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WAR & PEACE

Explosions and Crashes: Military Aircraft Are a Threat to US Civilians

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On April 3, a third military aircraft crashed in just one 24-hour period. That incident happened when a [Marine Corps helicopter attempted to land \(https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/us-marine-corps-aircraft-incident/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/us-marine-corps-aircraft-incident/index.html) in Djibouti, and occurred shortly after another [Marine Corps helicopter crashed \(https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/us-marine-corps-aircraft-incident/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/us-marine-corps-aircraft-incident/index.html) nearby the Naval Air Facility El Centro in California, killing four crewmembers. Then, also in that same 24-hour period, a [Marine Corps Harrier jet crashed \(https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/us-marine-corps-aircraft-incident/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/us-marine-corps-aircraft-incident/index.html) during its takeoff from the Djibouti-Ambouli International Airport.

On April 5, a [US Air Force Thunderbird jet crashed \(https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/f-16-jet-crash-air-force/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/f-16-jet-crash-air-force/index.html) at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, killing the pilot. This was the third Thunderbird jet crash in just the last two years, and became the fourth crash of a military aircraft in less than 36 hours.

This January, the [US military even had to apologize to Japan \(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/09/national/u-s-apologizes-japan-repeated-military-accidents/\)](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/09/national/u-s-apologizes-japan-repeated-military-accidents/) over repeated military accidents in that country. Following a protest lodged by Tokyo against Washington over two forced landings by US military helicopters in just a few days' time in Okinawa, US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis was forced to apologize to his Japanese counterpart. [Truthout has reported \(https://truthout.org/news/item/43779-as-us-military-flies-overhead-okinawa-residents-live-under-a-cloud-of-fear\)](https://truthout.org/news/item/43779-as-us-military-flies-overhead-okinawa-residents-live-under-a-cloud-of-fear) on how residents in Okinawa living near US military bases live in chronic fear of crashing US military aircraft.

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This, coming on the heels of the fact that in 2017 alone, the number of US military aircraft [emergencies and incidents over Japan more than doubled \(https://www.rt.com/usa/416798-military-aircraft-emergencies-japan/\)](https://www.rt.com/usa/416798-military-aircraft-emergencies-japan/). Including two accidents that happened just outside of Japan, on average, a little more than one accident occurred every two weeks during that year.

Other threats that accompany living near a US military base include the likes of drunken soldiers killing civilians while driving multi-ton sized vehicles through cities. This happened in Okinawa, where on April 11, [a Japanese court sentenced a US Marine \(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/11/national/naha-district-court-sentences-u-s-marine-four-years-fatal-drunken-driving-crash-okinawa/\)](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/11/national/naha-district-court-sentences-u-s-marine-four-years-fatal-drunken-driving-crash-okinawa/) based there to four years in prison for killing a 61-year-old man when the Marine crushed his vehicle while driving drunk.

The US military maintains bases in at least [80 countries \(http://fpif.org/us-military-bases-80-countries-must-close/\)](http://fpif.org/us-military-bases-80-countries-must-close/) around the world.

The US military is held as a sacred cow in the US. Anyone questioning the military, or even requesting it to take more safety precautions, is labeled “unpatriotic” and often attacked.

However, the threat to US citizens from an increasing **[US domestic military expansion](https://truthout.org/news/item/29524-domestic-military-expansion-spreads-through-the-us-ignites-dissent)** (<https://truthout.org/news/item/29524-domestic-military-expansion-spreads-through-the-us-ignites-dissent>) is more real than ever.

Domestic Dangers

This March, a **[US Navy F/A-18 warplane crashed](https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2018/03/14/super-hornet-crashes-near-key-west/)** (<https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2018/03/14/super-hornet-crashes-near-key-west/>) off the coast of Key West, Florida, killing its two crew members.

A fleet of more than 80 similar warplanes is stationed at Naval Air Station (NAS) Whidbey Island in Washington State. Using this base as one example, the potential of a catastrophe for anyone living in proximity to a military base is high.

[To see more stories like this, visit “Planet or Profit?”](https://truthout.org/news/item/22419-planet-or-profit) (<https://truthout.org/news/item/22419-planet-or-profit>)

In December 2016, a **[canopy explosion before takeoff](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/military/sd-me-growler-explosion-20161229-story.html)** (<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/military/sd-me-growler-explosion-20161229-story.html>) of one of the warplanes there critically injured the crew of two.

More recently, this January, a mechanical malfunction caused icing within the cockpit and **[forced pilots to fly blindly](https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2018/02/23/flying-blind-and-freezing-navy-investigating-terrifying-ea-18g-growler-flight/)** (<https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2018/02/23/flying-blind-and-freezing-navy-investigating-terrifying-ea-18g-growler-flight/>) in temperatures 30 degrees below zero; the pilot used a smart watch to navigate, otherwise the aircraft may well have crashed.

Since May 2010, on average, **[every six days](https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-navy/2017/06/15/the-navy-s-30-day-review-reveals-few-answers-for-cockpit-air-problems/)** (<https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-navy/2017/06/15/the-navy-s-30-day-review-reveals-few-answers-for-cockpit-air-problems/>) there is what the military calls “physiological episodes,” wherein Navy pilots experience oxygen deprivation due to mechanical malfunction. While the Navy claims the issue is under control, to date, it is unclear if this problem has been resolved.

In just the last year, there have been at least **[two mechanical failures](http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-growler-incident-20180228-story.html)** (<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-growler-incident-20180228-story.html>) with NAS Whidbey warplanes that resulted in emergencies.

In addition to the ever-present danger of aircraft crashes, **[jet noise is well documented](https://truthout.org/news/item/32045-sounds-of-war-navy-warplanes-producing-deadly-noise-around-us-bases)** (<https://truthout.org/news/item/32045-sounds-of-war-navy-warplanes-producing-deadly-noise-around-us-bases>) to having deadly health impacts on humans and wildlife.

In communities nearby the Navy airfields, noise levels from the Navy’s EA-18G “Growler” warplanes have been recorded to 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.

Nearby NAS Whidbey, the Navy uses **[Outlying Field \(OLF\) Coupeville](http://citizensofbebysreserve.com/References/Files/citizens%20fact%20sheet%20FINAL%20for%20Print%5B1%5D.pdf)** (<http://citizensofbebysreserve.com/References/Files/citizens%20fact%20sheet%20FINAL%20for%20Print%5B1%5D.pdf>) for touch-and-go landing practice on a weekly basis. Touch-and-go landing practices are used to simulate landings on an aircraft

carrier, among other training exercises. When they do so, the warplanes **[regularly fly within 200-300 feet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfNjylHkco)** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfNjylHkco>) of residential homes near the airstrip.

Another danger stems from the fact that the runway itself is far too short. Being a WWII-era runway, it **[is 5,400 feet long](http://citizensofeyresreserve.com/References/Files/citizens%20fact%20sheet%20FINAL%20for%20Print%5B1%5D.pdf)** (<http://citizensofeyresreserve.com/References/Files/citizens%20fact%20sheet%20FINAL%20for%20Print%5B1%5D.pdf>)

The length of runway recommended for the type of Naval aircraft using it is 8,800 feet. There are at least three schools and hospitals located within one mile of the end of this runway, in addition to the fact that there are four schools located within one mile of the Navy's touch-and-go flight paths, along with around 400 private residential homes in the crash zone.

By comparison, two runways located at Naval Air Station Lemoore in California, are each 13,500 feet long. That base at least has a nearly 30,000-acre buffer area around it, whereas OLF Coupeville has a mere 800-acre buffer area. The longer runways and larger buffer areas are necessary as precautions in case of mechanical failures or crashes.

There are several hundred acres of bird-rich marsh area around OLF Coupeville, and within them are 16 kinds of birds that are large enough to create a serious collision hazard to the Navy's warplanes. **[According to the Air Force](https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=icwdmbirdcontrol)**

(<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=icwdmbirdcontrol>), the average number of bird strikes to military aircraft every single year is between 300 and 400, and the number **[reported by the Navy](http://www.public.navy.mil/NAVSAFECEN/Documents/media/magazines/approach/Approach-MECH_Vol_61_No2.pdf)** (http://www.public.navy.mil/NAVSAFECEN/Documents/media/magazines/approach/Approach-MECH_Vol_61_No2.pdf) between 1981 and 2011 is a staggering 16,000. **[More than half](https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=icwdmbirdcontrol)**

(<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=icwdmbirdcontrol>) of the bird strikes involving military aircraft involve fighters and trainers.

Currently, the Navy is proposing 35,500 low-altitude training flights over this marsh area.

Unregulated

The **[Navy claims](http://westcoastactionalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Welding-email-500-100-foot-zone.png)** (<http://westcoastactionalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Welding-email-500-100-foot-zone.png>) that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) allows it to fly down to 500 feet over rural areas, and 1,000 feet over urban areas, despite the fact that the **[FAA states clearly](https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/apl/noise_emissions/airport_aircraft_noise_issues/noise)**

(https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/apl/noise_emissions/airport_aircraft_noise_issues/noise), it is not allowed to regulate military aircraft operations.

The US Government Accountability Office published a study on January 18 of this year titled, "**[Homeland Defense: Urgent Need for DOD and FAA to Address Risks and Improve Planning for Technology That Tracks Military Aircraft](https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-177)**" (<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-177>)."

"Since 2008, the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of Transportation's Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have identified a variety of risks related to Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) Out technology that could adversely affect DOD security and missions," **[reads the report](https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-177)** (<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-177>). "However, they have not approved any solutions to address these risks."

Prevalent Reach

In Idaho alone, at least nine cities in the most densely populated area of the state are soon to be designated as an **Urban Warfare Training Range for the US military** (<http://www.idahostatesman.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/article205628554.html>).

There has been an **outcry of resistance** (<http://www.idahostatesman.com/opinion/readers-opinion/article206308434.html>) from civilians in Idaho, given that the aforementioned training actions would entail **more than 4,000** (<http://www.idahostatesman.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/article205628554.html>) three-hour-long low-level “gunfighter” flights over several cities there.

Protests (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/03/03/ben-and-jerrys-co-founder-ben-cohen-arrested/392588002/>) and outcry against military activities that are encroaching on civilian areas are becoming increasingly common.

Cate Andrews lives in the Puget Sound region of Washington State near a naval air strip. Along with thousands of others there and other locations throughout the Sound, Andrews is afflicted by health-endangering levels of noise from the Navy’s warplanes.

“The noise has impacted my life in every conceivable way,” she told Truthout. Andrews also expressed alarm about the possibility of Naval jet crash in her area. She said she feels it is likely to happen, it is just a matter of time.

Andrews, however, is fighting back. As a member of **Citizens for Ebeys Reserve** (<http://citizensofebeysreserve.com/>), a group of locals working to protect their communities from the dangers of living so close to a military base, she spends several hours daily answering calls from others complaining about the jet noise and other concerns, along with doing research about health impacts and dangers the Navy poses to her community. Andrews is actively involved in organizing others to resist the Navy’s harmful actions and willful neglecting of the safety concerns of the citizens they are, in theory, supposed to protect.

Even retired Navy personnel are outraged by what they are seeing.

“I served at [NAS] Whidbey for eight years,” Navy veteran Charlie Stephens told Truthout. “I retired in 1997, in large part because I had finally come to understand that there is no honor in dishonorable work, and I could no longer serve and maintain my integrity. In fact, it has long been true that it’s not possible to serve this country honorably.”

Stephens said that the military “doesn’t give a damn” about the damage it does, both at home and abroad, but that this “isn’t big news.”

“They’ve got a huge fraction of the population sucked into the nearly religious belief that the military is important to their safety ... it isn’t,” he added. “It’s for wrecking other countries and other cultures. Its core competency is death and destruction in the name of Wall Street, for the most part. Lt. General Smedley Butler was right in the 1930s when he said that war is a racket. A hugely profitable racket.”

In President Donald Trump’s budget for the 2019 fiscal year that has been submitted to Congress, estimated US military spending is **\$886 billion** (<https://www.thebalance.com/u-s-military-budget-components-challenges-growth-3306320>).

The stakes have never been higher

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Dahr Jamail (<https://truthout.org/authors/dahr-jamail/>)

Dahr Jamail, a *Truthout* staff reporter, is the author of *[The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption](https://www.amazon.com/End-Ice-Bearing-Witness-Disruption-ebook/dp/B079G4NJVD)* (<https://www.amazon.com/End-Ice-Bearing-Witness-Disruption-ebook/dp/B079G4NJVD>) (The New Press, 2019), *[The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1608460959?ie=UTF8&tag=dahjamsmiddis-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1608460959)* (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1608460959?ie=UTF8&tag=dahjamsmiddis-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1608460959>) (Haymarket Books, 2009), and *[Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1931859612?ie=UTF8&tag=dahjamsmiddis-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1931859612)* (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1931859612?ie=UTF8&tag=dahjamsmiddis-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1931859612>) (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from Iraq for more than a year, as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last 10 years, and has won the Izzy Award and the Martha Gellhorn Award for Investigative Journalism, among other awards. His third book, *[The Mass Destruction of Iraq: Why It Is Happening, and Who Is Responsible](https://www.amazon.com/Mass-Destruction-Iraq-Disintegration-Responsible-ebook/dp/BooML3KAN6)* (<https://www.amazon.com/Mass-Destruction-Iraq-Disintegration-Responsible-ebook/dp/BooML3KAN6>), co-written with [William Rivers Pitt](https://truthout.org/news/item/24170-from-the-desk-of-william-rivers-pitt) (<https://truthout.org/news/item/24170-from-the-desk-of-william-rivers-pitt>), is available now on Amazon. He lives and works in Washington State.