

# Los Angeles Times

## Death in a desert bunker



Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times

Robert Powell is leading a campaign to destroy the abandoned bunker where two teenagers were shot to death on Jan. 5. The two-story bunker, which is about a mile south of California 58, is all that remains of the former Hawes Auxiliary Field, which was built during World War II.

**Abandoned structure near Apple Valley was a teen hangout. Then two were shot to death.**

**By David Kelly, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer**

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**HELENDALE, CALIF.** -- For more than 20 years the bunker has stood alone in this remote stretch of desert, a crumbling relic from another era with graffiti-scarred walls, hidden alcoves and a warren of dark hallways leading nowhere.

Gaping holes puncture the concrete roof, creating 30-foot drops to the floor below. Thousands of bullet casings crunch underfoot. Shattered glass forms a jagged carpet inside and out.



Over time the abandoned Air Force installation has become the haunt of bored teenagers, target shooters and outlaws.

And sometimes worlds collide.



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That may have happened in the early morning hours of Jan. 5, when 30 or 40 teenagers from this small community between Barstow and Victorville held a birthday party at the bunker. By dawn two teenagers lay dead inside. Both were shot in the head at close range. The crime scene was so harrowing, it rattled even hardened homicide investigators.

According to the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, the victims -- 16-year-old Bodhisattva "Bodhi" Sherzer-Potter and her boyfriend, Christopher Cody Thompson, 18 - stayed behind after the party broke up. Some time before dawn they were killed.

**Both enjoyed stellar reputations at the top-flight charter school where they met and among those who knew them. Sherzer-Potter, of Silver Lakes, was an aspiring filmmaker who routinely studied until 11 p.m. and whose mother rarely let her out of her sight.**

Thompson, from Apple Valley, was a guitar-playing introvert who listened more than he talked and treated his girlfriend well.

"It's really an extraordinary case," sheriff's spokesman Sgt. Rick Ells said. "I worked homicide for years and if you take away gangs and drugs you eliminate about 80% of the cases. But these two kids were really squared away."

Authorities have ruled out murder-suicide and have been interviewing everyone who attended the party. They also seized computers from the victims' homes.

Det. Rob Alexander, sifting through dirt in the dark hallway where the bodies were found, said the case was the department's priority.

"We have put everything aside to work on this," he said. "Emotions are running high."

Many local adults learned of the bunker only after the slayings and were shocked that it had been allowed to sit open for so long.

"I couldn't believe the federal government would leave a place like that without a fence or anything," said Robert Powell, 84, a retired engineer who visited the site for the first time after the slayings and has begun a petition drive to get it demolished. "When I saw the hole in the top, it really unnerved me. The sheriff and police are well aware that this place exists and should be in the forefront of closing it."

Some teenagers said they had encountered armed skinheads at the bunker.

"I was out there a year ago and there were some guys who came up on us," said a 16-year-old who identified himself only as Matt. "They had shaved heads and looked like Nazi Lowriders."

The Nazi Lowriders are a white supremacist gang active in the high desert. Swastikas can

be seen scrawled on the bunker. "R.I.P. Bodhi" is spray-painted on one wall and "Dead Body in Here," with an arrow pointing the way, on another.

Authorities say they know gang members have frequented the site, but they have received no complaints of trouble in the last 18 months.

"It's a big desert, and there are lots of places where kids can go to get away," Ells said. "If you were to close this one, another place would open up. I don't think you can foresee this kind of thing happening."

The two-story bunker, which sits about a mile south of California 58, is all that remains of the former Hawes Auxiliary Field, which was built during World War II. The complex once included a 1,226-foot-tall radio tower used by the Strategic Air Command. The bunker housed generators and wiring for the tower, which ceased operations some time in the mid-1980s.

Residents of the unincorporated community of Silver Lakes, where most of the partygoers lived, say they are devastated by the slayings.

"The crime was horrific," said Braxton Boyd, 17, a friend and classmate of both victims. "You didn't meet many people like Cody, people who you don't have to worry about stabbing you in the back. I never went to the bunker, but Bodhi was into weird and spooky stuff."

**Thompson and Sherzer-Potter attended the Lewis Center for Educational Research, a charter school in Apple Valley with 1,000 students and a waiting list of 3,000.**

**Sherzer-Potter, a sophomore, was known for her sunny disposition and the avant-garde movies she made in school. She and Thompson met in a film class taught by Steve Orsinelli.**

"Cody mentioned a year ago that he went out to the bunker and I freaked out. I wouldn't go out there," Orsinelli said. "He said it was no big deal that it was abandoned. That's no big shocker in the desert. We have abandoned mines, bombing ranges, old military bases all over the place. But I never saw a bunker like this."

**Rick Piercy, president and chief executive of the school, said the slayings had caused some soul-searching among staff.**

**"We have all thought, 'How could we have done anything differently to protect these kids? Why didn't we know about this place?' " he said. "The bunker needs to be taken down. It's become a symbol of the evil in this world."**

Pamela Thompson, Cody's mother, said she knew of the bunker but didn't know her son went there.

"It's a bad, terrible place. If I have to stamp it down to the ground myself, I will," she said. "I don't want this to happen to some other kid out there."

Leah Sherzer, Bodhi's mother, said her daughter had taken her to the site once before, promising that it would be "cool."

"I was appalled. I said, 'It's not cool. It's frightening, it's dangerous,' " Sherzer said. "I told her, 'Honey, you are not allowed here anymore.' I could tell she was torn, she looked hurt."

Sherzer, a single mother and school psychologist, kept her daughter close and only recently let her walk to the grocery store alone.

"I've been holding my daughter hostage from the world," she said. "She was gifted but naive."

Sherzer-Potter often studied up to four hours a night and had a tutor in math, her mother said. She was named after the Buddhist beings who guide humans to enlightenment. Her 23-year-old brother is named Zen.

Mother and daughter would bake bread on Sundays and give it to neighbors. In her spare time, Sherzer-Potter wrote poetry, some of it dark.

"Something is eating away at my creativity. . . . every time I try to get these thoughts and images out of my head they come out twisted and mangled and not what I wanted them to be," she wrote.

At first, her mother wasn't happy that she was dating Thompson.

"When I met Cody he looked a little rough for my daughter. I told him, 'I don't like you, you're too old for my daughter,' " she said, sitting at her kitchen table. "But he was always respectful, and he won me over. It wasn't easy to date my daughter."

The night of the shootings, Sherzer-Potter had gone to stay with relatives in Orange County. At some point she slipped out and was picked up by a friend who drove her to the bunker.

"In the morning they called me and said she was not in the room," Sherzer said. "Then Cody's mom calls and says they are looking for Cody. I realized we had a real problem. Then someone called and said Cody was dead."

Shortly after, she received the news about her daughter.

"She thought the bunker was safe all these years," Sherzer said. "It represented a freedom from the constraints of society."

"I want the military to tear it down," she said, "but right now I have a daughter to bury. I don't have time to be an activist."

No one is eager to claim responsibility for the bunker. The federal Bureau of Land Management oversees the site but says the Air Force would be responsible for getting rid of it.

As for putting up a warning sign, "the way the desert is, if there is a sign up for 24 hours it will be shot up or torn down," said BLM's chief ranger in Barstow, Bob Hastey. "These kids will party anywhere and everywhere. I have seen it for 20 years."

The Air Force said this week that it expected to demolish the bunker by the end of the year and that Edwards Air Force Base was interested in acquiring the land.

"There is no activity at the site," said Linda Geissinger, an Air Force spokeswoman in Sacramento. "We don't need it, we don't use it, and we don't want it. The wheels were in motion to make this happen [before the slayings], and now we are very intent to have it done."

Since the slayings, more and more residents have driven the jarring dirt roads to get to the place.

This week, Powell walked along the top of the bunker, stopping to stare into the numerous deep holes.

Powell knew Leah Sherzer and Bodhi Sherzer-Potter well, and being only yards from where the girl died made him uncomfortable.

But nothing could quell his outrage that, despite the obvious hazards, the bunker had been allowed to stand for decades.

"You could pump it full of sand. You could put in concrete plugs," he said. "You could get a bulldozer out here and in one hour bulldoze the whole thing."

He studied the supports and thought for a moment.

"If you left me alone with a case of C-4 plastic explosives," he said, "I could probably get rid of it."

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