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By Hal Bernton, Seattle Times staff reporter

Navy rejects call for more monitoring of Growler jet training on Whidbey Island

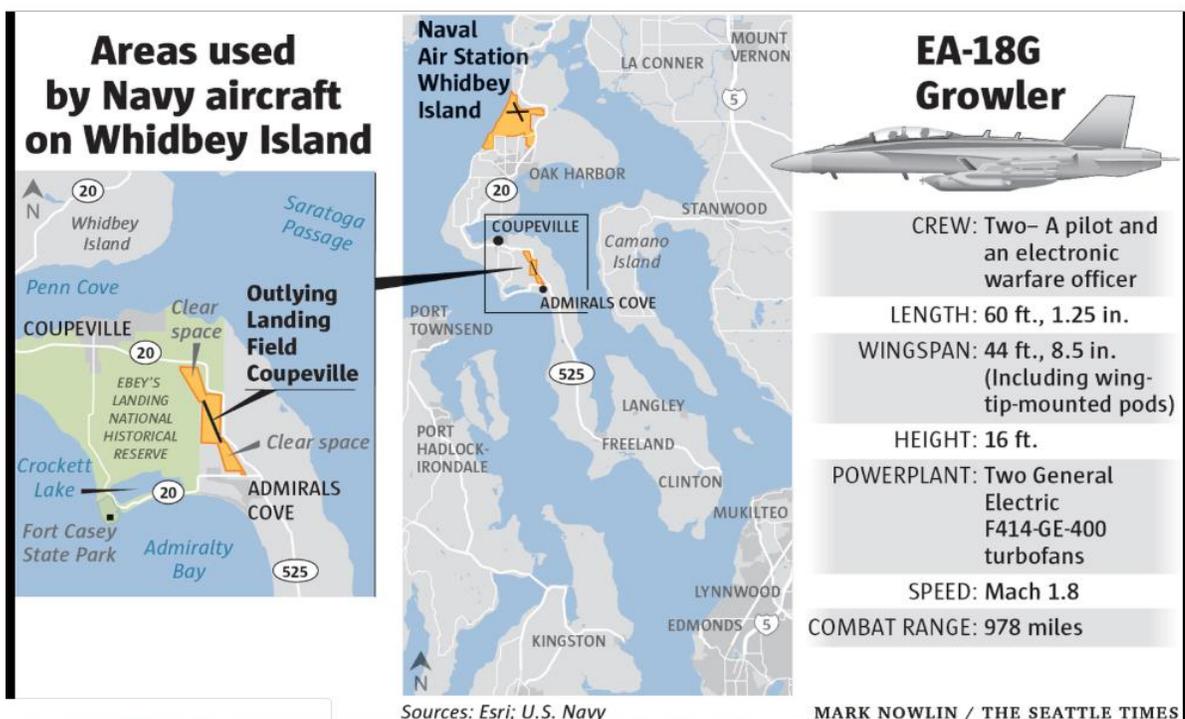


An EA-18G Growler takes off from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island during an exercise in 2016. (Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times)

Navy plans for expansion of Growler training flights has drawn strong opposition from many residents of central Whidbey Island, where Ebey Landing National Historical Reserve is located.

Navy Secretary Richard Spencer has rebuffed a request from a federal advisory council to undertake additional monitoring of the Growler EA-18G jets as they fly over Ebey's Landing National Historic Reserve on Whidbey Island.

Spencer's decision was detailed in a March 8 letter to the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. It marks the latest setback for central Whidbey Island residents opposed to a major expansion of low-flying Growler training as up to 36 aircraft are added to the fleet of 82 now based at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island.



Spencer noted that the Navy has already done modeling to determine the noise impacts, and that noise measurements also were taken by the National Park Service. “I decline to implement additional noise monitoring efforts” Spencer wrote in his letter.

The Whidbey Island Naval Air Station is home to the nation’s Growler aircraft, which jam communication and launch systems and play a leading role in the military’s electromagnetic warfare. The Navy, under the National Historic Preservation Act, had to consult with state and local groups over how more of the noisy Growler flights would affect the district that encompasses the 17,000-acre Ebey’s Landing area. But it was not required to reach an agreement.

Under the Navy’s preferred option, the airfield near Coupeville would have a total of 24,100 takeoffs and landings annually, a nearly fourfold increase. Most of them would be field carrier practices that involve brief touchdowns on the air field.

In early December, the Navy — citing a “fundamental difference of opinion — terminated talks with state and local groups about easing the impacts of expanding Growler training over the historic district.

On Dec. 19, the federal advisory council held a public hearing in Coupeville on Whidbey Island. Then, in February, the council’s Chairwoman Milford Donaldson sent an eight-page letter to the Navy that recommended additional noise monitoring. Donaldson also suggested other actions, such as tracking the impacts of the increased flights on tourism and investment, and possibly providing financial support for sound insulation in residential buildings.

“I hope you will see these recommendations as a wise path forward,” wrote Donaldson. The letter raised hopes among opponents of the Growler expansion.

“We are heartened that the (advisory council) ... review has brought to light the magnitude of the harms that will be caused by the Navy’s proposed undertaking,” said a statement released by the Sound Defense Alliance, a coalition of groups that have sought to curb the training flights.

Spencer, in his letter, noted that the Navy will help to fund a preservation project at Ebey’s Reserve — providing \$876,000 to the National Park Service to help refurbish the Ferry House, a landmark home built in 1860

But the Navy does not have the legal authority to pay for residential sound insulation for private homes, since such funding is only available to operators of public-use airports, Spencer wrote.

Allyson Brooks, the state Historic Preservation Officer, said in a Monday evening statement that she was “very disappointed” that the Navy rejected most of the federal advisory council’s recommendations.

NOTE FROM QUIET SKIES OVER SAN JUAN COUNTY:

The letter from Secretary Spencer can be seen at: https://www.achp.gov/sites/default/files/2019-03/Secretary%20of%20the%20Navy%20Response%20to%20ACHP.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1RNU-117iZ-7JY_CRILG1ez4BwldFEiIPUiby5gUAOA5ODhD8QCV90QSY

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