

BY JON VARA

Technicians prepare for a controlled demolition of unexploded ordnance found in a burial pit on the Pinecastle Jeep Range, near Orlando, Fla.



Home on the Range

During World War II, the U.S. military leased 12,000 acres of cattle range near Orlando, Fla., to use as the Pinecastle Jeep Range, a munitions demonstration and training facility. After the war, the army tidied up a bit before handing the site back to its original owners, with the friendly advice that it might be best to leave certain areas undeveloped in the future.

But the future brought big changes, including air conditioning, mosquito control, Disney World, and hordes of retirees. In time, the old Jeep Range began to sprout houses and, eventually, the Odyssey Middle School.

Soon after the school opened in 2001, it became evident that quite a lot of military hardware had been buried under the school grounds decades before. Although it's never been determined whether the buried material was left there by the military or a civilian landowner, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers (USACE) conducted a clean-up of the site in 2007 and 2008, removing 14 tons of scrap metal and debris, including 125 unexploded munitions.

Then things got interesting: With real-estate prices beginning their nationwide collapse, homeowners in residential developments on the margins of the range

sued builders for failing to disclose the area's history—which plaintiffs blamed for declining property values.

Meanwhile, the USACE continued inspecting the entire 12,000-acre range. When that work was completed last year, the team had documented and dug up an additional 5,000 objects, of which 24—none of them in residential areas—were found to be potentially explosive.

A number of lawsuits are still working their way through the courts, but at least one has been settled: In 2011, home builder The Ryland Group paid out \$1.2 million—without admitting wrongdoing—to a group of 118 plaintiffs. The modest size of that payout and recovering property values seem to have taken some of the steam out of further suits. But for some area residents, dreams of a big payday die hard. USACE project manager Frank Araico recalls one recent conversation with a landowner seeking to document the results of the inspection of his property. “I told him we could provide that, but that we hadn’t found anything hazardous,” Araico says. “He gave me a blank look for a second, then said ‘Oh, crap.’”

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Photo: courtesy USACE