

Hush-Hush Mt. Weather Is a Crisis Facility

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By Ken Ringle

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Mount Weather, the federal installation very near the site of yesterday's plane crash, is the sort of top secret mountain-top retreat Ian Fleming was always dreaming up for James Bond.

Located on the Loudoun-Clarke County line 47 miles west of Washington and 1,725 feet above sea level, the 85-acre site was purchased by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1903 and later considered for a summer White House by President Calvin Coolidge.

Now, according to Defense Department sources, local residents and those who worked on its conversion during the Cold War days of the early 1950s, it is one of several alternate command posts for use in the event of an Atomic attack on Washington.

Unlike Ft. Ritchie, Md., however—the hollowed-out mountain 65 miles north of Washington known as "the

underground Pentagon" or "The Rock,"—Mount Weather is not a military installation.

It is operated by the General Services Administration for the Office of Emergency Preparedness. Pentagon sources say it is presently used as a highly classified communications base for the Civilian Intelligence Agency—part of the CIA's world-wide communications network.

Mount Weather, however, has had some problems staying anonymous. Nearby residents of Clarke and Loudoun counties refer to it as "the government's worst kept secret."

For one thing, it is located astride the Appalachian Trail, and hikers are forever pausing to gawk through its high, barbed-wire topped fences at the signs and blinking lights warning people to stay away.

During the anti-Vietnam days of the late 1960s, a bearded hiker reportedly stumbled onto the place, sketched the layout of the

base from the top of a nearby tree, and had the sketch published in a Washington underground newspaper called "The Quicksilver Times."

There is also the daily traffic to and from the place, through little hamlets like Round Hill and Bluemont, where people notice such things:

People who work "up on the mountain," they say, are conspicuous in the area by always having a cleared the first and most frequently er, triggering some kind of road to work in the winter.

Virginia Rt. 601, a winding secondary road that would normally be low priority for snow clearance, is usually the first, an most frequently cleared road in Clarke County—from Virginia Rt. 7 four miles to the Mount Weather gates.

Then there are the cultural vicissitudes of the area.

According to one Clarke County resident, the red-coated riders of the Clarke

County hunt once chased a fox into Mount Weather, triggering some kind of alarm and leaving a small legion of whistle-blowing guards aswarm in foxhounds.

The embarrassed riders had to ask at the base gates to get their foxhounds back.

Such incidents have led to legends of some Doomsday capability nestled in the underground tunnels of Mount Weather, which one man who helped build them says are "just like in 'Seven Days in May'."

Defense Department sources, however, say the realities of Mount Weather are somewhat less dramatic and they seem puzzled that the base is as highly classified as it is.

A GSA spokesman yesterday politely declined to comment on what Mount Weather was used for, how many people work there, or how long it has been in its current use.

He said only that the resources of the base

("showels, ropes, things like that") were offered to the rescue workers.

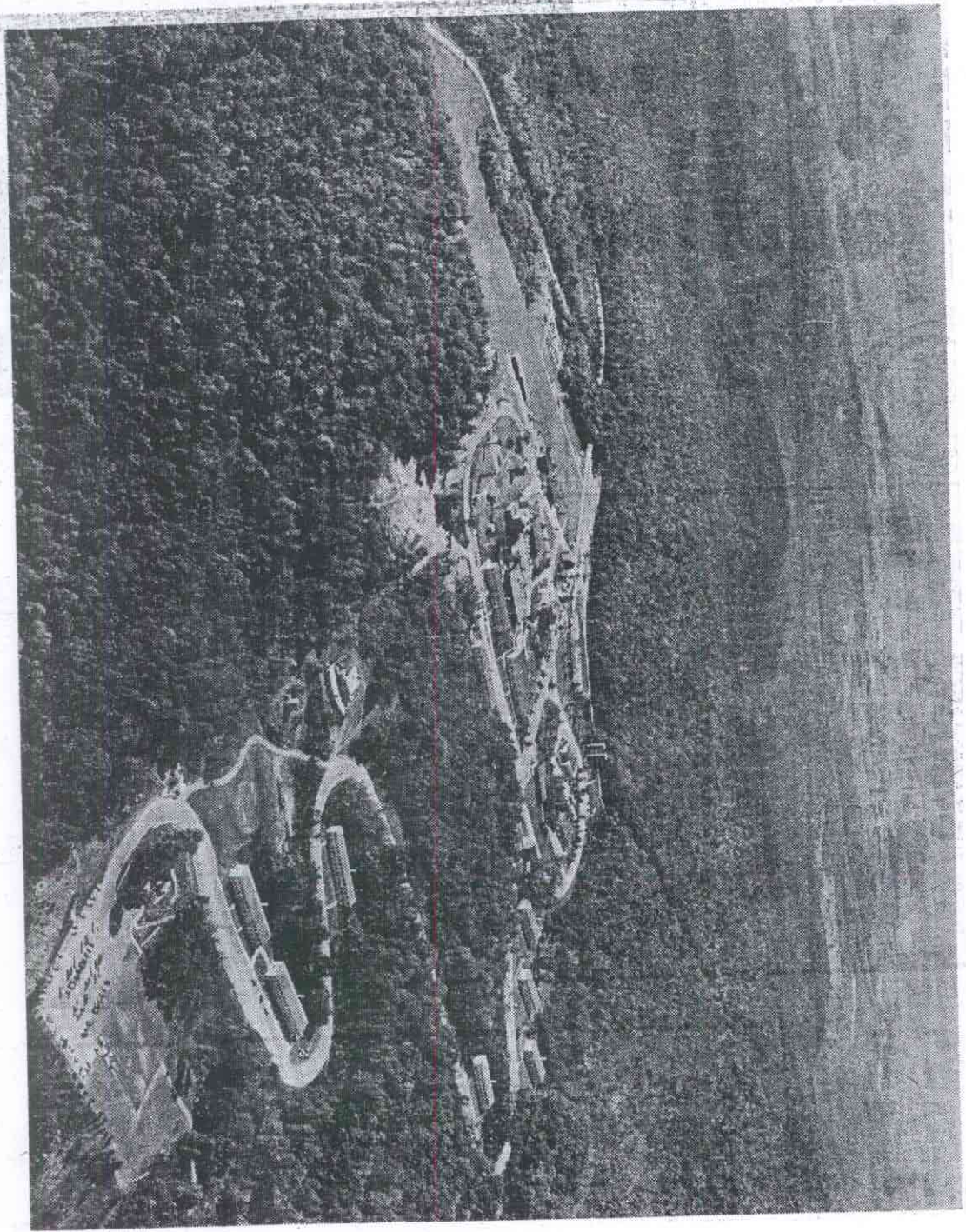
No piece of the wreckage fell within the limits of Mount Weather, he said, no us3 was made of the bases hospital and no traffic was routed through the base.

Though Rte. 601 was blocked off to keep spectators from the area, he said, it was not done at the request of the GSA or anyone else from Mount Weather.

Mount Weather was not always as mysterious as it is today. Originally a weather station for the Agriculture Department, it was used for artillery range finding experiments during World War I.

During the Depression, hobos were housed there for work and calisthenics programs by the District of Columbia's transient relief agency.

Later it was used as a weekend retreat by Roosevelt administration members huddling to discuss the policies and programs of the New Deal.



Mt. Weather installation, due west of Dulles International Airport, is near scene of jet plane crash that killed all 92 persons aboard.

By Ken Fell—The Washington Post