

Joshua Tree's Aircraft Warning Stations

Commemorations of the 70th Anniversary of World War II have started. One of the ways Joshua Tree National Park contributed to that fight was the placement of two aircraft warning stations within its boundaries.

It began on November 28, 1942 when San Bernardino National Forest Supervisor DeWitt Nelson requested, on behalf of the United States Army Fourth Fighter Command, to build “three” portable aircraft warning stations (only two were determined ultimately to be needed).¹

The Fourth Fighter Command, locally located at March Field (currently the Air Reserve Base in Moreno Valley), was activated on July 8, 1941 and assigned to the Fourth Air Force. It provided air defense for the west coast until disbanded on March 31, 1944.² Working through the Aircraft Warning Service, a “network of posts thru which enemy planes cannot pass without detection”³ was being established. Each station was to “be of a temporary and portable nature in that the living quarters will be in a trailer house with a portable latrine and water tower.”⁴ All stations were connected by a relay radio communication system and the stations in the Monument were connected to the Santa Rosa Peak Station. Both stations were staffed by two observers working 12 hour shifts with water being hauled from Twentynine Palms.⁵



Armband Aircraft Warning Service⁶

On December 1, 1942, Acting Superintendent Walter G. Attwell granted temporary permission “for these temporary installations according to the following requirements: 1)

¹ DeWitt Nelson, San Bernardino National Forest Supervisor, San Bernardino, California, to Joshua Tree National Monument Superintendent, letter, 28 November 1942, Aircraft Warning Stations; Joshua Tree National Monument War Emergency File 201, General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

² Maurer Maurer, editor, *Air Force Combat Units of World War II* ([Washington, DC]: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 442.

³ Nelson to Superintendent, 28 November 1942, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Duane Jacobs, Acting Superintendent Joshua Tree National Monument, Twentynine Palms, California, to Regional Director, memorandum, 16 January 1943, Aircraft Warning Stations; Joshua Tree National Monument War Emergency File 201, General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁶ Mary Irene Ohlfs Aircraft Warning Service Armband, digital image, 15 January 2012; privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twentynine Palms, California. 2012.

the installations should be located so they will be as inconspicuous as possible, thus eliminating the desire of campers to occupy the adjacent area in lieu of the designated camp sites, 2) no green vegetation shall be cut, 3) the maintenance of sanitation (pit toilets) shall comply with the instructions of the Superintendent, and 4) all refuse shall be buried.”⁷

With Acting Regional Director Herbert Maier concurring on December 9, 1942,⁸ Special Use Permit No. 1 (1943) was issued to San Bernardino National Forest to build the stations and signed by Acting Superintendent Duane Jacobs on January 27, 1943. The permit for the stations was valid “for the duration of the present war and for six months thereafter.”⁹

The Split Rock Station (now referred to as Crown Prince Lookout) was activated on February 28, 1943.¹⁰ The station was designed by the Forest Service similar to their fire lookout towers to be 10 feet square primarily composed of windows and cedar shingle roof. The living quarters (an Army house trailer) were 50 feet below the station accessed by a wooden stairway.¹¹ The water tank had a 250 gallon capacity and sat on eight-foot stilts. And, a twenty foot pole to support a radio antenna. The station was built by forest employee Carl Peterson and a four person crew from Del Rosa.¹² It remained on the peak for eighteen years until burned by vandals in 1961.¹³

⁷ Walter Attwell, Joshua Tree National Monument Acting Superintendent, Twentynine Palms, California, to DeWitt Nelson, San Bernardino National Forest Supervisor, letter, 1 December 1942, Aircraft Warning Stations; Joshua Tree National Monument War Emergency File 201, General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁸ Herbert Maier, Acting Regional Director, San Francisco, California, to Acting Superintendent Joshua Tree National Monument Superintendent Attwell, memorandum, 9 December 1942, Aircraft Warning Stations; Joshua Tree National Monument War Emergency File 201, General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁹ Joshua Tree National Monument Special Use Permit No. 1, 27 January 1943; Joshua Tree National Monument War Emergency File 201, General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

¹⁰ Duane D. Jacobs, Memorandum for the Director, typescript, 1 March 1943; vertical files; Joshua Tree National Park Archives, Twentynine Palms, California.

¹¹ Jacobs to Regional Director, 16 January 1943, National Archives and Records Administration.

¹² Carl O. Peterson, “Looking Back Twenty Years” (typescript, 10 July 1965, Joshua Tree National Park Archives, Twentynine Palms, California), p 2.

¹³ Ibid, p 1.



Split Rock Station¹⁴

The Pinto Basin Station, which was built second, was completed in March 1943¹⁵ and established adjacent to Old Dale Road somewhere between mile 2.2 and mile 8.7 (Township 3 South, Range 12 East). I believe I found its location 5.5 miles from Old Dale Junction. There is almost no written information on this station.



Split Rock Station foundations¹⁶

¹⁴ "Split Rock Station", JOTR No. 20575, digital image, nd; historic photo collection; Joshua Tree National Park Archives, Twentynine Palms, California.

¹⁵ Duane Jacobs, Acting Superintendent Joshua Tree National Monument, Twentynine Palms, California, Custodian's Monthly Report for March 1943, Joshua Tree National Park Archives, Twentynine Palms, California.

¹⁶ Split Rock Station foundations, digital image, 21 October 1993; privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twentynine Palms, California. 2012.

General “Hap” Arnold ordered the cessation of the Aircraft Warning Stations effective October 16, 1943. This was “not based upon any belief that the war’s end is yet in sight” but to an assumption of a low “risk of enemy air attack” and released the observers for “other important wartime responsibilities.”¹⁷ The Pinto Basin Station was closed on October 20, 1943 with the Split Rock station remaining unstaffed in the event of an emergency.¹⁸



Suspected latrine foundations of the Pinto Basin Station¹⁹

All that remains today of the Split Rock Station is some concrete foundations. The only evidence of the Pinto Basin Station is the suspected latrine frame. I found no reference in *The Desert Trail* to the park’s Aircraft Warning Stations. Although there were weekly listings of who was on duty at the station in Twentynine Palms.

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¹⁷ “Volunteer Civilian Aircraft Warning Service Eliminated,” *The Desert Trail* (Twentynine Palms, California), 8 October 1943, p. 2, col. 1.

¹⁸ Duane D. Jacobs, Custodian’s Monthly Report for Joshua Tree National Monument, typescript, October 1943; vertical files; Joshua Tree National Park Archives, Twentynine Palms, California.

¹⁹ Pinto Basin Station latrine foundations, digital image, 01 February 2012; privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twentynine Palms, California. 2012.

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"Split Rock Station." Digital image. nd. Historic Photo Collection. Joshua Tree National Park Archives, Twentynine Palms, California.

Split Rock Station Foundations. Digital image. 21 October 1993. Privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twentynine Palms, California. 2012.

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