

# THE WAR FOR QUIET

Sam Goldman | April 16, 2019

Shele Kinkead lives on a couple acres fifty feet off the Calawah River, one of the many small rivers and creeks that wind through and around Forks, Washington, on the western side of the Olympic Peninsula. The property is a corridor for elk, and gardening it effectively means beating back the salmonberries. A few years ago, Kinkead was tending to the yard with her black lab mix when a faint grumble appeared over the horizon. She stopped to listen and look around; she loves aviation and has her pilot's license and wanted to know what was in the air this time. She also said a prayer. Kinkead has had friends die in the woods, and the sound of one of the Coast Guard's Chinook helicopters could mean a medical emergency. Then the birds began to quiet. "This was louder," she said. "This was a different kind of sound."

The deep rumbled intensified and grew into a roar, the tree branches began to shake, her dog went berserk, and a jet came whooshing along the Calawah. It wasn't skimming the treetops but was low enough that Kinkead thought it might crash. Her heart began to race. "It almost blew me down, it was that loud," Kinkead recalled—"and windy." She brought her dog inside to calm it down. The plane was long gone by the time the roar faded out several minutes after it first appeared.

This was Kinkead's first encounter with a Growler, which doesn't just mean a fancy beer container in her neck of the woods. All of the United States' supply of the Boeing EA-18G Growler is based at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, a thirty-mile drive and ferry crossing from downtown Seattle and an eighty-mile flight from Kinkead's rural patch of northwestern Peninsula.

Forks—now known less for its shrinking timber industry than for the popular *Twilight* novels set there—is also home to quiet-seeking veterans. It's a patch that many folks like Kinkead and her late husband discovered when it came time to leave the hustle and bustle of modern urban life behind.

Growler noise is the “sound of freedom” for many in northwest Washington, including Forks. For others, the roar of warplane engines is an abuse of military power and a shattering of a corner of the United States renowned for tranquility, stunning natural beauty, and acoustic purity. “It’s so calming to come out here,” one Navy vet told me in Forks, “and then you get the jets.” These folks contend that the Navy’s air operations here are set up more for convenience than national-security necessity. They say it degrades quality of life—not only through frequent disruption of everyday activities but through negative health effects. On top of that, a salubrious natural resource we instinctively seek out—silence—is being lost amid the Navy’s expanding footprint. In recent years, the number of Growlers based on Whidbey Island has risen to eighty-two, and the Secretary of the Navy recently gave the thumbs up for thirty-six more to take to the Washingtonian skies.

The struggle over the sounds of northwest Washington pits one of America’s most powerful entities against locals and avid outdoors folks. In 2012, activists took the Navy to court over the noise and lost. Now, another lawsuit is pending in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, this one against the Forest Service for permitting an operational expansion on the Peninsula. Yet another is likely on the way.

But the clash also reveals how our expectations and experiences shape the physical and mental toll that noise—typically thought of as a “nuisance” or “annoyance”—has on us.

**O**lympic National Park—lush, exotic, Tolkien-esque—covers the heart of the Olympic Peninsula like a splash of green paint on a small canvas, crowding out the Peninsula’s towns against its rustic coasts. Tourism is Washington’s fourth-largest industry, with visitors shelling out over \$21 billion annually for encounters with unadulterated nature. But the state’s largest employer, aside from the state itself, is the military and defense sector.

The Navy first laid anchor in the state in 1929, but it wasn’t until Pearl Harbor and the turning of the Pacific Ocean into a gigantic battlefield that the Navy’s presence here took on real importance. The first naval plane touched down on Whidbey Island in 1942. Over the following decades, the air station grew in personnel, aircraft, and significance.

The Prowler was the Navy's principal machine for disrupting enemy radar, but in 2009 the military shifted to Growlers—a more powerful plane used to jam enemy communications and, on paper, no louder than its predecessor. The jet is one of the first to a fight and blocks enemy defenses so planes with the real weapons can more safely swoop in and blow things up. The planes first saw action in the 2011 topping of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, have been used against Islamic State, and are still deployed in the Middle East.

Currently, a large swath of the western Peninsula, including Forks and parts of Olympic National Park, lie within the planes' Military Operations Area. From Whidbey, they fly west over the Strait of Juan de Fuca—which separates the Peninsula from Canada—and then south through the training area. The training is like a high-speed aerial game of hide and seek. Electronic mobile emitters—bulky, white, ice-cream-truck-like stand-ins for enemy defenses—are wheeled out to hidden locations, roped off from civilians, and give off signals the Growlers must pinpoint. The jets swoop in, typically from the sea, at what is supposed to be 30,000 feet or higher. And when these multi-million-dollar machines take off, they produce at close range noise around 150 decibels, an eardrum-rupturing level endured only by crews wearing two layers of protection.

The decibel system isn't an intuitive one. It's logarithmic, which means seventy decibels—a vacuum cleaner—sounds half as loud as eighty decibels—a garbage disposal—and roughly an eighth as loud as the 98 decibels maximum the Navy says could be heard from nearby Coupeville Elementary School during Growler training. Last fall, one Navy vet in Forks caught his sound meter topping out at 96 decibels.

Washingtonians pushing back against the Growlers insist there are other, suitable training venues in even less-populated areas, like Mountain Home Air Force Base, in Idaho. The Navy has countered that the airspace in the Pacific Northwest as “relatively uncongested compared to other areas,” while noting that proposed alternatives lie far from the sea, and the extra fuel to travel out to them would waste millions in taxpayer money and increase the amount of time pilots spend away from their families. Stopping altogether isn't feasible either, the Navy says: Landing a jet on a ship is a perishable skill.

**M**aryon Attwood recalled sitting in the bathtub one day when a Growler went over. “And I watched all the water in the tub vibrate—you know, just vibrate. And I thought, ‘Oh. My. God.’ When you hear people describe how that sound impacts them,” she added, “that’s what they say: ‘It feels like that sound is inside me.’” It’s the low, penetrating frequency of Growler noise that separates the jet from the Prowler. Think of the guy who pulls up next to you at a stoplight, volume and bass turned all the way up.

Attwood grew up in the Midwest, married a Navy man, and moved to Pensacola, Florida, a city known for naval aviation, before settling in the Pacific Northwest. She’s now head of the Sound Defense Alliance, an umbrella organization for some dozen other groups pushing back against the Navy’s expanding operations. At least one of the alliance’s constituent organizations is preparing another lawsuit over the Navy’s environmental review process. “I have become radicalized in a way that is very unexpected,” she told me one evening in a central Whidbey taco diner.

She thinks most central Whidbeyans have some form of PTSD. The noise is all the talk in the central Whidbey coffee shops, she said: *Is this affecting our health? If we want to move, will the noise impact the value of our home?* Attwood described the flyover routine in air-raid-drill terms: locate ear muffs, shut windows, bring pets inside. “It absolutely stops everything you’re doing. If you are outside, you are running for cover and trying to protect yourself.” She frequently flees her home at night when she knows the jets are coming. (Operations over the Peninsula are posted ahead of time in the newspaper but vary considerably week to week.) “I grab my headset, jump in the car, put my earmuffs on, I drive past the field, and I go to this friend’s house.” Going to the movies or out to dinner is also governed by the operations schedule.

But the stakes go beyond derailed conversations and sleep loss, she said. Attwood believes anti-Growler voices went unheard during the Navy’s community information meetings on its proposed changes. Thousands of negative comments were submitted on the plans’ environmental impact documents. The dial didn’t seem to move.

And she’s far from alone in that sentiment.

It was the sea of trees, the rugged terrain, the picturesque beaches, and the unadulterated natural beauty that drove Doug and Beverly Goldie to leave Calaveras County, California in 2010 for the northeast Peninsula. Doug's public school career culminated with a professorship at Peninsula College, Beverly had been mostly in education administration. They retired and turned their attention to their five scenic acres and their organic garden.

Their peace of mind didn't last long. At their worst, the Goldies said, they could hear Growlers up to a dozen times a day, as early as 4 a.m., as late as midnight, with the loudest passes breaking 90 decibels and scattering birds from their trees. Doug feels the sound waves reverberate against his body. "It literally makes the house shake," he said.

"It has created for me a type of PTSD-type situation," he continued, "where, as soon as I start hearing that roar coming, I find my pulse increasing, I find myself getting upset. Bev and I moved here for the peace and quiet."

They wasted no time forming an organization called Save the Olympic Peninsula. They also became regulars at public-information meetings, which Doug repeatedly summed up as "dog-and-pony shows." The Goldies said after attempting to hand out their own materials during a meeting, they were escorted outside to hand them out there, where it was raining. What stung especially was an air station spokesperson allegedly telling the Sequim city manager that the Goldies were misinformed: The sources of their frequent complaints were commercial airliners, not the Navy's jets. "It's terrible feeling like we're collateral damage," Doug said.

Perhaps the most aggravating aspect for the Goldies and others I spoke to is the purported retribution. The Navy encourages folks to document and submit unusual or disturbing activities, but those who use the complaint channels the most believe doing so can invite retribution. "There was a long period of time when we'd call, and then I'd just say to Bev, 'You know what, we're going to get buzzed tomorrow because I called and complained,'" Doug said. "And sure enough, one or two or three would just come screaming right over the house. To me, being candid, we took it as, 'Hey, fuck you. We're going to fly wherever we want.'" (When I spoke with Navy spokesman Mike Welding, he denied that the Navy does this, adding that pilots and those sending them out never even see who lodges complaints.)

**H**uman are evolutionarily wired to respond to the abrupt sounds that indicate danger. The stick snapping behind you might be your friend approaching rather than a tiger preparing to pounce, but you'll live longer if you react as if it's the latter. An ambulance siren, a toddler stomping around the unit above, and a military jet flying over your house aren't signals you're about to get eaten, but they still trigger involuntary fight-or-flight responses, especially when they're loud and unexpected. These aren't reactions you're necessarily aware of; I'm typing this sentence to a pair of police sirens, and consciously, at least, I feel fine. And these familiar noises also aren't necessarily traumatic (unless, say, you live somewhere where a nearby siren may herald the death or arrest of someone you love).

But frequent fight-or-flight responses strain your autonomic nervous and endocrine systems, which leads to higher blood pressure, elevated heart pace, poor sleep, negative social behavior, and more. Those, in turn, leave you more liable to heart attack or stroke or lower test scores in school. One notable study from the 1970s found that sixth-graders on the side of a New York school facing an elevated train track had reading levels a year behind their counterparts on the quieter side of campus. Those who are elderly, sick, or have anxiety disorders are not as resilient, meaning a stronger, more prolonged response to harsh aural stimuli. Loud sounds with lower frequencies—Growler rumbles jiggling your insides—also feel worse.

Orfeu Buxton, a Penn State biobehavioral health professor, says the time of day makes a difference, too. "If this is during sleep, it will come across as much more unexpected or disruptive," he said. Doug Goldie described the noise of a flyover after bedtime as "so violent."

"Then you lay awake," Beverly had added, "because you're all amped up over 'Here they come again. What the hell are they doing this time of night?'"

According to Erica Walker, a noise and health researcher in Boston, the Goldies remained amped up not only because they were woken up, but because they feel it's *wrong* to be woken up at 11:45 p.m. by a jet. Because they've heard they're mistaken in what they hear flying over. Because they feel the Navy's not listening. Because they came to

northwest Washington expecting to live out their retirement in peace and tranquility. Expectations and experience make noise worse both physically and mentally when they reinforce each other in this kind of feedback loop.

I asked Ron Minson, a psychiatrist who uses sound in therapy, whether the Goldies' and others' frustration, resentment, and feelings of helplessness make their physiological responses worse. "Categorically, yes," he said. Even after the rumble has faded, it's hard to get back into a state of equilibrium when you're left remembering how much the noise is impacting your lifestyle and how unjust the whole situation seems. "So not only are they predisposed to be worse when it happens," Minson said, "but they're continuing the defensive posture as if the jet is still going over unrelenting, simply because of the emotional, mental attitude."

Nor is it something that people can "get over," according to Minson. This is evolution, we're talking about. "It's not like people just need to grow up and love the military," as Buxton put it. You can't rationalize your way out of your body's adverse reactions. Even the folks calling the roar "the sound of freedom" would have their health degraded, researchers told me, even if the effects are not exacerbated by their mindset. (Welding said many of N.A.S. Whidbey Island's offices are in World War II-era buildings without great sound proofing, only a few hundred yards from where jets take off and land. "We kind of habituate to it," he told me.) But a noise that's perceived as hostile, threatening, or uncontrollable triggers an even stronger reaction.

"It's almost a form of sensory abuse," Shele Kinkead told me over burgers one night in Forks' only bar. "It's something one cannot fight against, and one has virtually no power to fight against—but in my core of cores, I know is wrong."

In a refrain I heard repeatedly as I toured northwest Washington, Attwood told me the Navy are "the folks who are supposed to be protecting us, and yet they're the ones who are harming us."

**T**he Goldies got out of the activism game for good a couple years ago. Doug said "the vitriol out there" made it untenable. "The futility of it all is extremely difficult to deal with because I feel all this is a continued erosion of democracy."

When we spoke, they were fresh off a six-week camping trip that lacked the “intrusion of absolutely crazy noise.” That experience was what inspired their move to their corner of Washington in the first place.

“I’m extremely saddened by it because we thought we had bought this property to spend the rest of our lives here,” Doug said, “and we didn’t fully understand that we were going to be basically in a warfare range.”

The day after we spoke, the Goldies left for an extended vacation in Costa Rica, fully aware that the country had abolished its military seventy years prior.

Maryon Attwood, however, is in it for the long haul. Rallies are still planned. Other lawsuits are in the works. “I kind of think sometimes you don’t know what the universe has planned for you,” she said. “And I kind of feel like I got drawn here to help with this battle.”

Out west, Shele Kinkead is more serene. She seemed to me the most likely to find equilibrium between all the involuntary fight-or-flight responses. “My fear is that it becomes a noise people become accustomed to and that it becomes an ingrained part of our lives,” she said. “And I just don’t see that as tolerable.” But she won’t move away—Forks is her home. And so she, in spite of her activism, tries to minimize the noise’s impact on her life.

“As far as being all-consuming,” she said, “I don’t allow it to be because I don’t want to live my life with anger or frustration.

Still, she admitted, “when I hear it, I get riled.”



## **SOURCE LIST**

“The War for Quiet”

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### **CHARACTERS AND EXPERTS IN THE STORY**

#### **Shele Kinkead**

Resident and activist in Forks, WA

Interviewed in person in Forks on Nov. 11, 2018

#### **Maryon Attwood**

Resident and activist on Whidbey Island, WA

Interviewed in person in Freeland, WA on Nov. 9, 2018

Interviewed over the phone on background in October 2018

#### **Doug and Beverly Goldie**

Residents and former activists in Blyn, WA

Interviewed over the phone on Nov. 4, 2018

#### **David Youngberg**

Veteran in Forks, WA

Interviewed in Forks on Nov. 12, 2018

#### **Mike Welding**

Spokesperson for N.A.S. Whidbey Island

Interviewed over the phone and through email in February and March 2019

#### **Erica Walker**

Noise and health researcher in Boston

Interviewed over the phone on Jan. 16 and 30, 2019

#### **Orfeu Buxton**

Health and noise researcher at Penn State University

Interviewed over the phone on Jan. 16, 2019

#### **Ron Minson**

Psychiatrist and therapist in Denver

Interviewed over the phone on Jan. 16, 2019

## **RESEARCHERS WHO INFORMED THE STORY BUT WERE NOT MENTIONED**

### **Jo Solet**

Health researcher at Harvard University  
Interviewed over the phone on Jan. 16, 2019

### **Stephen Stansfeld**

Health and noise researcher at Queen Mary University of London  
Interviewed over Skype on Jan. 21, 2019

### **Lorraine Maxwell**

Human ecology researcher at Cornell University  
Interviewed over the phone on Jan. 22, 2019

### **Kent Johnson**

Data analyst in Boston  
Interviewed over the phone on Jan. 30, 2019

## **BACKGROUND INTERVIEWS THAT INFORMED THE STORY**

### **Matt Rasmussen**

Editor, Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics  
Spoke with in October 2018

### **Andy Stahl**

Executive director, Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics  
Spoke with in October 2018 and April 2019

### **Patricia Jones**

Executive director, Olympic Forest Coalition  
Spoke with in October 2018

### **Donna Osseward**

Board president, Olympic Park Associates  
Spoke with in October 2018

### **Rob Smith**

Northwest regional director, National Parks Conservation Association  
Interviewed in Seattle on Nov. 9, 2018

**Ron Richards**

Chair, Save the Olympic Peninsula  
Interviewed in Port Angeles, WA on Nov. 12, 2018

**Gordon Hempton**

Acoustic ecologist  
Interviewed in Joyce, WA on Nov. 12, 2018

## **MOST IMPORTANT NON-HUMAN SOURCES**

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<http://www.whidbeyeis.com/>

**Pacific Northwest Electronic Warfare Range Environmental Assessment**

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Noise and the City (Erica Walker's research), 2016

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## **OTHER IMPORTANT NON-HUMAN SOURCES**

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**Navy Warfare Training on the Olympic Peninsula**

Sierra Club

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**“Quiet: A Soldier’s Fight for the Most Silent Place in America”**

*Seattle Met*, 2016

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**Sound Defense Alliance**

<https://sounddefensealliance.org/>

**Naval Air Station Whidbey Island**

[https://www.cnic.navy.mil/regions/cnrnw/installations/nas\\_whidbey\\_island.html](https://www.cnic.navy.mil/regions/cnrnw/installations/nas_whidbey_island.html)

**Whidbey Island**

Topographic-map.com

<http://en-us.topographic-map.com/places/Whidbey-Island-670688/>

**West End Quiet**

David Youngberg’s YouTube channel

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPV0EH\\_8rVtF0p81HRyMqg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPV0EH_8rVtF0p81HRyMqg)

**Former Naval Air Station Puget Sound at Sand Point**

Naval Facilities Engineering Command

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPV0EH\\_8rVtF0p81HRyMqg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQPV0EH_8rVtF0p81HRyMqg)

**History of N.A.S. Whidbey Island**

U.S. Navy

[https://web.archive.org/web/20080110200718/http://naswi.ahf.nmci.navy.mil/naswi\\_history.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20080110200718/http://naswi.ahf.nmci.navy.mil/naswi_history.htm)

**Olympic Peninsula**

<https://olympicpeninsula.org/>

**Washington State's military and defense industry**

Washington State Department of Commerce

<http://choosewashingtonstate.com/why-washington/our-key-sectors/military-defense/>**Olympic National Park History and Culture**

National Park Service

<https://www.nps.gov/olym/learn/historyculture/index.htm>**Washington State: Tourism**

Washington State Department of Commerce

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Purdue University Department of Chemistry

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