



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

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Alpha-Foxtrot-Five-Two-Black, The Ground Observer Corps in Bakersfield, 1956

By Frank "Kent" Rodgers

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Introduction by Gilbert Gia

In August 1943 California Governor Earl Warren established *Ground Observer Corps Week* in recognition of the civilians in its service. Sheriff John Loustalot had established Kern County's Ground Observation Corp (GOC) shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and at the time of Warren's announcement its local volunteers numbered 2,752, equally divided between men and women. Their posts were in homes, shacks, observation towers and on the tops of buildings and mountains. Loustalot commended the volunteers: "*They are the finest people in the county, unselfish, patriotic and will to do more than talk about the war.*" And the sheriff's accolade included those GOC volunteers who were prisoners at Tehachapi, Keene, Camp Owen, and the Lerdo road camp; all of them had notable records of GOC service of which Loustalot was proud.¹



¹ Bakersfield Californian, Aug 2, 1943

Accompanying that August story was news that a few days hence a Messerschmitt 109e that had been downed in England would be displayed at 19th and Chester in Bakersfield. Wrote the Californian, "*The 109e has a top speed of 354 mph at 12,300 feet and has been clocked in a power dive at 460 mph. Its range is 412 miles. Fitted with a 12 cylinder liquid-cooled engine of 1150 HP, the fighter functions without a carburetor.*"²

The GOC lapsed after WWII but restarted in Kern County during the Korean Conflict and became a round-the-clock program after July 14, 1952. It continued on through the Cold War.³

Frank Rodger's Account⁴

"In 1956, when I was in the seventh grade, I finally got a chance to participate, in a safe and inconsequential way, in the great Cold War that had been underway for as long as I could remember. I heard that the air force was looking for volunteers to serve in the Ground Observer Corps. The stated reason was that gaps in the radar screen still required ground observers to help detect and identify enemy bombers at the earliest possible moment.

Another boy from my neighborhood and I checked with the local office of the GOC and discovered that we were indeed eligible to serve as observers even though we were twelve years old. We jumped at the chance and soon went to meet the supervisors who would teach us the ropes and monitor our service.

We learned that the GOC was organized as a series of observation posts that reported to a central filter center where all of the reported aircraft were tracked and if suspicious were reported to the Air Defense Command for interception. When we began our service, the filter center was located in a brick building just across from the Nile Theater. At that time, the aircraft that were reported were tracked on a very large flat table using miniature airplane models pushed along using a slender rod with a flat tip. The set-up looked exactly like those I had seen in old news reels about the Battle of Britain.

The observation post to which we were assigned was atop the Tegler Hotel just a hop and a skip from the filter center. It was a small wooden building with large glass windows and a walkway that extended completely around the building so you could walk around it and observe aircraft coming from any direction. Inside were a couple of folding chairs, a small flat table built into the wall, and a crank telephone straight out of World War I.

Most of the time we were outside looking for aircraft, which we recorded on a form we held in a clipboard. A typical report would go something like "One unknown, multi-engine, very high, north-northwest," and we would add the time the observation was made. To report an unknown to the filter center we would crank the telephone handle

² Ibid.

³ Bakersfield Californian, Apr 23, 1951, Jul 17, 1953

⁴ Frank Rodgers 2014 email to Gilbert Gia. It is included here by his permission.

three times, and when the person taking the reports answered, we identified our post – which was Alpha Foxtrot Five Two Black. Then we read the information we had written down as clearly and distinctly as possible. Evidently we did that pretty well, since I don't remember the filter center ever asking us to repeat a report.

We spent four hours every Saturday afternoon watching the skies over Bakersfield. I had been interested in airplanes all my life, since my father had spent World War II helping to build B-24 Liberator bombers at Consolidated-Vultee (later Convair) in Fort Worth, Texas, and my three uncles had all served in the Army Air Forces.

My serving as a GOC volunteer was like going to an airshow every weekend! My friend and I were proud when we received our ground observer's wings, which were exactly like those in the accompanying figure from the Aircraft Recognition for the Ground Observer booklet.



The most exciting observation we ever made was of a huge jet bomber that seemed to have ten engines suspended under its wings, and it passed directly over Bakersfield at a very low altitude. We thought this bomber warranted special attention, so we called our supervisor to tell him the news. He patiently explained that it was probably a B-52 out of Edwards Air Force Base with test equipment and not extra engines under its wings and that we need not be quite so excited about it.

We took everything about our assignment quite seriously. We had been told to keep the door from the hotel onto the rooftop locked at all times and to admit no one who couldn't show identification to prove that he had any business at the GOC observation post. When a silver haired gentleman knocked hard on the door one afternoon and told us peremptorily to let him in, we refused to do so until he pulled out his identification showing that he was in fact a supervisor in the GOC. He was pretty annoyed with two whippersnappers who demanded to see his identification, but ultimately he calmed down and acknowledged that we had followed the correct procedure.

There was a sense of camaraderie among the volunteers at all levels, which extended on our part to the Air Force fliers whom we all admired. When Captain Melburn Apt was killed in the crash of the Bell X-2 rocket plane he was testing at Edwards AFB, someone placed a notice of the crash on the bulletin board at the filter center and added a statement that everyone there mourned the loss of a courageous flier.

Some people in the community questioned the value of ground observers with binoculars looking for high flying jet bombers armed with nuclear bombs, and even

youngsters like us saw their point, but we nevertheless wanted to serve to demonstrate our patriotism and our desire to do something in the Cold War that almost everyone expected would someday become a shooting war.

There was ample reason to feel this way in 1956. The Soviet Union, which was the principal adversary among the communist nations, had just sent a huge military force into Hungary to crush the revolt there, and some of the refugees that fled to the United States came to Bakersfield. Their stories of Soviet brutality left little doubt in the minds of Americans as to what they could expect in a war.

*Sufficient publicity was given to the Ground Observer Corps that a typical 1950s "bug" movie was produced to demonstrate the usefulness of the network of observation posts across America. This was *The Deadly Mantis*, a Universal-International film starring Craig Stevens, William Hopper, Alix Talton, and Pat Conway. William Hopper was already well known as Perry Mason's right hand man in the Perry Mason television series, and Craig Stevens would become popular two years later as Peter Gunn, the cool private eye in the television series of that name. Perhaps in an effort to lend the movie an air of credibility, it began with a statement of Newton's third law that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction and showed the eruption of a volcano in the South Pacific jarring loose a prehistoric and gigantic praying mantis frozen in the arctic ice. As the mantis flies southward, devouring personnel assigned to man the Distant Early Warning (DEW) line of radar stations, the Department of Defense takes steps that are stressed to be the same as those used for destroying an enemy aircraft, and the Ground Observer Corps, to which the movie is dedicated, plays its part in tracking the monster.*

In retrospect, the Ground Observer Corps was both a Cold War publicity ploy to make Americans aware of the Soviet threat (and to make them willing to pay for the huge expenditures of tax monies to counteract it) and a genuine effort to augment the radar screen until it could be fully implemented across the Arctic. If memory serves me, the GOC was disbanded in 1958 after having served its purpose. My friend and I played a very minor role in its service, and there are doubtless many residents of Kern County and elsewhere who can add much more to this brief account."

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