

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 #7. April 10, 1994

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ABC News Loses Camera Equipment

Acting at the request of the anonymous Groom Lake security force, the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department on Friday afternoon confiscated the equipment and videotape of an ABC News film crew after the crew was seen with a video camera at the Freedom Ridge viewpoint.

While the unacknowledged Groom Lake air base has become a popular subject for many news photographers, the ABC crew claims they took no such pictures. They say that, on the advice of the network's legal counsel, they never pointed their camera in the direction of the secret base. The news report was to focus on the ironies of military secrecy, including the logical inconsistencies of the photography restriction. Crew members also say they filmed only on public land and never crossed the nearby military boundary.

After driving down from the ridge in two four-wheel-drive vehicles, the four-man crew and their two escorts were stopped and detained by two deputies of the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department. Also present were two men wearing camouflage fatigues with no name tags or insignia. These men, presumably members of the perimeter security force, declined to identify themselves, but the vehicles they were driving bore U.S. Government plates.

Members of the film crew told the deputies they took no footage of the base, but apparently their word was not believed. Based on the statements of an unnamed security guard who claimed to have seen the ABC camera pointed at the base, the deputies obtained a search-and-seizure warrant by radio, then confiscated all equipment and tapes of the crew and their escorts. Equipment seized included a professional video camera, sound mixing equipment, tape recorders, microphones, batteries, cables, a tripod, scanner radios, walkie-talkies and video and audio tapes. The total value of the equipment was estimated to exceed \$65,000.

According to local activists, this is the first time that a search warrant has been served on visitors to the Groom Lake perimeter.

Immediately following the seizure, the equipment was taken inside the base perimeter and turned over to the anonymous private security force. The film crew was not informed of the equipment's final destination or if they would get it back. It is not clear why the tapes and equipment were turned over to the security personnel and not retained by the Sheriff's Department or the local justice court that issued the warrant. On public land, it is assumed that only the Sheriff's Department has jurisdiction, not the security personnel.

The ABC crew consisted of correspondent James Walker, producer Robert Haberl, cameraman Robert Jennings and sound technician Mel Barr. All are employed by ABC News and were on assignment for "World News Tonight with Peter Jennings." Accompanying the crew was government oversight activist Glenn Campbell, from whom radio

equipment was seized. A sixth member of the party, aerospace historian Peter Merlin, was detained with the others but did not lose any equipment.

Members of the party were individually searched, as were their vehicles. After the equipment was seized, the six were allowed to leave the area. No one was arrested, and the group was detained for approximately two hours total.

The ABC crew and Mr. Campbell say they will fight the seizure.

[[Transcript of later ABC report](#)]

[Federal photography statute: [18 USC 795](#)]

Trial Date Correction

In [DR#4](#), the rescheduled trial date for four of seven accused trespassers was incorrectly reported. The rescheduled date is Apr. 13 (not Apr. 18). Even this date may be subject to revision owing to delays in obtaining subpoenas.

On Jan. 2, the seven Las Vegas residents were arrested at a guard house about one-half mile inside the military boundary, about 13 miles northeast of the secret Groom Lake base and about a mile northwest of the public Freedom Ridge viewpoint. [See [DR#1](#).] Members of the group claim they crossed the border by accident while trying to find a well- publicized hiking trail to Freedom Ridge.

The group passed the border while driving on a maintained access road serving the Groom Lake base. The border point is marked by signs on either side of the road but no fence or gate. This stretch of unpaved road has been dubbed "Sucker's Alley" by experienced visitors because of the growing number of first-time tourists who have driven beyond the signs here and been arrested at the guard house just beyond. The border and signs are located where the road passes through a narrow ravine where there is limited warning time and no convenient place to turn around. Visitors who drive up to the guard house to ask for information are usually arrested immediately with no opportunity for excuse or explanation.

The group also claims that they passed a security patrol immediately after crossing the border and that the patrol made no attempt to stop them. They say an occupant of the vehicle waved to them in an apparently friendly manner, a gesture taken as an implied consent to proceed.

While three of the seven chose to plead "No Contest" at their arraignment and accept a fine, the four remaining defendants have maintained their innocence and rejected plea bargain offers by the District Attorney. The four say that although they did cross the line, the circumstances were confusing and they did not do so intentionally.

In the course of the arrest, cameras, telescopes and binoculars belonging to members of the group were seized by the anonymous security guards. Receipts were given for some of this equipment, but they were not signed. The equipment has not yet been returned.

Campbell Seeks Confiscated Film

Rachel resident Glenn Campbell is continuing to seek the return of four rolls of photographic film taken from him on June 16, 1993. Like the ABC crew in the more recent incident, Campbell was seen with a camera on public land near the military border but claims he took no pictures of restricted installations. Campbell says that he was near the border north of Groom Lake where the base itself was not visible.

Campbell says his film includes shots of a military helicopter deliberately buzzing him and a companion at a height of 25-30 feet about the ground. He says that under Air Force regulations, aircraft are supposed to maintain an altitude of

500 feet above any person, building or vehicle. Campbell characterizes the encounter as a deliberate assault in which the helicopter downwash was used to bombard the pair with flying debris. Campbell says that the film contains proof of both the action and the intent.

Although Campbell voluntarily gave his film to a Sheriff's deputy when asked to so, he says that it was with the explicit understanding that the film would be developed and returned to him. Campbell says that, despite numerous demands and inquiries, the film has not been returned. He says he has not been given any notice that the film is being forfeited either, and he has not be charged with any crime. Campbell contends that his property has been confiscated without due process.

"I did not photograph any installation," Campbell says. "You couldn't even see anything from that area, so I figured it was safe to let the Sheriff examine my film. I know now that I was foolish, but I thought I would get it back, especially when the pictures contained clear evidence of Air Force wrongdoing. I thought the Sheriff would retain control of the film and the federal authorities wouldn't be so dumb as to try to cover up their own crimes. I was wrong."

In a letter to Mr. Campbell, the District Attorney confirmed that the film was turned over to the Air Force but gave no further specifics. Mr. Campbell's lawyer, Steve Hofer, has formerly requested information from the District Attorney on where this film is being held and to which party a suit should be directed. Campbell says he will pursue the matter in court if no progress is made.

In an unrelated case, no word has been received on the status of the two rolls of film taken from a photographer working for the *New York Times Magazine* after he was seen on Freedom Ridge with a camera on March 23 [DR#6] It remains unclear at the writing whether the rolls relinquished actually contained any pictures or whether the photographer or his employer will choose to pursue the case.

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