

Sounds of War: Navy Warplanes Producing Deadly Noise Around US Bases

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A Navy e-18 “Growler” jet refuels while in midair, June 15, 2010. The noise produced by Growlers averages at 81 decibels inside a home, which is louder than the noise level averaged by heavy truck traffic. (Photo: [US Navy](#))

“This is a public health emergency that is literally killing people.”

This stark, shocking warning about the US Navy’s war-gaming in the Pacific Northwest comes from Dr. James Dahlgren, a doctor of occupational and environmental medicine who is also a diplomat of the American Board of Internal Medicine.

He spoke with Truthout about how Navy warplanes flying in and out of Naval Air Station (NAS) Whidbey Island, as well as the Navy’s OLF [Outlying Field] Coupeville in Washington State’s Puget Sound, are generating chronic exposure to noise levels well in excess of 80 decibels.

To provide an idea of relative loudness of sounds: A vacuum cleaner is 70 decibels, heavy truck traffic is around 80 decibels, a chainsaw is 90 decibels, and being within approximately 100 feet of a jet engine is 140 decibels. Exposure to 140 decibels may cause immediate and permanent hearing damage or loss, as well as bleeding from the ears.

In communities nearby the Navy airfields, noise levels from the Navy’s E18 “Growler” warplanes have been recorded that regularly reach 130 decibels, and shockingly, even average 81 decibels *inside* residential homes.

The human health impacts from these levels of chronic jet noise include hearing loss, immune toxicity, insomnia, stroke, heart attacks and even death.

“The first time I heard the Growlers, in August 2012, they started flying over my house, and I developed a cardiac arrhythmia on the spot and had to go to the ER,” retired lawyer Ken Pickard, who lives on Whidbey Island, told Truthout.

Pickard is the executive director of [Citizens Of Ebey’s Reserve](#) (COER), a group that describes itself as “committed to closing OLF Coupeville and removing the EA18G Growler from North Puget Sound.”

OLF Coupeville is a Naval military airport located two miles southeast of Coupeville, Washington, a small town on Whidbey Island.

Pickard is a third-generation Coupeville resident, who realized after his trip to the ER: “I realized if I wanted to continue to live here, we needed to do something to stop this, so we started COER.”

Growing numbers of US residents are finding themselves in the firing line of domestic military expansionism, whether it be living in [areas subjected to chronic, harmful jet noise](#), or having their [fishing areas disrupted and polluted](#) by Naval war gaming exercises. For many, the issue could literally be a matter of life and death.

Major Health Crisis

The impacts of noise pollution are often underestimated. Its effects span a broad range of health issues, many of which don't seem connected with sound or hearing at first glance.

“This is a major health crisis caused by noise, and that's why it's so hard for people to understand,” Pickard said. “We first thought it was just hearing loss as an issue, but there are several very real life-threatening issues [that result from] living with this.”

Karen Bowman, an occupational and environmental health specialist of over 25 years, empathizes with Pickard and all those who are suffering health impacts from the chronic jet noise in their area.

“When people hear intense jet noise at the levels they are around OLF Coupeville, as well as around numerous other military bases in the country, our bodies go into functions that cause hypertension, increased triglycerides, lack of sleep, anxiety, lack of enough REM and other negative impacts,” Bowman told Truthout. “Several studies show that the higher the decibels and the longer the hours, the higher potential for increased myocardial infarction, hypertension, anxiety and other issues.”

While the situation at Coupeville, Washington, might seem like an anomaly, chronic exposure to jet noise levels is an issue for hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions, of people in the US. And the situation in Coupeville has implications for anyone and everyone living near an airbase anywhere in the country.

Pickard, whose group has brought a motion for a preliminary injunction against the Navy, believes the issue boils down to this: “The question is, can the military be allowed to willfully and irreparably injure citizens in order to conduct their training?”

The oral arguments in COER's motion for an injunction started in July in a federal district court in Seattle; it won't be until later this summer that we learn what the federal court decides. Meanwhile, millions of people across the country are being injured by chronic jet noise, and the crisis is worse than most people know.

Bowman explained it this way: “When you are trying to relax at night, we can't turn off our hearing like we can our vision by just closing our eyes. So if we're sleeping or trying to relax, jet noise heard is perceived as danger, and our bodies react instinctively.”

COER hired an expert to measure noise levels around OLF Coupeville, and Bowman spoke to the results of the study. She explained that people in the area around the Navy's airstrip are regularly exposed to 80 decibels and that at that level, OSHA requires training and hearing protection be worn, as part of a hearing protection program.

Maryon Attwood, a business owner in Coupeville, has recorded 130 decibels of Naval jet noise on the front porch and regularly records noise of 80-85 decibels inside her home.

When the jets fly over her family's home, "We stop doing whatever we were doing in living our lives, take immediate actions to protect ourselves, close all of the windows, and reach for our noise-reducing head phones."

This of course means they can no longer talk to each other or anyone else, and if the flights continue, they are forced to leave their home to escape the damaging jet noise, which of course becomes more challenging at night.

Attwood said that the experience of being exposed to this level of noise produced by the warplanes "is hard to describe."

She explained: "It vibrates windows, walls and water in the bathtub. You can feel it vibrating the insides of your body. It is frightening. It feels like you are going to die. The noise really is killing me, slowing and over time. And I am having physical symptoms of this impact, both physically and psychologically."

According to Dr. Dahlgren, Attwood's experience of feeling like she is going to die is not unfounded, according to several peer-reviewed medical studies: These levels of noise can, actually, cause death.

"The cardiovascular system is at risk," he explained. "Noise excites a classic stress response, because historically humans and other mammals are hard-wired to respond to noise as danger. So when loud noise occurs, the stress response causes an increase in blood pressure and heart rate and alertness. It is a basic biological reflex. So if I were to put a blood pressure cuff on you and expose you to those noises, your blood pressure would go up."

And if the noises we are exposed to occur abruptly, as when a Growler, the single loudest aircraft ever manufactured, flies near our home, the negative health response Dahlgren refers to becomes even more accelerated.

"Approaching Levels ... That Would Kill People"

A peer-reviewed study titled, "[Acute circulatory effects of military low-altitude jet noise](#)," published on the US National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health website, tracked Israeli jet fighters as they took off and landed over homes nearby airstrips in Israel. The situation, in many ways, mirrored what people on Whidbey Island near the military airstrips are exposed to.

"The effect on blood pressure was devastating," Dahlgren said of the study. "It is identical to what the COER people are experiencing. You can extrapolate from that Israeli study that this is very, very bad for your cardiovascular system. There is a huge body of literature that gives evidence that noise of the urban areas is causing cardiovascular disease in the general population. It's a ubiquitous adverse effect on humans."

Dahlgren also noted how the nervous system is greatly impacted and said the jet noise interferes with sleep patterns. He pointed out that lack of sleep can lead to anxiety and depression, making the Whidbey Island flights, which often continue past midnight, particularly harmful.

According to Dahlgren, people, and especially children, also develop a psychological response to the noise, and it interferes with their ability to learn.

He also cited a study titled, "[Acoustic Noise as a Non-Lethal Weapon](#)," which discusses the damaging effects of noise-weapons that have been used by the military and police and said that it is important to note that the French government did studies using 140 decibels of sound as "a weapon to kill people."

"If you are exposed to below-audible levels – very low [frequency] levels but at 140 decibels – sound waves can actually fracture the liver," Dahlgren said. "If you look at their [sound level] studies from Whidbey, these jets generate sub-auditory effects that were also reaching 140 decibels. People describe that their internal organs are vibrating as these planes fly over their homes, and that is exactly what is happening."

The low rumblings that accompany the loud jet noises are basically lower-frequency sound waves that actually cause internal organs to vibrate, causing the damage Dahlgren is speaking of, even if the rumblings don't *sound* loud.

"There is another study from Holland from commercial jets landing in Amsterdam," Dahlgren continued. "There is an increase of heart attacks, and I postulate that on Whidbey, there are probably people who've had heart attacks and strokes from this and have died. We have to remember that on Whidbey, the levels of noise you're looking at, up to 120-30 decibels – you are approaching levels that the French had decided would kill people."

The Navy's Response

Truthout requested comment from the Navy about the noise issue on Whidbey Island and contacted Michael Welding, the Navy's public affairs officer in Oak Harbor, on Whidbey Island. When asked if the Navy was aware of the noise problem and all of the complaints about it coming from residents around Whidbey Island, Welding stated: "Although the Navy disputes a number of assertions that have been made about the noise impacts experienced as a result of flight operations at OLF Coupeville, the Navy also understands that some people are concerned about those operations. The Navy strives to be a good neighbor and works with the community to attempt to address those concerns. The Navy will conduct a review of the available literature on alleged health effects from aircraft noise as part of the Environmental Impact Statement that is being prepared now."

However, members of COER dispute Welding's claims that the Navy is working with the community to attempt to address their concerns.

"We've had no dialogue with the Navy," Pickard told Truthout. In fact, he said, he has been unable to get any response from the Navy whatsoever.

"Last year, some of our members went to DC and met with the deputy director of Environmental Health at the Pentagon, and we presented our health info, which we thought would be of great interest, but they already knew it all," he said. "They knew what this does to people. They basically thanked us for coming and sent us on our way. They'd done the research; most of our information comes from them, but they just don't care."

Cate Andrews, a board member of COER, was equally exasperated by the Navy's lack of responsiveness.

“The response we’ve gotten from the Navy is basically no communication,” she said. “We’ve sent them hundreds if not thousands of emails, faxes and letters, and we’ve had total nonresponse. It’s been frustrating beyond comprehension. The message we are given by this is that citizens don’t matter to the Navy, or the politicians.”

Truthout asked Welding what the Navy was doing to address the noise issue.

“While our mission continues, we work with our local communities to modify flight operations to minimize our impact when possible,” Welding said. “We meet often with elected officials, school representatives, and community organizations and groups. When schools notify us about their testing schedules, we adjust our flights if weather conditions allow. During weekends, we minimize flights at OLF Coupeville to limit disturbance. Additionally, in an attempt to make the public more aware of our planned operations, we publish flight schedules for OLF Coupeville on our Facebook page and in the Whidbey News Times a week in advance. We also send this flight schedule to other area media outlets, which may or may not choose to publish the information.”

Attwood and Pickard acknowledged the Navy is publicizing its flight schedules, but said that this does nothing to alleviate the extreme noise pollution and the health impacts it is causing in their communities.

Dr. Dahlgren explained that he had sent the Navy scientific studies addressing the noise issue but had also never received a response.

“You’re in a whole new ball game of absurdity when they try to say that this [jet noise] is not going to hurt anyone,” he said, about a Navy claim that the jet noise is harmless to communities surrounding the airstrips. “They’ve not even bothered to look at the literature I’ve sent them. It’s as if they don’t want to be burdened by the facts.”

Dahlgren concluded that the only reasonable solution for the Navy would be to fly their warplanes in areas not populated by humans and animals.

“Bottom line is they need to build an airstrip somewhere else outside of any population areas,” he said. “They are just using their bullying tactic to get their way, that’s my impression.”

A Social Justice Issue

According to David Mann, an attorney for COER, Navy aircraft using one of the flight paths on Whidbey Island arrive “directly over, and at well under 1,000 feet, over more than 1,000 homes, including the Admirals Cove neighborhood.”

“The Navy can’t come back and say they are not exposing people to over 80 decibels,” Bowman told Truthout. “They are, and those people are not required to wear hearing protection.”

Bowman feels that this level of noise pollution, the deleterious health impacts, and the Navy’s bellicose response to requests to change the situation are “a social justice issue.”

“Because you don’t see the Bill Gates and the Rockefellers living across the street from the airport or OLF Coupeville,” she said. “There are other issues besides noise, and there is jet fuel, dust and other harmful particulates as well. All of it makes for a huge human health

issue.”

The US EPA defines noise as an “unwanted or disturbing sound.” Sound becomes “unwanted” when it interferes with normal life activities such as sleeping and communicating, as well as when it disrupts or diminishes one’s quality of life.

The EPA sets community noise standards at 70-dBA. Washington state has stricter standards and lists the maximum allowable noise in a residential setting at 55dBA, with the limit going down to 45dBA between 10 pm and 7 am.

Nevertheless, the military uses “national security” as the primary excuse for remaining exempt from the laws and regulations that apply to everyone else.

“The military can usurp these [regulations], and they are torturing the citizens that they have been hired to protect,” Bowman said. “Noise is becoming an ever-increasing issue. I see noise at these levels as toxic.”

When the US used to conduct above-ground nuclear testing in Nevada, people living downwind from the tests became irradiated by the fallout and developed dramatically increased rates of cancer. (They were referred to as “downwinders.”) Maryon Attwood pointed out that years of concerted organizing and resistance on a community level eventually succeeded in stopping the above-ground nuclear tests in the US.

“The DOD no longer tests nuclear bombs above ground because we know the harm it causes, even though we can’t see it,” Attwood said. “This has similarities with our situation. We know that the noise levels of the military supersonic jets cause harm to people. Yet they keep doing it, and we are damaged as a result of their training by something that can’t be seen but harms us in our own homes. We’re not downwinders, we’re underneathers. The precedent of causing harm to civilians by the nuclear testing was stopped when the harm was acknowledged.”

Bowman believes that people should not be afraid to stand up and advocate for their health and use their civil rights to address this issue.

“This is an opportunity where we can say we know you do this to protect us, but over the years it’s gotten worse and needs to be changed,” she said. “People must stand up and question this and demand change.”

Pickard said that COER has filed for an injunction to stop the flying at the OLF field, pending a health impact study and a completed Environmental Impact Study on these issues.

“We are just working to prevent irreparable injury to civilians living in their fly zones,” he said. “But the Navy hasn’t done any studies on the health impacts.”

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