

Army Faces Fierce Fight on Historic Hawaii Valley

By STEVEN LEE MYERS

SCHOFIELD BARRACKS, Hawaii ó The Makua Valley rises from the leeward coast of Oahu into the volcanic bluffs of the Waianae Mountains, home to a multitude of endangered species. The valley floor is peppered with archaeological ruins, including the remnants of temples where humans were once sacrificed.

The valley, just over the ridge from this Army post, is said by some to be a sacred place, the mythic birthplace of the Hawaiian people. To the United States Army, it is a sorely needed training area, where troops from the 25th Infantry Division could fire rifles, mortars and howitzers in the closest approximation to combat short of war. The Army's guns, however, are silent.

The Army suspended training at the Makua Military Reservation two and a half years ago amid a public outcry that followed several brush fires sparked by gunfire. Now the Army's plan to resume training has met fierce resistance from a coalition of residents and environmentalists who assert that military training, particularly with live weapons, is destroying the valley's cultural, historic and environmental legacy.

"Our problem with the military is they don't understand the significance of Makua Valley," said William J. Aila Jr., a leeward coast resident and outspoken opponent of the Army's plans. "They're bombing the Earth Mother."

The controversy here in Hawaii is not simply local. It represents something that military commanders say is becoming one of the greatest threats to the readiness of the nation's military forces.

All of the armed services are fighting to keep or expand the training areas they say are needed to sustain combat-ready forces ó from the Navy's bombing range on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques to the Army's National Training Center in California's high desert.

The challenges, known broadly around the Pentagon as "encroachment issues," have simmered for years, but in the last decade they have become more frequent and more intense. Bases across the country are facing legal and political challenges. The Air Force is fighting a sweeping lawsuit that would halt low-level training flights nationwide until a comprehensive study could be done on their impact.

And many believe the challenges will only increase as environmental awareness grows, as American Indians demand greater respect for traditional homelands and as suburban sprawl reaches once-remote bases, sharply increasing complaints about noise, safety and health.

"It is a problem that is real," the secretary of defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld, said at his Senate confirmation hearing in January. "The United States needs bases. It needs ranges. It needs test ranges. And it cannot provide the training and the testing that people need before they go into battle unless those kinds of facilities are available. And each year that goes by, there are greater and greater pressures on them."

Here in Hawaii, where the issue has become entwined in local politics, the nascent sovereignty movement and concerns over economic development in the relatively impoverished leeward coast, the pressure may just be enough to shut down military training in the Makua Valley once and for all.

The Army's presence in the valley dates to the 1920's, when the service installed gun emplacements there. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army confiscated 6,600 acres in and around the valley to train troops for World War II, evicting ranchers who lived there. It still occupies nearly 4,200 acres today.

For decades, the Army and the other services bombed, strafed and otherwise carried out training exercises in Makua Valley with relative impunity. In recent years, however, the training has drawn protests from residents and, increasingly, the attention of federal regulators.

The fires that prompted the Army to suspend training in September 1998 raised concerns among officials with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service about the threat posed to 41 endangered species of plants and animals in or near the valley.

It was then that the Army's legal battle began. A group of residents and an advocacy group, the Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund, filed a lawsuit demanding that the Army comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and conduct a thorough review of the impact that training was having on the valley.

The Army ultimately settled the lawsuit, agreeing not to resume firing weapons in Makua until it had reviewed any potential impact and notified the public in advance.

After more than two years of study, the Army announced last December that it planned to resume training, though in a more limited way, with units of more than 100 soldiers conducting operations and firing weapons in narrowly drawn zones.

The 25th Division's commanders argued that they had designed the training to minimize, if not eliminate, the effects on Makua Valley's historic sites and environment, but the plan provoked a new round of protests and a new lawsuit.

This time, the residents contended that the Army had failed to conduct a more rigorous and expensive environmental impact study. The less time-consuming environmental assessment, they said, did not consider a variety of issues, including whether there were alternative sites for military training.

"There have been a significant number of impacts from the training that the Army has just not considered fully," said Paul H. Achitoff, a lawyer for Earthjustice.

After protests that included a raucous community meeting in the town of Waianae in January, the division's commanders withdrew their plan, saying they wanted more time to consult with residents and others.

The Army also tried to have the lawsuit dismissed, but on March 1, a federal judge in Honolulu refused.

The division commanders say the prolonged suspension of training in the Makua Valley has caused what one officer called "a slow degradation" of readiness. Last year only 8 of the division's 18 companies completed the annual live-fire training exercise the Army requires.

The Schofield base itself has firing ranges, but the commanders say only Makua has the space to allow a company of soldiers to maneuver through the terrain while firing their weapons and experiencing the thunderous impact of artillery and other weapons exploding near them.

"You don't want to experience that sensation for the first time in combat, with all of the other stress you face," said the division's assistant commander, Brig. Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry.

The Army's use of Makua has been greatly complicated by the expansion of the list of endangered species. In the early 1990's, the number of plants given protection jumped sharply, with 186 new species listed in Hawaii alone.

General Eikenberry maintained that the Army had gone to great lengths to protect the environment at Makua, despite the fires. Evidence of the fires is still visible in the scorched trees along the valley floor. The division has a team of scientists monitoring the plants and trying to propagate the rarest of them, and an archaeologist working to protect the ruins from the troops. But Fred Dodge, a doctor from Waianae and one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, said the Army still acted as it had in the past, refusing to consider alternative ways to simulate combat.

"This is the 21st century," he said. "I think if they can break out of that cold-war mentality, they could find there are other ways to train."

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