

Roar of fighter jets from Key West base pits residents against Navy

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U.S. Navy

An F-18 Super Hornet from the Evaluation Squadron Nine based in China Lake, Calif., enters the break at Naval Air Station Key West during training.

For many who live and work near Naval Air Station Key West, where fighter jet pilots train year-round, the “sound of freedom” has been brain-rattlingly loud since the arrival of the F-18 Super Hornets.

The super-noisy fighter jets created a 10-year battle between the Navy and its neighbors. There have been many complaint calls to the base, zoning disagreements over new development, a county-issued “cease and desist” resolution, claims the Navy committed fraud and even a resident-led crusade with a website: stoptheplanes.com.

Several base commanding officers have come and gone without finding a way to keep the peace with Monroe County and the community while training pilots and crews in air-to-air combat and carrier

landings.

But now it appears the battle is about to come to an end with the conclusion of a \$1.5 million, three-year, federally required environmental impact study that determined that the next generation of aircraft, including the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter that will replace the Super Hornet in the next few years, will not significantly affect wildlife or residents.

Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus soon will select one of the final report’s four options, which range from the status quo, with the introduction of no new-model aircraft, to allowing the new aircraft and up to 9,500 more “training operations” per year. The report recommended the choice that allows the new aircraft and up to 4,500 more training operations per year.

Over the past 10 years, the Navy has conducted an average of 47,500 training operations a year out of NAS Key West.

Takeoffs and landings are considered individual training operations. So if one Super Hornet practices carrier landings on the runway, then a single flight could constitute several such operations.

Still, said former Monroe County Commissioner Kim Wigington, the report’s recommendations are “all disappointing.”

Retired Navy pilot John Hammerstrom, who served on the community oversight committee for the study, was more blunt: “I think the Navy has committed fraud.”

It’s not because he doubts the main conclusion of the 800-page study: The new aircraft will not be significantly louder than the current aircraft operating at the island base.

Hammerstrom said the fraud stems from the Navy’s falsely claiming that it properly evaluated the super-loud Super Hornets — which were used as the baseline to compare against the noise levels of the new aircraft — at NAS Key West.

“To say they did is a lie,” Hammerstrom said. “I don’t know how else to put it.”

Hammerstrom, who lives almost 100 miles away in Key Largo, spent hours researching the issue,

amassing a long paper trail of public documents that appear to back up his case and that he has posted on his blog, johnhammerstrom.com.

The Super Hornets first arrived at NAS Key West in 1999, when production models of the new jets were evaluated for tactical capability during a two-week detachment. They began regular training in squadrons at the base in 2003.

In 2004, an update to the land-use plan changed flight patterns over the affluent Key Haven neighborhood. To mitigate the problem, the Navy instructed its pilots to make sharper turns. That led to other neighborhoods complaining that the Navy would not do the same for them. That's when resident Paul Caruso began his mission to halt the Super Hornets with the stoptheplanes.com website.

But it was not until 2007, when the Navy and Monroe County were battling over whether to allow zoning for a proposed resort development near the base, that the Navy declared for the first time in Monroe County that a brief mention of the Super Hornets in the 500-page 2003 environmental assessment — called "Maintenance Dredging of Key West Channel and Truman Annex Harbor" — met the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA).

It was just three pages, and it was not included in the original draft. Just the noise technical study for the Joint Strike Fighter and other, quieter aircraft at NAS Key West was 169 pages long.

An afterthought?

Hammerstrom's paper trail seems to show the three-page section about the Super Hornets was introduced as an afterthought, sometime after the "Finding of No Significant Impact" was issued in April 2003.

Regardless of the timing, county consultant Michael Davis, a former deputy secretary of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who has done NEPA work for 33 years, including 23 with the federal government, said the section about the Super Hornets does not meet legal requirements.

Davis pointed out that in 2003, the Navy conducted a full environmental impact study for the introduction of the Super Hornet to the East Coast. The 1,000-plus-page document found substantial impacts on the communities in Virginia and North Carolina, where the home bases for the new jets would be located.

"The Navy needs to demonstrate some physical reason it is different at NAS Key West," Davis said a few months ago. "They'll have a challenging time doing that."

In the final environmental impact statement, which was published Aug. 2, the Navy did not directly tackle the legality of the Super Hornet's evaluation at NAS Key West, but instead took the position that the current study was done correctly, based on the current situation at the base.

"What we did is include the FA-18 Super Hornets as part of the existing condition," said Ted Brown, spokesman for the U.S. Fleet Forces Command, which oversaw the study. "It's a forward-looking document, not a backward-looking document. It incorporates the new aircraft being added, with the baseline expressed accurately."

But for many residents, it is like having a doctor determine a baseline of a patient's heart after the patient has had a heart attack.

In 2009, a frustrated Monroe County Commission passed a resolution requesting that the Navy "immediately cease and desist" the Super Hornet operations until more noise studies could be conducted. The Navy did not comply.

In 2011, the county rescinded the request in the hope that the new environmental impact study would address its many concerns, provide soundproofing assistance for homes in the affected areas, change flight patterns and use alternate runways that would take the sound more over water than over neighborhoods.

"The Navy had a great chance for a do-over," Wigington said.

But it did not prove to be the case.

"My take," said Monroe County Administrator Roman Gastesi, "is the three significant issues we

had were completely not addressed: the baseline, of course, the noise mitigation and using the alternative runway.”

The Navy says it does not use the alternative runway more often because it is shorter and because winds are usually more favorable on the main runway.

Mitigation options

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also expressed concerns about high noise levels, and recommended residential mitigation (home buyouts and soundproofing) and “greater use of other available runways as weather and airfield operations permit.”

The Navy’s response: “Congress has not given military services the authority to install soundproofing in homes and buildings that are not owned by the federal government.” But it did say it takes measures to restrict noise, including limiting late-night flying to mission-essential activities.

The Navy has its supporters in the Lower Keys, including one resident from Cudjoe Key who wrote this during the public-comment period on the environmental impact study: “Why do people buy, or build next to the runway, and then complain about the noise? ... Just be thankful that the flag on the planes is that of the USA.”

The Boca Chica airfield at NAS Key West was built for civilian use. But in 1943, during World War II, the Navy took it over when most of the surrounding area was undeveloped.

The Navy prizes the base, considered the premier location in the country to conduct air-to-air combat training, for its yearlong great weather, thousands of miles of unencumbered air space and tactical combat training center that allows pilots to review their training in real time.

Economic boost

And beyond being patriotic, Monroe County officials and residents know the value of the Navy, which has pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into the local economy.

Still, for the few thousand who are affected by the noise, a little relief would be welcome.

But unless Monroe County’s last-ditch efforts — which include pleading again for a face-to-face meeting with Mabus — come through, it is not likely to get any quieter.

Capt. Steve McAlearney, the new commanding officer at NAS Key West, said in a statement that the process to complete the study was a “very long and thorough one.”

“I won’t speculate on what the secretary of the Navy’s final decision will be,” he said. “But any of the three alternatives offered will help to maintain NAS Key West as an ideal military aviation training site for Navy tactical aviation as well as other Department of Defense and federal agencies’ missions.”

Wigington, who used to live near the base but moved, said she holds out hope that the Navy will provide more mitigation to alleviate the noise for her friends and former constituents.

“Honestly, it didn’t seem this bad when I moved in 12 years ago,” wrote Rose Jones, who grew up in a Navy family and now owns a home a few miles from the base in Big Coppitt Key.

“I wish I could enjoy open windows and the use of my porches and yards,” she wrote in her submission to the public comments on the environmental impact study.

“However,” she wrote, “I can live with the present situation, but increasing the activity level and/or the noise would make life in my neighborhood feel like living in a war zone.”