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Rock Art Sites at Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command

The Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, home to the Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command, is located in the southern Mojave Desert, one of the hottest and driest deserts in North America. It is the Marine Corps' largest training facility, occupying 935 square miles (approximately 600,000 acres).

Currently, over 1,200 recorded archeological sites have been identified. The most visible of its prehistoric resources are the rock art sites. To date, there are three recorded rock art sites located within the installation boundaries. A fourth has been located, but has not yet been completely recorded. With approximately 15% of the installation inventoried for cultural resources, the potential exists for many more rock art sites to be found as surveys continue.

The first rock art site recorded on the base is the Foxtrot Petroglyph Site. The site, CA-SBR-161, documented in 1979,¹ was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in February 1995. The Foxtrot Petroglyph Site encompasses

approximately three linear kilometers of rock art applied to the southern face of a large lava flow located in the central/eastern portion of the installation. The rock art at this site is unusual because it has both petroglyphs (images scratched, pecked, or chiseled into rock surfaces) and pictographs (images painted on rock surfaces). The site consists of five areas where rock art concentrations occur along the lava flow. The site has over 450 rock art panels and over 1,300 design elements present in the five defined areas. Foxtrot contains rock art styles common to both the Great Basin and southern California deserts. Great Basin abstract is the predominant style represented. The common abstract motifs are cross-hatching, wavy lines, circles, concentric circles, and meandering lines. Additionally, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures are common. The unique blend of different styles and motifs at Foxtrot indicates use by Native Americans for ceremonial or ritual purposes over many centuries, making the site a truly unique resource.

The second recorded rock art site is the Lavic Lake petroglyph site, CA-SBR-7898, located in the northern sector of the base. Unlike Foxtrot, this site is located in a basalt boulder field and includes pecked and incised images. Bisected circles, meandering lines, rakes, rectangular grids, and a pattern of interlocking triangles are found on the panels at this site. Documentation² for this site identified 55 boulders with 63 glyphs. Although not large, it is an important resource that provides information on the variability of rock art styles, elements, and motifs found in the desert west.

The third recorded rock art site, the Cleghorn Pass Site, was found in April 1998, by biologists conducting surveys of sensitive plant species in remote areas of the base. Dropped off by helicopter at the crest of the Bullion Mountains, biologists were making their way down a major drainage when they discovered a single boulder covered with petroglyphs. The find was reported, and cultural resources staff flew by helicopter to the location to record the site.

Photos courtesy Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command.

Common abstract motifs at the Foxtrot Petroglyph Site.





The Lavic Lake Petroglyph site is located in a basalt boulder field.

Designated CA-SBR-9768, the Cleghorn Pass site is located at the western end of a small secondary drainage near the southern terminus of the central Bullion Mountains. This minor drainage converges with a larger, northeast-trending seasonal drainage that enters a major wash some 2.5 km northeast of the site. It should be noted that this wash co-joins with other washes to form the major wash that borders the Foxtrot site on the south. Situated among granitic hills and outcrops, the two igneous boulders that comprise the site appear to be out of place. Nearby are a number of ephemeral waterfalls and natural water tanks (*tinajas*) that attract a number of animals when water is present. Elevations in this part of the Bullion Mountains range from 2,400 to 4,000 feet and the site is located at the 3,060-foot elevation.

The main archeological feature at the Cleghorn Pass site consists of a large boulder displaying petroglyphs, images pecked into the rock surface on three sides of the boulder. Additionally the top of the boulder has been ground flat and a cross glyph pecked onto its surface. Five cupules—small, bowl like depressions—have also been pecked and ground along the edge of the top of the boulder. The boulder measures approximately 1.0m in height and 1.25m at the base. The east face of the boulder exhibits about 20 petroglyph elements, including two animal figures that appear to be “lizards.” The other glyphs are all abstract and consist primarily of circles and curved connected lines and are considered typical of Great Basin Abstract and Curvilinear design elements.³ Differential repatination among the glyphs indicates that there were at least three separate episodes of inscription. The north face of the boulder has three amorphous glyphs and the let-

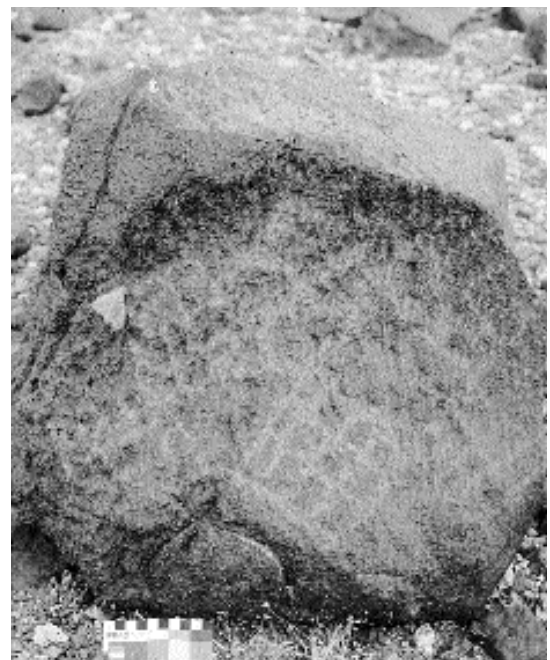
Pattern of interlocking triangles found at the Lavic Lake Site.

ters “WB” carved into it. The south face has a single amorphous, pecked glyph.

The second feature at this site is of the same igneous material as the rock art boulder and is located about two meters east of the latter. It is an unshaped, tabular, and unifacially ground millingstone. Additionally, a plain pottery sherd and a single chert core were found in close proximity. The site area showed no signs of military activity; however, an early historic mining camp dating to the late 1800s/early 1900s is located adjacent to the rock art boulder.

Rock art is one of the most difficult media to document. Elements and portions of elements are visible or not depending on light and weather conditions as well as perceptions on the part of the recorder. Therefore, with each episode of inventory or recordation, a different perception in the number and kinds of elements present is generated and it is often difficult to reconcile the findings. It is, therefore, also difficult to compare various rock art sites effectively.

In looking at the three rock art sites at the Combat Center, the most obvious difference is in their setting or landscape; from a cliffed lava flow, to a boulder field, to an isolated boulder in a remote location high in the mountains. While Foxtrot and Lavic Lake are easily accessible, Cleghorn Pass is remote and entails a difficult climb. Rock art expressions are highly visible at Foxtrot and may be considered as part of the “public” realm. Rock art at Lavic Lake and Cleghorn Pass, however, is not as evident. The



The main feature at the Cleghorn Pass sites consists of a single boulder with petroglyphs on its surface.

Lavic Lake petroglyphs are located on a limited number of boulders within a larger boulder field. There, if you did not know where to look, you would not know that they are there. Cleghorn Pass rock art is very visible, but is remote and difficult to access. The latter two sites can thus be characterized as part of the private or secret realm.

Foxtrot is the largest site with the greatest number of elements and as expected appears to span the greatest length of time. Looking at repatination as a relative measure of age, Foxtrot has some glyphs that are so heavily repatinated as to be virtually indistinguishable from the parent material and are, thus, probably many thousands of years old. As there are habitation sites in the vicinity of Foxtrot that are 7,500 to 7,000 years old, it is possible that some of the rock art is equally as old. The remaining glyphs vary in their degree of repatination from moderate to light indicating fairly continuous applications over time. The Lavic Lake petroglyph site, if related to habitation sites found in the surrounding vicinity, could date to between 3,500 and 1,500 years ago. The degree of repatination of glyphs at this site appears relatively equal connotating inscription within a relatively discrete time frame. The Cleghorn Pass site has relatively little repatination visible; however, there is sufficient visual evidence that glyphs were applied to the rock surface on at least three separate occasions, possibly over a number of decades.

Inasmuch as historic Native American peoples of interior western North America generally do not admit knowledge of the purpose or meaning of rock art designs, numerous interpretations have been offered regarding their function. Some researchers propose that rock art sites in the region were related to hunting of large game, for example acquiring hunting magic. Others have associated rock art with vision quests, expressions of interrelated beliefs, and rites of passage. The Foxtrot site with its numerous and graphically different styles and motifs offers the opportunity to develop a comparative database against which other sites can be compared. The Lavic Lake and Cleghorn Pass sites, although much smaller, provide additional information on the variability of



rock art styles, elements, and motifs found on the base and in the region. All three sites demonstrate the range of environments used by Native Americans and offer an unparalleled view into the range and depth of Native American traditional practices unavailable through other records or artifacts.

Notes

- 1 Daniel F. McCarthy, *The Foxtrot Rock Art Site, CA-SBr-161*, Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base, San Bernardino County, California. Unpublished report for U.S. Marine Corps, Twentynine Palms, California (1979).
- 2 Meg McDonald, J. Jeffery Flennikan and Daniel F. McCarthy, *Evaluation of Prehistoric Resources at Pisgah Crater Lava Flows and Lavic Lake, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, San Bernardino County, California*. Unpublished report for U.S. Marine Corps, Twentynine Palms, California (1996).
- 3 Robert F. Heizer and Martin A. Baumhoff, *Prehistoric Rock Art of Nevada and Eastern California* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1962).

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