

*David and Goliath:
The Fight To Site an Outlying Landing Field in
Washington and Beaufort Counties*

David and Goliath. That's the image residents of Washington and Beaufort counties frequently use to describe their fight against the U.S. Navy's plans to establish an outlying landing field, or OLF, for pilot training in those counties.¹

The metaphor not only reflects the indignation many residents feel over the military's proposed endeavor, but it also evokes what some see as the struggle's primary issue: whether the rights of one heavily populated, wealthy, politically powerful region in Virginia trump those of a sparsely settled, poor one in North Carolina. "We're at the bottom of every list when it comes to poverty, dropout rates, SAT scores, you name it," says Jeanne Saunders, who owns a 1,000-acre farm in Washington County near the OLF site. "You can't find a thing to recommend us to anybody. That's why we were considered a weak place to go to try to dump this thing."

U.S. Census numbers back up her economic picture, showing Washington County's 13,400 residents with an average annual household income of about \$29,000—about \$10,000 below the statewide figure. Only 69 percent of residents have a high school education compared to 76 percent statewide. The county's population decreased by 3 percent between 2000 and 2004.²

By contrast, the Navy's current takeoff and landing practice field near its Oceana base in Virginia Beach, Virginia, is nestled into a growing and already densely populated area of pricey homes and commercial developments. Virginia Beach's population increased 3.4 percent between 2000 and 2004, to 440,000. Ninety percent of the city's residents are high school graduates, and the city's median household income, at \$48,705, is nearly \$20,000 per year higher than that of Washington County residents.³ More than 100,000 residents live in a zone designated for jet-noise that is deemed unsuitable for future housing developments.⁴

The Census Bureau also reported 143,359 non-farm jobs in Virginia Beach in 2001, compared to 3,796 non-farm jobs in Washington County, and 15,307 in Beaufort County, which

contains a portion of the OLF acquisition area. For the Navy, it might seem a sensible choice to move the airstrip to a largely rural area of Eastern North Carolina that will for many years remain free from encroachment of residential and commercial development. The first mention of the OLF was by Robert J. Natter, commander of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Natter wrote in a letter to Virginia Beach area residents in October 2000: "It is precisely because of community concerns over jet noise that we are carefully exploring the establishment of an additional outlying field to accommodate Super Hornet training..."

Rear Admiral Christopher Weaver, during a speech before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on April 1, 2004, also cited light pollution from surrounding development as one problem the Navy has experienced at Oceana, along with limited capacity to expand. "The current site near Virginia Beach, VA is not as effective for night-time training due to ambient light sources, and lacks the capacity to handle a training surge such as experienced for the war on terrorism and Operation Iraqi Freedom," Weaver told the committee. "The Washington County site is about halfway between NAS Oceana and MCAS Cherry Point. We believe it is the best alternative from an operational perspective."

The U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee is chaired by Virginia Republican Sen. John Warner, a former secretary of the Navy. The Navy's funding request for acquiring property for the North Carolina OLF was \$61.8 million in fiscal year 2005, with an ultimate pricetag of \$185 million. The Hornet squadron base and operations would remain at Oceana and, according to Navy documents, the airstrip would bring 50 or fewer jobs to North Carolina. Meanwhile, local residents say more than 200 farm jobs would be lost.

An organization known as NO-OLF—North Carolinians Opposed to the OLF—is working to defeat the Navy's project. While the prospect of losing some 30,000 acres in taxable acreage has been a major catalyst for the opposition, other factors have also played significant roles.

Residents decry the potential loss of family farms, worry about negative impacts on local wildlife preserves, and warn of the danger migrating birds pose to pilots taking off and landing at the site, adjacent to the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, winter home to more than 10,000 swans and geese. Further, they argue that Virginia Beach homeowners knew about the jet noise when they purchased their homes, while Washington County residents would have the noise problem foisted upon them against their will.

Some say future prospects for the struggling area's economy are also at stake. Recent record-breaking real estate prices in coastal areas have led many second-home buyers and retirees to look toward the North Carolina "inner banks" for property, a trend that could one day be an economic boon for the Washington County area and other sites along the sounds and riverfronts.

Mark Fagan, an economist at Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama, who studies the economic impact of retirees, says the strategy is a smart one for rural counties. "These relocating retirees bring sizeable net worth—\$300,000 to \$400,000—and an annual income of \$35,000 to \$40,000 to their community of relocation," Fagan says. "Retirement development is a good, clean way to increase the tax base."

Not only would the jet noise detract from the area's retirement and tourism options, the limits on air space that are imposed surrounding any military range can diminish the ability of private and commercial flights into the area, according to aviation experts and officials at the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

In a letter to President George W. Bush, dated May 18, 2005, state Senate President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight outlined his opposition to the OLF. Basnight writes that he and his constituents "remain strongly opposed to this OLF because of the dramatic negative impact it will have on tax bases of these economically distressed counties, the danger in which it would put military pilots, the degradation that would occur in the environmental and wildlife com-

munity, and the effect on individual property owners."

The greatest danger to pilots presented by the Washington County site would be from migrating waterfowl. If sucked into a jet engine, birds can cause the engine to stall or even crash. The risk is considered greater for smaller jets such as military aircraft because they have fewer engines. For their part, Navy officials say migrating birds can easily be avoided by radar using the Bird Avoidance Model, or BAM, and by observing existing flight restrictions for National Wildlife Refuge properties. Environmental concerns can be mitigated by moving residents out of areas where noise levels would be greatest and by placing land-use restrictions on buffer lands surrounding the landing field that would protect the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary. And, Navy officials argue, the low population density and central location between Oceana and Cherry Point make the site ideal for training exercises. The site also would fit the nation's emerging national defense strategy by increasing surge readiness—or ability to deploy on short notice, Navy officials say.

Neither U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole (R-N.C.), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, nor Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) has taken a position on the OLF issue.⁵ Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue, who has been working to maintain good relations with the military through the Base Realignment and Closure proceedings, commends the citizen activists, although she personally doesn't oppose the OLF.

"I admire the folks who have spoken out against and for the OLF," Perdue says. "The people from my home county, Craven County, wanted the OLF to come. We passed resolutions urging the Navy to site the OLF in our home county. But I'm proud of what has gone on in Eastern North Carolina because I think communities must step up and be heard about their concerns.... The military and the Defense Department are used to folks across America having the right to say what they think should be done."
—continues

Three environmental groups and the Washington and Beaufort county governments have filed suit to contest the proposed OLF location, and on May 27, 2005, U.S. District Court Judge Terrence Boyle (Eastern District, N.C.) granted a motion for a summary judgment following arguments by their attorneys. Boyle, who has been nominated by President Bush for a higher U.S. Court of Appeals seat, ruled that the Navy had not completed its legal requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act to evaluate the impact of the OLF on the surrounding area. "The court has spoken," Roper Mayor Bunny Sanders, of Washington County, told the *Washington Daily News*. "David has won this battle."⁶ Opponents cheered the decision. The Navy appealed but announced it would reconsider sites in four other North Carolina counties—Bertie,

Craven, Hyde, and Perquimans. Meanwhile, the Navy has resumed land acquisition from willing sellers in Washington and Beaufort counties. It remains to be seen who will win the war.

—Renée Elder

FOOTNOTES

¹ Bill Sandifer, "Judge to Navy: No OLF," *Washington Daily News*, Washington, N.C., May 31, 2005, p. 1A.

² U.S. Bureau of the Census, American FactFinder, PopulationFinder, on the Internet at http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Jon W. Glass, "Navy has been tuned out, crowded out at Oceana," *Virginian Pilot*, Norfolk, N.C., Sept. 12, 2004, p. 1A.

⁵ Valerie Bauerlein, Rob Christensen, and Lynn Bonner, "Senators take no position on Navy field," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., April 4, 2005, p. 1A.

⁶ Sandifer, note 1 above.

Key Dates in OLF Site Selection

October 2000: Navy announces that new Outlying Landing Field (OLF) will be considered to mitigate noise complaints from Virginia residents concerned about jet noise from Oceana Naval Air Station and an OLF at Fentress Field.

August 2002: Navy releases draft Environmental Impact Statement listing a site in Washington and Beaufort counties near Plymouth, N.C., as one of two preferred sites.

September 2003: Navy announces decision to locate its proposed \$186 million OLF on 30,000 acres in Washington and Beaufort counties over the objections of local officials, affected land-owners, and environmentalists.

January 2004: Environmental groups and local government officials in Washington and Beaufort counties file suit in federal district court to block the OLF.

April 2004: U.S. District Court Judge Terrence Boyle grants a temporary injunction blocking further land acquisition or site preparation by the Navy after Washington and Beaufort counties, the National Audubon Society, the N.C. Wildlife Federation, and Defenders of Wildlife raise questions about the Navy's environmental study.

November 2004: In internal Navy emails made public in court proceedings, Navy officials indicate they were pressured to justify the OLF site in Washington and Beaufort counties after superiors had already decided to place it there, using the term "reverse engineering" to describe the process.

February 2005: Judge Boyle bans further work by the Navy in Washington and Beaufort counties, ruling that the Navy violated environmental laws in selecting its preferred OLF site.

June 2005: Navy announces it will study environmental impact at four additional North Carolina sites in Bertie, Craven, Hyde, and Perquimans counties.

September 2005: Federal Appeals Court upholds Boyle's ruling that the Navy did not properly assess the environmental impact of the field in Washington and Beaufort counties, but also directs Judge Boyle to allow the Navy to proceed with some tasks at the site while reassessing environmental impact.

November 2005: The Navy receives Boyle's modified injunction allowing the Navy to continue land purchases with willing buyers and conduct more tests at the site.