Valparaiso Settles Suit with F-35 Noise Concerns

By Meagan O'Halloran | Updated: Tue 9:31 PM, Mar 02, 2010

A year and a half ago, every city and town in Okaloosa County was anxious to welcome the new F-35 Joint Strike Fighter pilot training program to Eglin Air Force Base.
Every city except Valparaiso, where residents said they were worried about the additional flights and excessive noise.
This week the Air Force and Valparaiso announced a settlement to the city's federal lawsuit.
The whole episode has left Valparaiso looking like the villain of the county.
Some call it the "Sound of Freedom", others call it an ear-splitting nuisance.
Regardless, Eglin Air Force Base will become the new home to 59, F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets this fall.
Folks in nearby Valparaiso were worried about the noise the additional five dozen jets will cause.
They decided if they couldn't stop the jets from coming to Eglin, at least they'd have some say about where at Eglin.
Doug Wycoff is the city attorney for Valparaiso and says,
"the decision Congress made to identify Eglin as the Initial Joint Training site could not be challenged.
So the question boiled down to where on the 723 square miles of Eglin would this plane go to bed at night at wake up in the morning?"
In September 2008, city officials voted to sue the Air Force and the Department of Defense after an Environmental Impact Statement found the training site originally proposed would have significant noise impacts on surrounding areas.
That set-up a firestorm of criticism from Valparaiso's neighbors, some of which are still upset of the lawsuit.

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Ginger Campbell is a waitress at "Say Cake" Deli and Bakery. She comes from an Air Force family and has lived in Val-P for the last twenty-six years. She doesn't understand why the city made such a stink about things.

"People know when they move here it's a military town, if you don't want to be in a military town then you shouldn't have moved here" Campbell says.

The "Say Cake and Bakery" is a local hangout for many in the military and they proudly support Eglin Air Force Base.

"If it wasn't for our military, all our small businesses wouldn't have anything right now. It provides everything for us; our support, financial, everything" Campbell adds.

Despite then hard feelings, Valparaiso won some concessions for its residents.

The lawsuit settlement requires Eglin to pay $60,000 dollars towards the city's legal costs. And the Air Force has agreed to explore reasonable operating alternatives for the F-35's, which include the possibilities of constructing a new runway or re-locating a current training site somewhere else on the massive Eglin reservation.

"They're not going to use runway 1-9 which would entail the airplanes flying right over the middle of Valparaiso except when required by emergency, unplanned contingency, or weather affecting the aircraft performance" says Wycoff.

The Air Force has agreed to set up a noise committee with representatives from Okaloosa, Walton, and Santa Rosa counties.

The agreement also allows Valparaiso the right to challenge the Air Force again if it does not follow the settlement guidelines.

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