



April 8, 2011 – SFGate.com - [Oakland Naval Hospital demolished with a bang](#)

By Carolyn Jones, Chronicle Staff Writer

**Oakland** -- Flash, ka-boom and a venerable old Navy hospital in the Oakland Hills collapsed into history Friday.

Oakland Naval Hospital, formerly called Oak Knoll Naval Hospital, which closed 15 years ago, imploded just after noon when City Councilman Larry Reid detonated 800 pounds of dynamite that blasted the 11-story building into a pile of rubble.

Neighbors applauded the demolition and exchange high-fives. Navy nurses wept. Developers sweated with relief. City officials beamed like 5-year-olds.

"I teared up," said Tom Stoller, senior project manager for SunCal, the developer. "We've worked so many years on this. It feels like post-partum depression."

Reid could not stop smiling. One would think the city had a balanced budget, the [A's](#) were staying and he just got a table at Fenton's.

"It was awesome," Reid said. "They asked about different ways of demolishing it. Wrecking ball and crane? I said no. We want an implosion."

The hospital served Navy personnel and their families for 28 years, from the time it opened in 1968 until the Navy pulled out in 1996. Thousands were born or died there. Vietnam casualties were treated there. Prisoners of war healed there. Ground-breaking research in prosthetics, dialysis, tissue grafts and psychiatry happened there.

Oak Knoll was once among several military hospitals in the Bay Area, including the Presidio, but now only the medical center at Travis Air Force Base remains.

"I saw this place built and now I'm seeing it come down," said Nancy MacDowell, a retired Navy nurse who served two stints at Oak Knoll. "So many memories. I remember seeing these kids come in from Vietnam, double amputees, and we'd try and keep their spirits up. I remember all the babies delivered here. My son was born here."

Navy Nurse Corps Capt. Joanne Fritch said she remembers changing a bed when she heard on the radio that the Berlin Wall came down.

"We thought, 'Wow, that's history,' not realizing that we were part of that history, too," she said. "This place has been such a big part of my life."

At the 167-acre site, the hospital was the largest and last building to be razed in a former military site that dated back to pre-World War II. All the concrete and steel will be recycled.

SunCal plans to build 960 homes and retail on the property, set aside 50 acres of open space and restore Rifle Range Creek, which currently runs through a culvert. The project has suffered years of delays because SunCal's financial partner, Lehman Bros., filed for bankruptcy, throwing Oakland Naval Hospital and dozens of other developments nationwide into limbo.

A judge could rule as soon as May, allowing SunCal to break ground, or the proceedings could drag for years, said David Soyka, a SunCal spokesman.

Neighbors have long been pressuring SunCal and city officials to clean up the site. Homeless people moved into the buildings, and vandals stripped copper and other valuable materials. Finally, a judge ruled last year that Lehman Bros. must pay to clean up the property.

After workers removed asbestos and other toxics, the old hospital was ready to come down.

First, the fire department blew a 10-second warning horn, and people in the crowd began counting down. When they hit zero, Reid pulled the lever on an old wooden box that resembled something from a Wile E. Coyote cartoon.

A quick series of flashes illuminated the cavernous interior, then a dozen deafening ka-booms, like bombs dropping, echoed off the hillsides. Within 12 seconds, the hospital was a pile of concrete.

"Yes!" said neighbor Pat Frick, exchanging high-fives with her friend, Allene Warren, as the dust ballooned across the oak-studded hillside.

Hundreds of other neighbors, camped alongside the property line with lawn chairs, coolers and cameras, applauded and cheered when the building came down.

"It's such a long time coming," Frick said. "Now we can finally start the next chapter here."



*Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle*

*The Oakland Naval Hospital implodes within 12 seconds after 800 pounds of dynamite were detonated.*