

'Area 51'

The cold war still rages in the Nevada desert, site of an air base so secret it doesn't exist.

By Donovan Webster

Photos

- [Glenn Campbell](#) (34k) moved to Nevada to see for himself what the Air Force says isn't there. [Close-up.](#) (25k)
- What isn't there, [the base at Area 51](#) (41k) (at night).
- [A patch](#) (23k) Campbell distributes.
- [Steve Medlin's black mailbox](#) (35k), where locals gathered to gawk at strange lights and listen to strange noises.
- [Cover of the magazine](#) (16k): "The Media: Out of Control?"
- [A restrained alert](#) (38k) on the way to Freedom Ridge. At other locations, the signs also advise, "Use of deadly force authorized."

GLENN CAMPBELL IS STANDING ATOP a long ridge in the deepest Nevada outback. It's shortly after sunrise on midspring morning, and in the valley ahead of Campbell 12 miles downhill to the west is one of the last great riddles of cold-war America. Along the valley floor, arranged across the pale, alkaline silt of a dry lake bed, sits a test facility so secret the United States Government won't even admit its existence.

"There it is the base that doesn't exist," Campbell says, pointing at the boxy buildings and runways in the distance. Campbell, a balding 35-year-old dressed in desert-colored military fatigues, tilts his camouflage-blotchy cap back on his head. He lifts a pair of binoculars and stares. "Yep," he says, lowering the field glasses and smiling, "it's the same top-secret air base that was there last week."

Even from a dozen miles off -- as close as civilians can get before entering restricted land and being arrested -- the facility below us is as Campbell describes. Nestled between steep mountains and inside the recesses of the off-limits Nevada Test Site, 90 miles due north of Las Vegas, dozens of airplane hangars are easily visible, as are satellite dish gardens, control towers and a handful of 737's. The airfield below us, Campbell says, is among the largest in the United States. Because of its secret "black budget" status, it doesn't appear on any Federal budget allotments. Nor does it appear on Federal Aviation Administration or United States Geological Survey maps. "Doesn't have an official name, either," Campbell adds.

A computer programmer by trade, Campbell in 1992 sold his shares in the Boston-based software company he worked for; he'd heard of the roiling mystery surrounding the air base and, with time on his hands, came out to see it for himself. By January 1993, Campbell had relocated to the nearest town, Rachel (20 miles away, one gas station, a bar-restaurant, no post office), eventually setting up shop in a \$215-a-month trailer and calling himself the Secrecy Oversight Council.

Since that time, he has translated a dogged, computer hacker esprit into 18 months of exploring base perimeters and pioneering two mountaintop vantages on safe Bureau of Land Management holdings. He also writes and publishes a newsletter, The Groom Lake Desert Rat (named for the dry lake bed the base abuts), with a circulation of 900 and a cheekily informative \$15 Baedeker called the "Area 51 Viewer's Guide" (Area 51 is the numbered square the base inhabits on old gridded Nevada test site maps) that helps steer the curious clear of arrests.

Campbell lifts his binoculars again. He scans the rills between our lookout -- a mountain he's named Freedom Ridge -- and the distant airfield. In the intervening desert is a line of orange posts, some topped with stainless-steel orbs the size of basketballs. Several closed-circuit TV cameras have been positioned as sentries. At those places, and at other key locations around the desert, are large, unambiguous "Restricted Area" signs, signs that also advise, "Use of deadly force authorized."

"Ah," Campbell says, pointing, "they've arrived. The Cammo Dudes are here."

Mark Richards, a photographer, and I follow Campbell's gesture. Along the perimeter below us, two white Jeep Cherokees with Government plates have materialized from the desert emptiness. They sit just inside the gravel-road gateway to the base, their engines idling in the growing daylight. Inside the Jeeps are heavily armed, camouflage-clad (hence the "Cammo") security agents who were tipped to our arrival by the automobile sensors that litter all the public roadsides leading to this mountain.

"What's this," Campbell says. "There's another fellow -- over there, driving a different kind of vehicle." He points to a low mountain just north of Freedom Ridge. A white pickup truck is parked on the knoll's top.

Richards, using a telescope, fixes on the truck. "Hey," he says, "they're filming us. They're got a big telephoto TV camera. They're filming us!" Campbell commandeers the telescope. "That's new, that's *new*," he says, obviously pleased. He hands the telescope around: the hilltop TV camera is the kind usually seen at stadium-size sporting events. It's being operated by a man wearing a camouflage uniform and a green insulated jacket. Campbell suggests we wave a greeting to the cameraman, then adds: "They're probably filming us to establish probable cause, in case they want to search us on the way out. I love it. This is a *wonderful development!*"

IT IS PERHAPS THE MOST SECRET MILITARY installation in American history. And, in addition to Area 51 and Groom Lake, it has, over its 40-year history, acquired a slew of other, less-formal nicknames: Dreamland (for the strange aircraft developed there), the Ranch, the Box (for its restricted airspace) and Watertown Strip, to name just a few.

Since Air Force and Pentagon officials -- including Air Force Secretary Sheila Widnall and Gen. Walter S. Hogle, the Air Force director of public affairs -- continue to flatly deny its existence, "facts" are hard to come by. According to Campbell and what scant few pieces of information the Pentagon will impart, the area began life as a secret base in 1954, when Lockheed arrived there to develop the U-2, a high-altitude spy plane used for surveillance beyond the Iron Curtain. In later years, the facility -- whose runways, hangars and sheds were built by the Department of Energy -- has served as a laboratory for such top-secret aircraft as the SR-71 Blackbird spy plane, the B-2 Stealth bomber and the F-117A Stealth fighter. Most recently, it has also been said to house the "Red Hat Squadron," a stable of aircraft purchased from defecting Soviet fliers, and the teardrop shaped TR-3A Tactical Reconnaissance Plane said to have been secretly employed in the gulf war.

Another rumor widely circulating is that the base has recently been home to an entirely new breed of supersonic spy plane. Dubbed Aurora, the \$15 billion plane runs on controlled explosions of cryogenic methane or ammonia, which propel the triangular, matte black aircraft to between four and eight times the speed of sound. Aurora may have actually left behind two pieces of evidence. The first was a powerful "sonic wake" that some say may have tripped a trail of earthquake sensors beneath its flight path over the Mojave Desert in June 1991; others describe seeing a unique looking contrail that resembles doughnuts on a rope.

During the base's first 35 years, local ranchers and miners were merely titillated by the vacuum-like secrecy surrounding the place. Sometimes, on slow sagebrush nights, the high-desert locals congregated at Steve Medlin's black-painted

mailbox just off Route 375 and watched the blinding, fluttering lights that illuminated the skies above the base, 36 miles to the west. Other nights, they stood by the rancher's mailbox and listened as sonic booms creased the sky from every angle, cracking and echoing chaotically through the canyons. Still other nights, it was said, a silent, whirling dome appeared above the mountains, hovering in one place, then hopscotching around the sky.

Then, in 1989, the simple pleasures of having a secret air base as a neighbor faded when a self-described physicist named Bob Lazar flashed across the Las Vegas TV news. Lazar said he had worked at the base for a few months the previous year, "reverse-engineering" one of the nine captured alien saucers housed there to learn exactly how its extraterrestrial power source worked. Lazar's personal credentials haven't checked out (he claims his educational records, from the California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, were destroyed by the Government), but his description of how the saucer worked was enticingly elaborate -- as are the Government pay documents Lazar can show for the period he claims to have worked at the air base. Within weeks, tabloid TV had picked up Lazar's allegations, and flying saucer and Government conspiracy buffs from around the world began arriving. Then, when a Soviet satellite photo of the Groom Lake base turned up, legitimate news reporters began arriving as well, turning the hamlet of Rachel, with its 100-some residents, into a unique tourist destination and converting a onetime roadhouse into the Little A'Le'Inn ("Earthlings Welcome"), a bar-restaurant-motel whose five rooms are constantly booked.

Meanwhile, as Campbell continues playing to an ever-increasing audience, his efforts are not lost on the Air Force, which he's placed on his "Desert Rat" mailing list for free. "We read his publication," says Air Force Col. Douglas Kennett, "and we know what Mr. Campbell's doing near a base that may -- or may not -- exist. While Mr. Campbell says the base is there, and while the Soviets appear to have photographed a base there, the Air Force is also aware of those times when Mr. Campbell or Russian spy satellites might be looking us over -- and we can adjust our activities for that. That is, if any activities are going on at a base that may -- or may not -- exist."

Existent air base or no, the United States Government has decided to end Campbell's desert romps. Last September, and despite all Air Force denials that the place exists, Air Force Secretary Widnall wrote Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt requesting control of nearly 4,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management holdings just outside the base perimeter. Not coincidentally, the property requested by Widnall includes the mountaintop vantages Campbell has designated for his "tours."

AFTER A FEW HOURS ATOP FREEDOM RIDGE, the thrill of watching a top-secret airfield from 12 miles has crumbled into boredom. Campbell has pointed out some of the specific buildings on the base: the commissary; the bowling alley-movie theater; the employee housing, and the "Scoot-N-Hide Shed," an open-walled roof beneath which secret aircraft can be shuttled in the event of a spy satellite flyover.

For the past few hours, Campbell has been using a police scanner radio to monitor a conversation between the security forces and the local sheriff's department, which has dispatched a patrol car to "meet" us as we leave Freedom Ridge. Over the radio, there is much talk of search warrants, and because of this, Campbell has another plan. "Let's see if we can't draw them out a little," he says. "Let's get lost up here for a while."

We get back in our rented Jeep and head down the ridge toward the valley. Rather than follow the gravel two-track back toward the highway and Rachel, however, Campbell turns off early, down one of the steep draws that falls away from the roadside. "Let's ditch the car," he says. "It makes 'em really nervous when they don't know where we are. Let's see if they won't come find us."

Leaving the car, we stumble down the draw's slope on foot, threading our way into a rocky wash. About a half-mile along, the stone walls draw close together, providing overhang and shade. Here, Campbell says, is where we should wait. In his desert camouflage suit, he sits down and, reaching into bulging pockets, extracts a luncheon only an ex-computer programmer could love: a few cans of Mountain Dew ("twice the sugar and double the caffeine of Pepsi") and a plastic bag of Dutch-style pretzels.

For a while, nothing happens. Then, in the distance, we hear the distinctive whomp-whomp of helicopter blades. An olive-drab Blackhawk helicopter passes overhead and we all duck beneath the overhangs as the aircraft moves along the

ravine, a few hundred feet above us. "This is great," he says, tucked beneath the granite outcrop as if playing ding-dong-ditch on the Government. "They'll have to come for us on foot." The helicopter, which has Air Force insignia -- but no identifying numbers -- continues up the gully, finally hovering above our Jeep half a mile beyond us.

After a few fruitless passes, the helicopter heads off, and over the radio we hear the voice of Sgt. Doug Lamoreaux of the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department. He has found our Jeep just off the Freedom Ridge two-track and has parked near it. He's searched the area, he's saying, and has now started tracking our footprints in the sand. To keep ahead of him, we continue working down the wash until it opens up, spilling onto the open desert floor.

As we head across the sagebrush, hoping to circle back to our vehicle, the helicopter returns and drops down until it hovers just above us, its downblast throwing a hurricane of sand into the air and -- in violation of the Air Force General Flight Rules -- forcing us to lay flat on our stomachs and cover our faces against the sandstorm. There the helicopter hangs, pinning us to the desert, until Sergeant Lamoreaux exits the wash and spots our location.

The game is up.

STANDING IN THE DESERT WITH SERGEANT Lamoreaux, you get the idea he doesn't enjoy being called upon as law enforcement for Groom Lake. "They've got their own security," he says, "but those guys aren't allowed to make arrests, so they call the Sheriff, and I'm the one who always ends up sweating out here."

As Lamoreaux politely threatens to arrest us unless Richards surrenders his film, you can tell that he's tired of having to chase the curious away from this place. "Iv seems everyone and their dog has photos of that base," he says after Richards hands over two rolls of film. "So I don't know what they're trying to protect. I've even seen a picture of it that was taken from a Russian spy satellite."

Still, Lamoreaux does his job. Which, in this case, means conducting a field interrogation. He requests that Richards and I produce identification, adding: I don't need to see your ID, Glenn. We've got your records already." Over the next few minutes, as he takes notes about the day's events, Lamoreaux says that the Lincoln County authorities are growing tired of protecting this place from people who can legally visit it. "The District Attorney is talking to higher-ups about getting the Sheriff's Department out of having to come here," he says. "It's a time and money consuming waste."

Due completely to an accident of proximity, Lamoreaux and Lincoln County have been increasingly dragged into Groom Lake's vortex. Each year since 1989, Lincoln County has billed the Air Force about \$50,000 for police visits to the land east of Groom Lake. Only a few of Lamoreaux's field interrogations resulted in anything more than paperwork. Most recently, on Jan. 2 of this year, seven Las Vegas residents were detained by base security forces toting automatic rifles after the seven became lost on desert back roads and crossed inside the Groom Lake boundary. "They held us at gunpoint, searched our vehicles and detained us for approximately two hours before the Highway Patrol came," says Connie Ruiz, one of the trespassers. "They never read us our rights."

Today, however, all is friendly. In fact, by the time we return to our vehicles, Lamoreaux has turned into a tour guide, advising us of a naturally occurring hot-spring pool nearby. "That's where I'll be tonight,>" he says, climbing into his four-wheel-drive Dodge. "After chasing you guys down that canyon, I'm gonna need to soak the soreness out of me."

PARADOXICALLY, DESPITE ALL THE CAT AND mouse fun of secret air-base hunting, what may prove Area 51's undoing aren't fantasies of little green men or the activities of people like Campbell. In the next few weeks, in a Washington Federal courtroom, a pair of organizations -- the Environmental Crimes Project and the Project on Government Oversight -- will file a citizen action lawsuit against the Air Force, claiming criminal environmental violations and at least one possible death stemming from the illegal burning of toxic and hazardous wastes at the base.

The suit names at least 39 former Area 51 employees who are ready to testify that, thanks to the open-air burning of hazardous and toxic wastes in exposed "burn pits" north of the base, they have sustained long-term damage from dioxins and other hazardous materials. The wastes burned -- resins, hardening compounds and solvents called furans (used in the anti-radar coating of Stealth aircraft) -- are said to cause dioxin-related health problems like liver damage, skin

diseases and birth defects. The lawsuit, which will include testimony illuminating daily operations at Area 51, is the first of many steps to gain reparation, a process that may also lift the veil of secrecy that has covered the base all of its life.

One of the plaintiffs, a former air base worker named Sam Paternostro, says: "The bottom line is that it did occur, and I saw it. I don't know exactly what was burned, but I've seen guys from Lockheed dumping all sorts of stuff into those pits. Everybody dumped their wastes in there." Paternostro, who describes the burn pits as open trenches 15 feet deep and 300 feet long, says that, when the pits were ignited, "acrid smoke, with a plastic smell to it" filled the air.

Unlike Paternostro, Helen Frost cannot give firsthand accounts of the burning or the base, since it was her husband, Robert, who worked there and who died in November 1989 of cirrhosis of the liver, a disease she claims he contracted after being exposed to the toxic smoke at the base. According to Frost -- and the worker's compensation claim her 56-year-old husband was awarded in October 1988 -- one day while working directly downwind of the burns, the skin on her husband's hands and neck turned red and began to peel, a condition known as acute phototoxic dermatitis. While Frost's case has languished in a courtroom before (a wrongful-death lawsuit against Lockheed was dismissed on procedural grounds), she is hoping that, this time, she will prevail. Toting a chemical tissue report filed by Peter Kahn, former member of the New Jersey Agent Orange Commission and a Rutgers University biochemist -- which says her husband's tissues showed unusually high levels of dioxins and dibenzofurans -- she plans to enter the District of Columbia courtroom with new data and a renewed sense of mission.

Heading up the litigation will be Jonathan Turley, a law professor at George Washington University who also directs the 30-member Environmental Crimes Project. While Turley won't speak specifically until the case begins, he does say this: "We believe we've got at least two convictions here, stemming from the knowing and illegal incineration of toxic and hazardous waste. These are serious charges, and the Air Force can no longer wish them away."

THE SUN HAS RISEN HIGH IN THE sky now, and as Glenn Campbell drives along the roads leading from the secret air base, he says he doesn't know what he'll do when -- and if -- the Groom Lake facility is finally exposed.

"I really haven't thought that far ahead," he says, adding that one of the kooky aspects he's enjoyed by being America's Area 51 authority is his notoriety within a strange circle of U.F.O. fans. "I've seen them all," Campbell told me the day before our outing. "They all come to my door wanting accreditation. The paranoids, the curious, the conspiracy buffs and people who believe they've been abducted."

One of Campbell's favorite visitors was a man who claimed to be Ambassador Merlyn Merlin II from the planet Draconis. "The Ambassador hung around town for a couple of days," Campbell says. "He came to my door every morning, then he eventually left the area. I try not to be judgmental; I try to keep an open mind."

As the Jeep rolls toward the stop sign at the paved highway's shoulder, Campbell says that, for the short-term, he'll keep overseeing the comings and goings, just to see how the story plays out. "For a long time now," he adds, "Groom Lake has served as the ultimate Rorschach inkblot. Anyone can see anything in the sky at night. If what's happening out there ever is unveiled, a lot of people may be disappointed."

Donovan Webster recently wrote about the global land mine crisis for the Magazine. His book, "Aftermath: Cleaning Up a Century of World War," will be published next year by Pantheon.

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