



GLOBE PHOTO: STEPHEN ROSE

Al Larkins, a supervisor with Foster Wheeler Environmental Corp., walking around unexploded military debris on Nomans Land Island. The company is clearing the bombs and other military debris from the island.

Cleanup target: Nomans Land

Navy's island
firing range
will be refuge
for wildlife

By Thomas Farragher
GLOBE STAFF

NOMANS LAND ISLAND - The 56-year battle of Nomans Land Island was in the mop-up stage yesterday. The bombs and bullets left by mettle-testing warriors are surrendering to the birds.

A practice range for Navy jets and Air Force bombers since 1942, the island - and its 628 acres of stone walls, thick brush, freshwater ponds, and million-dollar vistas - will soon be handed over by the military to the US Department of Interior as a wildlife preserve off-limits to the public.

"The birds have put up with all this for more than 50 years," said Tim Prior of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. "Now it's theirs again. And that's only right."

Three miles south of Martha's Vineyard, the island is something of a World War II landmark and Cold War relic. Its undulating hills and sandy cliffs were a pincushion for shells, dummy bombs, and strafing bullets that are now being meticulously removed by a private contractor as the island prepares for its transition from military property to a place where peregrine falcons can rest undisturbed on their way south each winter.

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Cleanup target: Nomans Land

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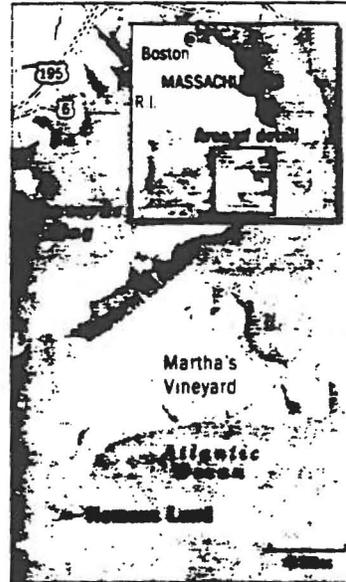
"As a society, it's nice to know that we have this place, even if we can't get to it," said Bud Oliveira, the project leader with the Fish and Wildlife Service's refuge complex in Sudbury. "I'm hoping what you'll see here in six months is what you'll see here for the next 50 years. It's going to be a refuge - in the true sense of that word. And I think that's the best thing we can do with a beautiful resource such as this."

On a tour of the island yesterday, which officials called the first ever officially sanctioned media visit here, visitors found teams of metal detector-wielding workers crisscrossing overgrown fields, front-end loaders transporting bombs to an inspection area, and a finned bomb with its parachute still attached stuck into the sandy cliff overlooking the island's south shoreline.

"As long as the powder is dry in these things, it's still good," said George Bridgeman, health and safety officer for Foster Wheeler Environmental Corp., the company being paid \$1.6 million to clear the island of dangerous debris.

But there have been no injuries during the cleanup, scheduled to last another month. Then it will become an uninhabited refuge, its shores patrolled by the Coast Guard. Its airspace will be restricted because the island will remain a visual target for military pilots who will use high-tech simulation gizmos, not bombs, to test their accuracy.

The 30 to 40 workers who have been toiling here since the beginning of the year, placing flags to mark ordnance, have so far uncovered 9,769 pieces of bombs, bullets, or other military-inflicted metal, weighing 578,000 pounds. About 1,000



GLOBE STAFF MAP

pieces are considered "possibly suspect," meaning they may carry live charges and will be blown up by special detonation teams.

"This place is never going to be safe for people," said Oliveira. "There's always a threat of a bomb coming to the surface. Ten pounds of black powder have been found in some of those bombs."

Roger Alves of Freetown, who was working with a metal detector yesterday, said there are few jobs that come with a daily boat ride and such breathtaking scenery.

"I've been in the union for 34 years and this is the most dangerous job I've ever had, but because of the training we get, it's one of the safest, too," said Alves, who recently found remnants of an airplane used for target practice. "I like the exercise, to tell you the truth. And I can stand to lose some weight."

The Navy, which for years leased

the island from the estate of Joshua Crane, one of a succession of private owners, took the island by eminent domain in 1952 for \$67,500.

Practice bombing raids ended in 1996. And during the summers of 1993 and 1994, the Navy suspended exercises so President Clinton could enjoy his vacation on the Vineyard without the aerial racket some residents often complained about.

All the complaints, however, have not stopped with the bombing raids.

The Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head is asking Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to resolve its claim to the land.

"The tribe's claim to Nomans Land Island is based on its use as a traditional summer encampment dating from prerecorded history, which holds significant archeological interest to the tribe," wrote Beverly M. Wright, the tribe's chairwoman, in a May 29 letter to Babbitt.

Before Nomans Land Island became part of Chilmark in 1714, the island was used by the Wampanoags during summertime excursions. Wright said yesterday - a tradition she hopes will be renewed.

Wright said the Wampanoags will press their case with the federal government. "We're doing everything we were supposed to do, but we're still being left out of the process. I'm very disappointed."

But environmentalists are ready to leave Nomans Land Island alone in peace, a place for terns and turtles and the two ewes (believed to have been transported to the island by Vineyarders looking for pasture) that still graze here oblivious to the rusty rockets being plucked from the soil.

"Island habitat is so unique that anytime you can preserve it, especially on the East Coast where development pressure is so intense, you've got a golden opportunity," said Prior.

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