



DEFENSE BASE CLOSURE AND REALIGNMENT COMMISSION
2521 South Clark Street, Suite 600
Arlington, VA 22202
Telephone: 703-699-2950

August 15, 2005

*The Honorable John W. Warner
225 Russell Building
Washington, D.C. 20510*

Dear Senator Warner:

Thank you for your letter of August 12, 2005 concerning the Commission's August 20, 2005 hearing. I appreciate your concern for a fair and transparent Commission evaluation of the Secretary of Defense's proposals for closing or realigning military installations. As you know, the Commission is mandated to consider whether the Secretary substantially deviated from statutory BRAC selection criteria and the force structure plan in failing to recommend closure or realignment of an installation. On July 19, 2005 the Commission voted, in accordance with the process established by law, to consider whether the Secretary substantially deviated from the statutory criteria and force structure plan in failing to recommend closure of NAS Oceana.

The Congress wisely provided for the independence of the Commission in its deliberative and decision making process. We are directed and pledged to deliberate and decide issues free from improper influence. However, we are also committed to an open process and, to the maximum extent possible, to accommodate communities, and their representatives, seeking to provide the Commission with information relevant to our deliberations and decisions. We believe we have achieved that goal.

That is why the Commission agreed to the Virginia delegation's request to accompany the Commission's site visit at NAS Oceana. That is why the Commission agreed to the Virginia delegation's request for a separate hearing in Virginia to take testimony on issues relating to recommendations affecting the National Capitol Region. That is why we accommodated the Virginia delegation's request for a May 27, 2005 meeting with area commanders to hear the delegation's concerns regarding proposals for realigning installations housed in DoD leased office space. Other than site visits, that meeting was the only Commission meeting

Chairman: Anthony J. Principi

Commissioners: The Honorable James H. Bilbray, The Honorable Philip E. Coyle III, Admiral Harold W. Gehman Jr., USN (Ret), The Honorable Jim Hansen, General James T. Hill, USA (Ret), General Lloyd Newton, USAF (Ret), The Honorable Samuel K. Skinner, Brigadier General Sue Ellen Turner, USAF (Ret)

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in which uniformed personnel explained their views in the presence of the Congressional delegation. I also met with Governor Mark Warner to discuss NAS Oceana.

We believe we have also been responsive to your personal wishes, making an unprecedented request to seek testimony from the Chief of Naval Operations at our hearing on NAS Oceana and agreeing that the August 10, 2005 site visit to Florida would be conducted only by staff members.

However, we are also mindful of our responsibility to base our deliberations, to the greatest extent possible, on certified data and sworn testimony. The August 20 hearing will provide a venue for sworn testimony on issues properly on the Commission's agenda. The Commission's deliberations and decisions will be based on military value and other selection criteria. No other factors will be considered.

I believe you share my view that there is no higher military value than the safety and proficiency of America's uniformed young men and women, in this case the naval aviators our nation sends in harms' way in the defense of our nation. The Commission's goal is to ensure our Navy provides Atlantic Fleet naval aviators with a location and conditions for training, whether at NAS Oceana or at another location, like those they will have when they fly and fight while deployed. These issues are addressed in the second military value BRAC selection criterion. Testimony in prior Commission hearings confirms the existence of serious issues compromising the military value of training and operations at NAS Oceana. These issues have been widely reported in local news media such as the enclosed articles from the Hampton Roads Virginian-Pilot.

The Commission must explore every possible option to ensure the best possible opportunities and environment for naval aviation operations and training. Our August 20 hearing will contribute to that process.

You have expressed particular concern that the Commission is acting contrary to section 2903 (d) (e) of the BRAC statute. I respectfully submit that the Commission is in full compliance with the law. Further, the Commission would be

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remiss in performance of its statutory duties if it did not thoroughly investigate what was formerly NAS Cecil Field as a potential east coast receiving location in the event that NAS Oceana is closed or realigned.

Thank you for your continuing commitment to the men and women who defend our nation and for your interest in the issues before the Commission.

Sincerely,



Anthony J. Principi
Chairman

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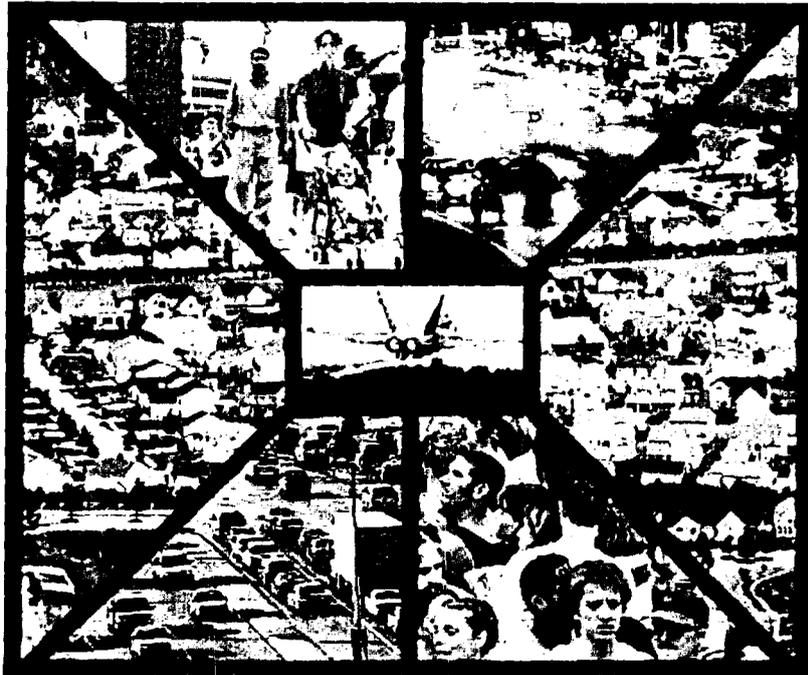


Navy has been tuned out, crowded out at Oceana

By JON W. GLASS, The Virginian-Pilot

© September 12, 2004

Last updated: 8:01 PM



file photos

VIRGINIA BEACH — In this Navy town, where many embrace the roar of fighter jets as the “sound of freedom,” city leaders never miss a chance to tout their partnership with the military.

Even so, they repeatedly have turned a deaf ear when asked to rein in development that the Navy has said threatens the mission and future of Oceana Naval Air Station.

From 1975 to mid-2004, the City Council ignored Navy objections in nearly three out of every four votes, based on a review of Navy letters and city records.

OCEANA UNDER PRESSURE

More in this special report:

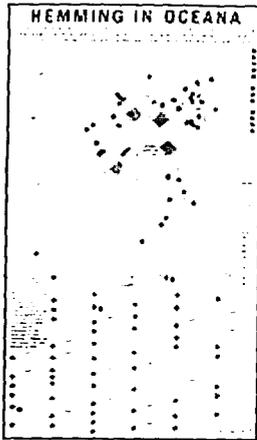
Part 2: Training is touch-and-go around Oceana

Of 70 development proposals examined, the council approved 51 over Navy opposition while denying 19. More than half of the votes came during the go-go 1980s as careening growth turned the Beach into Virginia’s most populous city.

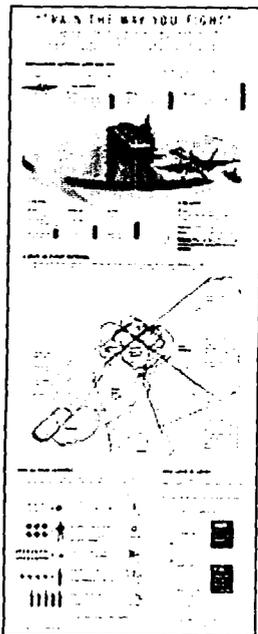
Maps and Graphics

(Note: These are large PDF files that may take a while to load)

The pattern is revealed in a stack of letters written by more than a dozen captains who commanded Oceana. The letters, released earlier this year by the Navy, show that the officers fought a mostly losing battle to keep growth at bay.



Development encroachment around
Oceana (6 megs)



Training and flight patterns at Oceana (2
megs)

But they also show that the Navy is not blameless. Some Oceana skippers lobbied City Hall more aggressively than others. The Navy also offered little or no resistance to housing developments in low- and medium-jet-noise zones around Oceana until last year – a stance the military now regrets.

The letters offer a historic window on a long-running, high-stakes debate that involves national defense, property rights and money.

Typical is a 1981 letter urging against a developer's plan to increase the housing density on 23 acres for the resort area's Salt Marsh Point neighborhood. "I must very strongly recommend the requested zoning change be denied and, further, urge the City not to permit dense residential development to take place in this area," Oceana's commander wrote. The City Council approved the rezoning.

As the dust settles on 30 years of sprawling growth, the letters underscore why Oceana, the city's top employer, is also No. 1 on the Defense Department's tally of most-encroached-upon air bases.

That's a red flag for the Navy as it braces for another round of base closings from the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act, or BRAC.

It also has given Beach leaders pause. This summer, the city and the Navy agreed to a truce of sorts, launching a joint land-use study on how the city can continue to grow and redevelop without threatening the base's military value – key to Oceana's survival.

Encroachment around Oceana became an issue at a 1993 BRAC hearing and gave city leaders a scare. But pressure to develop has continued.

If Oceana is put on the BRAC hit list in 2005, the city may have itself to blame, said Councilwoman Reba S. McClanan.

"I think the wolf is at the door," she said.

The letters make clear why the Navy's East Coast master jet base is so hemmed in today. The problem crept up one rezoning at a time, each approval making it harder to say no to the next.

Nearly a third of the city's 439,467 residents now live in jet-noise zones that the Navy considers incompatible for housing developments. Many are in homes where roaring Navy jets drown out TVs and disrupt backyard barbecues.

Over the years, development moved down Lynnhaven and London Bridge roads to the west and southwest of Oceana, spurred, in part, by the city's approval of Lynnhaven Mall in 1976, over vehement Navy protests.

To the east and northeast, a series of rezonings turned sections of the Oceanfront resort into dense rows of condos and apartment complexes. The same thing happened to the north and northwest in Great Neck.

Rezonings have consumed most of the farm fields and woods that surrounded Oceana when it opened in 1940.

The Virginian-Pilot requested the letters under the federal Freedom of Information Act. Here's a sampling from the Navy's file:

- In 1976, the City Council approved Lynnhaven Mall, one of the largest malls in Virginia. It lies in Oceana's

loudest noise zone and partly in an area where the risk of jet crashes is highest.

The base's commander at the time, Capt. W.D. Knutson, opposed the project, writing that the city and the Navy had a "moral commitment" to avoid putting people in harm's way.

Today, jets bank into hard 180-degree turns around the mall as they head for downwind landings at Oceana. Shoppers in the parking lot can wave to the pilots.

"The odds are that there's going to be a plane crash in the center of that mall," Knutson, retired in California, said recently. "I hope to God it doesn't."

- In 1978, the council rezoned 70 acres of industrial land for 160 homes in Oceana's loudest noise zone along London Bridge Road. The Navy wrote that complaints from the "adverse effects of noise would be repeated and vigorous" and sent a delegation to City Hall to oppose it.

"Everybody seemed to think the Navy was just being obstinate," said Floyd E. Taylor, a retired civilian personnel officer who testified for the Navy.

- In 1985, the council rezoned 30 acres that once sprouted strawberries on South Lynnhaven Road for a condo community. A Navy letter called it "highly incompatible" and "most undesirable." A coalition of civic leagues, armed with 1,000 signatures, opposed it, too.

- In 1989, the council agreed to increase the density on 13 acres for the 96-unit apartment complex Herons Point, off Fremac Drive, between Laskin Road and Interstate 264 in the highest noise and accident-potential zones.

"If incompatible development is allowed to continue, the operating capability of this Master Jet Base will be compromised, affecting our ability to perform mission requirements in support of our national policy," Oceana's commander wrote.

- In 2000, the council rezoned farm land along Indian River Road for Dewberry Farms, a single-family neighborhood of about 50 homes in a medium jet-noise zone.

"The Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Defense consider this noise zone normally unacceptable for residential uses," the Navy argued.

- Last year, the council approved a developer's plan to demolish an aging motel off Laskin Road and replace it with a 10-building, 90-unit luxury condo complex in an accident-potential zone off Oceana's most heavily used runway.

Council members applauded the redevelopment of a problem property near an Oceanfront gateway. The Navy urged redeveloping the site in ways that would not conflict with the base.

In the 1970s and '80s, J. Henry McCoy, a former mayor and council member, cast votes for much of the development that drapes Oceana like a horseshoe.

"To Monday morning quarterback," McCoy said recently, "I'd say some of those things should never have been approved." Jerry Riendeau, a retired rear admiral and Beach resident, recalls Oceana in 1955, when "I felt like I was flying out of a jungle." But "slow, insidious" growth has changed that, raising doubts that the upcoming land-use study, known as JLUS, can solve the base's encroachment problem.

"I would suggest that JLUS is about 35 years too late," Riendeau told Beach leaders last month.

Since its founding in 1963, Virginia Beach has been a city on the move. Beach leaders have seemed to want it all – the taxes and prestige that growth produced and the economic benefits generated by Oceana, essentially a Fortune 500 heavyweight with its \$759 million payroll and 12,300 military and civilian employees.

Mayor Meyera E. Oberndorf, who joined the council in 1976, after the mall vote, became one of the Navy's staunchest supporters. With land prices rising and property owners itching to cash in, she said, efforts to balance the Navy's concerns against the lure of economic development have caused "constant stress."

"It became a struggle between land owners' rights and the need and desire to protect Oceana," she said.

McClanan, like Oberndorf, rose from the ranks of neighborhood civic activists who worried that unchecked growth would bring traffic jams, crowded schools and higher taxes.

"It was totally a developer's world," McClanan said. "There was so much money to be made, nobody wanted to hear what the Navy said. The thought that you would limit what people could do with their land was just a foreign concept."

In the '80s, up to 1,000 new residents a month poured into the city. The development proposals flowing into City Hall reflected that.

Littleton Hudgins, a real-estate developer who won several resort-area rezonings opposed by the Navy, said the council was trying to keep pace with the market.

Council watchers in the '80s left meetings in disbelief as developers won high-density rezonings. Virginia zoning laws call for a "reasonable use" of property, but putting more people in homes where jets might crash, or pass by with a deafening roar, seemed "absurd," said former North End resident Georgette Constant.

Noise didn't seem to scare away buyers or renters.

Today, a marketing brochure for Herons Point, built near a finger of Linkhorn Bay, promises a "calm, relaxing lifestyle." There's no mention of jet noise, but renters must sign a lease addendum that discloses the noise, said property manager Leighann Nichols.

The council made disclosure a condition of the 1989 rezoning. Now, it is required on any sale or rental in the noise zones.

"It's kind of hard to hide," Nichols said of the thunderous jets. Even so, the complex is nearly full year-round, she said.

Lynnhaven Mall's success reinforced a prevalent view in City Hall that Virginia Beach's growth would not jeopardize Oceana.

"The Lynnhaven Mall, despite the fact it was probably a risky decision, has turned out to be a very beneficial element in our community," said city Planning Director Robert Scott, hired the year the mall was approved. "It's hard to look back and say the council made a wrong decision."

Then, as now, builders and developers contributed the most money to council election campaigns and carried weight.

"No question about it," McCoy said. "They approached everybody on council. I don't think anybody was being dishonest. It was, 'We helped you get elected.' A lot of politics was involved. "

Lawyer Grover Wright became the development industry's go-to guy. At council meetings, he went for the jugular.

"It was like watching an alligator snapping at his prey," Oberndorf said.

His attack was simple and powerful: If the Navy wanted a parcel to remain undeveloped, Washington should buy it.

"I just don't feel they have the right to control people's property for nothing," Wright, who is semi-retired, said recently. "Why punish one guy when development has occurred all around him? It's discriminatory."

That logic resonated in City Hall. Former Councilman John Baum, trained as a land appraiser, routinely criticized the Navy for asking the City Council to zone away a person's ability to develop their land. During 28 years on the council, Baum rarely voted the Navy's way.

"The Navy is important here, and I respect them; they're protecting the country," Baum said. "But in a democracy one of your rights is private property."

The Navy's counter-argument hasn't changed over the years: Land owners have other options. The Navy views industrial, commercial and some retail developments as compatible, if they don't draw large numbers of people.

To answer critics, the Navy eventually turned to Congress for money to buy land or development rights around Oceana. U.S. Rep. G. William Whitehurst, a Republican military hawk, steered nearly \$60 million to Oceana between the mid-'70s and mid-'80s.

"My position was, the Navy was there first and the city should not be granting permits to people to build close to a military airfield," Whitehurst said recently.

With the money, the Navy purchased some land outright, but mostly bought development rights – nearly 3,700 acres around Oceana's 5,300-acre base and another 8,800 acres around Fentress Auxiliary Landing Field in Chesapeake, also threatened by development.

But even this solution had problems. Navy lawyers dragged land owners to court to settle disputes over property values. People criticized the Navy for spending as much to buy development rights as it would have taken to buy the land.

Money for the program, which competed with other defense needs, dried up by the late 1980s. "It turned out to be quite unsatisfactory," said former Rep. Owen B. Pickett, a Democrat who replaced Whitehurst in 1987.

In the end, the effort "has almost been money thrown away," said former Oceana commander John E. Allen, a Chesapeake resident.

For all the Navy's concerns, there's evidence that the military contributed to the problem.

Oceana's commanders rotated every two or three years. Some fought development aggressively; others rarely wrote letters. Some spoke at City Council meetings to make the point; others sent a subordinate or no one at all.

Most of all, they wanted Oceana to be a good neighbor. Since the Navy lacked veto power over the council's zoning decisions, all the commanders had was public opinion and the government's goodwill.

Capt. Knutson created such an uproar in City Hall with his objections to Lynnhaven Mall in 1976 that a four-star admiral muzzled him.

"We had senators and congressmen calling the Navy and saying, 'What's going on here? You're butting into local politics,'" Knutson recalled.

City leaders and developers have said the Navy has been inconsistent. The Navy, for example, opposed the Dewberry Farms development off Indian River Road in 2000 but sent no letters objecting to several other subdivisions built nearby under the same flight path and in the same noise zone, said city planner Stephen White.

In some cases, Oceana's opposition seemed half-hearted. The Navy would write a letter about official policy but would not actively object.

"There was an understanding that the Navy had certain degrees of opposition," said Charles Salle, a former assistant city attorney and Planning Commission member. "They were 'opposed' and they were 'strongly opposed.'"

Former Oceana commanders said some development that passed without a fight caused headaches later. One was the Verizon Wireless Virginia Beach Amphitheater, off Princess Anne Road, near a Navy flight path between Oceana and Fentress.

Oceana signed off on the location in a 1993 letter. That was before the arrival, in 1998 and '99, of the louder F/A-18 Hornets.

"I used to get calls from folks running the amphitheater saying, 'Hey, we're having a concert over here, is there anything you can do?' " said retired Capt. William C. "Skip" Zobel, who commanded Oceana from 1999 to 2001. "I would never have said they could've built that there."

Last year, the Navy began opposing all new homes in all noise zones, but even that tougher policy has gray areas. The dilemma was clear during debate in February over the proposed 490-home Ashville Park.

The Navy opposed the development, off Princess Anne Road, in the city's transition area and partially in Oceana's lowest noise zone. Council members, though, gushed over its neo-traditional homes and open spaces, designed by a nationally known architect.

They turned for guidance to Rear Adm. Stephen A. Turcotte, head of the Mid-Atlantic Command, which oversees all area Naval installations. Put on the spot, the admiral gave a Zen-like answer: Its impact on Oceana, he said, would be a "pebble" in the water, not a "boulder."

Suddenly, everyone in City Hall began assessing development proposals as stones and rocks. A few weeks later, though, Turcotte clouded the water by pointing out that a few pebbles could amount to a boulder.

Navy officials acknowledge that past attempts to discourage homes in noise zones sent a mixed message. The U.S. government now is defending itself against lawsuits filed by 2,093 property owners in Virginia Beach and Chesapeake who claim that the noisy Navy Hornets have devalued their property.

"We were a kinder, gentler Navy," said Alan F. Zusman, head of the service's noise-zone program. "We finally realized we were getting too many complaints. We believe that continued development under the flight paths is not a wise decision for us or the city."

If past is prologue, the Navy may face an uphill battle in what some worry could be Oceana's last stand.

"From a practical point of view, the development is there and we continue to fly," Zusman said. "The question for the future is, how much more development will occur."

The last prime pieces of undeveloped land in Virginia Beach, mostly south of Oceana, are increasing in value. Developers are itching to build pricey homes there.

For now, City Hall is on board with the Navy. The City Council has delayed acting on several development proposals, mainly in the transition area, pending the expected December completion of the land-use study.

Beach leaders are optimistic that the study will show ways for Oceana to continue its mission and the city to grow its tax base.

They're eyeing tougher noise-disclosure laws, new restrictions on development and purchases of property that the Navy wants undeveloped. They're open to sharing the costs of buying out landowners, noting that the city already has spent millions to preserve farm land from development in the southern, rural half of Virginia Beach.

As the city ages, redevelopment, especially at the resort, offers possibilities for undoing some past mistakes, Scott said.

So far, the Beach has dodged the base-closing bullet. But McClanan said time may be running out.

"I think we need to put our money where our mouth is because we're down now to where there isn't room to talk about it," McClanan said. "The Navy is so much of what we are, it's just hard for me to imagine the city without the Navy."

Reach Jon W. Glass at 222-5119 or jon.glass@pilotonline.com

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Training is touch-and-go around Oceana

By JACK DORSEY, The Virginian-Pilot

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Last updated: 8:56 AM



Cmdr. Dave "Mongo" Koss checks an F/A-18 at Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach. Photos by Bill Tiernan/The Virginian-Pilot.

VIRGINIA BEACH — The Navy has long stressed training the way it fights.

But at Oceana Naval Air Station, that is no longer the case. It has been years since the base's Navy pilots have been able to practice like they fight, and the gulf between the two is growing.

The reason: jet noise.

The chief purpose of Oceana, the Navy's East Coast master jet base, is to train pilots to take off and land on aircraft carriers. In recent years, however, Oceana officials have modified training to mitigate jet noise for neighboring residents.

At Oceana and Fentress, an auxiliary practice field in Chesapeake, war planes now fly vastly different patterns than they would if they were approaching or leaving an actual carrier. They fly higher, come in steeper and follow awkward flight routes.

And according to Capt. Tom Keeley, Oceana's commanding officer, the Navy is out of alternatives.

"We are at the limit," Keeley said.

Continued development near the airfields has raised concerns that the Navy might eventually move its operations from Oceana, which is now the military's most-encroached-upon air base.

Oceana has more people – about 120,000 – living in its high-noise contours than any airfield in the country except Miami International Airport, which has roughly 124,000.

And development pressures are increasing as Virginia Beach and Chesapeake look for more places to build homes. City and Navy officials are trying to hammer out a long-range plan to manage growth while allowing the Navy to continue training pilots.

The Navy is hoping to build another auxiliary field in North Carolina, to take some of the pressure – and noise – away from Fentress. But those plans have hit legal roadblocks, and there is no telling when, or even if, the field will be built.

In the meantime, Keeley does his best to schedule flight operations that provide the necessary practice for pilots but limit the roar of engines over residences. Technically, the jets can fly whenever and almost wherever they want – but Navy officials try to minimize nighttime and Sunday morning flying.

Keeley, who flew at Oceana as a bombardier/navigator in an A-6 Intruder in the late 1970s, said he has even honored specific requests on occasion, such as not flying during a certain time period because of a wedding or public function.

But with Oceana fielding roughly 220,000 takeoffs and landings each year and Fentress getting about 140,000, Keeley and other Oceana commanders have found it challenging to train pilots properly while keeping the community happy.

At both fields, the repetitive activity relies heavily on “touch-and-go” exercises, in which pilots simulate a carrier landing then immediately take off and circle around for another landing.

Though the runways at Oceana and Fentress are longer, wider and safer than the deck of a carrier, Navy officials do their best to give pilots a target that resembles a flight deck. But you cannot replicate a carrier landing on solid ground.

“I shake like a leaf every time I land on a carrier at night, and I have done it 450 times,” said Lt. Cmdr. Dave Koss, an F/A-18 Hornet pilot with Strike Fighter Squadron 87. “I literally roll out and my knees are shaking.”

Flying at Oceana and Fentress is safer for the pilots than working off a carrier, but because of neighborhoods and buildings around the airfields, patterns are modified – most importantly in the steeper approach.

With carrier landings, pilots are at about 800 feet when they’re a mile out, then they decelerate and descend to 600 feet before lining up and coming aboard. At Oceana, the approach is at 1,500 feet, dropping to 1,000; at Fentress, it’s 1,000 feet, dropping to 800.

Lt. Cmdr. Mark Sullivan, an F-14 pilot and veteran landing signal officer with Fighter Squadron 211, has spent countless hours at the unforgiving steel stern of an aircraft carrier guiding approaching pilots. He also has pulled considerable duty at the darkened end of a concrete Fentress runway. The difference in approaches is dramatic, he says.

“It’s similar to having a guy practice on a 10-foot basketball hoop and then all of a sudden reduce the hoop down to 8 feet,” Sullivan said. “They are just going to be shooting rocks for the first couple of times.”

Development around the airfields has brought other changes to the way pilots train. When operating off carriers, pilots rely heavily on instrumentation; here they use specific visuals.

"When you fly at Fentress," Koss said, "your pattern is looking down on the ground: 'OK, here is that road; I am good to go. There's that guy's house I don't want to fly around.'" The landmarks also can be obstacles.

"This whole neighborhood is off limits to us," Sullivan said, pointing to a map of Fentress. " So we fly around this farm on this side. We stay outside this road here, cut back in on this side so we don't cross the Intracoastal, go all the way out here and now drive over to try to get on line."

Capt. Mark Mills, who commands Air Wing One at Oceana, says flight patterns at Fentress are a half-mile wider than those used at the carrier.

"We do it, obviously," Koss said, "but it's not easy because we are creatures of habit. You are trying to establish good, solid habit patterns."



Cmdr. David Silkey, executive officer of VFA 87 Golden Warriors, and Lt. Cmdr. Dave Koss, operations officer of VFA 87, prepare to go onto the flight line to conduct an inspection of the F/A-18 s they'll be flying on a training mission.

Training at Oceana and Fentress, pilots are unable to get into the rhythm they do with an actual carrier pattern. And while they practice for emergencies, it's just not the same.

"We have trained them to fly a certain way," Sullivan said, "how to set his fuel flow, how much angle of bank to use, when to look outside and when to look inside.

"Now you send them to the scariest environment you can possibly imagine: pitch black, the deck is going up and you hear the call on the radio for 'Power! Power!' then 'Wave off!' – blood-curdling calls that scare the heck out of you.

"Now the guy is going to have to go back to that one thing that he learned – to set power and set angle of bank – and he is going to struggle."

There are 265 aircraft assigned to Oceana, a number that has been falling. Just three years ago, the base had 316 planes; in 2010, it is scheduled to field 231 aircraft.

Oceana has 145 F/A-18C Hornets, seven Super Hornets and 80 F-14 Tomcats, but the Tomcats are being phased out. By the end of 2006, they are all expected to be retired.

The current model of Hornets also will be augmented by more F/A-18 E and F model Super Hornets, which will be trickling in this fall and will begin flying regularly next spring.

Eventually, there will be 120 of them based at Oceana, and by everyone's admission, the Super Hornets are louder than anything now flying here.

"It is going to change the look and sound of what is flying in and around Oceana," said Cmdr. C.J. Deni, commanding officer of Fighter Squadron 211, which has operated from Oceana for 55 years.

"We want the community to be ready for it and we want to maintain our relationship with the community. We don't want to see the rules and procedures continue on a trend that will make it more difficult for us in the future."

Jet fighters are not the only aircraft that train at Oceana and Fentress – the E-2C Hawkeye radar planes and C-2 Greyhound cargo planes based in Norfolk also practice at the airfields.

Some of the activity at the Navy airfields involves qualifying new pilots to land and take off of carriers. But much of it is also refresher work, allowing more experienced pilots to keep up their skills or re-qualify .

Because of the risky nature of their work, carrier pilots are constantly being tested.

Sometimes, the Navy requires them to be re qualified twice in one year.

The standard rule for each pilot is to conduct two day time periods and six night time periods before being qualified. Each period has six landings.

Weather, operational commitments and maintenance requirements can make scheduling the necessary practice sessions difficult. But the impact of residential development around the airfields continues to generate the most problems.

Koss recalls carefree days of flying from Cecil Field, Fla., which the Navy closed in 1999.

"Cecil was out in the middle of nowhere," he said. "We took off and went right over the ocean and did our mission. We went straight to the bombing targets and did our mission. There was no 'Be at this altitude. Be at this airspeed.' It was 'Go do your stuff and come back.' "

But at Oceana, they do things differently. In addition to the adjustment in approach altitude, flights heading off shore get over water as quickly as possible to lessen jet noise.

Southbound departures are not allowed to climb above 4,000 feet until they are 15 miles away from Oceana. Then they can climb, dumping their jet noise and exhaust over the water instead of over homes.

Helicopter pilots used to approach and leave Oceana over Rudee Inlet, an easily spotted landmark from the air. But now they are routed in and out above Camp Pendleton, the state's seaside military reservation.

The Oceana pilots say they can see the advancing encroachment around the Virginia Beach field every time they return from deployment.

“Going back and forth on cruise is just amazing,” Sullivan says. “Leave this town for six months and it is a different town when you come back.”

Among the complaints Keeley says he hears from residents is that the planes at Langley Air Force Base in Hampton don't seem to create nearly the noise issue that the Navy jets do.

That, Keeley says, is because Langley pilots take off, conduct their missions, then return and land. They don't have to practice countless touch-and-go landings because they never land on carriers.

“We already know how to take off and land on 8,000- or 12,000-foot runways,” Keeley said. “What we practice is how to land on about 200 feet of that carrier deck.”



An F/A-18 Hornet from Oceana Naval Air Station turns after a touch-and-go landing at the Navy's Fentress auxiliary landing field in Chesapeake. Carrier training requires pilots to do numerous touch-and-go's.

Oceana pilots sense that they alternate between being viewed as heroes and villains in their home community – heroes after returning from deployments, villains while flying practice missions over Hampton Roads.

Their safety records are strong; considering the more than 300,000 annual takeoffs and landings they conduct, accidents are rare. The last major incident here involving an F-14 or F/A-18 was in 2001 at Fentress, when a Tomcat belly-landed with its wheels up. Before that, another Tomcat crashed at Oceana in 1996. None of the crew was injured in either accident.

“We are doing whatever we can to operate out of here safely,” said Cmdr. Dave J. Silkey, executive officer of Strike Fighter Squadron 87, a Hornet unit.

Pilots say they have heard residents question the need for them to fly so often, especially at night. But night training is essential because during combat, most missions take place during the cover of darkness.

“Every flight we do has a purpose,” Koss said. “We don't go out and showboat.”

Plus, the jets have recording devices that provide a detailed paper trail of the flight – the altitude, speed and location of the jet at any time.

“So if someone says this jet flew over my house, we will actually go and pull the tapes out of the jet,” Koss said.

Despite the noise-induced friction between the Navy and the community, pilots say they like flying out of Oceana and enjoy the lifestyle it affords their families.

"We are trying tremendously hard to work with the Virginia Beach community," Silkey said. "We are adapting our patterns in every possible way. We love being here. This a great place to grow up and live."

Navy officials will not comment on the upcoming BRAC 2005 – the Pentagon's latest round of base realignment and closure, designed to streamline the nation's military by closing or realigning bases and commands.

As the Navy's master jet base on the East Coast, Oceana would appear to be safe from closure or losing planes – except for the encroachment issue. And jet noise already has played a role in some jets not being located at Oceana.

Partly because of the noise factor, two Navy Hornet squadrons were sent to the Marine Corps Air Station at Beaufort, S.C., when the jets were moved from Cecil Field in the mid-1990s. And a year ago, the Navy announced it would put two Super Hornet squadrons at the Marine Corps base in Cherry Point, N.C.

Initially, the Navy wanted to have all of the Super Hornets at Oceana. But noise concerns led to the proposal of a new practice field to ease the load at Fentress. The Navy chose a site in Washington County, N.C., for the new airstrip – and then gave two squadrons to Cherry Point so the state could reap some economic benefit in exchange for the rural runway 70 miles south of Virginia Beach.

Opponents of the Washington County airfield have had recent success in stalling the project. Navy officials still insist that the plan will go through, but it has hit a significant legal roadblock. A recent ruling prohibits the Navy from purchasing any more land for the proposed 30,000-acre site, and there is no indication when the next step might be taken.

A delay in building the airstrip, or cancellation of the field, would hamper the Navy's goal of trying to reduce jet noise in Hampton Roads and could put the future of the base more at risk.

How Oceana will fare in BRAC 2005, or future realignments, remains to be seen, but Keeley said there is no question about the importance of the base's mission.

"Since 1990, every carrier air wing stationed here has seen combat," Keeley said.

And with the global war on terrorism showing no signs of letting up, he expects Oceana's contributions to remain significant.

The challenges remain considerable, as well.

Keeley's job of balancing the demands of the training with the concerns of the community will only get tougher when the noisy Super Hornets arrive.

For now his juggling act is working, Keeley said, but, "We are not training like we fight."

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HEMMING IN OCEANA

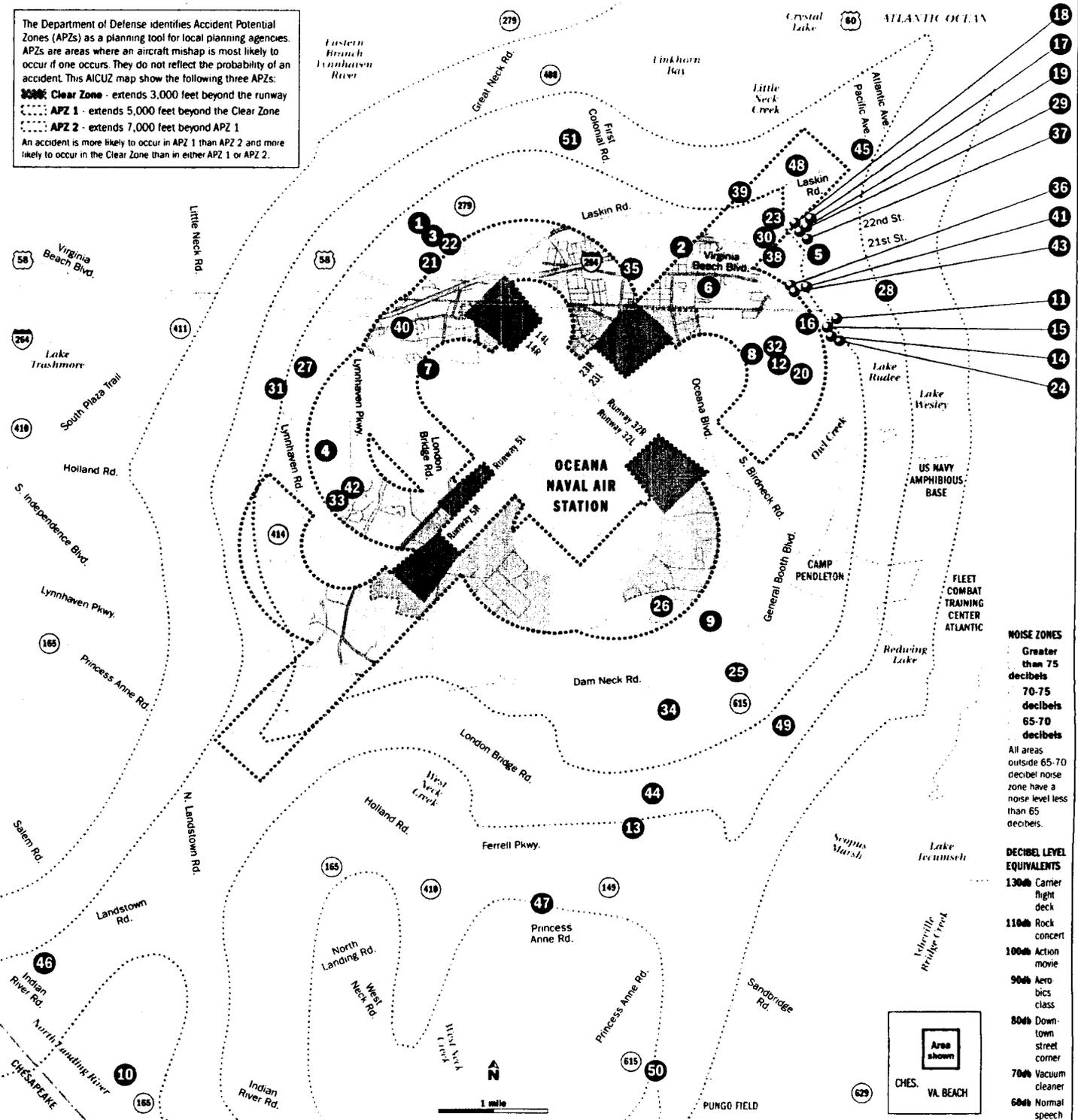
For the past three decades, the Virginia Beach City Council has failed to heed Navy warnings against allowing homes in high-noise and accident-potential zones around Oceana Naval Air Station. Now, nearly one-third of the city's 439,467 residents live in areas where the Navy views housing as incompatible with the base's mission.

In 1978, the Navy created an Air Installations Compatible Use Zones map, or AICUZ, to help local governments limit residential growth in areas exposed to loud jets and the risk of crashes. The Navy's current AICUZ map, last updated in 1999 and depicted here, designates zones where jet noise over 24 hours averages 65 to 70 decibels, 70 to 75 decibels and 75 and greater decibels. Residents, however, are exposed to much louder "single-event" jet noise. An F/A-18 Hornet, for instance, can expose homeowners to around 114 decibels of sound - louder than a rock concert. The accident-potential zones, or APZs, are areas where jets fly over at least 5,000 times a year and the risk of crashes is highest.

The Department of Defense identifies Accident Potential Zones (APZs) as a planning tool for local planning agencies. APZs are areas where an aircraft mishap is most likely to occur if one occurs. They do not reflect the probability of an accident. This AICUZ map show the following three APZs:

- Clear Zone** - extends 3,000 feet beyond the runway
- APZ 1** - extends 5,000 feet beyond the Clear Zone
- APZ 2** - extends 7,000 feet beyond APZ 1

An accident is more likely to occur in APZ 1 than APZ 2 and more likely to occur in the Clear Zone than in either APZ 1 or APZ 2.



- NOISE ZONES**
- Greater than 75 decibels
 - 70-75 decibels
 - 65-70 decibels
 - All areas outside 65-70 decibel noise zone have a noise level less than 65 decibels.
- DECIBEL LEVEL EQUIVALENTS**
- 130dB Carrier flight deck
 - 110dB Rock concert
 - 100dB Action movie
 - 90dB Aero bics class
 - 80dB Down-town street corner
 - 70dB Vacuum cleaner
 - 60dB Normal speech

This time line, based on city and Navy records, shows development city officials have approved since 1975 despite Navy objections that it was incompatible with Oceana Naval Air Station. Not included are council votes to approve development the Navy discouraged but viewed as compatible if equipped with noise insulation and noise-disclosure for buyers.

1975

1 Rezoning for apartments within 6,000 feet and on the centerline approach to Oceana's runway 14.

1976

2 Permit for a church in an Accident Potential Zone (APZ) and the loudest noise zone.

3 Rezoning for apartments, then in an APZ, and in a high-noise zone.

4 Rezoning to allow construction of Lynnhaven Mall, now partially in an APZ and in the loudest noise zone.

5 Approval of the Pavilion convention center, then partially in an APZ and in a medium-noise zone.

1977

6 Rezoning of 5 acres from business to apartments in an APZ "severely impacted" by jet noise.

1978

7 Rezoning of 72 acres from industrial to residential for 160 homes.

8 Rezoning of 9 acres in an APZ and high-noise zone from industrial to apartments.

9 Rezoning of 10 acres from agriculture to residential in an APZ.

OCT 18 - Oceana's new skipper asks city for mandatory noise disclosure law, but city defers to real estate industry's voluntary disclosure.

1980

10 Rezoning of 68 acres in loudest noise zone.

1981

11 Rezoning for apartments that triples the housing density, then in the loudest noise zone.

12 Rezoning for apartments in the loudest noise zone.

13 Rezoning for up to 300 homes on 64 acres.

14 Rezoning of 23 acres already zoned for apartments to allow more units in a high-noise zone and under the flight path of runway 23.

15 Rezoning of 15 acres increasing the density for a condominium project in the highest noise zone.

1982

16 Rezoning of 13 acres to a higher housing density in loudest noise zone.

17 Rezoning for apartments, then in an APZ, and in a high-noise zone.

18 Rezoning for a 12-unit apartment building triples the density in an APZ and high-noise zone.

19 Rezoning for apartments, then in an APZ, and in a high noise zone.

1983

20 Rezoning of 15 acres at a higher density for apartments in the loudest noise zone.

21 Rezoning of 4 acres from business to apartments in loudest zone and directly under the flight path of runway 14.

22 Rezoning of 8 acres from community business to apartments in the loudest noise zone beneath the approach to runway 14.

23 Rezoning of 1.24 acres from business to apartments in an APZ and high-noise zone.

1984

24 Rezoning of 1.5 acres for a denser apartment development in the loudest zone near the flight pattern for runway 23.

25 Rezoning of 10 acres from business to residential for single-family homes, then in an APZ, and in a medium-noise zone.

1985

26 Rezoning of 12 acres of farmland to apartments in the loudest zone.

27 Rezoning of 30 acres in medium- and high-noise zones.

28 Rezoning to allow a denser residential development, then in the loudest noise zone.

29 Rezoning of an acre, then in an APZ, and in the loudest

noise zone for apartments less than 2 miles from the ends of runways 5 and 23.

30 Rezoning of 8 acres to allow up to 123 apartment units in an APZ and loudest noise zone.

31 Rezoning of 10 acres from business to apartment district where jet noise is "unacceptably high."

32 Rezoning of 2 acres for condos in the loudest noise zone.

MAY 22 - A Navy A-6E bomber skids across Oceana Boulevard, killing two Navy pilots and a woman in a car. It's the first time a civilian dies in a jet crash at Oceana.

33 Rezoning of 2 acres from business to hotel for a proposed 96-unit hotel.

1987

34 Rezoning of a 148-acre farm for a proposed 444-home subdivision partly in the loudest noise zone under the landing pattern for runway 32. (The owner later sold the property for the city's Corporate Landing Business Park.)

35 Permit for a day care in the loudest noise zone under the landing pattern for runway 23.

AUG. 31 - Navy warns that development threatens Oceana's future.

1988

36 Rezoning of nearly an acre from business to apartment district for a group home in an APZ and the loudest noise zone.

1989

37 Rezoning for apartments, then in an APZ, and in a medium-noise zone.

38 Rezoning of 16 acres to a higher density for up to 153 apartments in an APZ and loudest noise zone.

39 Rezoning of 13 acres to a higher density for a 96-unit apartment complex in an APZ and the loudest noise zone.

1993

40 Rezoning of industrial land for a single-family home in the highest noise zone directly under an Oceana flight path.

41 Permit allowing more mobile homes in the loudest noise zone at a trailer park.

42 Permit for a bingo hall in the loudest noise zone and lying under the landing pattern of Oceana's busiest runway.

AUG. 23 - A year after Oceana escapes a base realignment and closure scare, the City Council adopts a noise-disclosure law and requires insulation in new homes built in noise zones - more than 16 years after the Navy began requesting it.

1995

OCT 10 - City manager writes letter raising no objections to a developer's request for federal tax credits to finance a 174-unit apartment complex in loudest noise zone on Harpers Road.

43 Permit granted to expand a group home in an APZ and the loudest noise zone.

2000

44 Rezoning for an independent living facility for seniors on 6.2 acres in a medium-noise zone and under a flight pattern.

45 Rezoning of 1 acre from single-family to apartments under the flight path to one of

Oceana's busiest runways.

46 Rezoning of about 27 acres from agriculture to single-family homes under the flight path flown by training pilots.

2002

DECEMBER - The Defense Department, without telling the city, adopts a policy to oppose new housing in all noise zones around military air bases

2003

JUNE 27 - Navy officials meet with Planning Commission to explain a new policy opposing homes in jet-noise zones.

47 Rezoning of 1.5 acres of farmland for two single-family lots in a low-noise zone.

48 Rezoning for a 10-building, 90-unit condo project in an APZ and medium-noise zone, in the first major test of the Navy's new policy.

DECEMBER - The council agrees to a land use study with the Navy in hopes of ending development disputes.

2004

49 Rezoning of 5 acres in a medium noise zone for 17 single-family homes.

50 Rezoning of 474 acres of farmland partially in a low-noise zone for 490 homes.

MARCH 23 - Council indefinitely defers rezoning of three development proposals in noise zones.

51 Rezoning approved for a 20-unit condo in a medium-noise zone.

SOURCES: City of Virginia Beach, Navy
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The Virginian-Pilot

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