



World War II Comes to the Badlands

The Badlands Gunnery Range



The Stronghold District of Badlands National Park offers more than scenic badlands with spectacular views. Managed by the National Park Service in conjunction with the Oglala Sioux Tribe, this 133,300 acre area is also steeped in history. Deep draws, high tables, and rolling prairie hold the stories of the earliest Plains hunters, the paleo-Indians, as well as the present day Lakota Nation. Homesteaders and fossil hunters have also made their mark on the land. There is a more recent role this remote, sparsely populated area has played in U.S. history: World War II and the Badlands gunnery range.

Preparing for War

As a part of the war effort, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) took possession of 341,726 acres of land on the Pine Ridge Reservation, home of the Oglala Sioux people, for a gunnery range. Included in this range was 337 acres from then Badlands National Monument. This land was used extensively from 1942 through 1945 as air-to-air and air-to-ground gunnery ranges. Precision and demolition bombing exercises were also quite common. After the war, the South Dakota National Guard used portions of the bombing range as an artillery range. In 1968, the USAF declared most of the range excess property. 2500 acres are retained by the USAF but are no longer used.

Firing took place within most of the present day Stronghold District. Land was bought or leased from individual landowners and the Tribe in order to clear the area of human occupation. Old car bodies and 55 gallon drums painted bright yellow were used as targets. Bulls-eyes 250 feet across were plowed into the ground and used as targets by bombardier bombing flights. Small automatic aircraft called “drones” and 60 foot by 8 foot screens dragged behind planes served as mobile targets. Gleaming bright white from the air, the large fossil remains of the elephant-sized titanotheres were commonly targeted by bombers. Hundreds of fossil resources were destroyed in bombing efforts. Today, the ground is littered with discarded bullet shells and unexploded ordinance.

Human Impacts

For safety, 125 families were relocated from their farms and ranches in the 1940s. Those that remained nearby recall times when they dove under tractors while out cutting hay to avoid shells dropped by planes miles outside of the boundary. In the town of Interior, both a church and the building housing the current post office received six inch shells through the roof. Pilots in practice, operating out of Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City, found it a challenge to determine the exact boundaries of the range. Fortunately, there were no civilian casualties. However, at least a dozen members of flight crews lost their lives in plane crashes.

Unexploded ordnance (UXO) is explosive or chemical munitions that were prepared for action but did not activate. Most UXO is from past activities associated with training or weapons testing. It comes in all shapes and sizes - from small bullets to large bombs.

Litter That Can Kill

Just as it was difficult for pilots to determine the gunnery range from the air, it is challenging to find your way when exploring the Stronghold District. There are few roads. The natural conditions of rain and snow add to the complexity. Throughout the Stronghold District are spent 50 caliber machine gun shells and 20 mm cannon shells. Larger explosive shells are occasionally found eroding out of the Badlands buttes. If you find any shells, do not touch them. Note where you are. If you have a map, note on the map where you are. As soon as possible, report this to the White River Ranger Station at (605) 455 - 2878 or to Badlands Bombing Range Staff at (605) 867 - 1271. The National Park Service, working with the Oglala Sioux Tribe, the U.S. Air Force, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are undertaking a clean up effort for this sacred ground. Do your part. Leave all objects you find in the park in place. Report anything unusual you find to a park ranger.

How Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) May Appear

Some UXO are not visible. They can be at ground surface or be partially or completely buried. In fact, UXO may be found at depths of 20 feet below the ground surface or more. Some UXO were stabilized by a parachute, resulting in a buried UXO but a visible parachute. UXO may also be covered with vegetation, snow, or other matter. Do not enter heavily vegetated areas.

UXO may appear in parts or fragments. All UXO, whether in pieces or in whole, present an equal hazard. If you find one UXO, assume that others are present.

What Should You Do If You Find an Unexploded Ordnance

- Do not continue to move toward a suspected UXO. Some UXO are sensitive to motion and could explode if you come too near.
 - Do not move or disturb UXO nor should you move any object near or on UXO. It may have become unstable over time.
 - Note the location, including directions, any landmarks, or other features that would aid in locating the UXO.
 - Leave the hazard area immediately. Other UXO could be present.
 - Stay away from areas of known or suspected UXO. Do not enter fenced areas with posted UXO warnings.
 - Remember to report any UXO to either the Badlands Bombing Range Project staff at (605) 867 - 1271 or to the White River Visitor Center at (605) 455 - 2878.
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Echoes on the Wind

Stand on the edge of a canyon carved through the Badlands and imagine a time when the faint hum of planes grew into a steady buzz. The White River Badlands, avoided by the soldiers of the nineteenth century, becomes a training ground for the airmen of the twentieth. The wind gives way to an explosion. Or not. Those UXO wait for the opportunity to do what they were built to do: detonate. Remain unharmed by leaving these tangible reminders of a world of war in place and sharing your find with those who can continue to keep this small part of the world safe.