

# Bitterroot: The West's Magazine

## ‘We Are Collateral Damage’: More, Louder Jets Roil Military Communities

Levi Pulkkinen • Posted on September 13, 2019

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Whidbey Island, home to a Naval air station, is no stranger to military noise. But newer, louder jets that are flying more often are starting to take a toll on residents. | Illustration by Maddy Olson



It started with a familiar tone, the growl of a jet in flight, distant and forgettable. Background noise.

Then the whine arrived. The raw wail of metal slicing the dusky air over Washington's Whidbey Island.

The roar that followed was sound as force — penetrating, suffocating. Jangling pocketed keys. Touching bone.

“People who’ve heard about it, they think about airplanes, they think about jets, but they really can’t imagine it,” said Anne Harvey, standing on the porch in her backyard as Star, her aging black lab, lounged on the grass below. The dog, increasingly deaf, was oblivious to the growing growl.

“We have a great view that way looking towards Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains, and the sunset,” Harvey said, her voice rising as the next EA-18G Growler closed in. “That’s Ebey’s Landing. We live in paradise.”

Now, the whistle — the twin-engine Navy fighter banked, its left wing dipping as its engines fired. By this point, Harvey was yelling.

“Except for one thing!”

*Rip!* Forty seconds of noise followed as Harvey waited.

“They’ve been all over the map. They’ve been out over the prairie. I was talking to these people ...”

*Growl. Whistle. Rip!*

“It matters if we have two going or three going. Four is just horrible, because they’re passing every 15 seconds ...”

### *Growl. Whistle. Rip!*

For 90 minutes, the sounds carried on like that, as the Naval Air Station Whidbey Island-based planes swooped in and out of a small airstrip due east of Harvey’s home. Every pass sounded a little different, but residents like Harvey say that new, louder jets and their increased flight frequency have changed the rural island north of Seattle.

As the American military shifts its focus toward East Asia, weapons like the Growler are moved to bases in the West. New aircraft, designed with modern, technological warfare in mind, are replacing Cold War-vintage jets. And some residents, even those accustomed to sharing space with the military, worry their communities, environments, and even their health are at risk.

On Whidbey Island, the relationship between the armed services and the citizenry took a historically sharp turn in March, when the Navy signed off on plans that would quadruple the number of training landings at the airstrip near Harvey’s home. Small consolations — the Navy will try to avoid buzzing schools on days when standardized tests are being given, for example — weren’t enough to appease state officials who sued the Navy, or the congressional delegation now calling for an on-the-ground study measuring the noise created by Navy jets.

“Really, what’s happened [on Whidbey] and in the country more broadly is that the Department of Defense is not following the guidelines of the National Environmental Policy Act,” said Matt Mikkelsen, a soundscape researcher. “It all lends itself to people believing that they’re not operating in the public’s best interest.”

Sound moves in fits and starts across a landscape, shaped by air’s temperature and land’s gradient, said Lauren Kuehne, an ecologist at the University of Washington who studies noise pollution in public spaces. Subtle changes in the orientation between sound sources and recipients alters that flow wildly.

“Loudness,” Kuehne said, “is perceived.”

Whidbey Island residents have been living with jet noise since the 1940s. Opened during World War II, NAS Whidbey sits near the northern end of the narrow, curving 40-mile-long island. It is the primary base for the EA-18G Growler, a version of the Hornet fighter built to scramble or destroy enemy radar installations and eavesdrop on communications. Growlers and the plane’s predecessor, the EA-6B Prowler, listened to and jammed cell phone calls in Iraq and Afghanistan while supporting special operations forces, and participated in the air war over Libya.

The station and its cross of runways are located just north of Oak Harbor, a Navy town of 23,000 that is Whidbey’s largest urban center. The base sits in a shallow bowl, which presents a problem of topography: pilots cannot train for carrier landings if they have to dodge hills to reach the tarmac.

An airstrip nine miles south is the Navy’s solution. Naval Outlying Field Coupeville is a mile-long runway that sits on a plain south of Coupeville, a tourist and farming town of 2,000 that has retained its 19th Century air.

West of the airfield is Ebey’s Landing, a bluff and beach that form the jewel in a national historic reserve protecting nearly 20,000 acres scattered around the central bend of the disjointed island. Marbled murrelets, tufted puffins, and bald eagles — all protected species — hunt offshore while red knots, solitary sandpipers, and black oystercatchers stalk the beaches.

Jets practicing aircraft carrier landings take off from NAS Whidbey for the outlying field and circle overhead before cutting a low turn near Ebey's Landing and touching down. Then they rocket back up, rejoining a line of planes orbiting in a tight oval. On training days, this can continue for hours as jets return to base to fuel up or switch pilots.

Helen Price Johnson won her seat on the Island County Commission in 2008, the year before Growlers arrived on the island. Soon, complaints began trickling in. Residents had been told to expect a sound similar to the jet noise they'd dealt with for generations with the subsonic Prowlers. Instead, their world resonated with a new, lower tone.

"Ever since the Prowlers were replaced by the Growlers, those who are in the flight path have experienced a lot more vibration," said Price Johnson, whose district includes Coupeville. "This is a lower frequency, so it has a very different impact both on the vibrations in your home but also in your body. ... That's different from how the Navy had described it."

Under the plans approved in March, an island that heard 6,100 practice take-offs and landings each year at the Coupeville outlying field could now experience more than 24,000. Also expanding: the number of jets. Whidbey is now home to 82 Growlers, and will soon have 118 planes making 112,000 flights annually, including the landing practices and flights elsewhere.

Harvey lived with the Prowlers. When they were replaced with Growlers, she lived with them, too. Sometimes they pass directly above her home. The noise used to simply be a part of island life for the 35-year resident. An annoyance, sure, but not a crisis. The situation changed when the Navy upped the training tempo. On days and nights when Growler pilots are training, the jets rip over every 30 to 90 seconds.

"Nighttime, it's just horrible," Harvey said. "There was a night where I actually called [Senator] Maria Cantwell. They'd flown until 12:30 a.m. on a school night in early June. Our kids are grown, but all I could think about was families with little, little ones trying to get their kids to bed."

The Navy had been steadily expanding operations at Whidbey for years when, in March, it finalized plans to expand landing trainings on the island. That decision came after a yearslong environmental review meant to determine whether the health of the island and its residents would be hurt by the expansion. First announced in 2013, the process left critics like Larry Morrell feeling ignored.

"The Navy wasn't paying attention to anything the public was saying," said Morrell, a retired tech executive heading up the Sound Defense Alliance, a coalition hoping to constrain Navy expansion around western Washington.

Residents were perhaps most troubled by the Navy's dismissal of complaints from state Health Department officials, who warned that the level of noise described in "all recent reports" by island residents evidence "a threat to public health." State officials said noise exposure degrades mental and physical health, and can impair cognitive development in children. The oldest and youngest are particularly susceptible to noise's ill effects, as are people with sleep disorders or mental health issues.

In its study, the Navy stopped short of claiming there is no physiological harm caused by the Growler noise, concluding only that research on the issue has not shown a "causal and significant relationship between aircraft noise and health."

"Research conducted to date has not made a definitive connection between intermittent military aircraft noise and non-auditory health effects," authors of the Navy study stated. "The results of most cited

studies are inconclusive and cannot identify a causal link between aircraft noise exposure and the various types of non-auditory health effects that were studied.”

State public health officials argue, in essence, that a lack of evidence is not evidence. Beyond that maxim, they describe a growing body of research that connects noise and health effects. Some of the harms are obvious — hearing loss, interrupted sleep, disturbed communication — but researchers have also found evidence that increased noise adversely affects those with dementia and depression, and it is linked to higher rates of cardiovascular ailments and stroke.

Some who study noise also study quiet. Aural treasure hunters searching for the quietest quiet place struck gold in 2005, discovering what would become known as the “One Square Inch of Silence” near the Hoh River on the west side of the Olympic Mountains. There, in what he describes as the least noise-polluted place in the lower 48 states, Gordon Hempton found hours could pass without a manmade sound interrupting nature’s symphony. Hempton’s team recently founded Quiet Parks International, which promotes and certifies quiet places around the globe.

To advocates for quiet, the little slice of old rainforest is part of a cautionary tale. It is special, after all, because there is so little serenity left. Noise pollution, particularly from passing aircraft, fills most of America’s empty spaces.

“It’s so quiet, you just end up hearing your circulatory system and the hissing in your ears,” said Mikkelsen, the soundscape researcher who has worked with Hempton. “There’s just this sense of relief and this sense of awe at the natural environment. ... The number of places you can experience that is so few that it’s kinda hard to grasp.”

The Olympic Peninsula, sparsely populated and largely covered by the namesake national park, is an epicenter for natural quiet. But its tranquility is threatened by the same ramp up of Navy activity taking place on Whidbey Island. The Navy has been increasing its use of an electronic warfare training area extending from the western slopes of the Olympic Mountains into the Pacific Ocean.

“Every 15 minutes, we get the sound of a fighter jet,” Mikkelsen said. “I’ve been leading tours with people who think we’re experiencing a landslide, that there’s been an explosion.”

Kuehne, the University of Washington researcher, had recently finished a study of soundscapes in Seattle-area parks when she found herself intrigued by a complaint called into her office about an uptick in Growler flights from Whidbey Island. Kuehne had lived at Neah Bay on the peninsula’s northwestern tip, and she remembered the quiet. She picked up a draft of the Navy’s Environmental Impact Statement (the one that was finalized in March to so much consternation on Whidbey), and was shocked.

“I started reading some of the science they were citing, and I got kinda mad,” Kuehne said. “There’s just no science in it. Saying there’s no evidence is a cheat.”

When Kuehne realized the Navy did not intend to do any on-the-ground testing on the Olympic Peninsula, she secured \$8,000 in small grants to do some herself.

She and her mostly volunteer team recorded hundreds of hours of audio during 2017 and 2018, sampling at three sites around Olympic’s west slope. Combing the recordings, they found that 85 percent of the audible air traffic was of military origin, and that some sites were seeing 80 to 100 passes a day. According to Navy statements, most of the aircraft using the electronic warfare testing range fly from Whidbey.

“The take-home is that a single user, in this case the Navy, can have a disproportionate and dominant impact on an area,” Kuehne said.

Mikkelsen compared the Navy’s expansion to the seizure of public lands. “The Navy is essentially closing down areas of public land to do this training,” he said. “The experience of Olympic National Park is being taken away.”

Explaining its plan to expand training on the Olympic Peninsula, the Navy estimated in 2015 a 10 percent increase in the number of flights into the training area, which amounts to roughly one additional flight per day. The Navy is conducting another environmental review of its training operations in the Pacific Northwest. The final report, expected to be released in the summer of 2020, will stretch thousands of pages that, by law at least, should provide a “hard look” at the consequences of Navy activities in the region, including the electronic warfare testing range. The review is not expected to include any on-the-ground noise monitoring.

Tensions similar to the ones in Puget Sound and the Olympic Peninsula are arising across the West, as the Pentagon shifts its focus toward the Pacific. Bombing ranges in Nevada and Utah are expanding, as are airbases in Idaho, Alaska, and Utah. Colorado’s Fort Carson is the nation’s fastest growing Army installation. As they grow, patriotic sentiment, economic necessity, and community wellbeing come to compete.

In Idaho, environmental activists sued the Air Force in April after an environmental review of a fledgling urban warfare training program left them dissatisfied. Under the training scheme, F-15 Eagle fighters orbit Boise and seven other southern Idaho cities hunting faux troop convoys. When a target is spotted, pilots circling 10,000 to 18,000 feet above tag it with a laser.

The Air Force avoided conducting a full environmental review, finding instead after a cursory investigation that the trainings carry no significant impact. Attorneys for the activists contend war games began before the public was notified in February 2018.

“This is a permanent installation that’s going to affect the quality of life in Boise, and most people didn’t know it was coming,” said Sarah Stellberg, an attorney with Advocates for the West representing the Idaho activists.

Though the trainings are ongoing, no effort has been made to measure the actual noise they create, Stellberg said. To determine noise levels in its environmental review, the Air Force, like the Navy in Washington state, relied on modeling. The lawsuit, brought on behalf of a handful of Boise-area residents and the local chapter of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness, would force the Air Force to conduct a deeper inquiry if successful.

In Stellberg’s view, the Air Force not only failed to examine the impact circling F-15s have on the quality of life in Boise, but also on the wildlife in the area. Their path crosses a raptor sanctuary on the Snake River, as well as several wilderness areas.

While the damage caused by noise pollution isn’t as obvious as the harm caused by its chemical cousins, jarring noises disrupt animal behavior, Mikkelsen said. When noise is loud enough, owls can’t hunt. Grouse can’t communicate with their long-range, low frequency calls. New noise carries new stress into an ecosystem.

“Noise pollution effects an ecosystem in ways we’re really only beginning to understand,” Mikkelsen said.

Similarly, conservationists in New Mexico worry that an Air Force plan to expand F-16 Fighting Falcon training over the Gila River will negatively impact the watershed.

If the Air Force's preferred plan is approved, the 870 square-mile Gila Wilderness would see as many as 30 F-16 sorties a day, said Allyson Siwik, executive director of the Silver City-based Gila Resources Information Project. The fighters, stationed at Holloman Air Force Base, often fly low and fast, and sometimes break the speed of sound at higher altitudes.

Siwik worries what Air Force activity will do to the nation's first designated wilderness reserve.

"The danger to our community and public lands is much more than a not-in-my-backyard issue," Siwik said by email. "The wild beauty of New Mexico's last free-flowing river is worth defending. The country's oldest wilderness area is worth defending. The white-tailed deer, the coati, the black bear, the pocket mouse, they are all worth defending."

Noise-concerned citizens going after the military may only be in the initial stage of the fight. The coming decade will see Western skies grow even louder, as the Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Air National Guard continue their transition to an even noisier jet: the F-35 Lightning II.

The F-35 will step in for 1980s-vintage fighters that currently form the backbone of America's flying forces in the most expensive military acquisition effort ever. The timing of that transition is anyone's guess. The sheer number of planes — some 2,500 — would be an unprecedented lift even without the cost overruns, Beltway spending scandals, design flaws, and equipment failures that have plagued the F-35 project. The final plane is slated to be delivered in the late 2030s.

An Air National Guard study found stationing 18 F-35s at Boise International Airport would make 83 homes unlivable. Analysts examining an F-35 expansion at Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks, Alaska, determined noise would increase on and around the base. The Pentagon office tasked with managing military-civilian friction warned that F-35 flights at Utah's Hill Air Force Base may have to be rerouted to appease the public.

Sandwiched between Salt Lake City and Ogden, Hill manages the Utah Test and Training Range. That 2,624-square-mile range situated in rural northern Utah received approval to add nearly 1,000 square miles in 2017 at the urging of then-Senator Orrin Hatch. The Utah Republican, speaking during a community meeting on the F-35 expansion, acknowledged the aircraft would be noisier, but said he believed "the patriotic communities" near the base "will be supportive."

Members of the Washington congressional delegation show that patriotism only goes so far. Representative Rick Larsen, a Democrat representing Whidbey Island, and Senator Cantwell introduced language into the 2020 defense appropriations bill that would require the Navy and Air Force to conduct some real-time noise monitoring of jets. The Defense Department successfully opposed similar efforts previously, though Cantwell and Larsen's proposals were both included in the bills that passed their houses of Congress.

"As the House and Senate work out differences between their versions of the bill, I will continue to advocate for provisions to mitigate the impact of base operations on surrounding communities while ensuring the mission at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island remains strong and Navy pilots get the training they need," Larsen told *Bitterroot*.

In July, when the office of Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson took the unusual step of suing the Navy, attorneys for the state claimed that the Navy analysis of the Growler expansion was

flawed to the point of illegality. The Navy has not yet responded to the lawsuit, nor did Navy public affairs officers respond to repeated requests for comment for this story.

State leaders' decision to take on the Defense Department carries risk. The military is the second-largest employer in Washington, and a recent state Commerce Department estimate pegged Defense Department direct spending in the state at \$13.1 billion. The Growler, while manufactured elsewhere, is a product of Boeing, a power player in the state.

That defense largesse isn't spread evenly, even on Whidbey Island. Navy activity is centered around Oak Harbor, where Mayor Robert Severns condemned the lawsuit as "irresponsible and unjustifiable in the eyes of the majority of our citizens."

"Most island inhabitants do not consider Navy noise to be bad noise," Severns said in a letter to Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson. "It is not created on purpose and is not prolonged in nature. The majority of time there is no noise." Severns posited that the lawsuit might scare the Navy away from Puget Sound, leaving its people "without the protection and support that we value as a community and a state."

Price Johnson, the Island County commissioner, said the controversy has divided the island. Residents who share Severns' view rally to show support for the Navy, while those opposed to the expansion are disparaged as anti-Navy.

"That worries me," Price Johnson said. "We're such a small community, and there's no threat to the Navy base. It's well understood how important the Navy is for security and that the pilots need training. ... The pilots and their families live in these communities, too, and we want everyone to get a good night's sleep."

For her part, Harvey talks of being confronted in the supermarket because of her bumper stickers, one of which carries the silhouette of a Growler slashed with a red line. (Stickers professing a love of jet noise are common on the island's north end.) She gets accused of being anti-Navy for objecting to the flights that shake her home regularly.

Meanwhile, the community's future has been thrown into doubt, thanks to forces much larger than the in-fighting among residents on this tiny, once quiet island: the U.S. military, the defense economy, and the political system. Neighbors and relatives are moving away from the jets, relocating to the island's southern end or leaving Whidbey entirely. Homeowners worry for their nest egg. Outdoor labor has become a liability, a particular problem for farmers working the land.

"We feel like we are collateral damage," said Harvey. "[The military is] supposed to be protecting us, they're supposed to be on our side. We feel like they think we're the enemy."

## **Levi Pulkkinen**

Levi Pulkkinen is a frequent contributor to *The Guardian*. His work also appears in *US News & World Report*, *The Appeal*, *High Country News*, and *Next City*. He covered the Pacific Northwest for a decade with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*