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TITLE: MYSTERY MAY DEEPEN FOR BASE IN NEVADA

PUBLICATION: Reno Gazette-Journal

DATE: Dec. 26, 1994

AUTHOR: McClatchy News Service

* Air Force: Hoping to get control of 4,000 acres of mountains.

SACRAMENTO, Calif.- The military appears to be within days of shrouding one of its worst-kept secrets, a much-publicized Air Force facility in Nevada that officially doesn't exist.

Two mountain peaks that provide a distant vista of the base may soon be off-limits to the public. Yet the attempt by the Air Force to ban access to the vistas hasn't stopped aviation buffs, UFO believers and even the Russians from viewing and photographing the phantom base.

"The publicity is what created my business," said Glenn Campbell, a 35-year-old resident of rural Nevada who has subsisted in part by selling \$15 guides to the mountain vistas.

The vistas in question-- White Sides Mountain and Freedom Ridge--are next to the giant Nellis Air Force Range north of Las Vegas and are now controlled by the Bureau of Land Management.

The Air Force in 1993 requested that it be given control of nearly 4,000 acres of the mountains. After a formal consideration process, the BLM in November gave a tentative yes.

Barring any change of mind, the BLM could make the decision final within days or a few weeks, said Curtis Tucker, an area land manager for the agency.

It's unclear precisely what the Air Force is Doing on its complex of airstrips and buildings on the part of the Nellis base known as Groom Range.

"Some specific activities and operations conducted on the that range, both past and present, remain classified and cannot be discussed," said Lt. Col Mike Gannon, a spokesman for the Air Force.

The most conventional explanation is that the base is one of the places where the Air Force has tested various top-secret aircraft and has trained its pilots.

The least conventional explanation is literally out of this world. In 1989, a Las Vegas man said he once worked at the base and helped to conduct tests on alien spaceships the Air Force had obtained through a cooperative arrangement with the non-earthly beings.

"I've seen some strange things in the sky, but nothing that would lead me to believe that we're dealing with things from another planet" said Tucker. "In my mind, there's human beings behind what is going on."

There is no doubt that something is down there. Popular Science magazine, for example, splashed on its cover an aerial photograph of the base reportedly taken by a Russian satellite in 1988.

The 35-year-old Campbell, who is single, and lives in a mobile home trailer and conducts his "Psychorat" computer activities from another next door.

"I've repackaged this as an issue of government accountability," said Campbell, who now down-plays the UFO theories because, after two years of surveillance, he has yet to see one.

He plans an "End-of-the-World" party on the ridge just before it becomes off limits.

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