

# The Groom Lake Desert Rat

*"The Naked Truth from Open Sources."*

AREA 51/NELLIS RANGE/TTR/NTS/S-4?/WEIRD STUFF/DESERT LORE

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## Issue #6. April 6, 1994

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## Cammo Dudes Raise The Ante

### Is It Illegal To Photograph A Nonexistent Base?

These can't be happy times for the "Cammo Dudes," the anonymous camouflage-clad security guards who patrol the outer border of the Groom Lake base and adjoining public lands. The recent national publicity has brought a steady stream of tourists to the Freedom Ridge viewpoint, and the Dudes have to track them all. A security system set up to catch relatively crude Soviet spies seems ill- equipped to deal with hordes of high-tech Americans in their sport utility vehicles toting the latest electro-optic gadgets from the Sharper Image catalog.

Particularly irksome to the men in beige is enforcement of a vague 1948 federal statute against photography. According to [Section 795](#) of Title 18 U.S.C., it is illegal to photograph any "installation or equipment" defined by the President as requiring such protection, with a potential fine of up to \$1,000 and one year in prison. This statute is cited in signs approaching the border, but we have not yet found any case of it being tested in court. The main legal problem is that if the base does not officially exist and is not publicly defined anywhere, how can a visitor know when he is taking a picture of it? The military could claim that ANY picture taken of ANY land within the Restricted Zone is illegal, but by that definition you couldn't take a snapshot anywhere in southern Nevada if military-controlled mountains happened to appear in the background.

Given that detailed photos of the Groom base taken from public land have already been widely published and televised without a peep of protest from the military, the average citizen might assume that any such regulations are moot. The technology of 1948 was certainly different from today, when camcorders can fit in the palm of your hand and telephoto lenses can get clear shots from dozens of miles away. If the military does not control people's movements and activities on public land and cannot restrict the possession of cameras themselves, it is pretty near impossible for them to control photography.

But that doesn't prevent the Dudes from trying. They diligently track and observe all visitors to see if they might be carrying a camera. If they see one, they call the Sheriff. A deputy makes the long trip from Alamo to interview the suspects. He asks if they were taking pictures, and if they admit they were, he asks for their film. It has taken a while, but the watchers have eventually caught on that he is "asking," not "ordering" them to turn over their film, and all they have to do to retain it is say, "No."

The burden of proof is then on the authorities to show "probable cause" that a crime has been committed. Visiting

Freedom Ridge and having a camera in your possession do not constitute probable cause, since there are no legal restrictions against either. To justify a warrant for search, seizure or arrest, some witness has to come forward to say he saw you taking pictures. This is a problem for the Dudes because they, like the base itself, do not officially exist. If the patrols saw you taking pictures, they are unlikely to make an official statement to that effect, because that would place them at risk of public exposure in the court system.

When they see a camera on Freedom Ridge, the Dudes still call the Sheriff. The deputy who responds goes through the motions of investigating the complaint, but not with much apparent enthusiasm. The Dudes dump their problem on the Sheriff's Department but provide no support should the situation get hot. This has lead to a number of embarrassing encounters where the county has been left holding the bag.

In March 1993, a crew from a Dallas TV station was caught red handed. When stopped by the deputy, they admitted to taking footage of the base from White Sides Mtn. The deputy asked for their video tape, but they refused. After a standoff of a couple of hours in which the station's lawyers were called and the feds consulted, the feds declined to pursue the matter, and the crew walked away with their tape.

In August 1993, Psychospy and several of the legendary Interceptors were camped on Freedom Ridge when they were awakened by a Sheriff's deputy, escorted to this remote site by a Cammo Dude. The deputy asked to search our bags for cameras, but we declined the offer. Without our consent, opening our bags would have required a warrant. If any of the Cammo Dudes had seen us with cameras earlier, they were apparently unwilling to make a statement to that effect, and again, the feds backed down. The deputy had made a long drive and a stiff hike for nothing.

The issue of "probable cause" is a natty one for the Cammo Dudes. If they don't exist, won't interact with visitors and can't testify in court, how can they pursue a case against alleged photographers? By the time the Sheriff arrives any infraction that might have occurred is long past. Film, cameras and even the suspects themselves can easily vanish in the 40 minutes it takes the deputy to arrive. Without a direct admission from the suspect or the testimony of a Dude, any prosecution of the 1948 statute would seem hopeless to pursue.

The Dudes never give up, however. The problem of tourists photographing the nonexistent installation has evidently caused enough chagrin in the secret base hierarchy to make them to pull out all the stops. In their latest move, they've gone to the top secret "Q" Division of the Special Weapons Research Directorate for a high-tech James Bond gizmo to quash those Interceptors once and for all....

## The Super Mega Spy Cam

On March 23, Psychospy was visiting Freedom Ridge accompanied by the usual media rif-raff. This time it was a reporter and a photographer working for the *New York Times Magazine*. We drove to the top on the now well-beaten "Freedom Ridge Expressway," then lounged at the viewpoint for an hour or two. Two Dude patrols, a Cherokee and a white pickup, watched us from separate hilltops behind the line as we scanned Groom Lake with a spotting scope. All we saw was your run-of-the- mill secret base, just sitting there, no big deal.

Turning the scope toward the Dudes, however, one of the visitors caught something new. The occupant of the pickup, about a mile and half from us, was now out of his vehicle and doing something in the desert about 50 feet away. At low magnification, he seemed to be standing behind a large, dark green form about as tall as he was. The shape of the blob was reminiscent of the Creature from the Black Lagoon when first emerging from the slime, and we might have wondered at first whether the man was being attacked by the creature's desert cousin.

Switching to higher magnification revealed that the blob was actually a tripod draped in camouflage netting, and on top was some sort of bulky device that the man was looking through. It was hard for us to make out the details from our distance, but the device resembled a large studio video camera pointed directly at us. Psychospy was reminded of the device spotted atop a camouflaged van during the Freedom Ridge Field Trip in January. [\[DR#1\]](#) It was apparent to us that this was a surveillance camera, probably of high magnification given its size, and that it was probably attached to a VCR deck. They were obviously trying to collect evidence of people photographing the secret base.

At times like this, we find it immensely helpful to have the Sheriff's radio frequency (154.86 MHz) programmed into our scanner. Sure enough, shortly after we spotted the "Super Mega Spy Cam" looking up at us, we heard from the Sheriff's dispatcher that Range Security had called with a complaint. Three individuals, including the notorious GLENN CAMPBELL and a reporter from "The New York Press," were seen taking pictures from "the area referred as Freedom Ridge."

We were outraged at these unfounded charges. Psychospy didn't have a camera. The reporter didn't have a camera. The photographer... darn it, where did he go to? Up until now, anyone taking reasonable precautions could pretty much snap whatever pictures they wanted. CNN did it. So did local stations from Boston, Dallas and Las Vegas and major newspapers and magazines from around the country. Big time news crews, used to filming in really dangerous situations in wars around the world, drive past the wordy No Photography signs without even slowing down. Even the little guy without the backing of a powerful news organization could get away with a few snaps as long as he didn't wave his camera around. The Dudes can't see much from over a mile away, and even if they did, they probably wouldn't come forward to testify.

The Super Mega Spy Cam (SMSC) changed all that. On the Sheriff's frequency, we heard our own license plate number reported. Reading license plates from a mile and a half away is no mean feat. With that magnification, you could not only see if someone had a camera but maybe even the f-stop and exposure settings. What's more, everything the operator sees is probably also being recorded on tape, perhaps for use in court. Over the radio, we heard that the District Attorney and local Justice of the Peace were being notified, as well as the legal advisor for the range. This could mean only one thing: search warrants.

The authorities had never gotten this serious before, and all Psychospy can say is, it couldn't have happened at a better time. The Times guys wanted action, and the Cammo Dudes were graciously providing it. Full red carpet treatment. The reporter had dodged bullets and counted bodies in the Gulf War, while the photographer cut his journalistic teeth in Afghanistan, Haiti and the L.A. riots. These guys couldn't be happier than to relive the thrill of battle, this time with no real risk of being shot. With the Sheriff still twenty minutes away, we decided it was time to pack up. In full view of the Dudes and the SMSC, we casually loaded our gear into the 4WD, rolled down the dirt track at a leisurely pace, then stopped at a lower ridge where we waved at the guy in the white Cherokee.

Then we vanished.

It was a pleasant day and we had plenty of time, so we decided we would take an alternate route. We turned off the track and down into a ravine where the Dudes couldn't see us. We went as far as we could in the 4WD, then we decided to take a stroll. We hiked about fifteen minutes down a gorge to some protected ledges near the base of Freedom Ridge. There we relaxed and broke out the Mountain Dew and pretzels.

After a while we began to feel really guilty. Over the radio, we heard that the deputy had discovered our car and was now tracking us on foot. He was good. Psychospy was used to dealing with the uninspired Cammo Dudes who hardly ever left their vehicles. Now we were being pursued by a professional who was reading our footprints in the sand. Sooner or later, he would find us, and he would be pissing mad.

We debated the merits of hiking back to meet the deputy instead of putting him through the wringer. We had no problem with playing with the anonymous Dudes--That's what they are there for.--but the deputy deserved more respect. Obviously, he was not here of his own volition. The Dudes had dumped an impossible problem on him and expected him to solve it. We felt bad about making him sweat and were getting ready to head back to face the music when miraculous redemption came from the skies.

Black Hawk.

Suddenly, our escapade became all worthwhile as we dove for cover. We huddled behind bushes along the sides of the ravine as the big green helicopter combed the hillsides looking for us. It made several passes down the ravine, as the Times photographer snapped away, but they apparently didn't spot us. As they began to search other areas, we realized that we would have to make ourselves more obvious if we wanted to bring the chopper back. We hiked down to the bottom of the ravine and out into the open desert. Wanting to be spotted but too proud to wave the white flag, we

crouched behind spindly bushes that didn't do much to hide us. The helicopter came back, and they managed to detect us. It circled around us a couple of times, then came down low, hovered directly above us and blasted us real good.

All right!

It is very tempting in cases like this to overestimate the threat. For example, in a similar story published in Popular Science, where Psychospy and aviation expert Jim Goodall were "picnicking" under a small tree, the helicopter that blasted us seemed to get closer and closer with each telling of the tale. In Popular Science, it nearly took off half the tree, when in reality it never physically touched it, only hovered within a couple of feet (or roughly 25 to 30 feet above us). In the later encounter, the Times reporter conservatively estimated that the helicopter was 50 feet above us, although Psychospy and the photographer thought it was less. In any case, it was close enough at least to blast us with sand and force us to close our eyes. The helicopter "sat" on us for about ten seconds, then it rose straight up.

The obvious message was, "Ha, we found you!"

Regardless of whether the chopper was 30 feet or 50 feet above us (or whether we were frightened or thrilled by the encounter), this action violates the Air Force's own regulation regarding operating altitudes, which, except for take-off and landing, require a minimum altitude of 500 feet above any person, vehicle or building. (AF Regulation 60-16, Section 5-10.) Never during our visit did we leave public land, and at the time of the "assault," we were about a half mile from the border.

The helicopter went back to where the deputy was and transported him to a hill that was closer to our position. Then it hovered near us at a fairly respectable distance, about 100 feet above and 100 feet away, as it waited for the deputy to reach us. As it hovered, we had a chance to examine the helicopter in detail with binoculars. We were looking for tail numbers but found none. There was a faint Air Force insignia and a few other minor markings but otherwise nothing to identify the craft. Certainly, this must be a violation of a regulation, too.

When the deputy arrived, he was not a happy camper. He asked us if we had cameras on the hill. Psychospy replied, in lawyer-like tones, that what we were doing on the hill was our private affair and that we had no desire to discuss our activities. The deputy said it was the wrong answer. We were seen taking pictures from Freedom Ridge, and based on this information, he could hold us until search warrants could be obtained. Psychospy replied that the deputy must do what he has to do.

That's when the photographer broke down and confessed. He admitted that he did have a camera on Freedom Ridge but that there was no film in it at the time. His only goal in displaying it was to provoke the Dudes into sending out the helicopter. The only shots he took were of the Black Hawk buzzing us over public land.

Showing no emotion, not even a smirk, the deputy relayed this story over the radio to his superiors at the Sheriff's Department. He asked them what he should do next. After a long pause, the word came back that the subjects could either voluntarily turn over their film or they would be held until a search warrant could be obtained for their vehicle.

The reporter and photographer huddled for a moment, then they began to argue violently. The photographer did not want to turn over his film. He was a professional, he said, and he had broken no law. The reporter insisted that he must turn over his film, that it was the only way to get out of this sticky situation. The argument went on for five minutes at least, while Psychospy paced around in the background, shaking his head and rolling his eyes to high heaven.

Finally, the photographer gave in. Psychospy nearly cried as he watched this proud man, veteran of countless Third World conflicts, reduced to quivering jelly by the Cammo Dudes and the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department. Haltingly, painfully, the photographer emptied his camera and his bag and turned over his film to the Sheriff. Both rolls.

There was some debate on the Sheriff's channel about whether the photographer might have shot more than two rolls. We don't know what was happening off the radio, but presumably the Sheriff was contacting the Dudes about what they wanted to do. We heard from the deputy that there was some talk of executing a warrant anyway, but evidently the will was not strong. As we hiked back up the hill with the deputy to where our cars were parked, the reporter took the opportunity to interview him. At the top, the deputy provided the photographer with a receipt for the two rolls, and we

parted amicably.

Did the photographer shoot more than two rolls? Perhaps the answer will be revealed in a future edition of the New York Times Sunday Magazine.

## Analysis

The journalists had identified themselves as working for the New York Times, but we sensed that it didn't have much to do with how we were treated. It seemed to us that the Sheriff's Department had gone through the motions of investigating the complaint but had no interest in pushing it any further than necessary. It seems that whenever the Sheriff's Department goes out on a limb to pursue an AF complaint, the AF leaves them hanging. The Cammo Dudes may complain a lot, but they never back it up with a court appearance or any kind of public action that might "reveal" their existence.

Realistically, serving a search warrant would have opened a Pandora's box of problems for the Sheriff that the nonexistent feds would immediately wash their hands of. If the Sheriff had searched our vehicle, found exposed film and seized it, a noisy custody battle would become inevitable. If the Sheriff searched the vehicle and find no exposed film, nationally publicized embarrassment might follow, with the Cammo Dudes, as usual, providing no support to the county.

Even the Super Mega Spy Cam doesn't help any. At best, what the tape might show is close-up pictures of people using cameras on public land. It doesn't provide any indication of what the people are pointing their cameras at. The tape alone provides no useful legal evidence unless someone is willing to testify that the base exists, the cameras were pointed at it and that the Groom installation is designated by the President as requiring protection from photography.

Any attempt to prosecute a photographer who stays on public land would seem a legal and public relations nightmare as long as the Groom base is unacknowledged. Indeed, any such court case might only provide an opportunity for activists to prove, without a legal doubt, that the base does indeed exist. It seems unlikely, then, that the feds would ever press charges, especially in the current climate where any case would be intensely watched. Without the political will to prosecute, complaints to the Sheriff and the execution of search warrants would seem only a means of harassment. As it stands now, calling the Sheriff when people are seen with cameras seems little more than an attempt by the Cammo Dudes to coerce visitors into "voluntarily" relinquishing their film.

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## How To Trap A Dude

With so much public interest in the mysterious Cammo Dudes, every journalist wants to interview one. Trouble is, whenever you approach them on public land, they literally run away, dashing across the border where you can't follow.

The day before the incident reported above, Psychospy and the Times reporter were touring a different part of the border with several other visitors. While traveling in a three-vehicle convoy down a rugged dirt road, we passed one of the Dudes in a white Cherokee, evidently alerted by the ILLEGAL ROAD SENSORS we had tripped. After he passed, the reporter jumped out of our vehicle and ran after him, trying to get him to stop, but the driver gunned the engine and sped away.

Fortunately, we saw a second Cherokee coming down the road a few minutes later, and this time we knew what to do. After our lead vehicle passed him, it turned diagonally across the road, and the trailing vehicles did the same, trapping the Dude between. The reporter then sauntered over and conducted a leisurely interview.

What did the driver have to say? "No comment" pretty much sums it up. "Don't ask me any questions," was his most memorably line, although spoken in an amiable tone. The Dude was clearly embarrassed at being so easily captured, but he did have the presence to ask the reporter who he was writing for.

The reporter's reply was relayed through the Cammo Dude bureaucracy, but got strangely garbled in the process. The

next day, the Dudes reported to the Sheriff that the journalist was from "The New York Press." We had never heard of this publication but speculated that it must be one of the gay community newspapers out of Greenwich Village.

Perhaps the Dudes are more worldly than we thought.

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## Intel Bitties

CAMOUFLAGE FATIGUES. The Cammo Dudes are dressed in SIX-COLOR DESERT camouflage [Wrong, see [DR#8](#)], not the three-color style more widely available in Army-Navy stores. Some visitors have come in three-color and felt oh so gauche. Don't embarrass yourself. Six-color cammo is available at Army-Navy 1 in Las Vegas or by mail from US Cavalry (catalog: 800-777-7732).

FREEDOM RIDGE STATUS: Still open. No closure date set.

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