

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR
FORT BLISS LOCAL FLYING AREA AND LOCAL FLYING RULES (FB 95-1)
FORT BLISS, TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO

1.0 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

Fort Bliss proposes to revise the Fort Bliss Local Flying Area (LFA) flying rules (Fort Bliss 95-1 [FB 95-1]) for Army helicopter flights from Biggs Army Airfield (AAF) to outlying airports beyond the boundaries of the Installation. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to provide that operating airspace by defining the Fort Bliss LFA to include areas outside the boundaries of the Installation where pilots can practice visual flight rules (VFR) and instrument flight rules (IFR) flights at normal operating altitudes while interacting with FAA low-level air traffic control. The Fort Bliss LFA was established in the early 1990s and was delineated by the distance a single rotary-wing aircraft could fly from Biggs AAF on a single tank of fuel with normal reserves. Outlying non-Department of Defense (DoD) private airports were identified at the boundaries of the LFA to provide fuel for the return trip to Biggs AAF. FB 95-1 was developed to provide guidance and rules that would govern flights from Biggs AAF to destinations on the Installation and within the Fort Bliss LFA, in compliance with Army Regulation 95-1 (AR 95-1).

The Proposed Action is needed to provide Army pilots at Fort Bliss with practical, realistic training for flight proficiency in National Airspace outside of Fort Bliss Training Complex (FBTC) restricted airspace, where interaction with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) low-level air traffic controllers and interaction with local private and commercial airport air traffic can be practiced on long-distance, cross-country routes. Implementation of the revised FB 95-1 Local Flying Rules is needed to establish training protocols and operating rules necessary to conduct flight operations in the LFA safely and in accordance with all applicable FAA and Army regulations. Interim FB 95-1 rules are currently in effect, which limit flights in the LFA to a minimum altitude of 3,000 feet above ground level (AGL).

2.0 DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

Alternative 1 would have the Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) continue using the Fort Bliss LFA for flight training as it is currently delineated and following the revised FB 95-1 rules. Training rates (number and frequency of sorties within a given time period) would remain essentially unchanged from the initial stationing of the CAB at Fort Bliss in 2007. The CAB has approximately 276 aviators to train annually, and each aviator requires an instrument evaluation check plus at least four additional flights into the LFA. Single-aircraft sorties would be most common, with about one-third of the sorties comprising multi-ship groups of two or more aircraft. Rates would typically be approximately 16 sorties per week, but could approach approximately 40 sorties per week during times of unusually high activity. Additionally, the number of sorties in the LFA could also vary considerably depending upon differences in individual and crew proficiencies (i.e., the need for more or fewer flights to reach required skill levels).

The majority of sorties would originate from Biggs AAF and traverse to selected regional airports within the LFA along generally straight-line paths. There are 14 non-DoD airports located within and around the edges of the LFA. The second leg of most sorties would be a direct return to Biggs AAF without transiting to additional airports, due to logistical (mainly fuel) constraints; however, flights to additional non-DoD airports prior to returning to Biggs AAF could rarely occur. Thus, much of the LFA would be overflown relatively infrequently.

Helicopters would fly in FAA designated airspace as prescribed in the revised FB 95-1 rules at a minimum altitude of 500 feet AGL. Due to numerous terrain and man-made obstructions and directions from FAA controllers, safe flight altitudes over most of the LFA would be higher than 500 feet AGL. Exceptions would be when approaching airports for landing. Over areas designated as noise-sensitive (heavily populated areas, national wildlife refuges, national parks, national monuments, wilderness areas, and areas having special environmental concerns such as habitat for sensitive species), flights would maintain an altitude of at least 2,000 feet AGL. The Mescalero Apache Reservation would also be overflown at an altitude of at least 2,000 feet AGL. In addition, air traffic control may require that certain segments along flight routes be flown at least 2,000 feet above man-made or terrain obstacles for added safety.

Two Maintenance Test Flight Areas (MTFAs) outside the installation are proposed in order to separate helicopters under maintenance testing from busy air traffic within the training areas on the FBTC. The primary MTFA is in the vicinity of Kilbourne Hole in southern New Mexico, with a secondary MTFA southeast of El Paso. Helicopters having undergone maintenance repairs must be checked before being returned to the unit for continued operation. Aircraft in the MTFAs would fly at approximately 2,000 feet AGL as single aircraft (estimated as approximately 20 flights per week). No low-altitude training areas outside of the FBTC restricted airspace are proposed for Alternative 1. Due to this lack of designated low-altitude training areas, Alternative 1 does not fully satisfy the purpose of and need for the Proposed Action.

Alternative 2 (Preferred Alternative)

Alternative 2 would use the same Fort Bliss LFA boundaries, provisions, and flight altitude limits as Alternative 1, and add three sparsely populated areas designated for low-altitude tactical training, where flight would be allowed down to 100 feet AGL: 1) an area in southwestern New Mexico in the vicinity of the town of Deming; 2) the Sierra Diablo area of west Texas north of Van Horn; and 3) the Talon Military Operations Area (MOA) in southeastern New Mexico. These designated off-Installation training areas are intended as alternate low-altitude training areas when similar terrain within the FBTC is unavailable.

Low-altitude training would involve four to six flights per month (included in the 16 to 40 per week for Alternative 1) for stationary simulated targeting behind topography, rather than continuous low-level cross-country flight. Up to six aircraft would be involved with each low-altitude training flight. Helicopters would hover at approximately 200 to 100 feet AGL behind topography and then “pop up” to simulate targeting of an enemy. No weapons would be deployed during the training flights. Training would be completed for each low-altitude flight usually in less than 15 to 30 minutes. More rarely, a supported aviation unit may request that the CAB conduct a low-altitude sortie for a specific objective. Prior to descending below 500 feet AGL and to avoid impacts, aerial reconnaissance would be conducted in the low-altitude training

area to determine that specific area (approximately 40 acres) to be used is clear of human population, livestock, other aircraft, and obstructions of any kind. Only in areas that are clear of human population or livestock at least 500 feet slant distance from the helicopter would altitudes briefly reach as low as 100 feet AGL.

The Guadalupe Mountains District of the Lincoln National Forest inside the Talon MOA would have a minimum altitude limitation of 500 feet AGL. The Talon MOA is controlled by HAFB and would be used sparingly as an alternate low-altitude training area.

Revised FB 95-1 rules would be followed for all flights from Biggs AAF within the LFA and, as in Alternative 1, the current frequency or rate of training would not change. Alternative 2 fully satisfies the purpose of and need for the Proposed Action.

Alternative 3 (No Action Alternative)

The No Action Alternative would make the interim FB 95-1 rules permanent, whereby all flights outside of Fort Bliss restricted airspace within the LFA would maintain an altitude of at least 3,000 feet AGL except for emergencies and landings/departures. The interim FB 95-1 rules would be followed for all flights from Biggs AAF within the LFA. This alternative does not fully satisfy the purpose of and need for the Proposed Action, since training for which the LFA is designated cannot be fully implemented.

3.0 SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES AND IMPACTS

The Environmental Assessment (EA) determined that the Proposed Action would have no significant impacts on the human or natural environments. No ground disturbing activities would occur. The primary impact on the human and natural environments would be noise from helicopter flyovers in the Fort Bliss LFA. Temporary and infrequent noise impacts of 88 to 92 decibels (dBA) would occur for flights at 100 feet AGL, 80 to 84 dBA for flights at 500 feet AGL, and 66 to 71 dBA for flights at 2,000 feet AGL. FB 95-1 flying rules instruct pilots to “fly neighborly” by avoiding overflights of residential dwellings and livestock whenever possible to minimize noise disturbance impacts. Noise-sensitive areas have minimum altitude restrictions established to reduce noise effects.

Federal species protected under the Endangered Species Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act would only be subject to negligible to minor impacts from helicopter noise and visual intrusion. Section 7 consultation under the Endangered Species Act is on-going and will be completed prior to the signature of the decision document.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the analyses of the Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative) presented in the EA and the measures to be taken to reduce impacts, I conclude that the impacts of the Preferred Alternative would not significantly affect the human or natural environments of Fort Bliss or the area within the Fort Bliss LFA. I further conclude that the Preferred Alternative would impose no direct or indirect effects that cannot be mitigated or that could contribute to cumulative effects requiring preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement, pursuant to the National

Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (Public law 91-190). Therefore, a Finding of No Significant Impact is warranted.

Steve O. Murphy
Colonel, U.S. Army
Commanding

Date

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