on our mailing list providing the information you need in order to attend. Also, the information will be posted on the White Sands Pioneer Group webpage and the White Sands Historical Foundation webpage.

Those of you who receive *Hands Across History* via email will probably be the first ones to receive word because we will send the postcard details electronically as soon as the cards are ready for mailing.



**FIFTY YEARS AGO:** Sergeant launches from the Plains of San Augustin were the first Army missiles launched from off the range back onto it. This was soon followed by Pershing launches from Black Mesa, near Blanding, Utah and Pershing firings from Fort Wingate, N.M. Also, the Gaddis Mining

Company dug up Victorio Peak inflicting most of the scars now on the peak. The two-month treasure hunt was co-sponsored by the Museum of New Mexico. At the end of the year radio commentator Paul Harvey visiting the range for briefings and a tour.

# One More Vivid Piece By Roger Ratliff

*Editor's Note: In the last two issues of Hands Across History I ran articles by Roger Ratliff about his time in the Signal Corps on Alamo Peak. He is an excellent writer so I thought you'd appreciate one more of Roger's pieces. It is more of a writer's exercise where one's task is to simply describe something. This is what Roger saw from Alamo Peak.*

By Roger Ratliff

As seen during the day from the top of a mountain called Alamo Lookout, the great, broad expanse of the Tularosa Basin disappears into the haze at the foot of the San Andres Mountains some sixty miles to the west. To the north and south there are no boundaries, the horizon blends into an undefined space between earth and sky.

In the mid-distance, on a clear day, one can discern the 8,000-foot asphalt runway of what was then called the Alamo Air Force Base. Between the air base and the San Andres the snow-white gypsum dunes of the White Sands National Monument extend into the heat distorted horizon.

At night, when the heat driven winds have subsided and the high desert atmosphere has lost its airborne sand, the view from this mountaintop is transformed. The San Andres peaks are silhouetted against the star field and at their foothills, the lights of White Sands Proving Grounds administration area are clearly visible. Headlights of individual cars can be seen as they emerge from the San Augustin Pass.

To the south, the combined light of two military bases and the cities of El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico, blend and scintillate, in passing through eighty miles of cool, clear desert air. To the north, beyond direct view, the city of Albuquerque is betrayed by an ever-so-faint glow along the horizon.

In the center of this darkened space, the Alamo Air Force Base is seen as a cluster of brilliant, sparkling white lights, its parallel lines of blue runway markers point toward a western infinity.

From this nine-thousand-foot high vantage point, a half circle arc, extending from north to west to south, encompasses five-thousand square miles of desert wilderness and

makes visible three military installations, each of which lies beyond the horizon of its neighbors. From here, there is an unobstructed, line of sight, radio communication path to Alamo Air Force Base, White Sands Proving Grounds, and Ft. Bliss. And therein lays my reason for being on this windswept peak at the western edge of the Sacramento Mountains.

## Co-op Statistics From 1970

*Information quoted from the Jan. 23, 1970 issue of the Missile Ranger newspaper.*

The Co-op Program began in July 1952 to provide the range a source of trained technicians. The first student trainees were graduated in 1956. Since then, a total of 207 students have graduated through the program. Of these, 157 accepted full-time jobs following graduation, 11 went to other government agencies and 39 sent into industry.

Of the 157 students choosing to work at WSMR, 92 – including one from the 1956 graduating class – are still employed at the range. Among those 92, a total of 26 hold GS-13 ratings, 34 are GS-12 and 23 are GS-11. In “bread and butter” language, this means that 86 of the 92 draw annual salaries ranging between \$11,500 and \$18,000.

In career breakdown, 46 of this group are electrical engineers, 24 are mathematicians, 15 are mechanical engineers and seven are physicists.

In addition to the relatively high number of Co-op graduates today working at WSMR, there are 46 employees who were initially enrolled as student-trainees but received their degrees outside the program and then accepted full-time employment at the range. Thus, according to Civilian Personnel officials, the Co-op Program accounts for 137 of the 893 skilled scientist-engineers employed at the installation.

One out of every six scientist-engineers at WSMR is a graduate or former member of the program.

Carl Clift of the WSMR Training and Development Branch said, “The result of the program speaks for itself. The program has paid high dividends to the installation and the government as well as to the trainee.”

## Statement of Purpose and Membership

The “Hands Across History” newsletter is published by the White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group (WSPG). Both nonprofit organizations aim to preserve the accomplishments of White Sands Missile Range.

The newsletter is intended to keep members of both groups informed about current events and share information of common interest. The edi-

tor is Jim Eckles. He can be contacted by email at [nebraska1950@comcast.net](mailto:nebraska1950@comcast.net) or at either address below.

Membership to either organization is open to anyone who shares their goals. However, details of membership (dues, etc.) differ between the two groups. For more information, please contact the appropriate organization and we will send it via the Post Office or email.

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# Lab Under Balloon For Stargazer

By Jim Eckles, Editor

I was only slightly aware of Project Stargazer until I pulled Joe Kittinger's folder in the WSMR Public Affairs Office looking for photos of his famous parachute jump from 102,000 feet. In the folder I discovered several photos of Kittinger and Bill White in association with "Stargazer."

Stargazer is one of the things Kittinger did after his high altitude balloon rides for Colonel Stapp. For Stargazer he was project manager. This was another balloon-based program that attempted to put a manned laboratory aloft for hours at a time in order to do astronomical research. Putting the telescope, cameras and other instruments at the edge of the atmosphere provided unique, very clear viewing opportunities at the time. Rockets obviously could get to these altitudes but the useful time for gathering data was only minutes long.

The system consisted of a two-person gondola or capsule suspended from a 280-foot diameter mylar balloon. The gondola was only partially pressurized so the men had to wear quasi-spacesuits which gave them some protection but allowed them to move about freely to complete their tasks.

There was supposed to be a series of four launches but the first one, on Dec. 13, 1962, was the only successful one. The pilot/engineer on the flight was Kittinger. His job was to



**The Stargazer mylar balloon being filled with helium.**

operate communications, control the balloon and monitor the life-support system.

The astronomer was Bill White, a civilian Navy scientist. With Kittinger taking care of the infrastructure, White's job was to run the telescope and other instruments.

The balloon was launched at 11:30 a.m. During the night, Kittinger was able to keep the balloon at 82,000 feet to provide stable observation conditions for White.

Kittinger ended the flight early the next morning because the balloon was beginning to drift toward Mexico. The total flight time for the experiment was 18.5 hours.

The flight was put together by a consortium of institutions that included the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, the Experimental Astronomy Lab of MIT and the Air Force's Office of Scientific Research. Failing to get another mission off the ground, the project was cancelled in 1966.

## Also In 1962

"Fire on the Mountain" by Edward Abbey was published. It is a fictional account of John Prather's battle with Ft. Bliss over his ranch on what became McGregor Range. The new range was needed so Nike students could fire their missiles from a place close by instead of Red Canyon.

For some reason, maybe because WSMR was so noteworthy in those days, Abbey placed the event at White Sands Missile Range instead of Bliss. To this day, the curious query White Sands about the Prather ranch.



**Joe Kittinger, left, and Navy astronomer Bill White snap photos of the activities around them before their Stargazer hatch is closed on the morning of Dec. 13, 1962.**

# Is It The Bismarck Or Just Another Fantasy?

By Jim Eckles, Editor

A film crew from the Travel Channel was on White Sands Missile Range on April 22 to see the Bismarck target over near the Tularosa Gate. They were drawn by the buzz on the web saying there is a dirt and sand mockup of the infamous German battleship Bismarck out there. It seemed like a perfect fit for their new television series about mysterious places.

This mockup is supposedly equipped with large logs to simulate the Bismarck's massive 15-inch guns – to make it more realistic. The claim is that the target was to be used by bombing crews from Britain's Royal Air Force in 1941.

The evidence of this battleship comes from a Google Earth satellite image of a spot at: 33 04' 38"N, 106 10' 59"W. Type in the coordinates on Google Earth and you can see what they are talking about. There is a low resolution shot below.

Since the internet is a huge jumble of useful data, fact, fiction, rumor, lies and stupidity, this story is quickly growing, taking on a life of its own as one version shoots off from another, and may soon be one of our local loony legends. In February I found the Wikipedia entry for the village of Tularosa mentioned the Bismarck as a local attraction.

Some bloggers are saying it is not the Bismarck but is really a mockup of the Tirpitz, the Bismarck's sister ship. It survived until 1944 whereas the Bismarck was sunk on May 27, 1941, a half a year before the United States entered World War II. In fact, the real ship was sunk about the time this target Bismarck was supposedly being built.

Again, on the web, anything goes and people are putting other spins on the Google image. One blogger thinks the United States actually built it to train bombing crews in preparation to destroy the Japanese navy. Given the construction date, that's pretty incredible by most any standard.

The construction date of May 1941 is a big, big problem for all of these theories. At the time the Tularosa Basin was at peace. It is true, goat ranchers in the mountains were



Google Earth image of the Bismarck target at Tula-G.

upset with Roosevelt because his administration bought all of Turkey's wool to keep it out of the hands of the Germans. That move denied the Nazis warm blankets and uniforms but sent U.S. wool demand into the tank. If local ranchers could sell their wool at all, it was at rock bottom prices.

But, in talking to these folks over the decades, I have never heard any scuttlebutt from them that one or more of them gave up their land or rented it out before World War II so the military could have a bombing range.

When I first went to Google Earth and found the image, I saw the very nice outline suggesting a battleship. But it is completely lacking in detail. In fact it turns out it is one of those association tricks we humans are good at – connecting a vague shape with something we are familiar with. We are very good at seeing puppies in clouds, famous people in rock formations and the Virgin Mary in tortilla burn marks.

The first thing I did was zoom out to find exactly where the ship was on White Sands. That was easy as it is just west of the Tularosa Gate and a few yards directly south of the Tula-G launch area.

I have been by there many times and have watched MLRS rocket shots from Tula-G. Tula-G is a typical MLRS launch site. They are scattered around the missile range to provide various ranges and azimuths for program testing while restricting the distribution of live ordnance to just a few impact areas on White Sands.

They are pretty simple with the main feature being a large berm or hill of earth making a safety barrier between the MLRS launch vehicle and the equipment and people on the other side.

When I zoomed in on the satellite image of the Bismarck it became pretty obvious what the reality was. The thing that looks vaguely like a battleship is really the borrow pit for the berm. It's an optical illusion. The engineers had to get the sand/dirt from somewhere to build the large berm and it was easy to dig it up on site and pile it up just a few yards away.

When I looked at the shadows cast by the sun on the small building at Tula-G and the other 3-dimensional structures and compared them to the Bismarck/borrow pit, it was clear the shadows for the battleship were for a hole, a negative space, not something sticking up in the air.

I got to go along when Monte Marlin, Public Affairs Officer, escorted the Travel Channel and their "investigator" Ben McGee out to the site. McGee is an honest-to-god scientist who tries to straddle the fence between the show's need for a theme of mystery and intrigue with the realities of ordinary explanations for things – like a borrow pit's shape that suggests a battleship to some people. I was along to provide a little history if needed.

I have been trying to track down how such a story got started. It is pretty rare when you can find the origins of one of these internet tales but I think I have found the source in

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# Birth Of A Myth — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

the form of a local writer who specializes in history articles. Over the years, his articles have appeared in area newspapers. They are well-written and informative pieces.

In January 2007 his story about a B-17 crashing during a training flight in World War II probably triggered everything. The article is about how the big plane crashed west of Socorro. He was able to get the Air Force accident report and profiles the flight in great detail.

As part of the article he mentions all the targets and bombing ranges scattered around southern New Mexico during the war. For instance, between Las Cruces and Deming, the ground is littered with targets that are easily identified from the air. There were similar targets on the eastern plains of New Mexico around towns like Hobbs and Carlsbad.

He wrote, "In early 1941, another interesting target was constructed southeast of Socorro. It was a scale model of the German battleship Bismarck, and was made of dirt with wooden logs for the gun turrets. This was built to train pilots from the Royal Air Force in identifying the famous battleship at night. However, the Bismarck was sunk in May

1941 — before the "adobe" Bismarck saw much use. It is still there today."

This seems to be the source for all the current interest because most everyone uses his description.

When I talked to the author he admitted he had never been to the battleship site and said he got the information from someone else who got it from someone else. That kind of chain of information is typical of most urban legends.

When I explained the borrow pit reality he was genuinely concerned about his article. He said he has gone to great pains to be as accurate as possible and doesn't want misinformation floating around.

I think it will be fascinating to see what happens next. Travel Channel's McGee agrees the Bismarck is nothing but a hole in the ground. We'll see what the Blogosphere makes of that when the show airs later this year.

The Travel Channel also visited Trinity Site during the April open house and the White Sands Space Harbor for the same program. The Space Harbor visit was interesting as we had winds and a sand blizzard like those in March 1982.



**David Soules and Monte Marlin board the Bismarck near the Tularosa Gate. It was easy getting on board but they couldn't find the Offizierheimgesellschaft - the officer's mess. Lunch had to come later in town.**

# Aerial Work For Signal Construction Unit

By Johnny Lay

Attempting to recall my army time at WSPG brought back memories of an enjoyable time in my life. I arrived in the spring of 1951 after completing basic training at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. Arriving at Orogrande in the middle of the night I could see the lights on the post and it looked to be only about 2 or 3 miles away - after a while we arrived. *(Editor's Note: Its about 25 miles from Orogrande to the main post.)*

The next morning I met the C.O. Capt. Bowman T. Barr and was assigned to a barrack that was much nicer than the one in Indiana. We used the Consolidated Mess for a while, but got our own Company Mess Hall and cooks. The food was good and small mess hall gave us the flexibility to schedule our work assignments.

For recreation we had a very nice swimming pool nearby and a hobby center with a photography room with equipment for developing, printing etc.

Our job consisted of maintaining the existing telephone lines and adding branch lines to new sites. We



Sergeant Johnny Lay up a pole tying in open wire communication lines at White Sands in 1952.

extended the main line north for several miles, all the way to the Trinity Site. We were so far north, we lived in tents and enjoyed every minute of it giving the new recruits experience in line building.

We also built a large antenna for the Military Armature Radio Field (MARS). This proved to be a challenge as the poles were 90-feet tall and very heavy. The engineering company provided a large crane and operator to help us set the poles.

Next came the task of climbing these poles to hang the three wire antenna. As best I can remember we had 5 or 6 soldiers with lineman experience and none of them or any of the recruits were volunteering to make that climb. I had one Mexican named Casimiro J. Salinas try it and as we climbed, he soon told me, "S--- man this is to high for me. I am going down."

I told him he didn't want the others to think he was scared and with that I got him to the top where he was OK.

As best I can remember the recruits with lineman experience were Gerald Benson - Minnesota, Jack Thompson - Washington, Jim Sikes - Louisiana, Alan Edwards - California and John Myers - New York.

We built one high voltage power line in some very hot weather, setting poles and stringing wire.

All in all, we had a good bunch of men. Our captain

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Johnny Lay, left, with his Funk Model B airplane that he kept hangered in El Paso while stationed at White Sands. He says it was a deep red with white leading edges and stripe. On the right is John Mayer.

# Would Like To Do It Again — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

gave us the order of our business. He said, “we will do our jobs, then we will service and repair our equipment, then we will do some soldering.” We seldom found time to soldier.

Our officers were Capt. Bowman T. Barr, Capt. Prim, Capt. Merical, Lt. Smiga, Lt. Hansotti. Those spelling are probably wrong. They are my best guess. There were others and all were good men.

Now a bit about my flying while there. I learned to fly before I learned to drive. I stored my little plane at El Paso International and every time I could I would go flying locally with trips to Silver City, Ruidoso and other small airports close by. Flying a small 75-hp aircraft in the high, hot atmosphere could be challenging at times but it was lots of fun for a young man. Wish I could do it all over again.

As I clean out my treasures and find any pictures I will send them to you if you wish.

*(Editor’s Note: In a follow-up Johnny wrote the following email. Obviously his computer is not his friend.)*

I see I failed to give you the designation of my unit. It was the 169th Signal Construction Company. I made a mess of my first e-mail. When I was just about complete it all disappeared and I started all over leaving out some info. You

know I helped give the people in Montana telephone service years ago and was proud of it. I don’t understand all this new stuff. Hope I am able to provide you with some usable info.

HAVE A GOOD DAY - JOHNNY LAY

*(Editor’s Note: We appreciate you sharing your memories and photos with us. Many Thanks.)*



**Johnny  
Lay  
Today**



**This is the 169th Signal Construction Company on parade in Las Cruces, coming down Main Street, in 1951. The commander out front is Capt. Bowman T. Barr. Johnny indicates he is on the right in the 5th rank.**

**Hands Across History  
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## **The Back Page**



**With summer just around the corner it seemed appropriate to run a pool photo. This image was captured by Robert Alley in May of 1952 at the Navy pool on White Sands. The next year it was renamed Holland pool in honor of Gunner's Mate First Class George Holland who was killed in a motorcycle accident earlier in 1953. Alley was a broomstick scientist assigned to the V-2 program at White Sands and was in charge of the first TF launch.**