

Retired military pilot lists reasons to oppose flights

Opposition to the
500-foot ceiling
continues to grow

By Greg Davis
Editor
The Franklin Journal
Tuesday, March 2, 2010

FARMINGTON – Mike Wells is a retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Colonel who flew A-10 Warthogs and F-15E Eagles, and in combat over his 20-year military career.

He remains a private pilot and aircraft owner today and is someone who many people pay attention to when he lists concerns with the Massachusetts Air National Guard's current plans to lower the flight training levels from an altitude of 7,000 feet to 500 feet above the ground over much of Western Maine.

Speaking to the Farmington Rotary Club, the Wilton resident, who is also a Republican candidate for State House District 90, shared the concerns he has listed at ANG public hearings around the region.

"It is not one of those things I will let just fly by,"

Wells said. "I am a patriot and that should not be questioned when I offer the opinion that we need to look at other options. I have been shot at before," Wells said.

He flew during Operation Desert Storm, was on the ground directing fire and helped to enforce the no-fly zone after the Iraqi conflict.

Wells said people should envision just what the Condor operational flight training area entails.

"You go from Bethel to Livermore Falls, north to Wilton and Farmington, west to Norridgewock, Abbott and Guilford; over to Eustis and Coburn Gore; to Coos County, N.H.; and back to Bethel. That is a large chunk of air space," he added. "Military pilots use the space for dog fighting and the only difference is they don't use real missiles and bullets," he said.

Wells described a typical training scenario. One set of aircraft comes in from Greenville and the other from Bethel, and within two to 2.5 minutes achieve the 7,000-foot aerial engagement.

The proposal is to decrease those training parameters to 500 feet. "Aircraft would have to apply more power and ignite afterburners," Wells said.

He pointed out the ANG environmental assessment is "full of holes and misinformation," something that also has been pointed out by Governor Baldacci, the Maine Legislature, which recently passed a joint resolution demanding that the Guard adhere to accepted standards in its process, as well as Maine's Congressional delegation.

"We demanded a full environmental impact study that takes into account safety, noise, habitat, business impacts and endangered species. The EIS we got was the same piece of work, with just a different cover," he said.

"It seems the ANG thought they could slide this through and it didn't work," he added.

Wells also complained that the Guard's study is "full of assumptions," such as listing two-thirds of the present airspace as being already used airspace, when much of it actually hasn't been used since Pease Air Force Base closed down and Plattsburg, N.Y. flights ceased. Wells noted the ANG report says noise is essentially the same with the 7,000 and 500-foot flight levels. That statement is only true if the noise levels are averaged and spread over the course of an entire day. That's how the Guard has been presenting its sound analysis, he pointed out.

"As a military pilot, if they lower the level to 500 feet, I'd be the first in line if they gave me an F-15 again," he said, but noted this same training opportunity already exists in Nevada and Cold Lake, Canada.. "Aircraft all over the Northeast will want to use this pristine airspace," Wells said.

He said for years, pilots have gotten low-altitude training in F-4s and later F-15s off the coast of Massachusetts, flying from Otis AFB. These low-altitude flights also can occur over upstate New York and parts of New Hampshire and it is a "matter of convenience for the Massachusetts ANG - not need - to come here," Wells stressed.

The Guard is spending \$22 million to soundproof homes surrounding its base in Westford, Mass. because of noise issues raised in that state, it was noted.

"These aircraft will be over Wilton, Farmington and Webb Lake, bringing a dog fight down to 500 feet, doing defensive maneuvers to avoid radar in full afterburner, with possible chaff expelled - and the report says it is no more dangerous than high-altitude maneuvers," Wells said.

"I have lost three friends in low-altitude flying accidents. One was in a B-1 in Colorado; another in an A-10 in England; and the third in an F-16 in Korea. The ANG really needs to clean up this report or drop the whole issue," he continued.

He said another problem with the report is that it lists private airstrips but ignores all the pontoon aircraft that frequent lakes such as Round Mountain Pond, Aziscohos Lake, Flagstaff, Mooselookmeguntic Lake and the entire Sandy River Valley, among others under this airspace.

"Many are not excited about Massachusetts infringing on airspace when they can get this training over that state, Colorado, upstate New York and Canada. It is an example of a little empire building within the unit, not a necessity," Wells stressed.

State Rep. Tom Saviello, said the legislature has noted the "arrogance in the way we have been treated and asked for a third-party review of the noise issue. ANG said they got one - from the Air Force. The Congressional delegation met with the ANG last Monday and we will get an update next week," he said.

Saviello, continued, noting the ANG ignored the Governor's call to take into account the Penobscot Nation, which has 40,000 acres under this airspace, and said the response by the Guard has been "condescending, like we are stupid and don't know what we are talking about. They only held local hearings because we pushed them to be here. At the meeting with Congressional leaders, we've asked for the doctrine that says they have to do this," he said. Wells continued, "They don't want to fly over their own communities and have put out press releases about the change of flights from A-10s to F-15s. A-10s are like being under a sewing machine and don't fly over this area very often."

Saviello said legislators' concerns with the ANG's present plans are very much a bipartisan issue, and praised Gov. Baldacci for his strong stance.