

Title: GROOM LAKE TOXIC BURNING ALLEGED

Subtitle: A former worker at the secret Air Force base says poisonous substances were routinely ignited.

Las Vegas Review-Journal, Mar. 20, 1994, Page 1B.

Illustration: Photo of "The B-2 Stealth bomber, one of the planes tested at the Groom Lake base." Map of buildings at the Groom Lake base, titled "Groomed for secrecy," with the following labeled: "Lockheed hangers," "burn pits," "Scoot-N-Hide shed," "Red Hat hangers," "Satellite dishes" and "Sam's Place bar and recreational complex."

By Keith Rogers, Review-Journal

Trucks hauling poisonous waste from California routinely arrived at the Air Force's secret Groom Lake base on Mondays and Wednesdays, said a former base worker who was employed there during the 1980s.

There were always two Kenworth rigs, he said. They towed trailers with sealed cargo bays sometimes filled with 55-gallon drums of resins, solvents and hardening compounds--stuff he said Lockheed Corp. used to coat its radar-evading Stealth aircraft.

At the base, 35 miles west of Alamo in Lincoln County, the trucks would roll past the dormitory complex where as many as 2,000 full-time residents lived, then down a road that parallels a taxiway that leads to Lockheed's hangers at the south end of the base.

There, just west of the road and at the foot of Papoose Mountain, the trucks would back up to one of the 300-foot-long trenches. Workers would then roll the barrels into these pits where the drums and their classified contents would be doused with jet fuel and ignited.

Like every activity at the base, the Air Force and the phantom trucking company, known only as NDB, operated with great latitude under the veil of secrecy, often in defiance of state and environmental laws at the time.

The waste shipments were never accompanied with manifests, which are required by law in Nevada and California. And the trail of paperwork to the base, once known as Area 51, was covered by code words.

Any reference to the base during the Stealth project was nonexistent in government correspondences, other than the name "Score Event," said the source who spoke on the condition of anonymity, but who provided a base manual, map and aerial photograph of the base that was taken in the mid-1980s by a government contractor.

"They could have hauled in untold amounts of things," he said.
"They would bring the stuff up from California at first twice a week, then once a week," he said.

His story about waste disposal practices at the Groom Lake base confirms what other workers and former workers have said about the burn pits and the acrid fumes that wafted over the hangers and dormitories where people lived and worked.

Nevada environmental officials are probing whether the burning was proper and George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley is preparing legal action against the Air Force, accusing it of environmental crimes. Turley has said his growing list of clients includes people who were injured by the Air Force's actions.

Nevada's only environmental official with a clearance to enter the base, Air Quality Bureau Chief Thomas Fronapfel, has visited the base twice since allegations about open-pit burning were made last year. He said he has "looked at most of the information" about waste burning practices at the base and has found that classified materials were burned, but they were mostly papers.

Fronapfel and his boss, Environmental Protection Division Administrator Lew Dodgion are still trying to determine how they will report their findings and what action, if any, they will take. Dodgion has said, though, that the amount of information that state has compiled about waste disposal practices at the base is small compared to what his staff has not reviewed.

Neither the Air Force, Lockheed nor NDB are licensed waste haulers in Nevada, according to the state's Motor Carrier Division in Carson City. NDB is not listed as a trucking firm in Nevada, California or in the National Directory of Addresses and Telephone Numbers.

Allen Hirash, a spokesman for the California Department of Toxic Substance Control, said, however, that Lockheed Aeronautical Systems Co., in Burbank, Calif., was a registered hazardous waste hauler from 1982 to 1991. Likewise, several Air Force bases in California once were registered to haul hazardous waste but the registrations have expired, the latest being the one for Beale Air Force Base. Its registration expired Jan. 31.

When asked about its waste hauling practices from Lockheed's Advanced Development Co. in Palmdale, Calif., the so-called Skunk Works division that developed Stealth aircraft, company spokesman Jim Ragsdale issued a statement that he said "is all my management is willing to say on this topic."

"Lockheed on occasions in the past has had requirements for removal of materials from our factory that our customer, the US Air Force, deemed to be classified materials. In those instances, Lockheed followed instructions from its customer as to how the

materials were to be transported away from the factory location," the statement says.

"When the materials were trucked away, the destination of the trucks and the eventual disposition of the classified materials were determined by the Air Force," Ragsdale's statement says.

Air Force officials in Las Vegas and at the Pentagon did not respond last week to questions about Lockheed's statement.

But in a telephone interview Thursday, Rep. Jim Bilbray, D-Nev., a member of the House Armed Services and Intelligence committees, said he has asked the Air Force to give him a "full, detailed briefing on any burning activities in its Nellis Range Complex, which maps show include the Groom Lake base.

"They may not be willing to come forward and admit to violations that they don't think took place," Bilbray said, noting that while he can't acknowledge the base's existence he said he has "deep reaching ability to peer in."

"What was done out there a few years ago, the institutional memory might not be there. Records might not exist," he said.

Regardless of the secret nature of the Groom Lake base, Bilbray said if any environmental crimes took place, the people who suffered from them should be compensated.

Bilbray confirmed that he has heard of the words, Score Event, in connection with the Nellis Air Force Range complex, but "I shouldn't get into it," he said.

"When you cannot acknowledge that a facility exists, it makes it very difficult to talk about what goes on there," he said.

What did go on at the Groom Lake base from 1980 through 1990 didn't come cheap, said the source who worked there during those years.

The source said he saw charts that listed the base's budget at between \$93 million and \$115 million per month. That figure fits with the \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion annual budget that private military analysts have estimated based on projects at the base and daily flights to shuttle workers there.

"I was staggered by the numbers," the source said.

High-powered, telemetry satellite dishes at the base's north end serve a dual role for communicating and fogging film of any would-be photographers who were detected on nearby ridges, he said.

A Scoot-N-Hide shed on one runway was used to keep secret advanced aircraft out of sight while foreign satellites orbited in view of the base.

While the F-117A Stealth fighter jets and a prototype B-2 bomber were housed at one end of the base, the government's Red Hat teams--the foreign Technology Assessment Group from Edwards Air Force Base in California--kept its collection of advanced Soviet MiG jets in hangers at the other end, the source said.

In the time he worked there, the source said base personnel were involved in seven plane crashes that involved three F-117s, one A-7 Navy chase plane and three Soviet MiGs, including one that landed in a woman's back yard in Rachel.

At least five unmanned F-86s were shot down for any Army battlefield air defense system project. The crashes and missile exercises sometimes caused range fires that could have been avoided, he said.

Sidebar: EXTRAVAGANT LIVING ON A SECRET BASE

Just because the 2,000 or so civilian and military personnel working at Groom Lake were fighting the Cold War didn't mean they couldn't enjoy a cold one.

A favorite watering hole was Building 170, the hanger-size centerpiece of the base's recreational complex. It is listed in one base directory as Sam's Place, a bar named after a Central Intelligence Agency official who once ran the base, said a source involved in base operations during the 1980s.

Sam's Place was a dark, fully carpeted nightclub with large padded chairs and a bar ringed with stools that rivaled the largest ones in Las Vegas, the source said. The bar and many of the facilities probably still exist, he said.

The club had four pool tables, dart boards and a big screen where pornographic movies were shown "until a few ladies on the base complained," he said.

The recreational complex was complete with an eight-lane bowling alley, a heated indoor pool, four racquetball courts, a basketball gymnasium with a wooden floor, tennis courts, saunas and a snack bar. At one time, a golf course and lighted softball field existed.

Supplies for the base were flown in from Hill Air Force Base in Utah aboard C-130s.

"Sometimes people would chip in and buy big ice boxes of shrimp that were flown in specially to the base from Florida in 20 to 30 big Styrofoam coolers," he said. The planes stopped at the base only long enough to offload the shrimp, he said.

Some colonels, he said, "had very extravagant tastes," including one who had grapefruit flown in from Israel at \$25 a piece and

requested deliveries of canned tuna from South America that he estimates cost the government \$26 per can.

In the dining hall, prime rib was offered every Wednesday afternoon and New York steaks were often on the lunch menu. "They used to serve frog legs, king crab and filet mignon at no charge," he said.

"They drank bottled water to the tune of \$50,000 a month," he said, comparing the lifestyles of some base inhabitants to high rollers in Las Vegas at the government's expense."

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