

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ETHAN ALLEN FIRING RANGE

By Colonel Alan Nye

Prior to the 1920's, the area that is currently known as the Ethan Allen Firing Range was home to many small farms, at least two water-powered sawmills, a church, a cemetery, a post office, and a school. Today, the remnants of these times still remain. We can identify the foundations for the homes and barns; we can find the sluiceways and dam foundations for the sawmills; the steps of the church still remain as an indicator of what the lifestyle was like back then. Stories have been told of whole families being found in the spring after having died from a contagious disease during the long winter, and of married couples traveling all the way to West Bolton from Underhill Center to celebrate their honeymoon.

For those who tried to farm the higher elevations, it must have been a difficult life. I personally have been at the LaBerge Farm above our artillery impact area in late June when there had been a frost that night, and then again in late August. It was a very short growing season. My interest in the early history of the area was set by my father when he would bring me as a child to the range, drive me around and talk about who had lived here, and show me foundations, old houses, and barns.

The Department of the Army originally purchased 6026 acres of land in 1926 for use as an artillery firing range for units stationed at Fort Ethan Allen. I have been told numerous stories from people who lived in Essex Junction or on Route 15, about the soldiers marching by with the horses and wagons on their way to train. They would buy items to eat and drink along the way. In 1941, the Underhill Firing Range was not large enough to meet the needs of the new and improved weapons that had been developed, and the Department of the Army bought another 5119 acres. In 1973, the Army exceded two parcels of land amounting to 62 acres that were not critical to the training needs. One was known as the Camp Fire Girls camp and is owned by the school district. The other is on the south side of Nashville Road. In talking with various people, you can hear two different stories about these purchases. The first is that the vast majority of the landowners were glad to sell their property and move, as living on this land was difficult. The other version is that the Government took the land for little or no money and people were very unhappy.

As the area around Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester became more built up and traffic on Route 15 increased, additional training areas were developed at the Underhill Firing Range. The earliest knowledge we have is the construction of a Known Distance Range on what was known as the Doyle Farm. This had, and still has, the ability to fire rifles at a distance of 600 yards, although we would have to cut the poplars, alders and pine trees.

During the late 1930's, an organization known as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) constructed a permanent camp up Range Road, or as we call it, Poor Farm Road, from Underhill Center. This camp consisted of thirteen buildings, a water distribution system and recreational facilities. Individuals from this camp worked in what is now the Underhill State Park and began work on a road up Mount Mansfield from the west side. Remnants of this camp include an old granite and mortar chimney, the water system pump and well, and foundation for the water tower and stairs leading down to the main camp area from the road. As the United States increased training prior to its entry in World War II, the training at the Underhill Firing Range increased. East of the CCC camp, the Army constructed a school to teach machine gun. This consisted of some permanent buildings, a water system, sewer system, and numerous tent platforms. They even constructed a moving target on railroad tracks that ran about a mile from the intersection of Beartown Road and Laberge Farm.

In the early 1950's, the accountability for the Underhill Firing Range was transferred from the Army to the Air Force. This was basically due to the fact that the Air Force had taken over Fort Ethan Allen. At this time, limited Air-to-Ground bombing was conducted at the Range with inert bombs. The drop area was in the Lee River valley and was identified by large yellow pylons. At least one of these still exists today.

1953-54 saw the arrival of the General Electric Company, which desired to do some short-term production test firing of the machine gun systems that they were making in Burlington. The National Guard was utilizing the Known Distance Range at the Doyle Farm. Due to the conflict over the use of the Range with the requirements of the General Electric Company, the National Guard began construction of a Known Distance Range off Nashville Road. Over the next ten years, efforts were made to create an internal road network on the Range that would require minimum off-post traffic between training areas.

Prior to the Bicentennial year of 1976, at the request of the Vermont National Guard, the name of the Range was changed by Congressional decree to the Ethan Allen Firing Range in honor of the Revolutionary-period patriot.

As dependence on the National Guard in the overall defense policy of the United States increased, the need to provide quality local training opportunities was realized. Starting in the late 1970's, several million dollars have been spent in construction to provide a year-round training site for battalion-sized units. This has included barracks, mess hall, administrative facilities, vehicle maintenance facilities and numerous ranges. In the last five years, a renewed interest in the need for a mountain warfare capability in the Army caused the Ethan Allen Firing Range to become home to the National Guard Bureau's Mountain Warfare School. Construction has included classroom space, an artificial ice-climbing area, downhill ski area with a poma lift and several rock-climbing and rappelling areas.

Over the years, because of the climate and precipitation that is very similar to that found in northern Europe, the Range has been the site of several tests. The most notable was the aerostat or balloon that was visible over most of Chittenden County. [This "balloon in the sky" test, Nye explained to us, took place in the late 1980's, when a 48' long dirigible, 14' in diameter, lit up and lofted to 5,000' to determine amount of rime frost that developed. It was meant to help in the development of an antenna that could work in case a major electromagnetic pulse wiped out electrical ground communications.)

The Range is home to the National Guard Bureau biathlon program, and there are two world-class cross-country and biathlon facilities on site. These have been host to several National Biathlon Championships and two World Military Ski Championships. In addition, we boast the only paved roller-ski loops in the United States. These trails are used by the local Bill Koch Ski Club and local high school and college ski teams.

The General Electric Company, Martin-Marietta [now General Dynamics, if there hasn't been another corporate takeover we've missed], has conducted production test-firing at the Ethan Allen Firing Range since 1953. At particular times, such as during the Vietnam War, they conducted testing 24 hours a day. Speaking as a member of the military, it is my belief that they make the best, most reliable gun system in the inventory today.

Over the last fifteen years, the National Guard's Adjutant General Donald Edwards, I, and in particular, Earle "Pete" Stygles have been committed to maintaining the historical significance of sites on the Ethan Allen Firing Range. This includes the preservation of large roadside maple trees, building foundations, bunkers, concrete firing positions, the moving target off Beartown Road, bridge abutments and stringers, the water tank foundation in West Bolton, old communication lines and poles, wells, and sewer systems. This should allow those who come after us to dream and fantasize as to what different objects were, what they were used for, and basically how people lived and worked on what we know as the Ethan Allen Firing Range prior to and after the ownership by the military.

Colonel Nye's account of the Ethan Allen Firing Range was originally presented to the Jericho Historical Society on 15 May 1993, and is included in Gardiner Lane's booklet



HEADQUARTERS FORT ETHAN ALLEN VERMONT

JEB:jah

April 28, 1933

Subject: Work Projects for C.C.C. Organization.

To : The Commanding General, First Corps Area,
Army Base, Boston, Mass.

1. In compliance with Radio your headquarters dated April 18, 1933, the proposed work for the C.C.C. organization at this station is outlined below.

2. It is contemplated that 150 C.C.C. men be utilized on the Fort Ethan Allen military reservation proper and 350 men be utilized at the Artillery Range.

3. The work for the 150 men at the Fort proper will be divided into the following classes.

- (a) Reservation lines and fences.
- (b) Clearing out and cleaning timber land.
- (c) Repairing and rebuilding dirt roads, trails, and bridle paths thru timber.
- (d) Drainage.
- (e) Clearing and leveling small tract for playground at rear of N.C.O. quarters.

4. In further detail this work is described and explained as follows:

(a) The Fort Ethan Allen Reservation land boundary is 5.5 miles in length. 3.5 miles are overgrown with brush. 3.2 miles are inadequately fenced. It is proposed to clear and clean a tract around all boundaries to a width of 12 feet and so improve the lines as to permit free access to all lines for inspection by a mounted man. For this work 20 men will be required for three months equipped with the following tools: 2 Axes, 5 Machettes, 15 Short-handles round pointed shovels, 4 Maddocks, 4 Brush hooks, 2 Crow-bars.

Working concurrently with the line clearing organization and additional detail of 15 men will be required for three months for the reconstruction of 3.2 miles of four strand barbed wire fencing on new posts set on 8 foot centers. The men to utilize all available posts on hand and to obtain the remainder from the wood land being improved. The following tools will be necessary for the fence work - 5 Axes, 2 SERP shovels, 2 LHRP shovels, 3 post hole diggers, 1 Brush hook, 2 Crow-bars, 1 Wire stretcher, 2 Claw hammers, and 2 Cross-cut hand saws.

(b) On the Fort Ethan Allen Reservation there are 1200 acres of second growth timber land which has never had any attention. It is proposed to lay this land out in $\frac{1}{4}$ mile squares, as indicated in red on attached photo map, opening up trails 10 feet wide on the $\frac{1}{4}$ mile lines to clearly define the