

*Sahara, Colomb Béchar* The Americans are by no means the only ones using deserts for secret research projects connected with defence. When atomic bombs were tested on the surface, deserts were invariably chosen, but I never saw this, nor did I write any reports about them. However in 1960, before joining the *Daily Telegraph*, I was invited by the French Government to report on science in Algeria and on that occasion was taken to Colomb Béchar, a small railway terminal linking it with Oran and Nemours on the Mediterranean coast.

In 1947 the French Army and Air Force established a missile testing range at Hammaguir, about 100 km to the south-west of Colomb Béchar in the Sahara where the weather conditions were equivalent to Jack Ass Flat, but with sandstorms of up to 150 km/hour. Our group of British science writers were treated to a night rocket launch, very impressive, but it revealed nothing technically. We slept the nights during this week-long visit in the barracks of the French Foreign Legion, and I remember being impressed with the electric sockets in the washrooms for electric razors [see Title 64].

*Woomera—Australia* In March 1966 I had an invitation to visit another desert missile range, this time in the middle of Australia, jointly established in 1946 by the British and the Australian Governments. During these 20 years a small town had grown up in this area, with bungalows for the women and children of the engineers working on the range, with an Olympic swimming pool and with a supermarket. However, I reported to the *Daily Telegraph* that “Woomera was a sad sight” when compared with American achievements. Technically the equipment had neither been updated nor extended during the last decades, and only small scientific rockets had been launched. However, failing any political or financial support from the two Governments, no large and modern missiles had been developed [see also Title 132].

*Sonoran Desert—Arizona* This beautiful desert was shown to me by a scientific friend, Professor Charles (Chuck) Sonnett, whom I visited in Tucson. We drove in his car a few hours and then I saw the most magnificent Saguaro cacti, up to 10 m or even higher, with their 5 or 6, or more branches, coming out of their green ribbed columnar tree-like stands. I was told remarkable facts about them, that they bloom for the first time after 50 years and that they can be up to 200 years old. It was pure nature, without man’s weaponry.

*Antarctic Continent* I saw this, the greatest desert of all, on my flight from the American Base of McMurdo to the South Pole. Below us the endless white ice, above us the pale blue sky, we crossed effortlessly the Beardmore Glacier, which had demanded such a super-human effort from Captain Scott to overcome [Title 195].