

**April 8, 2011 – Oakland Tribune - Oak Knoll Naval Hospital now just a dusty memory**

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OAKLAND -- Gone in 16 seconds.

But what a 16 seconds, as the old Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in the East Oakland hills -- a savior for thousands of injured military personnel and their families during much of the last century -- came down just after noon Friday thanks to 800 pounds of dynamite and a series of heart-rattling booms, gently sagging to the ground in slow motion like a wounded soldier taken out at the knees.

"Look at that. All that history up in a puff of brown dust," said a teary-eyed U.S. Navy Capt. Joanne Fritch, an active reserve nurse who served for many years at Oak Knoll. "This is really bittersweet. There were a lot of memories there," she said.

For others, including city officials, project managers from developer SunCal and neighbors tired of the vacant, blighted building, it was a happy ending and a sign of good things to come in the form of proposed housing, retail and open space. "This is a great day for the future of Oakland," said City Council President Larry Reid.

Hundreds of spectators lined surrounding streets, and more than 150 invited guests gathered under a white tent in a parking lot along Keller Avenue, set up as a viewing area overlooking the blocky, 11-story structure on this clear and chilly day, waiting and watching for the building's demise. Speeches were given, then several men in hard hats and orange vests appeared -- very serious professionals from Dykon Explosive Demolition of Tulsa, Okla., also known as big kids who like to blow things up.

"We heard there was a little earthquake in Napa today," Larry Voight, a demolition contractor for Dykon, said with a grin. "We were worried Mother Nature might beat us to it, knock this down and spoil all our fun."

As the time approached, Oakland police cars and fire trucks roamed adjacent streets, keeping people at least 1,000 feet from the doomed structure. When the "all clear" came, a siren signaled a three-minute warning. Then one minute. Then a verbal 10-second countdown came over a bullhorn. Breath was collectively held and Reid pressed the "fire" button on a small, black, remote-firing device. And the popping began.

Small charges kicked off first, to ignite the timers. Then a second's pause. Then the main event: 16 sharp and solid booms you could feel to your feet. When the dust cleared, a heap of concrete and steel remained, looking as though it had melted.

"It's really sentimental for me," said Howard Carter, 54, of Oakland. "I worked there 11 years, in housekeeping. We had a lot of fun there. I coached basketball here. Made a lot of friends. I'm sad to see it go in a matter of seconds."

Yet these seconds were years in the making. The 167-acre site, formally decommissioned in 1996, was sold to developer SunCal for \$100.5 million in 2005. But financial snags and courtroom battles stalled the project, and the hospital building -- which opened in 1968 and was the last structure standing among the nearly 100 military homes, barracks, stores and warehouses -- fell into disrepair. Finally in 2009, money to secure the property came through and the demolition project moved forward. In the next few weeks, crews will remove the rubble and recycle much of the steel and concrete.

"This has been a long process," said Pat Keliher of SunCal. "Even just this demo stage. We had to remove all the environmental contaminants, asbestos -- everything inside has been removed. That took about a year and \$3.5 million just to abate the inside and prep for the implosion. So it's great to finally be here today."

There were some unusual side benefits to the demolition as well. A crew from Lucasfilm recorded the sound of the explosions for future cinematic use. And the owners of LifeGuard Structures from Seattle, who build earthquake-resistant office and school furniture, had placed four of their desks on different levels of the building to test their strength. Company president Bob von Bereghy eagerly anticipated the results. "If the desks survive this, they can make it through anything," he said.