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Former Navy training vessel 'Neversail' in San Diego is again shipshape



Navy personnel jog past the Recruit, nicknamed the "Neversail," in San Diego. It is the only commissioned ship in the Navy that never touched water. (Don Bartletti / Los Angeles Times)

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For many Navy veterans, their first experience on a ship came aboard a replica informally called the Neversail at the boot camp in San Diego.

Starting in 1949, recruits learned the basics of seamanship aboard the wood and sheet-metal vessel anchored firmly to the ground — casting off lines, participating in fire drills and working and living in a very restricted space without unduly getting on each other's nerves.

But after the boot camp closed in 1993 and its affiliated training center four years later, the Neversail — its formal name is the Recruit — went into decline.

Rust and other signs of disuse were visible to motorists from heavily traveled North Harbor Drive, not far from the city airport, Lindbergh Field. The sun and salt air had taken a toll. To veterans, it was an outrage.

There was talk of renovation but in the hurly-burly of transferring ownership of the 361-acre training site to a private developer (Corky McMillin Cos.), not much was done.

Finally, Corky McMillin, officials at the Midway carrier museum and a group of eager volunteers decided that the Neversail should be returned to its previous glory — at least its exterior. Fixing the inside was considered far too costly.

Now, with the help of 300 volunteers, along with tens of gallons of gray and black paint, 60 sheets of metal, 20 sheets of plywood and new exterior lighting, the 233-foot-long, 41-foot-tall Neversail is back. Among the volunteers were electricians, carpenters, welders and sheet-metal workers, their work largely completed last year.

A plaque notes its history as the only commissioned ship in the Navy that never touched water. The plaque is the work of history buffs from the fraternal organization dubbed E Clampus Vitus.

"She was an icon in San Diego for decades," said Alan Makinson, chief executive of San Diego's E Clampus Vitus chapter. "To lose that tie to history would have been terrible."

The structure is on the National Register of Historic Places and listed as a California historic landmark. There were two other Recruit vessels at training bases, but San Diego boosters say those two no longer exist and were never considered commissioned ships.

Mike Plount, who went through the San Diego boot camp in 1967, said it was his first time aboard a ship, albeit a mock one. "It was cool, the kind of thing you never forget," he said.

Mac McLaughlin, retired admiral and now president of the Midway museum, said he hopes the ship will "educate and inspire future generations" and remind the public "of San Diego's contribution to our national defense."

By unofficial estimates, more than a million recruits spent time on the Neversail. Replica guns were on its deck; below were classrooms, a 54-bed bunk room, toilets and showers, plus a captain's cabin and a communications room.

In 1949, the construction was meant to look like a destroyer escort, at two-thirds the size and with fittings from salvage and mothballed ships. In the early 1980s, a reconfiguration made the Neversail into a guided-missile frigate.

When the boot camp was at its busiest — during the Vietnam war, for example — there were so many recruits that time aboard the Neversail was limited — just long enough to learn how to climb ladders and the difference between port and starboard, bow and stern.

"It was basic training and that's what the Recruit did, provide the basics," said Clint Steed, who retired in 2002 as a senior enlisted sailor.

Ed Lazarski, who went through boot camp in 1983, said most of his fellow recruits had never seen a Navy ship. "They looked at the Recruit and it was like 'Hey, so this is what a ship is like,'" he said.

Like other veterans, Lazarski was dismayed to see the Neversail in decline. "It was tough to look at it and see the paint peeling," he said.

The 361-acre site is now called Liberty Station, with open space, offices, housing and tourist-leaning businesses. A nine-hole golf course is open to the public.

Next to the Neversail is the Homewood Suites hotel, within walking distance is an Oggi's pizza parlor, a Thai restaurant, a sushi restaurant and a nail salon and spa.

The site has two hotels, and Corky McMillin plans to add three more. For the Neversail renovation, the company contributed more than \$160,000; Midway and the Navy helped round up volunteers from among the region's large population of veterans.

Makinson said his entire family was in the Navy — including a grandfather in the 1950s who served as an instructor at the boot camp. Still, Makinson enlisted in the Air Force.

"I'm the black sheep of the family," he said.