## Pride in Place

*Patton and his troops left their mark on a vast expanse of two deserts*

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NOT MANY TRAVELERS TAKE THE COTTONWOOD ENTRANCE to Joshua Tree National Park and fewer turn off on a dirt road before the park gate, a road that leads to a marker for a place called Camp Young. Pausing at the monument, visitors may puzzle over a sun-heated shrine of rusted bullet casings, typewriter keys, can openers and jagged chunks of shrapnel.

Typically motorists turn back here and continue their journey, never knowing they've stumbled on the greatest earth sculpture and largest archaeological site in the world.

The Desert Training Center (DTC) was established in 1942 by Major General George S. Patton, Jr., to toughen troops and develop tactics for desert warfare in North Africa. "We cannot train troops to fight in the desert of North Africa by training in the swamps of Georgia," Patton said in a speech. One million men trained here over the next two years. When the Army moved out in 1944, they left the remains of camps, depots, hospitals, rock lined walk-ways, mosaics, stone unit insignias and chapels.

The ruins are scattered from the Salton Sea to the Colorado River and beyond. (Patton's vehicle pool was stationed in the Palm Desert Cove, along Portola Avenue.) They cover an astounding 18,000 square miles of the California and Arizona deserts; that's roughly twice the size of Vermont. The scale of the historical military landscape is so massive it's difficult to comprehend even with maps laid out before you.

"These men really were landscape architects," says Bureau of Land Management archaeologist Rolla Queen. "The troops took pride in what they did out here. They left behind a wonderful, fascinating thing. There's nothing like it in the world."

Now and then—as you can see in the accompanying 1957 article from Desert Magazine—someone gets the idea this fascinating thing ought to be preserved. But preservationists are stymied by the scope of the undertaking, and they tend to move on to something more manageable.

The DTC presents a Field of Dreams sort of challenge, says Queen, the latest in a line of big-thinkers who want to preserve the sites. If you build it, tourists will come but how do you manage a ruin so huge? No one knows because nothing like it has ever been done before.

Still, while rushing to his multiple duties and appointments, Queen can't stop thinking about the wonders still to be discovered out in Pattonland. Almost every week, a new find materializes—a subterranean icebox or the mysterious remains of a strafing run (it took Queen three years to decipher the circular patterns left by the strafing). Something needs to be done soon because each year a few more relics get carted away, and wind and sun and time further erode what's left. (Note: It's against the law to take artifacts from public lands.

Each year, too, Patton's war recedes in memory. Once the camps boomed with mortar bursts, small arms fire and the General's voice barking over loudspeakers. Now, even if you strain your imagination, it's impossible to hear anything out here but wind and silence.

Once this swath of desert—350 miles by 250 miles— swarmed with homesick, gritty-eyed men, downing salt tablets and ducking behind tents to eat their powdered eggs out of the wind. They took part in endless maneuvers using live artillery; and an unlucky few were recruited for heat experiments (see the accompanying Desert Magazine article "With Patton on Desert Maneuvers"). Today you can travel for miles and never see a person or a vehicle.

With time, as the military associations fade, another aspect to the DTC is emerging: its beauty. You can't really see it from the ground, because hills and scrub and distance conceal so much of what's there.

But from the air, shapes and patterns appear—giant earthen artworks that look as if they were created by doodling aliens. The man who knows those patterns better than anyone—so well he sees them in his dreams—is Jesse McKeever, an Indio well-driller. McKeever learned to fly at 16, trading chores for flying lessons from a seaplane pilot at the Salton Sea. On practice flights, he noticed immense designs in the distance—grids and circles and lines heading off in space—-and asked his instructor: "What are all those tracks out there?"

He set out to find out and hasn't stopped in the three decades since.

On a recent morning, McKeever walked out behind his Indio machine shop, pushed open his gates and buckled into his blue and white Cessna 170. Bumping down his home airfield, surrounded by date groves, he headed out over Box Canyon and immediately the tracks of Patton's tanks started to appear everywhere. He flew over Camp Young and the vast Chuckwalla Bench where he buzzed Patton's throne—a lookout where the boss surveyed the troops. On to Victory Pass, Camp Coxcomb, Camp Granite, the chapels of Camp Iron Mountain.

For the next four hours, while dodging the occasional turkey vulture, McKeever zoomed in on rock-lined foxholes, trenches, machine gun emplacements and rusting concertina wire.

Guided by maps and newspaper articles he found in the Indio library, McKeever has spent much of his life getting to know this landscape. Now and then he'll even land his plane in the wilds where there is no airstrip, and hike in for a closer look at places like Palen Pass. Beautiful and remote, this is where Patton's men learned how to hold a pass. Out here, written on the landscape, you can see illustrated the principles in Patton's manifesto "How to Train Troops".

What draws McKeever, he says, are the reminders of  the hardships the troops went through while preparing to go on to something even harder. In the midst of fear, uncertainty and searing heat the men who dug the foxholes at Palen Pass also managed to create order and grace. ("The temperature in the shade is not mentioned here because there is no shade," Patton once wrote.) The soldiers wouldn't have called their creations art, of course. They might have said they were expressing pride or team spirit, but the designs they left speak for themselves.

Only a few explorers like McKeever have discovered these sights from the air. But now DTC boosters want to make this view available to more folks with an official Desert Training Center Sky Trail Tour. The brainchild of Larry Dighera, a Santa Barbara pilot who discovered the camp sites on flights to Las Vegas, the DTC sky trail has been featured in two pilots' magazines.

The BLM's Rolla Queen has plans to further promote the sky tour. It's an unconventional approach to tourism, but when you're in charge of the world's most unwieldy attraction, you've got to be broad-minded. The BLM is also looking at options such as walking tours of the camps, or a camp-to-camp trail.

The aim is to preserve the sites and to convey the magnitude of the largest military training exercise ever, an exercise that changed men and changed history. As McKeever says: "If these guys didn't have the proper training who knows how the world would be today."