FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR FORT BLISS LOCAL FLYING AREA AND LOCAL FLYING RULES (FB 95-1)
FORT BLISS, TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO

1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

Fort Bliss proposes to revise the Fort Bliss Local Flying Area (LFA) flying rules (Fort Bliss 95-1 [FB 95-1]) for Army helicopter flights within restricted military airspace and in the regional airspace beyond the boundaries of the Installation, in compliance with Army Regulation 95-1 (AR 95-1). The Fort Bliss LFA was established in the early 1990s to include a number of outlying non-Department of Defense (DoD) private and commercial airports. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to continue use of the Fort Bliss LFA so that pilots can practice long distance flight planning, using visual flight rules (VFR) and instrument flight rules (IFR) at normal operating altitudes, while also interacting with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and local airport low-level air traffic control. Implementation of the revised FB 95-1 Local Flying Rules will establish training protocols and operating rules necessary to conduct flight operations within the LFA safely and in accordance with all applicable FAA and Army regulations.

2.0 DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1 (Preferred Alternative)
Alternative 1 will have the Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) continue using the Fort Bliss LFA for flight training as it is currently delineated and following the revised FB 95-1 rules. Training rates (number and frequency of sorties within a given time period) will remain essentially unchanged from the initial stationing of the CAB at Fort Bliss in 2011. The CAB has approximately 276 aviators to train annually, and each aviator requires an instrument evaluation check plus at least four additional flights into the LFA. Sorties will typically consist of two to four aircraft, but occasionally up to approximately eight could fly together. Rates will typically be approximately 16 sorties per week, but could approach approximately 40 sorties per week during times of unusually high activity. Additionally, the number of sorties in the LFA could also vary considerably depending upon differences in individual and crew proficiencies (i.e., the need for more or fewer flights to reach required skill levels).

Approximately 85 to 90 percent of the sorties will originate from Biggs Army Airfield (AAF) and traverse to selected regional airports within the LFA along generally straight-line paths. There are 13 non-DoD airports located within and around the edges of the LFA. The second leg of most sorties will be a direct return to Biggs AAF without transiting to additional airports, due to logistical (mainly fuel) constraints; however, flights to additional non-DoD airports prior to returning to Biggs AAF could occur, though rarely. With the great preponderance of flights being from Biggs AAF to a regional airport and back, much of the LFA will be flown relatively infrequently.
Helicopters will fly in FAA-designated airspace as prescribed in the revised FB 95-1 rules at a minimum altitude of 500 feet above ground level (AGL). Due to numerous terrain and man-made obstructions and directions from FAA controllers, safe flight altitudes over most of the LFA will be higher than 500 feet AGL except when approaching airports for landing. Areas designated as noise-sensitive, such as heavily populated areas, National Wildlife Refuges, National Parks, National Monuments, wilderness areas, and areas having special environmental concerns, will have overflights maintain an altitude of at least 2,000 feet AGL (Map Enclosure). The Mescalero Apache Reservation will also be overflown at an altitude of at least 2,000 feet AGL.

Two Maintenance Test Flight Areas (MTFAs) outside the installation are proposed in order to separate helicopters under maintenance testing from busy air traffic within the training areas on the FBTC. The primary Mتها is in the vicinity of Kilbourne Hole in southern New Mexico, with a secondary Mتها southeast of El Paso. Helicopters having undergone maintenance repairs must be checked before being returned to the unit for continued operation. Aircraft in the MTFAs will fly at approximately 2,000 feet AGL as single aircraft (estimated as approximately 20 flights per week). Alternative 1 satisfies the purpose and need for the Proposed Action.

**Alternative 2**

Alternative 2 would use the same Fort Bliss LFA boundaries, provisions, and flight altitude limits as Alternative 1, and add three sparsely populated areas designated for low-altitude tactical training, where flight would be allowed down to 100 feet AGL: 1) an area in southwestern New Mexico in the vicinity of the town of Deming; 2) the Sierra Diablo area of west Texas north of Van Horn; and 3) the Talon Military Operations Area (MOA) in southeastern New Mexico. These designated off-Installation training areas are intended as alternate low-altitude training areas when similar terrain on Fort Bliss is unavailable.

Low-altitude training would involve four to six flights per month (included in the 16 to 40 per week for Alternative 1) for stationary simulated targeting behind topography, rather than continuous low-level cross-country flight. Up to six aircraft would be involved with each low-altitude training flight. Helicopters would hover at approximately 200 to 100 feet AGL behind topography and then "pop up" to simulate targeting of an enemy. No weapons would be deployed during the training flights. Training would be completed for each low-altitude flight usually in less than 15 to 30 minutes. More rarely, a supported aviation unit may request that the CAB conduct a low-altitude sortie for a specific objective. Prior to descending below 500 feet AGL and to avoid impacts, aerial reconnaissance would be conducted within the specific area to be used (approximately
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5 to 40 acres) to assure it is clear of humans, livestock, other aircraft, and obstructions of any kind.

Revised FB 95-1 rules would be followed for all flights from Biggs AAF within the LFA and, as in Alternative 1, the current frequency or rate of training would not change. Alternative 2 would provide more training options for the CAB in using the three low-level training areas, but such low-level flying can be accommodated in Fort Bliss restricted airspace. This alternative would satisfy the purpose of and need for the Proposed Action but was not chosen since it is not needed.

Alternative 3 (No Action Alternative)
The No Action Alternative would make the interim FB 95-1 rules permanent, whereby all flights outside of Fort Bliss restricted airspace within the LFA would maintain an altitude of at least 3,000 feet AGL except for emergencies and landings/departures. The interim FB 95-1 rules would be followed for all flights from Biggs AAF within the LFA. This alternative does not satisfy the purpose and need for the Proposed Action, since training for which the LFA is designated cannot be fully implemented.

3.0 SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES AND IMPACTS

The Environmental Assessment (EA) determined that the Proposed Action (Alternative 1) will have no significant impacts on the human or natural environments. No ground disturbing activities will occur. The primary impact on the human and natural environments will be noise from helicopter flyovers in the Fort Bliss LFA. Temporary and infrequent noise impacts of 80 to 84 decibels (dBA) will occur for flights at 500 feet AGL, and 66 to 71 dBA for flights at 2,000 feet AGL. FB 95-1 flying rules instruct pilots to “fly neighborly” by avoiding overflights of residential dwellings and livestock whenever possible to minimize noise disturbance impacts. Noise-sensitive areas have minimum altitude restrictions established to reduce noise effects. No additional impacts on cultural resources, air quality, or radio frequencies will occur.

Negligible to minor impacts on biological resources, airspace, and socioeconomics conditions are expected. Section 7 consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) has been completed. Federal species protected under the ESA and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act will only be subject to negligible to minor impacts from helicopter noise and visual intrusion. The lesser long-nosed bat (Leptonycteris curasoeae yerbabuenae), a Federal Endangered species, has recovered sufficiently such that the species no longer meets requirements for protection under the ESA and has therefore been removed from the Federal List effective 18 May 2018 (83 FR 17093).
4.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the analyses presented in the EA and the measures to be taken to reduce impacts, I conclude that the impacts of the Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative) will not significantly affect the human or natural environments of Fort Bliss or the area within the Fort Bliss LFA. I further conclude that the Preferred Alternative will impose no direct or indirect effects that cannot be mitigated or that could contribute to cumulative effects requiring preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (Public law 91-190). Therefore, a Finding of No Significant Impact is warranted.

[Signature]

Date 2730418

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