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The departing Naval Station

A simple command ceremony today ends a long relationship between Long Beach and its Naval Station. Like many liaisons it has been uneven, but now that it is over, it is hard to say goodbye.

Residents with long memories associate sailors on leave with the days of the old Pike amusement zone, noisy taverns, tattoo parlors and the Shore Patrol. That was the old Navy, which actually disappeared some years ago, to be replaced by more serious and career-minded men and women, many with families, who blended in nicely with the landlubbers. Now even they are leaving.

The Long Beach Naval Station celebrated its 50th anniversary a couple of years ago, but the relationship goes back much further. The city built its first Navy Landing at a cost of \$12,500 in 1926, and for a generation before that ships had been calling here. The size of the installation grew in wartime and contracted in peacetime. As recently as three years ago there were 17,000 sailors here; soon there will be none. The station closes officially on Sept. 30.

This has happened before, in 1950, only to be reopened for the Korean and Vietnam wars, and again in 1974, but only for five years. This time, no one believes that it will ever open again.

The Naval Shipyard continues to function, but will have to survive the next round of base closings in 1995. Meantime, the shipyard will manage the property and the few remaining operations, such as the

commissary, exchange and pharmacy.

The shipyard is worth keeping, not just because its shrunken workforce still numbers 2,500, but because of its proven efficiencies and its contribution to maintaining an effective Navy. Its primary threat may in fact be political as much as economic, but in any case it deserves the appropriate local support.

The Naval Station enjoyed community support over the years in varying degrees. At times base commanders felt, at least privately, that the townspeople could have made the Navy people feel more welcome. But in recent years at least, that was not the case. Navy officials involved themselves in civic activities — one, in fact, Rear Adm. John Higginson, remained after retirement to serve as president of the Chamber of Commerce.

Another, Capt. Edward F. Leonard, commander of the base during the late Sixties, spoke warmly of the special relationship that had developed between the Navy and Long Beach — partly because of the facilities, which included not only a shipyard but a supply center, a hospital and a wide array of shoreside services, but especially because of the people. Long Beach, he said, was the best homeport in the Navy. And so it was.

It is painful to end a relationship that, for better or for worse, goes back to earliest memories, shares a connection to the sea and has stirred deep feelings. The Naval Station and Long Beach had that kind of relationship. But no longer.