

**Southwestern In Focus
EL PASOAN, MISSILE SITES 'DAD-
DY,' MEMBER OF SPACE, RANGE
PIONEERS**

By Gene Hargrave
EPT Sundial 11/26/72

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Turner is not a Mexican name and many might have wondered how such a place came into being. It really concerns the story of Col. Harold Turner who was recently honored at Cape Kennedy; Fla., as one of 25 Missile, Space and Range Pioneers in the world.

Along about 1947 the United States Army was conducting test firings of captured German V2 Rockets at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico.

One of the rockets were off course and landed just south of Juarez, Mexico. Fortunately, the rocket landed in an uninhabited area. There was no damage except a huge and much photographed crater in the desert area of the State of Chihuahua which was dubbed "Turnerville" after Col. Turner then commander of the missile range.

A long-time resident of El Paso, Turner recalls how the incident became an international affair.

"In a few minutes, everything broke loose. I checked with my friend, the commanding general of the state of Chihuahua. He assured me that there was no damage and that he would clear the unfortunate event with the authorities in Mexico City. Then I had to report to my general in Washington."



HAROLD TURNER

HAD TO EXPLAIN

Turner recalls how he had to explain to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, then chief of staff of the Army, how the accident happened. "Just a few minutes later I was on the phone with the Secretary of State, the late and great Gen. George C. Marshall. My instructions were to make a complete investigation of the circumstances and report in person to Washington."

In the meantime, the press, cranks and even local officials were on Turner's back. "I received one call from what is comparable to our attorney general of the state of Chihuahua. He told me that I was waging a private war with Mexico and that if I ever crossed the bridge into Mexico again, he would have me arrested."

"Of course there were damage claims. Two or three were intriguing. One man wanted to put in a claim against the Army because his wife became so scared she became frigid."

When told that he would have to file a written claim, the gentleman allegedly was willing to settle for \$250.

GETS INTO ROCKETS

Ironically, Colonel, Turner says that this firing of the rocket was the most productive and valuable of all the 28 rockets fired under his supervision while at White Sands.

The investigation showed that when the rocket was fired, it was known to be off course immediately. A German technician who was supposed to push the destruct button, just did not push it. This led to the development of the "Fool Proof Safety Device."

"Turner got into the rocket business when he was assigned to the office of the Chief of Ordnance of the Army as a ballistics expert. The old Army Air Corps had developed a rocket that was attached to the wings of a plane. The rocket was some 4½ inches in diameter and about 30 inches long. The drawback was that a 15-foot tube had to be attached to the wings of the plane to guide the rocket to its target. These tubes reduced the speed of the fighter planes so much that they became sitting ducks for the enemy anti-aircraft fire. Thousands of rockets were stockpiled. Air Force commanders would not risk their planes and pilots. So the problem was turned over to ordnance.

"I was given two weeks to come up with a solution by General Campbell, Chief of Ordnance," Turner said

He recalled his experiences as an air observer and fledging pilot in World War I. "In the good old days, chock blocks were placed under the wheels of the airplane. The motor was 'reved up' and when maximum power was reached, the blocks were pulled out and the plane took off nearly straight up, he said.

Taking a few, hundred of the rockets up to Allegheny Proving Grounds, the technicians took Turner's ideas and developed a delayed fire device, and it worked.

Soon planes in Europe and the Pacific theaters were using the rockets with devastating effects and Colonel Turner became a rocket expert.

A short time later, Turner was called into the chief's office and was told that he was to go to White Sands; to set up a range to fire rockets. German experts were being brought to the United States to set up a rocket program. The great Dr. Werner Von Braun was among the group, and a number of captured V2 rockets were brought from Germany.

SHOW CURVATURE

In one of the rockets fired Cal Tech scientists set up two cameras in the V2. Turner said "It was probably the first time in history that pictures were taken that showed the curvature of the earth. It showed the area from Lower Baja California, to well above northern California, some two thousand miles."

Another first that took place during Turner's command at White Sands was the explosion of the first atomic bomb at Trinity Site. "I had arrived in Las Cruces, N.M., two days before the explosion. When the bomb went off, I was asleep in the Amador Hotel in Las Cruces. The first I knew of it was on reading the morning paper although it was on the property I was supposed to command. It was the Army's best kept secret."

Early in 1949 Turner received a call from Washington and was asked to take a new command. He was told that he was to go to Florida, purchase land, plan a launch area, supervise construction and conduct test firing of guided missiles.

So Col. Turner, daddy of White Sands Missile Range, was transferred to and became the granddaddy of one of the great projects of the space age, Cape Canaveral, Florida.

“That’s how I got to be a Space Age Pioneer and the daddy of both White Sands Missile Range and what is now Cape Kennedy where our astronauts were launched to the moon.”

Under Turner’s supervision, the first successful two-stage space rocket was fired. It was called “Bumper” and was a WAC Corporal Missile mounted on a facsimile of a German V2 rocket.

While at Cape Canaveral, Turner suffered a cerebral accident and was medically retired from the Army.

WAS SEAMAN

A native of Pittsfield, Mass., he took to sea, became an able-bodied seaman and a licensed Life Boat Crewman. After World War I he went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later attended that institute doing post graduate work while in the Army. He also is a graduate of the Army Industrial College, the college for the highest ranking officer personnel.

Turner has good reasons for retiring in El Paso. “As a kid I always wanted to go West. I got my first chance as a flight and aerial observer training at Fort Sill, Okla., in World War I. Now I am here by choice and I love my home in El Paso.”

A 33rd Degree Mason, he has been Master of all four bodies of Scottish Rites in the Valley at El Paso. He is a member of Ysleta Lodge and a member of the El Maida Shrine.

Col. Turner and his wife, Virginia, city editor of El Paso Herald Post, reside in the Lower Valley. They have one son, Gary.

As for Turnerville, Mexico, Turner first heard of it by chance. "One day I was walking down Texas Street in El Paso. A man approached me and said. ‘What is your cut?’ I was completely at a loss. The man explained how he had been down in Mexico and found that impact area and the crater of the misfired rocket was fenced in. There was a big sign at the gate which read ‘Welcome to Turnerville.’ For 25 cents American money one could gain entrance and search for parts of the V2 Rocket. The only thing I ever heard they found was an old mule shoe.”

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