

Lemoore Naval Air Station commander outlines expansion plans

By Rory Appleton
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The commander of Lemoore Naval Air Station, home to more than 12,000 sailors, Marines and civilians, on Monday detailed plans for a 25 percent personnel expansion over the next three years, which could require expanding the station and should increase its boost to the central San Joaquin Valley economy.

Capt. Monty G. Ashliman Jr., who took command of the installation in June 2013, addressed around 100 people at the Rotary Club of Fresno's weekly lunch meeting downtown. He discussed the expansion in some detail, but also touched on other factors relevant to local communities.

Ashliman, a former fighter pilot who keeps his skills sharp in test flights over the central San Joaquin Valley, began his presentation by clarifying the sometimes-confusing difference between the U.S. Air Force and Navy pilots.

"It's taken my mom a lot of years to learn that I am in the Navy but fly airplanes," he said, drawing laughter from the crowd.

Lemoore is the largest naval installation in the country for carrier-based aircraft, and soon will be getting larger. Currently, 15 active F-18 fighter jet squadrons and one auxiliary squadron are stationed there. One more is on its way in August, and another will move to Lemoore in 2018. A year from now the station also will get some of the first crews to fly the F-35, America's newest fighter jet. In all, more than 3,000 people – naval aviators and their family members – will be added to the base before 2019.

3,000

The number of sailors, Marines and civilians expected to move into Lemoore Naval Air Station by 2019.

About 60 percent of the nation's naval fighter jets will sit in Lemoore Naval Air Station. The Pacific Strike Fighter Wing, as it's called, is growing due to the Department of Defense's plans to divert 60 percent of all spending to the Pacific theater, Ashliman said.

This could require the installation, which currently sits on more than 16,000 acres in Kings County and about 3,000 acres in Fresno County, to expand. Ashliman expressed gratitude for the willingness of local officials to work with the Navy on this possible expansion. He said that clashing borders at Lemoore's East Coast equivalent in Virginia Beach have caused its flight training to be "one step above useless, meaning that without our military installations and surrounding communities working in coordination with one another, we run the risk of minimizing training opportunities available."

Lemoore Naval Air Station's growth presumably would increase its positive impact on the local economy. In 2008, a survey indicated that Lemoore and Veterans Affairs expenditures related to the station contributed \$1 billion to the central San Joaquin Valley in taxes, industrial purchases and labor costs. A new survey is being prepared for 2015, Ashliman said.

Ashliman also shared why the air station needs more water.

"It's not to wash our jets, take baths and play in the sprinklers," he said. The water is used to farm land on the installation. Because it received no water allotment in 2015, the Navy left much of the land fallow. This caused an increase in rodents, which attracted more birds in the air. Those birds caused more flight accidents. One bird strike is capable of destroying the jets' \$250 million engines or killing fighter pilots, Ashliman added.

In an interview after the meeting, Ashliman said that not much has changed in terms of security after multiple officers were named on an [Islamic State "kill list."](#)

100

The number of military personnel named on the Islamic State "kill list." Several are stationed at Lemoore Naval Air Station.

"We should be secure every day and night," he said. "I demand that of my security staff."

Ashliman said security numbers vary based on day-to-day intelligence information. Everyone on the ISIS kill list was notified, but he said that constant vigilance is required of all military personnel in a post-911 world. He did not specify exactly how many sailors and Marines are assigned to protect the base and its residents, but said it was "enough to cover our fence line and maintain patrols 24/7."

The speaking engagement was Ashliman's second official trip to Fresno in the last few months. He also served as the grand marshal of Fresno's Veterans Day Parade in November.

James Winton of the Rotary Club said that Rotarians were interested in hearing from Ashliman due to the amount of money being contributed to the area.

"It's good that they are here," he said. "We don't mind the noise."

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