

# Military courses face extreme measures

BY PETER BLAIS

The loss of appropriated funds to run most military golf courses is forcing many base commanders to significantly raise fees, eliminate low-cost memberships and, in some cases, consider closing their courses, according to government officials.

As of last Oct. 1, congressional guidelines forbid the use of any appropriated federal funds to pay for items like utilities and payroll at revenue-generating facilities — golf courses, officer and NCO clubs (takes effect Oct. 1), bowling centers, movie theaters and the like.

Overseas courses and those in remote areas may still receive some federal assistance.

"Basically, all state-side courses have to pay their own way," said Roger Patrick, golf program manager with the Navy's office of Morale, Welfare and Recreation.

There are 249 military courses worldwide. The Air Force leads with 95. The Army has 83, Navy 59 and Marines 12. Among them are some beautiful facilities including the Army's Presidio Golf Course in San Francisco, the Pearl Harbor Naval Station course (the Navy's busiest facility with more than

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80,000 rounds per year) in Honolulu, the Marines' Kanehoe Bay (Hawaii) facility, and Andrews Air Force Base's 36-hole complex in Clinton, Md.

With the annual federal deficit somewhere between \$100 billion and \$200 billion, all have come under budgetary scrutiny.

Base commanders are decid-

ing how to handle the loss of funds at their facilities. Since each situation is different, the problems and solutions are different. For instance, a course that has its own water supply will not be as severely affected as one that has to buy water from a nearby water company.

"Each individual base is differ-

ent. That's why you can't just raise greens fees 10 percent (across the board) to solve the problem," said Paul Piper, the Army's planning manager for golf. "It will definitely force us to become better managers."

To improve course management, the Air Force contracted with the Professional Golf Association to analyze operations at 15 of its courses. The study resulted in 46 recommendations, "some significant, some minor," said Ron Edmiston, golf and bowling program manager for the Air Force. Those recommendations will be discussed at a June symposium for course managers.

Among the recommendations were management incentives for running a cost-efficient operation and more closely tracking how often individuals are playing, said Edmiston.

For defense department personnel, greens fees and memberships at military courses have traditionally been a bargain compared to public facilities.

"We've seen daily fees and charges rise somewhat at most of our courses," said the Navy's Patrick. "Some of the larger bases have eliminated or modified membership plans. Those who played a lot were sometimes paying less than a dollar per round. Many courses are putting more emphasis on the more-expensive daily fees. The philosophy is that those who play should pay."

"We're making a major evaluation of our fee structure which is likely to result in higher fees," said Greg Gordon, head of the Marines' outdoor recreation section.

Edmiston estimates fees have increased between 80 and 100 percent at Air Force courses over the past three years.

"We're looking at innovative fee structures," said the Air Force official. "Say you have a course where a lot of retirees play. You've got a guy paying \$300 for a membership and playing 300 rounds a year. That's \$1 per round. But the course must make a profit.

"So you look at daily fees. If you charge everyone \$7 a round, you know you'll get \$7 every time someone plays your course. The public sector has shown that daily fees generate more income."

Higher cart rental fees and maintenance fees over-and-above membership costs have raised additional funds at some Navy courses, said Patrick.

People have complained about the higher fees, but generally keep playing at the military facilities, said Patrick. That's because, even with the increases, Patrick estimates the cost of playing at a military course is between 60 and 75 percent of that at municipal and daily fee facilities.

"Military courses aren't capitalized like most daily fee and municipal courses. They don't have the debt service or lease payments. So

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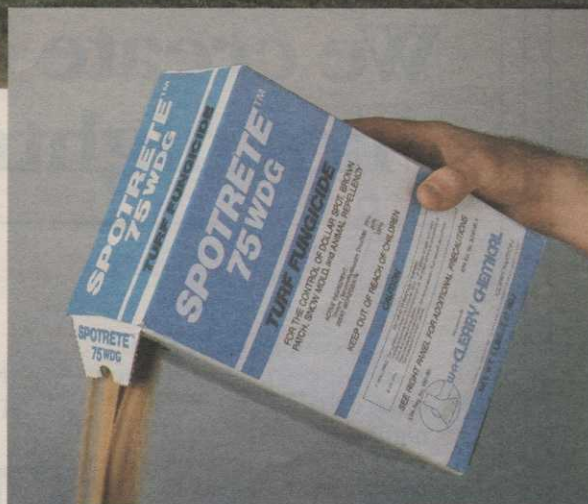
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their costs are lower," he explained.

But even with lower costs than their public-sector counterparts, and with golf being more popular than ever, some military courses could be in trouble.

### Closings possible

"There are moves afoot to close some courses," said the Army's Piper, although he offered no specifics. "If a course can't make money, then it may have to close down. Nothing is happening, yet. But if you have an installation where training leaves little time for playing golf, and there isn't a big retirement community that plays, then that course could shut down. It costs a lot of money to run a golf course."

"Some courses might close," agreed Patrick. "There haven't been any closures to date. But we operate a lot of nine-hole courses, some in low-population areas. The nine-hole ones are more vulnerable than the 18-hole ones."

The Air Force operates 34 nine-hole courses. Edmiston estimates one or two could close in the next few years.

Gordon said no Marine courses have been specifically identified for closure. "But closing a course is a real possibility. We have some that aren't paying their own way," he added.

Raising revenue by allowing non-military personnel to use military courses is an idea that is frequently mentioned, although it is currently forbidden. Security is an obvious concern. So, too, is competing with public and private courses.

Military courses are forbidden from competing with non-military facilities. However military facilities can host civilian tournaments if supported by community relations guidelines. And corporations can sponsor tournaments for military personnel.

But non-Defense Department personnel aren't allowed access to military courses, although that could change.

A joint military-private sector venture is being tested at the Naval Air Station at Cecil Field in Jacksonville, Fla., according to Patrick.

The course needs renovating. The Navy is putting the job out to bid. In exchange for renovating the course, the Navy will enter a long-term agreement with a private golf management firm to operate the course. The Navy would share in any profits.

The course, which is on the base's perimeter, would also be open to the public. Non-military golfers could make reservations two days in advance and would pay market rates rather than the discounted military rate. A special pass allowing access to just the course would be left at the gate.

"We'll put it out there to bid and see what happens," said Patrick.

Edmiston said the Air Force is watching the Navy's Cecil Field experiment closely, but doesn't

plan a similar venture soon.

"We'd like to see what we can do ourselves in the present environment," he said. "Management companies don't want nine-hole operations because it is difficult to make a profit. But they have said they will take a few losers if we give them some winners. We'll see."

Despite the loss of appropriated funds to run their operations, and the upheaval that's caused, military officials are generally upbeat.

"In the long run, our services and management will be better," said Edmiston. "If they're not, we'll be out of business."

## Nine courses on bases due to close

BY PETER BLAIS

Among the 86 U.S. military installations marked for closing by the Department of Defense are five Air Force and four Army facilities with golf courses.

Some are in areas of the country in desperate need of more courses.

With closings expected to begin later this year, Army Golf Manager Paul Piper and Air Force Golf and Bowling Program Manager Ron Edmiston said they expect considerable public and private sector interest in taking over those courses.

Norton AFB's 18-hole course is

located 59 miles east of golf-starved Los Angeles, ranked a lowly 316th in terms of total golf holes per capita among the 319 metropolitan areas surveyed in 1989 by the National Golf Foundation.

Other Air Force installations with 18-hole courses that are scheduled to close, and their NGF rankings, are Mather AFB, 12 miles east of Sacramento, Calif. (296th); Pease AFB, three miles west of Portsmouth, N.H. (184th); and Chanoute AFB, 14 miles north of Champaign, Ill. (58th). A nine-hole course at George AFB, 60 miles northeast of Los Angeles, is also going on the shelf.

A soon-to-be-shut-down Army installation, the Presidio of San Francisco near the Golden Gate Bridge, has one of the country's best 18-hole courses, according to Piper. San Francisco is ranked 311th among metropolitan areas by the NGF.

Eighteen-hole facilities at Fort Sheridan in Chicago (292nd) and Fort Dix, near Trenton, N.J. (220th), will also close. So, too, will a nine-hole course at Lexington Depot in Lexington, Ky. (72nd).

No Navy or Marine facilities with golf courses were recommended for closing by the Commission on Base Realignment and Closure.



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