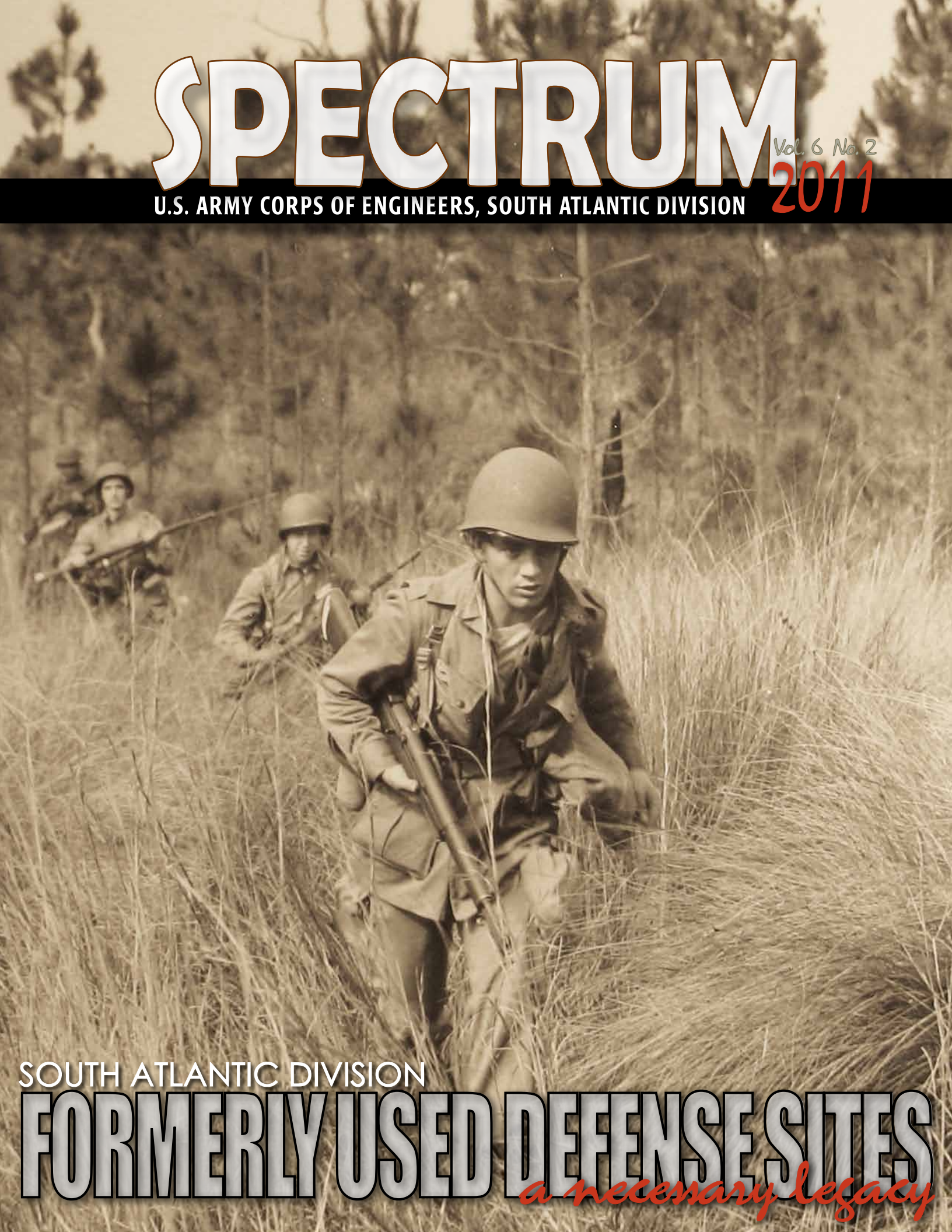
SPECTRUM

Vol. 6 No. 2
2011
U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS, SOUTH ATLANTIC DIVISION



SOUTH ATLANTIC DIVISION

FORMERLY USED DEFENSE SITES

a necessary legacy

Safe demolition of ordnance at the former Camp Butner, N.C. formerly used defense site. (USACE photo)

CLEANING UP former munitions sites

Last fall, a boy, playing in a pile of dirt outside Macon, Ga., on part of the former Camp Wheeler, found an interesting metal item. He and his friends played with the object, before he took it home. It sat in the garage for several weeks until a neighbor looked at it and suggested that the family have the sheriff's department inspect it.

Sheriff's officials confirmed the neighbor's fears: it was unexploded ordnance left over from World War II. The boys had found a practice mortar, but it had no explosives left inside. While this incident ended safely, it may have had a much different and more tragic result. This highlights the risk of finding ordnance items on former Department of Defense (DoD) training sites, and the need to ensure that residents know how to respond when they find these items.

"Some of these old munitions could damage a house, maim someone, or even kill them," said Julie Hiscox, a senior project manager who oversees much of the Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS) program for Savannah District. "We face constant challenges to identify UXO [unexploded ordnance], determine how best to deal with it, and to keep the public informed."

With 1,050 FUDS locations in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and North and South Carolina, Hiscox takes each cleanup job seriously.

"Most of these sites are very small and only some of them actually have munitions," Hiscox said, "but even limited impacts like small petroleum contamination add up in the environment." Larger projects, like the one at former Camp Wheeler, may directly affect people.

"We've discovered live mortar rounds buried in yards and gardens," she said. "We quickly notify the local authorities and the community members. We've had wonderful cooperation from everyone as we respond to these situations."

Hiscox and her team, along with ordnance disposal firms contracted to conduct research and removal, canvas specific neighborhoods informing people about the potential dangers. The Corps also conducts public information workshops to

Two Bibb County, Ga. residents listen as Julie Hiscox (right), senior project manager for Savannah District's FUDS program, explains a planned investigation and possible cleanup of World War II ordnance on the former Camp Wheeler. Hiscox presents at public workshops to help residents understand the Corps' plans and responsibilities. (Photo by Billy Birdwell, Savannah District)

engage local residents in the process. "The more people know and understand about our program, the more they support our efforts."

The type of cleanup required varies from property to property. Within the FUDS program, cleanup projects include:

- identifying, investigating and cleaning up hazardous, toxic and radioactive waste sites; and
- correcting other environmental contamination such as that caused by ordnance and explosives.

Community outreach is an important part of the job.

The U.S. Army serves as the DoD Executive Agent for FUDS, and the Corps of Engineers carries out the program. Through the FUDS program, the Army responds to DoD-generated pollution that occurred before the property transferred to private owners or to federal, state, tribal or local government organizations. The Corps has identified more than 2,700 sites in the U.S. where the DoD formerly had activity. Some are an acre or less. Some sites, like the one near Macon, can cover thousands of acres.

Savannah District uses a number of tools to keep the public informed and educated about FUDS and its cleanup operations. These include direct mail to impacted residents, public workshops, community meetings, school programs and websites.

Since educating children is a particular concern at Camp Wheeler and other munitions locations, Savannah District created a website – the UXO Safety Clubhouse – to provide information in a way that would keep children's interest while they learn about the "3 Rs of explosives safety" -- Recognize, Retreat, Report.

The UXO Safety Clubhouse is currently available on Savannah District's website, www.sas.usace.army.mil. The site uses games and animation to warn children of the dangers of UXO and how to respond should they find any suspicious items. "Savannah District will work with parents and schools to promote use of the Clubhouse to educate children in specific areas, such as the communities surrounding the former Camp Wheeler near Macon, Ga.," said Hiscox. "Children can play, learn and then print a UXO Safety Certificate to document their achievement."

Even the adult education programs emphasize the "3 Rs." The Corps wants residents to recognize suspicious items, even those rusted from decades under the soil. Once recognized, people are instructed to evacuate the area but leave a marking so they can direct authorities to the site. Finally, the program directs the finder to contact local law enforcement authorities to report the find.

The team has given ordnance safety presentations to emergency responders, public utilities personnel, law enforcement and local schools in addition to holding public information sessions. Last year, members of the team walked through one neighborhood in the former Camp Wheeler community, knocking on doors and talking to residents, in response to that practice mortar found by the local boy. The team's primary concern remains public safety.

"We certainly don't want anyone taking the item home as a souvenir," Hiscox said.

Hiscox and the district's "Wheeler" team were recently recognized with one of the district's highest awards for its community outreach work, including the new UXO website for children. The award recognized the team's "excellent achievement in delivering products and services to its customers."

The UXO team faces the continuing challenge of a mobile society. New residents move in, new communities are built and new businesses locate on formerly used defense sites. Education will continue for many years, so that information about the dangers of unexploded ordnance reach new members of communities and so that children—outside for a day of fun—are aware of what to do when they encounter another interesting but potentially deadly metal object. ♦

by David Wheeler
Savannah District

The UXO Safety Clubhouse is currently available on Savannah District's website, www.sas.usace.army.mil. The site uses games and animation to warn children of the dangers of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and how to respond should they find any suspicious items.