

Appendix G: Navy Airstrip Plan Hits Local Head Winds

Coalition Including Farmers, Hunters and Bird-Watchers Fights Deal Made in Washington

JOHN J. FIALKA, Wall Street Journal, 3-30-05

ROPER, N.C. -- When the Navy decided in September 2003 to build a practice-landing field for jets near here, one military planner described it in internal documents as a "political win/win." The move would reduce air traffic at fields in Virginia, where politicians were hearing complaints about excessive noise. North Carolina legislators saw an infusion to their economy.

That analysis may have been true for Washington, but the Navy didn't pay enough attention to local politics here. The plan was fought by a local bipartisan coalition including farmers afraid of losing their land, residents of Roper (population 600), bird hunters in the National Rifle Association, and National Audubon Society bird-watchers concerned about a nearby wildlife refuge.

Last month, a federal judge blocked the Navy from buying the land, stalling development of the airstrip. The Navy said it would appeal, but unless it wins in a higher court or persuades residents to back down, it will have to find another site.

It is a classic tale of horse-trading among national politicians creating unanticipated conflict back home. The genesis of this \$136 million project was a deal by the Navy, Sen. John Warner, (R., Va.), head of the Armed Services Committee, and Sen. Elizabeth Dole, (R., N.C.). Mr. Warner was facing thousands of constituent complaints about some of the military's noisiest jets landing near residential areas.

Sen. Dole said she would agree to a training field in North Carolina if two squadrons of the Navy's newest jet fighter-bombers -- \$57 million Super Hornets -- and their multimillion-dollar payrolls were shifted to a base near New Bern from Virginia Beach. A site 10 miles from Roper was chosen for the landing strip, partly because it was halfway between the Hornets remaining in Virginia and the squadrons moved to New Bern.

Because Roper residents, like those in Virginia Beach, worried about noise, the Navy agreed to stage a landing to reassure this farming community that a 32,000-acre practice-landing field would be a good neighbor. The Navy intended the airstrip for what pilots of carrier-based jets call "bouncing" -- about 16,000 touch-and-go landings a year.

In the January 2004 demonstration, four Super Hornets swooped down low over nearby farmland, then rose and vanished into the distance. Rather than winning over the locals, Rear Adm. Steve Turcotte, the officer who narrated the flyover, ended up galvanizing the opposition. The site was chosen, the admiral explained to onlookers, "because it is in the middle of essentially nowhere."

"After that we started saying we're from 'Nowhere,' " said Buster Manning, whose family has farmed this land for five generations. Roper used to be part of the Great Dismal

Swamp, but over the past 150 years, farmers have cleared and drained the land to plant crops.

The farmers who owned the fields slated for the landing strip felt trapped. When they met with Navy officials in the winter of 2003, they were told that they could either sell their land or the Navy would condemn it. A real-estate firm hired by the Navy already had bought some area farms.

Mr. Manning recalls one Navy officer at the meeting saying that a legal fight would be futile because: " 'We [the Navy] have more lawyers than you could ever afford to hire.' "

The farmers consulted a group of lawyers from Virginia, but "they told us it was a hopeless case," recalls Gerald Allen, who raises corn and soybeans. "That's when the women took over."

A group of farm wives joined forces with Bunny Sanders, the mayor of Roper and a veteran of civil-rights battles in the area. The 63-year-old mayor organized a parade of tractors down Roper's main street to emphasize the farm jobs and tax base that would be lost. She was certain the farmers had some political ammunition in the nearby Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, which hosts 100,000 waterfowl each winter including 22,000 turkey-size Tundra Swans.

She recalled that in 1997, a Navy Marine Harrier jet crashed near Roper after it struck a bird. "Here we are trying to train pilots to fight in Iraq, and they're going to get killed in a corn field in North Carolina . . . I went down to the refuge and asked them what does it take to spook those birds. They said a pickup truck would do it. So you could imagine what a Super Hornet would do."

The women held "paint parties," where they created lawn signs with the message: "Danger: Falling Birds & 57 Million \$\$\$ Jets." Through the signs, e-mails and social networking, the women built a political base for two lawsuits against the Navy, one brought by two local counties and a second by environmental groups.

Both sets of plaintiffs in the cases, which were combined by the court into one suit, used law firms that donated their time. When the Navy produced 190,000 pages of unindexed documents as its record, the attorneys assembled 30 law students from the University of North Carolina and Duke University, who volunteered to read them.

Among the documents, the students found a chain of Navy e-mails suggesting that the service had ignored early concerns of its pilots about bird collisions at the Roper site. Other e-mails suggested that one Navy planner complained of having to "reverse engineer" environmental studies to justify the Navy's chosen site.

Judge Terrence W. Boyle of the Federal District Court in Raleigh, N.C., last month issued a 27-page decision that said the Navy violated environmental laws by using "selective acceptance" of bird studies and picked only those that supported its decision. President Bush has nominated Judge Boyle for a seat on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals.

For now, the residents of "Nowhere" appear to have outflanked the Navy. Judge Boyle's February injunction barred the Navy from buying more farms around Roper, where locals say their cause has seen little support from Sen. Dole. A spokesman for the senator says: "She's made it a priority to make sure the Navy is made aware of those concerns that have been voiced to her office."

John Ulliot, a spokesman for Sen. Warner said "Sen. Warner and Sen. Dole had only one deal, and that was that the basing decision would be made solely on the merits by the Navy." He had no comment on the federal court's decision.

The Navy plans to bring the case to the Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va. "Being a naval aviator we live and breathe and work in a maritime environment and that environment includes birds," says Rear Adm. Don Bullard, the Navy's director of readiness and training at Norfolk, Va. All of the Navy's bird experts, he says, agree that the risk of bird collisions near the refuge "is manageable."

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