

# Military Overflight Program

**B**ased on the results of repeated surveys of park superintendents conducted by the National Parks Conservation Association, an estimated 150 parks, approximately 40% of all units in the National Park System, are actually or potentially affected by military overflights. Many of these parks are situated within 10 miles of military training routes (MTRs), military operations areas, or military ranges, such as the Nellis (Nevada) and Goldwater (Arizona) ranges, which are run by the U.S. Air Force, and the Fallon (Nevada) Range, which is operated by the U.S. Navy.

In the late 1980s, as the Cold War was ending, the Air National Guard (ANG) hosted the first regional airspace and range council meeting. That meeting, held in the Northeast, was designed to give all stakeholders information about and a chance to comment on ANG training operations that could affect them. It was so successful that the ANG soon applied the concept to other geographic regions of the country, with similar results. In 1994, the Air Force joined as a cosponsor. As part of its policy of “constructive engagement” with the armed services, the National Park Service (NPS) has not only participated in Air Force regional airspace and range council meetings around the country each year since 1995, but also has been on the agenda at each meeting.

As a result, NPS has managed to reach a large number of key Air Force military and civilian representatives, from top-level senior executives and general officers to installation and squadron commanders, airspace managers, and individual pilots and the crews who support them. Those Air Force officials now understand the Park Service’s mandate to maintain or restore natural sound environments to national parks and to reduce human-

produced noise, including that associated with aircraft, to the lowest practicable levels. With the establishment of an ongoing partnership and a relationship of trust between the two agencies, the NPS has been able to gain the understanding, empathy, and support of the Air Force for the missions and objectives of national park units.

This special relationship is illustrated by the fact that NPS is the only agency outside of the Department of Defense (DoD) to have hosted one of the Air Force regional meetings, and has now served as host for four such meetings, including two in 2003 (the Western Pacific Region meeting in San Francisco and the Southern Region meeting in Pensacola, Florida).

This partnership has produced numerous success stories. For example, in 2000 the Air Force facilitated a working relationship between NPS and the Navy that culminated in modifying a military training route, VR-1257, over Joshua Tree National Park. The relocation of the route, which was proposed by the park superintendent, resulted in enhanced low-level training for the Navy while having less impact on park resources and visitor experiences. The final environmental assessment was signed by both the

Navy and NPS.

Other success stories include that of Big Bend National Park in Texas, where the Air Force, which had been flying over heavily visited areas of the park, generating a number of noise complaints from park visitors, agreed to use an alternative MTR during the park's peak visitation periods. At Pipe Spring National Monument, located in northwestern Arizona in a remote and quiet natural setting, the Air Force voluntarily provided an additional buffer zone of one-half mile at an altitude of no less than 1,000 feet above ground level. This relocation of the MTR prevented the disruption of historic re-enactments and precluded possible damage to the park's historic structures from vibrations from low-level flights without causing a negative impact on military readiness training. Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and Death Valley National Park benefited from a decision by the DoD's Joint Policy and Planning Board, strongly supported by the commanders of Edwards Air Force Base and LeMoore Naval Air Station, to place a voluntary floor of 18,000 feet above mean sea level (MSL) on military aircraft using the R-2508 training complex, a route considered vital to systems development and aircrew training. The voluntary floor has greatly reduced noise intrusions on those parks and is in effect unless lower-level flight is deemed absolutely critical.

In some cases, the relationships established via NPS participation in Air Force regional airspace and range meetings have led to other kinds of success stories. One prominent example is Crater Lake National Park, in southwestern Oregon, site of the deepest freshwater lake in the United States

(Figure 1). In the summer of 2000, Crater Lake had contracted with the research vehicle *Surf Surveyor* to map the lake bottom, but the company that was to airlift the ship in and out of the lake exercised its option to extricate itself from the contract because all of its aircraft were in use fighting wild-land fires. With time running out, the Park Service's Pacific West regional director asked the Air Force for assistance. The Air Force's military liaison to the Department of the Interior contacted officials at Fort Lewis, Washington, which was able to send a CH-47D Chinook helicopter to airlift the research vehicle onto and off Crater Lake. The mapping project was a complete success. Without the assistance of the Air Force and the Army, the Park Service would have been unable to conduct the project and would have forfeited payment for the research vessel. Fort Lewis also benefited from a real mission in lieu of a training exercise.

Another major contributor to the strong relationship between the two agencies has been mutual visits to parks and military installations. For example, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks have conducted annual horseback-riding trips into the parks' backcountry for a number of key Air Force, Navy, and other DoD officials to heighten their awareness of the parks' preservation mission and the types of visitor experiences they are trying to protect (e.g., the opportunity to hear natural sounds, to have peace and quiet, and to have solitude). Since the backcountry trips began, the number of deviations from DoD altitude restrictions over the park has plummeted to nearly zero. Meanwhile, DoD has taken the chief ranger for Sequoia-Kings Canyon and other



Figure 1. In the summer of 2000 at Crater Lake National Park, the U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, and the National Park Service collaborated on airlifting a research vessel onto and off the lake. The research vessel was used to map the lake bottom. Without the two service branches' assistance, this important research project would not have been conducted.

NPS officials on orientation flights, and Edwards Air Force Base has hosted NPS officials for tours of the base.

The relationship between NPS and the armed services reached new heights in 2002 when they, in partnership with the National Parks Conservation Association, developed the *Air Force/National Park Service Western Pacific Regional Sourcebook*. This sourcebook, designed to enhance communication between the agencies and to facilitate problem-solving at the field level, features critical information about each agency. The final chapter profiles each Air Force installation and national park unit in the region. Color geographic information system maps are included for each installation and park unit to cross-reference the major park features underlying military airspace and

the military uses of airspace overlying the parks.

The sourcebook was approved by the NPS director and the Air Force chief of staff in December 2002 and was distributed to each park and installation in the region. While the two agencies may appear at first glance to have very different and potentially conflicting missions, the sourcebook quotes General Thomas White, Air Force chief of staff from 1957 to 1961, on the relationship between the defense of the nation and preservation of its resources: "The mission of the Department of Defense is more than aircraft, guns and missiles. Part of the defense job is protecting the lands, waters, timbers, and wildlife—the priceless natural resources that make this great nation of ours worth defending."

## References

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