

Whidbey Crosswind, March 2013: "Saying Farewell" by Justin Burnett

After three and a half years at the stick, Capt. Jay Johnston turned over leadership of Whidbey Island Naval Air Station in February.

Command was passed to Capt. Michael K. Nortier, a native of Sodus, N.Y., in a formal ceremony on base. Nortier reports to the airbase from U.S. Pacific Fleet's Operations Directorate.

Although the ceremony occurred after press time and could not be reported on in this month's Crosswind, Johnston sat down for an in-person interview Tuesday Morning and shared his thoughts on the past three years.

## FIGHTING FOR POSEIDONS

First and foremost, Johnston said one of the biggest challenges and greatest achievements of his tenure surrounds the planned arrival of four squadrons of P-8A Poseidon, beginning in 2015.

"I'll call that an accomplishment although I won't be around to see it because that's been two years of hard math, engineering, and hard work," Johnston said.

Based on the 737-800 airframe, the P-8A jets are the long awaited replacement for the P-3 Orion turbo-prop, the Navy's venerable but antiquated sub-hunter and surveillance aircraft.

Plans to station 24 of the new jets on Whidbey Island came into question in early 2011 when capital cost concerns threatened to bump the airbase to third in line to receive the aircraft.

Many were worried that the Navy would reevaluate its plans completely and that Oak Harbor would be nixed altogether.

Johnston and his team put their heads together and drafted a plan to modify existing hangars, rather than build new ones, to accommodate the arriving jets. It was efficient and got results.

"That got everyone's attention and, along with the national defense strategy's pivot to the Pacific, that made Whidbey the most attractive base to put the P-8A," Johnston said.

## ENCROACHMENT AND NOISE

Mitigating issues at Boardman Bombing Range in Northeastern Oregon has been another challenge. The facility may be little known to many on Whidbey Island but it's base property, just like Outlying Field Coupeville, and is a critical asset for pilot training, Johnston said.

The area surrounding the 72-square-mile range, and up to about 20,000 in altitude, is restricted air space. It's the only one available to Whidbey pilots and is essential for the low altitude, tactical training that goes on there.

The area has come under threat, however, by developers who want to build, and in some cases already have, wind farms with turbines that soar as high as 500 feet into the air.

It's a very real threat to pilot safety, he said.

“You've got \$100 million airplanes that these kids are bending around at 500 feet off the ground,” Johnston said. “You need clean airspace to do that in.”

Incidentally, one of the companies interested was from China and was deemed a threat to national security by the president.

Working with the remaining developers has been difficult; the community is about 250 miles away and a tight budget means Johnston's had to seek “compatible solutions” rather than pricey acquisitions.

By comparison, facilitating communication with Central Whidbey residents over noise concerns at Outlying Field Coupeville has been far easier, through finding a solution has been challenging as well.

Despite claims that citizen complaints have fallen on deaf ears or that the Navy officials don't understand the severity of the issue, Johnston said that's not the case.

“I've been flying here since 1996; I get it,” Johnston said.

The Navy has taken strides to be better neighbors, such as printing flight schedules, meeting with elected officials, and tailoring “operations to have the least impact,” but there isn't much else that can be done, he said.

Some have voiced hopes that the Navy might purchase new land and train elsewhere but the realities of military spending today might as well make that an impossibility, Johnston said.

“There's no money to develop additional training airspaces or runways... so it's up to us to be the best stewards of what we have,” he said. “That means using Coupeville and getting along with Coupeville folks the best we can.”

## WILL BE MISSED

Although he didn't mention them at the time, Johnston has several other accomplishments to be proud of.

Under his tenure, Navy Region Northwest selected the airbase as the best naval installation in the Northwest twice during the past three years. And won three Secretary of the Navy Platinum Energy Awards.

Not only has he been a leader and city partner, but the Johnston family is a true member of the community; Cheryl Johnston, his wife, is a teacher and their three sons attended Oak Harbor schools – two were on the Wildcats football team when it won the state title in 2006.

Johnston's next assignment will take him to Washington, D.C. Where he will work as the Operations Director at Naval Installations Command headquarters.