SMALL ARMS RANGES

Small arms ranges were a common feature in the open countryside during the 19th century, used by local volunteer and militia forces. By the beginning of the 20th century, many ranges had fallen into disuse. Those retained were used by the Army for training purposes.

During World War One (WWI) and World War Two (WWII), many small arms ranges were reactivated for use. Range complexes, comprising several shooting galleries, were established to allow for large scale firing practice.

Small arms ranges were also established at many military airfields, for use by ground troops and to test aircraft machine guns and cannons, and at military barracks and camps. These were both indoor and outdoor ranges.

Troops firing on a small arms range, WWII

1940s aerial photograph and corresponding plan of a range complex in Wales

Testing an aircraft Hispano cannon at a small arms range, WWII

Modern military small arms range

Small arms ranges vary in size, typically ranging from 25 yards to 1,200 yards.

The most common ammunition used on small arms ranges was Small Arms Ammunition (SAA), such as .303 rounds. Cannon shells, such as 20mm rounds, and Land Service Ammunition (LSA), such as grenades and mortars, are also known to have been used on small arms ranges during wartime.

Many larger small arms ranges remain in use under the control of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Access is carefully managed, and they often have extensive danger areas within which live firing may occur.

Hazard

UXO at small arms ranges will likely be concentrated around the target butts and firing points. Whilst some live SAA is likely to be found at former small arms ranges, it does not typically provide a significant risk of harm.

Establishing if larger calibre shells, which contain a High Explosive (HE) filling, and LSA were used a small arms range is important as these provide a more significant potential UXO hazard.

Metallic contamination from lead, antimony, or zinc, associated with spent ammunition, should also be considered on ranges with extended use as these metals are potentially toxic to humans and the environment.

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