



This wraparound photo by W.R. Thompson & Co., Richmond was published in the Daily Press, Sunday, Jan 24, 1993, given by Albert L. Ray of

1936-44

When Langley Bombed Fort Eustis

Large troop concentration and errant bombs ended range use

The Mulberry Island portion of Fort Eustis was considered a bombing range and a sub-base of Langley Air Base, then part of the Army, in September 1936. Some records show that Langley gave up Eustis as a sub-base January 24, 1941 when it was reopened as the Coast Artillery Replacement Center in 1941 but it continued to use the various ranges it had established previously.

As the war progressed, local bombing ranges were less used, but several accidents showed the danger of such use in populated areas. The Fort Eustis WWII diary (15 Nov. '45) shows that at about 10:30 a.m., January 17, 1944, 20 100-lb. bombs were dropped on Mulberry Island, the wind carrying ten which exploded near an ammo storage place and the other ten near the Dozier farm outside the post. Six days later at 6:50 p.m., three 100-pounders accidentally released from a Langley Field plane struck Barracks T418, in the vicinity of Bldg. 512, and in the area of the Tactical Motor Pool.

On March 17th, Langley personnel exploded demolition bombs from 100 to 1,000 lbs. in weight at a Mulberry Island area which caused minor damage to many buildings on the post. The same day, Fort Eustis Post



Newport News, whose father Bill Ray served as a sergeant at Fort Eustis in WWII. This photo was taken in 1941 from the water tower, looks west.

Commander Col. A.C. Gardner (18 Jan 43 – 4 Jul 44), contacted Col. Eugene A. Lohman, commanding officer, Langley Field (Nov. 41 – Oct. 44), requesting that this operation be suspended, which request was promptly complied with. (*See Air Force records, p. 2*)

Mulberry Island was in use Nov. 19, 1942, as a:

- ***Bombing Range**, both for demolition and practice bombing. Three new observation towers would be completed and ready for use about Jan. 1, 1943.
- ***Tow Target Area** fired at by Artillery units of Fort Eustis over the waters of the James River along the entire shore of M.I., and extending 10,000 yards from the shore.
- ***Pattern Gunnery Range**, a moving target (aboard a standard gauge “electric” railway) for use of machine guns fired from airplane turrets.
- ***Ground Gunnery Range** for .30 caliber rifle.
- ***Skeet Range** finished construction about Jan. 1, 1943. Langley Air Base also had ranges at Langley, bombing ranges at Plum Tree Island (also an aerial gunnery range), and four islands off Cape Charles,



Eastern Shore. (from a letter to 1st Air Force Command, Mitchel Field, NY.)

Fort Eustis closed 10 years after WWI, became part of the Justice Dept. for a prison for Prohibition offenders, a collection place for Bonus marchers on Washington D.C., then a training place for several government relief programs, the Works Progress Admin. (WPA) camp closing in Oct. '36.

Checking Out Area For Bombs

Perhaps earlier also, but in September 1960, an interoffice document shows that Fort Eustis sought information concerning the specific areas where bombs were dropped in those years. Records did not indicate the areas, it said. A study of the Post Historian's Office records indicated that real estate damage due to shell fire had only occurred on the extreme southern end of the vicinity of Jail Creek. An old print at the Engineer's Office showed the target area, but could not be coordinated with present maps, to be about 700 ft. north of the tower at the tip of the Island.

The 533rd Ordnance Det. was contacted. No records of any findings in the past, they said. One WWI-type bomb had been found on the golf course. A surface search that winter was proposed.

Digging back in letters of the Langley Base Range Office concerning the use of ranges, instructions say that after use, "they should be carefully policed and any necessary repairs reported directly to the range office. Reservation for there had to be made one week in advance, and the organization had to furnish its own range officer who became responsible for the unit's safety precautions.

Eastern Shore Thought A Safer Place For Bombing

A bombing and gunnery range squadron was activated to provide care of targets and provide gunnery instruction.

Besides the pyramidal targets on M.I., there were land targets at Plum Tree Island. To overcome the problems of bombing at both places, requests were made, and a lease was secured by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1942 to use the marshy finger-land of the Eastern Shore. In late 1944 bombing at Eustis ceased, and the Eastern Shore and the Atlantic Ocean shore and adjacent waters were used more heavily.

Radar training programs and new aircraft kept bombing activity ever changing. Norfolk-based P-47s were reported as having fired on Army aircraft along the Atlantic Ocean of the Eastern Shore during their air-to-air gunnery practice with towed aircraft.

Adapted from Dick Ivy's story in the Nov. 97 Historical Series of Fort Eustis Historical and Archaeological Association.

