

# Military's Tough foe: Pollution

## NAS faces massive cleanup after years of toxic dumping

By John Fritz  
News Journal

To scan the tidy grounds, neatly manicured golf course, and the beautiful vista of the Gulf of Mexico, it's hard to believe Pensacola Naval Air Station is one of America's most polluted places.

The sparkling facade belies decades of environmental abuse that in December 1989 landed Pensacola NAS on the federal government's military Superfund list of the most serious hazardous waste sites.

THREE YEARS after hitting the list, the base still is trying to get a handle on the extent of the contamination. And the start of the arduous cleanup process is years away.

"I wish it would have never happened. But it's not like Love Canal or a lot of these sites in New Jersey," said Ron Joyner, an environmental engineer working on the Installation Restoration project. "It's not as bad as it sounds."

Base officials say the polluted sites pose no imminent health or environmental risk. But others aren't so sure.

"I think that's misinformation, because we know it has been posing an environmental risk to Bayou Grande and Pensacola Bay," said Linda Young, publisher of Pro Earth Times and president of the statewide environmental group Planet Well.

LARGE QUANTITIES of industrial waste have been dumped or leached into the shimmering water that surrounds the base, which is built on a peninsula in southern Escambia County, Young said. "There is a good bit of contamination still out in the bay," she said.

"From my experience with other Superfund sites, it's very rare they aren't posing a human health risk as well."

A sample of some sites the Navy is investigating in Pensacola to determine the extent of contamination, according to a public report compiled by the base:

- For 35 years, industrial and hazardous wastes — solvents, cyanide and heavy metals — were dumped by storm sewers into Pensacola Bay. The wastes were common during the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

Sediment samples 300 feet offshore show only trace amounts of metals. But concerns remain about the location of the sampling sites, the method and depth of sediment sampling.

- In 1981, workers digging under the concrete apron of Building 3460, a helicopter repair shop



Bruce Graner/News Journal

Jason Sdomon and Michele Lucking take ground water samples for contamination testing from a small well at Pensacola Naval Air Station. The well has been drilled at the site of an old radium dial workshop.

### WASTE STORAGE SITES AT PENSACOLA NAVAL AIR STATION

The government may spend up to \$100 million cleaning up 39 individual hazardous waste sites at Pensacola Naval Air Station, which was added to the military Superfund list in 1989. The 17 sites below were determined to be the most serious and in need of full remedial investigation.



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■ In 1981, workers digging under the concrete apron of Building 3460, a helicopter repair shop, were burned by a "black slimy liquid" in the soil. The types of chemicals and extent of contamination are unknown. A leak in an industrial sewer line from the Naval Aviation Depot is the suspected source.

■ For 20 years, the Navy dumped sanitary and industrial waste — including solvents, pesticides,

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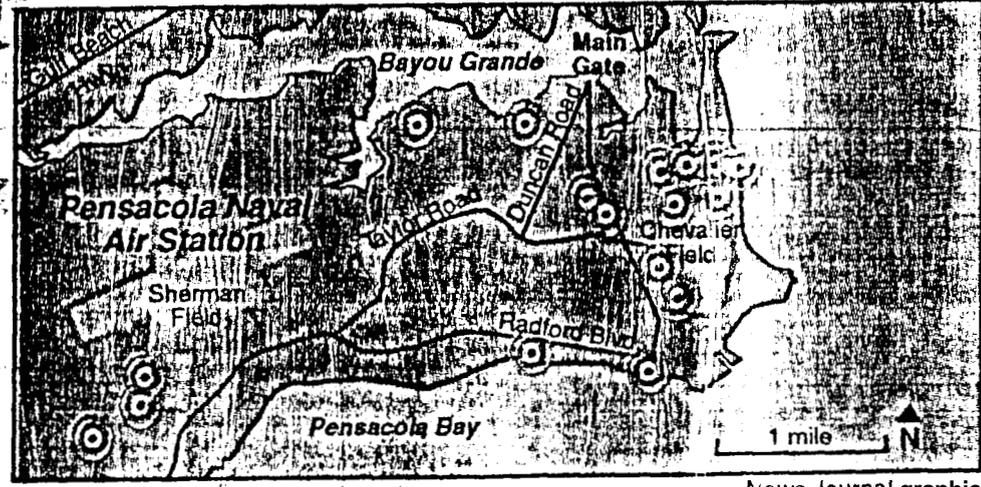


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News Journal graphic

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# NAS grapples with task of cleaning up conta

FROM LA... mercury and cancer-causing PCBs — at a solid waste landfill. Monitoring wells indicated contamination in the shallow and deep layers of the uppermost aquifer.

The shallow groundwater drains into Bayou Grande. Two deep wells occasionally used for drinking water tap the deep aquifer but do not show signs of contamination, the Navy report said.

Most of this pollution happened in the 1800s and early 1900s, when environmental laws were lax and people did not recognize the damage they were doing, Joyner said.

In days gone by, it was standard practice, for example, to paint an aircraft, then dump the waste paint and solvents onto the ground to eventually make their way into the water, he said.

"That's illegal now. But that doesn't correct the sins of the past," Joyner said.

The base was established in 1825 as the Pensacola Navy Yard, and it has continued to thrive. The largest industrial employer in Northwest Florida, the Pensacola Naval Aviation Depot, is situated on the 5,800-acre installation.

At one old paint shop, 30,000 gallons of waste paint, thinner and paint sludges were poured on the ground. A monitoring well showed low-level or no contamination. But the plume of contamination already may have passed the monitoring

“The military is beginning to wake up to the tremendous toxic problems they face. Unfortunately, in many cases, it hasn't been voluntary. It's as a result of agitation by citizens or education by journalists.”

— Bob Schaeffer, spokesman for the Boston-based Military Toxics Project, a national environmental group.

point, the Navy report said.

At another shop, 1,500 gallons of luminous paint were poured into the sanitary sewer annually for 30 years.

In 1976, the building was torn down and the drain pipe found to be radioactive. The drain pipe was removed to a depth of 18 inches, and the rest of it was capped with concrete.

Similar contamination is common at military bases throughout the country, said Bob Schaeffer, spokesman for the

Boston-based Military Toxics Project, a national environmental group.

“The U.S. military is the nation's No. 1 polluter. Virtually every base is a toxic waste site, ranging from relatively minor contaminants like degreasing stalls, through gas and oil products dumped in the ground, right through the most dangerous substances known to mankind,” he said.

The government will spend up to \$100 million to clean up the 39 sites at Pensacola NAS, base spokeswoman Michele Harrison said. The cleanup is not expected to start until 1997 and probably will not be completed until the year 2005, officials said.

The final plan, which the public will have an opportunity to comment on, must be approved by state and federal environmental regulators.

The firm Ensafe/Allen & Hoshall of Memphis, Tenn., has been contracted to determine the extent of contamination and suggest a course of action. That could be using pumps to flush contaminants from the groundwater, using pollution-eating bacteria or, in the most extreme cases, excavating contaminated soil.

In some cases, the best action might be no action at all, as in the case of the radioactive pipe at the old radium dial shop.

“You're going to cause a greater health risk by digging the thing up than by just

leaving it there,” Joyner said. “There will be a number of (sites) that will be left alone.”

Remedial investigation is complete on 25 of 39 sites, including 17 that were deemed to require extensive study.

But even at the most polluted spots, there are few — if any — outward indications of a hazardous waste site. To the naked eye, they may look like an open field, a lawn or a pile of rubble.

“You'd have to know it's there,” Joyner said. “People expect to see drums with green ooze. That's really not the case.”

Over the years, the Navy has become more aware of the environment.

“Anything that we know at this point would be a risk to the environment, we have a program in place to ensure the Navy is a good steward to the environment,” Harrison said.

In January 1988, Pensacola NAS developed the Navy's first Environmental Compliance Board to make sure regulations are followed.

The Navy also initiated a program to reduce the amount of hazardous waste that it generates.

Methods have been developed to collect paint-stripping waste, reclaim solvents and use a plastic material to blast paint off aircraft instead of using stripper.

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## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Installation Restoration Program is a comprehensive Defense Department program to assess past hazardous waste disposal practices and, if necessary, clean up old disposal sites to meet environmental standards.

The program consists of three parts:  
■ Preliminary assessment and site investigation to locate potential problem areas based on Navy records and other available information.

■ Remedial investigation and feasibility study to confirm and detail the nature and extent of any problems and to study alternative cleanup actions. Pensacola Naval Air Station is at this point.

■ Actual remedial actions for mitigation, clean up or long-term monitoring.

According to base officials, it will take until at least the year 2005 to complete the cleanup. Estimated cost: up to \$100 million.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency, Florida Department of Environmental Regulation and local agencies review and comment on each stage.

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"It's like an aircraft carrier. It's turning very slowly, but it's beginning to turn. There's much, much more to do."