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News Brief

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News Brief

Military Ordnance Found on U.S. Shores

~ Julie Stern, CISR staff

A World War II (WWII) bomb was detonated 25 June 2013 after it washed ashore on Assateague Island National Seashore, Maryland, U.S.¹ The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers surveyed the beach for two days, turning up more than 100 inert pieces of ordnance.²

On the same day a resident of Bay Head, New Jersey, U.S., located a partially buried WWII, German contact mine that was about 3 m (10 ft) from the shore.³ As a safety precaution, 15 nearby homes were evacuated, and the U.S. Coast Guard prevented boats from entering the area. Assateague Island and Bay Head were closed while the areas were combed with radar equipment, reopening after explosive ordnance disposal teams destroyed the munitions and the areas were deemed safe.^{1,4}

This is not the first time ordnance has washed up on U.S. shores—park rangers say it is “surprisingly common.”⁵ Ordnance has washed ashore in at least 11 coastline states. During the world wars, the U.S. military tested explosives at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland; Sandy Hook Proving Ground, New Jersey; and proving grounds in Arizona, California, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts and Ohio.⁶

The military discarded munitions in the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, mostly from the years 1943–1947. Dumping sites for unused bombs were only 97 to 161 km (60 to 100 mi) offshore. At the time, many countries practiced offshore dumping of munitions.



The explosive ordnance disposal team from the U.S. Army's Aberdeen Proving Ground detonates the World War II bomb off the shore of Assateague Island, Maryland (U.S.).

Photo courtesy of Maryland Coast Dispatch.

Army records of U.S. dump sites are vague, missing or were destroyed.⁷ The Defense Environmental Programs 2009 Annual Report to Congress listed military munition sea disposal locations in the U.S. from 1917–1970: 26 dump sites in the northeast, 17 in the southeast, 9 in the west, and 20 near Alaska and Hawaii.⁸ The U.S. Department of Defense prohibited the dumping of unexploded ordnance in U.S. coastal waters in 1970. Congress passed the Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act in 1972, banning the marine disposal of any material that would unreasonably harm humans or the environment.⁹

According to combined research by Texas A&M University oceanographers William Bryant and Niall Slowey, and researcher Mike Kemp, more than 31 million pounds (14,061 tonnes) of bombs are dispersed in the Gulf of Mexico and along the coasts of at least 16 U.S. states.^{9,10} While “potentially dangerous,” not all ordnance are highly explosive; National Park Service (NPS) files at Assateague Island assert that the test rockets buried off the coast “only carried sufficient explosives to detonate a smoke bomb”¹⁴

Munitions are shifting closer to the shoreline as Maryland and New Jersey experience soil erosion, which constantly changes the landscape along the coast. Therefore more ordnance will likely be discovered in the future.^{2,11}

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