



Mirage

Seeing is believing

I grew up in the lush green deciduous landscape of Penn's Woods, also known as Pennsylvania. I had never seen a desert before the Army transplanted me to El Paso in west Texas where I would train, work and live for the next three years. I had never seen mountains without trees, fields without grass, scrub oak and tumbleweed clinging to mounds of sand. It was exotic, I was wide-eyed, dazzled and in love.

I was quartered at Fort Bliss, an El Paso suburb, but trucked each day some 30 miles east into the scrubland called Waco Tanks. The desert was peppered with missile radar tracking sites where we monitored and tuned our tracking equipment and tracked actual missile test firings from White Sands New Mexico, some 50 miles north of our location.

We were usually on site before sun-up and got to watch the daily transformation of our surroundings. When low-level early morning sunlight strikes the western mountains, they appear to be higher, nearer, more colorful, and more detailed. It only lasts for a brief time, but we never got tired of watching it. Once the sun had ascended to its diurnal arc, the mountain resumed its traditional position, smaller, muted and farther away.

Then one morning as we were watching, we spotted a mobile mounted radar antenna seemingly abandoned, on a hillock some 300 yards from our site. My site commander, notably disturbed by appearance of an unsecured and highly classified piece of equipment, ordered a crew to retrieve the antenna and bring it back to our site. We watched from a high point on our own site as our truck approached the antenna. To our surprise, the truck stopped about half way there and turned around to come back. The truck crew reported that there was no antenna out there. When they approached the hill, the antenna disappeared. But there it was, still visible from where we stood. We stared at it dumbfounded for half-an-hour before it vanished.

It was much less of a surprise, though more dramatic, when a few weeks later we encountered a substantial three-story building in the same location as our phantom antenna. This time we resisted chasing the mirage, but a sharp-eyed comrade with binoculars reported that he could actually see people moving around in the windows of the building. Since all military buildings have numbers, he reported to us a building number clearly visible near the top of the structure.

We called the base and learned that a building with that number was located at White Sands, and to the best of their knowledge had not moved.

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