

Camp Hale littered with old munitions

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Denver Post Mountain Bureau

CAMP HALE — The boom echoing throughout the valley here last week was a potent reminder of the dangers lurking in and around this former Army camp, but officials fear that visitors still don't take the threat seriously.

Just days before munitions experts from Fort Carson cautiously detonated two aging pieces of ordnance discovered during a long-overdue sweep, someone moved one of the "Danger — Keep Out!" signs and covered it with a paper plate marked to direct people to the Johnson family picnic — in the middle of the former 1,400-acre target area.

In other cases, hunters have been known to shoot at potentially live mortar rounds, and hikers have taken home mine triggers in their backpacks, oblivious of the threat made even more lethal by the often-destabilizing effects of time.

"These are weapons of war. They're not souvenirs," said Laura Bishard of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. "These things can become more volatile over time."

Experts caution visitors about potential hazards

Camp Hale, which served as a base for the soldiers of the famed 10th Mountain Division during World War II and was used as late as the early 1960s by the CIA to train Tibetan guerillas, is littered with shrapnel, spent shells and undetonated explosives.

Since last fall, when four live rifle grenades were discovered, authorities from the state health department, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Forest Service have grown increasingly concerned with the dangers posed by an unknown amount of munitions left on public land.

"It's anybody's guess," Bishard said. "I can tell you it was striking for us to find those four rifle grenades last year because they were on the surface and very close to the road."

Last fall, the Forest Service closed the primary target area, including a three-mile stretch of the popular Colorado and

Continental Divide trails and the East Fork campground, while Army personnel searched for unexploded ordnance.

Deeming the immediate threat to be over, officials reopened the trail and campground last week.

"It's not something to panic over," said Cal Wettstein, Holy Cross District ranger for the Forest Service. "But the fear is that a lot of people camp in this area, and if a child were to find one of these and throw it in a campfire . . ."

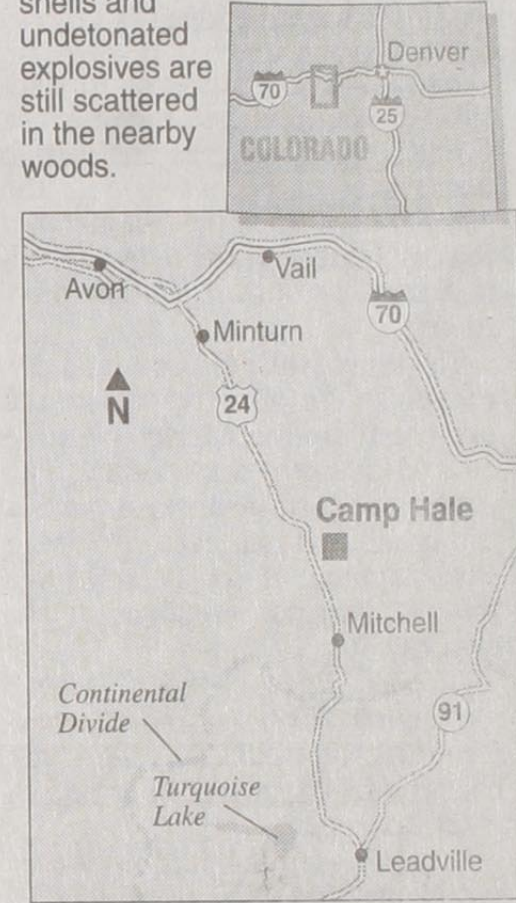
A sweep last month turned up a 2-inch bazooka round and a 3½-inch rocket motor — which were exploded last Thursday — making eight pieces of munitions discovered since last August.

But officials say money for subsequent searches is scarce under the Formerly Used Defense Sites program, and they estimate it would take \$2 million to scour the entire valley where military maneuvers took place.

"We're really at the beginning stage of surveying this site," said Jerry Hodgson, project manager for the Corps of Engineers.

Danger in the hills

Last week, soldiers detonated two old pieces of ordnance near Camp Hale. Officials warn that shrapnel, spent shells and undetonated explosives are still scattered in the nearby woods.



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U.S. armed forces. Camp Hale.