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Street-View Image-Gathering Banned on Military Installations

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WASHINGTON, March 7, 2008 – A new Defense Department policy prohibits the commercial gathering of detailed street-view imagery on U.S. military bases and installations.

U.S. Northern Command issued the policy message Feb. 28 after detailed images of Fort Sam Houston, in San Antonio, appeared on the Google Map Web site, said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Gary Ross, a NORTHCOM spokesman.

Google Corp. representatives had entered the post with permission and taken the images with roof-mounted recording equipment, according to the policy message.

Google Earth's Street View Web site revealed 360-degree detailed imagery of the post, including headquarters locations, access and control points, barriers, facilities and communal areas, Ross said. "This poses a serious operational risk to our force-protection effort," Ross said.

Google reportedly has removed the images from the Web site, he said.

Concerned that such imagery could be used to inflict harm on U.S. personnel or facilities, NORTHCOM put out guidance for all military installations banning all commercial image-collecting as soon as it became aware of the Fort Sam Houston incident, Ross said. That guidance is being forwarded throughout the Defense Department by the services and defense agencies.

In addition to banning any future commercial image collection, the guidance also requires anyone aware of a similar incident to report it immediately to installation officials.

The Fort Sam Houston incident isn't isolated, Ross said. Similar filming incidents have occurred at two nonsecured former bases closed due to Base Realignment and Closure Commission efforts. One, Fort Benjamin Harrison, Ind., was closed as part of the 1991 round of BRAC closures, but still houses the Defense Finance and Accounting Service Indianapolis, as well as U.S. Army Reserve and Indiana National Guard units. Another, the former Treasure Island Naval Base, in San Francisco, was turned over to local government control in 1996, but is still owned by the Navy.

Equally disturbing, Ross said, is filming known to have occurred at military housing areas outside the secured areas of Hanscom Air Force Base, Mass., and the U.S. Naval Training Center San Diego. Ross said he doesn't know whether that imagery ever was posted on the Internet.