

Islanders talk about Growlers

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Growing local and regional concern regarding the recent increase of loud EA-18G Growler jets at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, and the quadrupling of flight operations approximately nine miles south at Outlying Field Coupeville, has prompted community organizers to “Restore the Balance.”

In March, the United States Department of Defense formalized its years-long decision to add 36 electronic attack Growler jets to NAS Whidbey, bringing the number of aircraft on base from 82 to 112. The decision also increased Coupeville flight operations by 288 percent.

Thousands of objections were submitted by citizens and local, state and federal officials prior to the Record of Decision. NAS Whidbey is one of three major bases where Navy Field Carrier Landing Practice training occurs, a type of touch-and-go training that is crucial for pilots preparing to deploy on an aircraft carrier. The other two locations are NAS Lemoore in California and NAS Oceana in Virginia. For more than 40 years, NAS Whidbey has been the only home base for electronic attack aircraft in the United States.

The low-flying, rumbling jets conduct electronic warfare to suppress or jam enemy communications and launch systems. Under Navy expansion plans, crews will perform around 100,000 takeoffs and landings a year for the next three decades.

According to a Congressional Research Report from May 2019, the DOD believes the United States needs to “strengthen its efforts in electronic warfare to preserve U.S. qualitative military superiority over potential adversaries such as Russia and China.”

Sound Defence Alliance, which formed last year in response to the Growler expansion, created its “Restore the Balance” campaign to engage and mobilize the public, elected officials and opinion leaders “on the negative impacts of military expansion in our region.” SDA’s campaigns have shifted the needle in Congress, prompting representatives Derek Kilmer, D-6th District, and Rick Larsen, D-40th District, as well as Sen. Maria Cantwell, to require noise monitoring data from the Navy.

But considering that the low-frequency noise from the heavy, low-and-slow flying jet engines is compromising human, animal and environmental safety, that’s not enough, said SDA Executive Director Larry Morrell and Board Chair Rhea Miller at a community forum held at Emmanuel Parish Hall on Nov. 14.

“The SDA seeks to develop a large and unignorable presence in Washington to balance the voices promoting the military,” Morrell said, adding the alliance would like to redo the Environmental Impact Statement conducted by the Navy.

Other campaigns have arisen as well. The National Parks Conservation Association launched “Hear Our Olympics,” which assesses the threats Growlers pose to quiet and natural stability and calls for the Navy to leave the Olympic National Park’s skies.

“We want to move the additional 36 Growlers to another harmless location, somewhere in Nevada, Utah or the California desert,” Morrell echoed.

A concerned attendee responded they should simply be eliminated altogether.

Pilots in the Navy disagree, stating if they run out of land to move to or practice on, they will be unable to practice a hazardous, perishable aviation skill — attempting to land on aircraft carriers in the daytime and at night. And noise complaints are the problem.

“When push comes to shove, you’ll probably want us to be good at landing on carriers,” a senior Navy pilot told the Sounder, requesting anonymity.

“Coupeville is the size of Olga. Imagine Olga. Imagine the street that runs through there. Imagine aircraft landing touch and go drills there all hours, all days,” Miller, a longtime Lopez Island resident and former county commissioner, said.

Miller noted how detrimental the increase of 288 percent in trainings will be on a small community of homes.

“How do we get the military to pay attention to us? Death by a thousand cuts. Every time they’re reported by the public, it hurts them.” Miller said.

She created Quiet Skies over San Juan County, which encourages locals to report excessive aircraft noise on the group’s website, <https://www.quietskies.info/>. Every quarter, Quiet Skies publishes every recorded report of Growler noise and sends it to respective representatives in the legislature.

Additionally, San Juan County supports a website, <https://bit.ly/2rd1gak>, that can be used to report aircraft noise.

San Juan County residents can expect to be affected by Growler noise pollution, says Morrell. According to a NAS Whidbey flight approach procedure chart, one Growler holding pattern and flight path circles over Lopez Island, the south end of Orcas and Blakely Island.

Miller reported residents in Coupeville, as well as on the south end of Lopez, are currently being forced to wear ear protection inside their homes.

While the Navy acknowledges aircraft sound impacts, the pilots don’t always adhere to any direct flight path, Morrell said, indicating that the track is often an average representation without restriction. Two years ago, two junior pilots flying EA-18G Growlers diverted from their flight path to etch a phallus in the sky over North-Central Washington.

Longtime residents on Whidbey Island say they believe the noise from Growler practicing would be tenable if the pilots flew where they’re supposed to, recalling the path of the EA-6B Prowlers, the predecessor of Growlers.

Mike Welding, NAS Whidbey base public affairs officer, pointed out that the Growler flight paths are different than those of the Prowlers. Changes in the Environmental Impact Statement allow “pilots

to fly a more carrier-representative pattern using Runway 14, the approach from the north,” Whidbey News-Times reported.

That same Environmental Impact Statement prompted Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson to sue the Navy, claiming the review process for the expanded program failed to properly measure impacts to public health and wildlife on the island.

The Washington Department of Health outlined how exposure to noise levels similar to those at the air station could negatively impact health, including sleep, cognitive ability and cause cardiovascular disease. In the lawsuit, Ferguson said the Navy “failed to complete a thorough analysis of negative impacts on health.”

Is it possible, some asked, to find a balance between historic and environmental protection and national security?

“We don’t want to shut down the Whidbey Island NAS,” Morrell stated. “We are advocates for military infrastructure that does not damage the social, physical and economic health of our communities.”