

Closing in

A new enemy threatens
the West's military bases —
urban sprawl

The residents of San Diego's University City neighborhood are accustomed to military aircraft around Miramar, the nearby Marine Corps air station. But last year, on Dec. 8, a routine training flight went wrong when a fighter pilot lost power after taking off from an aircraft carrier 50 miles out to sea.

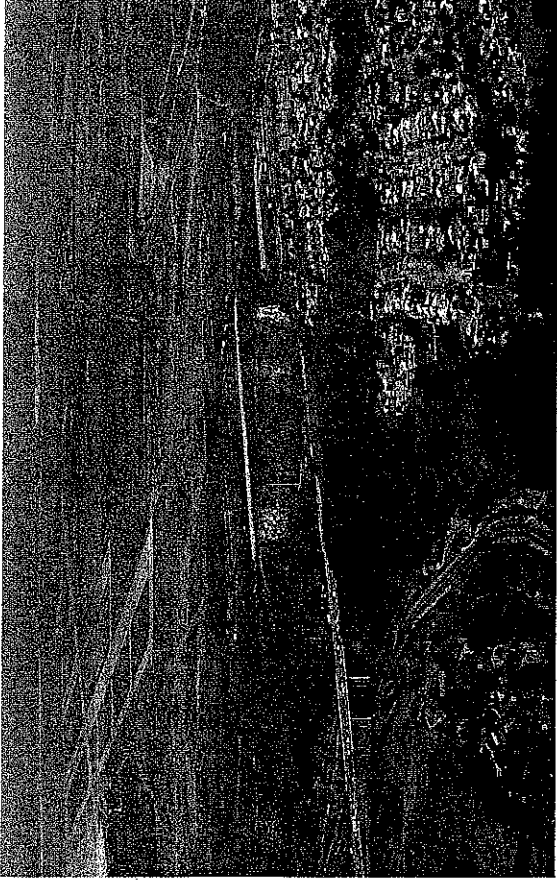
The F-18 Hornet was diverted to Miramar, but never made it. It slammed into a University City home about two miles from the base's runway. The pilot survived, but two women and two children were killed.

Some locals blamed the pilot, and some the military's decision to route the plane to Miramar. The air station should be closed altogether, others said, and operations moved to a Navy airfield in rural Imperial County. But Miramar had been built decades before the nearby houses. The real culprit was the fact that unchecked development had encircled a busy military installation.

Long a problem for Eastern military bases, such as Fort Bragg, N.C., encroaching development increasingly confronts both Pentagon officials and Western communities with nearby bases. With houses and malls lapping up against facilities such as Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., the military has grudgingly ratcheted up restrictions on live-fire exercises and training maneuvers.

To avoid further restrictions and prevent accidents like the Miramar crash, the Pentagon is increasingly trying to preserve buffer zones around bases by working with local governments and conservation groups. Though they've been long-standing antagonists on a range of issues, they're now finding common ground in the fight against sprawl, says Alan Front, senior vice president for the Trust for Public Land.

SOME WESTERN STATES have tried to stop encroachment with local planning requirements. Arizona, for example, limits housing on land next to military airfields, and it requires land-use plans for nearby developments that account for base and outlying residents.



Smoke rises from a University City neighborhood where an F-18 Hornet went down last December during a training flight. The Miramar air station runways, where the fighter plane was trying to land, are visible in the distance.

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that allows the military to form partnerships with state and local governments and nonprofit organizations to buy undeveloped land around bases. The Defense Department's cooperation is largely due to the connection between land preservation and the military's need to fully train and equip its forces. Sprawl necessitates restrictions in training activities, which in turn hinders readiness. "Before (REPI), the responsibility of base commanders tended to be almost entirely focused within the fence line," says Front. "The readiness issue is why that program exists."

Since 2004, resources for REPI and related programs have totaled around \$300 million, and over 100,000 acres have been protected around more than 40 military bases and ranges. "Many of these lands have been retained as economically productive working farms and ranches," says Bruce Beard, the Pentagon's REPI program director.

In San Diego County, the Trust for Public Land has bought 1,200 acres of land around Camp Pendleton. Nellis Air Force Base, which is near Las Vegas, is now working with a Nevada nonprofit called the Protectors of Tule Springs to preserve 13,000 acres of the Upper Las Vegas Wash.

The Nellis plan has another benefit as well — preservation of the wash's Ice Age fossil sites and endangered plants. Because many military bases and their surrounding lands are still relatively undisturbed, they end up being an "island of biodiversity in a sea of development," says Bob Barnes, The Nature Conservancy's senior policy advisor for military affairs.

When the Navy and Marines first expanded their operations at Miramar, the area was largely rural and unpopulated. But as San Diego boomed in the 1970s, development crept north towards

lands that provide homes for endangered fairy shrimp and San Diego mesa mint, as well as a host of migratory birds, insects, frogs and salamanders. To preserve the pools, the Marines restrict vehicle operations in certain areas. Buffer lands around other Western bases can provide a refuge for imperiled species caught between military operations and civilian development.

ALTHOUGH THE ECONOMY is slowing, the West's housing boom has yet to bust completely. Development interests retain a lot of clout, says Lenny Siegel, executive director of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight, a Mountain View, Calif.-based nonprofit that tracks environmental concerns near military bases. Clashes over buffer zones are likely to continue, Siegel warns.

After the December crash near Miramar, some locals expressed frustration with the developers. "You might include an aerial photo of Miramar from the late '50s or early '60s, when all the surrounding land was covered in sagebrush, coyotes and stray horses," Coronado, Calif., resident Russell Nevitt wrote in a letter to the local paper chastising "hysterical" coverage of the accident. "Then talk about all the residential and commercial developers who gradually encroached on Miramar, lining their pockets while demanding alteration to operations and flight paths."

Still, recent efforts to address the problem have made a difference. "Bases like Nellis ... didn't get surrounded by development overnight," Beard says. "Thanks to the REPI process, the government and stakeholders are working to preserve land that is not yet squeezed by sprawl. It's a lot easier to prevent encroachment," says Siegel, "thru: to roll it back." □