

CECIL FIELD'S TIME IS UP, BUT OCEANA ISN'T IN THE CLEAR

Louis Hansen
The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA)
December 31, 2006

Although the federal base closure commission disbanded last March, its ability to relocate Oceana Naval Air Station's fighter jet squadrons officially ends today.

Florida leaders will not meet today's deadline from the Base Realignment and Closure Commission to return the former Cecil Field - where Oceana's planes would have gone - to military service.

Oceana appears safe, at least for now.

But this BRAC round could leave a stain on the future of naval aviation in this region. Old and new competitors have lined up to attract Oceana-based units. And despite new restrictions on development around the base, growth issues are not fully resolved.

"This BRAC round was just the first challenge," said Joe Bouchard, a retired Navy captain and military analyst. "The worst is yet to come."

Bouchard said the threats to Oceana's long-term viability will come from several directions: future base closing rounds, changing Navy priorities, and other states seeking to obtain military assets.

"The competition is never ending," said Bouchard, executive director of the Center for Homeland Security and Defense at ZelTech in Hampton.

Jacksonville, Fla., officials rejected a multimillion-dollar subsidy that would have readied Cecil Field for the Navy's return. Then city voters in November turned down a referendum measure that would have forced the city to comply with BRAC's conditions for Florida to get Oceana's jets by today's deadline.

This month, congressmen from Texas and South Carolina announced their intentions to pursue operations and planes from Oceana.

Five Texas congressmen and the state's two U.S. senators sent a letter last week to Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael G. Mullen requesting a transfer of Virginia Beach-based training operations to Kingsville Naval Air Station near the Gulf of Mexico.

Navy officials rejected calls to move a training squadron earlier this year.

U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., this month proposed Beaufort Marine Corps Air Station as an alternative site should the Navy ever decide to move F-18s from Oceana.

The offer is not meant to prey on Virginia Beach, Wilson said, but a reaction to the military's continuing concern about encroachment by development and the resulting safety concerns.

Opening the discussion of relocating Oceana's jets "was a decision by BRAC," he said in an interview.

Wilson acknowledged that Beaufort would need substantial upgrades to win the jets. But he said the community, which includes fast-growing resorts in Hilton Head, can accommodate the additional families and infrastructure improvements that would come with an expanded base.

The BRAC decision to give Florida the opportunity to vie for Oceana's jets has forced Virginia to change its approach to protecting its military assets. State legislators passed several new measures in 2006 to restrict development around the base.

Virginia Beach, working with a regional committee that included the Navy, endorsed a plan to limit development to industrial and other low-density uses.

Bouchard said recent restrictions on development will help make the base safer and ease encroachment, but he noted that development around the base increased significantly between the BRAC rounds in 1995 and 2005.

"That's what got Virginia Beach in trouble," he said. "Actions speak louder than words."

Regional leaders also created the Hampton Roads Military and Federal Facilities Alliance. The regional agency's goal is to help build more consistent relationships with base commanders and seek opportunities to attract military assets.

Frank Roberts, executive director of the agency and a retired Navy F-14 pilot, said the region needs to make sure "that Oceana is the place the Navy wants to be."

Roberts said the region also needs to take a long-term view and prepare for the next generation of military aviation, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. The Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps will use similar versions of the future fighter jet. The new fighter would replace older models of the F-18.

The F-35 is still in the testing phase, and no bases have been chosen to host its squadrons.

Bouchard said he has seen hints that the strike fighter could be based somewhere other than Hampton Roads' two primary air stations - Oceana and Langley Air Force Base in Hampton.

The base closing commission ordered the three service branches to set up a training hub for F-35 fighters at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.

Bouchard said that could supplant similar F-18 operations performed at Oceana.

A failing grade given to Virginia by the Department of Defense inspector general could also be used against the base in future force structure decisions.

The inspector general ruled in May that Virginia did not live up to all the conditions set by the commission for Oceana to remain a master jet base, opening the door for Florida to return Cecil Field to the military.

"It's a weakness," Bouchard said. "It's not fatal. It can be overcome."

Even as the deadline passes, the community debate has continued.

Several months after their commission had disbanded, the commission staff posted a final letter on its Web Site opposing the continued operations at Oceana.

Amanda Medlock, a Navy wife living in Virginia Beach, begged the commission to close Oceana because of safety problems, encroachment and a perception that "this city shuns the military."

In an interview, Medlock said she feels the Navy community has been unfairly blamed for jet noise. Medlock, a Florida native, has accepted that she and her husband will spend at least two more years stationed at Oceana.

Still, she said, "I just wanted to have my voice heard."