Before 1941 there were only a handful of fatal aircraft crashes in New Mexico every year. During World War II (WWII) more than 7,100 fatal air crashes involving United States Army Air Force (USAAF) aircraft occurred on American soil. Collectively these crashes resulted in the loss of over 15,500 lives. The majority of these crashes involved training flights. In New Mexico there were three locations for the Second Air Force – Alamogordo, Clovis and Kirtland Field – and five for the Army Air Forces Training Command – Carlsbad, Deming, Fort Sumner, Hobbs and Roswell. As a result of ramped up training, air crashes in New Mexico rose from about 10 in 1941 to over 450 in 1944. A large number of largely non-fatal crashes occurred in the vicinity of airfields, such as 115 from 1942-1945 around Alamogordo Army Air Field.

A number of crashes occurred in mountainous terrane throughout New Mexico. For example, on April 22nd 1942 a B-24D Liberator (four engine bomber) hit Trail Peak near Cimarron within what is now the Philmont Scout Ranch. Later that year on October 15th a B-17E Flying Fortress, another four engine bomber, struck North Baldy Peak near Magdalena.

Other impacts occurred in a wide range of environments. A USAAF Consolidated OA-10 (Army designation for Navy PBY-5A Catalina flying boat) crashed in what is now El Malpais National Monument on August 1st, 1945. The aircraft crashed after having feathered one propeller (indicating an engine failure).

A smaller number of aircraft disintegrated at altitude including a B-17F east of Medio on January 1st, 1943 and a B-17E on August 23rd 1942 near Las Cruces. Mid-air collisions were not uncommon in training such as one between a Cessna AT-17 and an AT-17B on January 10th 1943 near Roswell.

Geologic factors influence not only the location of many crash sites but also their preservational potential. The large number of WWII crashes in New Mexico provide potential for a significant geoarchaeological dataset in aviation archeology.

Keywords:
Geoarchaeology, World War Two, aviation archeology, New Mexico