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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE, "A MESSAGE TO THE COMMUNITY FROM THE SHIPYARD
WORKERS" NSY PORTSMOUTH ME
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PORTSMOUTH HERALD

OPINION

Portsmouth Herald (N.H.), Wednesday, April 5, 2000

A message to the community from the shipyard workers

While Mr. Steve Haberman is entitled to his opinion, we take strong exception to his distortion of the facts in his column about the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard published in the March 13 edition of the Portsmouth Herald.

We are compelled to respond because we view his comments as doing a great disservice to the Navy, the shipyard, and our local communities. Readers should be exposed to the facts in this case and not be left with opinions based on misconceptions which, left unchallenged, could be construed as factual.

Mr. Haberman's opening statements indicate that the shipyard has "outlived its usefulness" and that "shipyard officials ... strive mightily to get enough work." Nothing could be further from the truth. The end of the Cold War has brought about changes that affect the entire defense industry. While this victory produced a peace dividend resulting in reduced military spending, the need to maintain a strong national defense remains high, especially in light of recent international unrest.

A major element of the nation's military readiness is its Los Angeles Class submarine fleet. Maintenance of these submarines is Portsmouth Naval Shipyard's primary purpose, a need that will continue throughout this decade.

The statements that "submarine overhaul business, the primary purpose for the continued existence for the shipyard, is dwindling or being shifted to newer military facilities" and "soon there will be no work for this yard" are just not true. While the number of submarines has declined, the maintenance requirements for those that remain, or those yet to be built, still exist. Currently scheduled work is programmed as far into the future as one can reasonably expect to forecast. Mr. Haberman's "no work for this yard" characterization could only mean some period more than 10-to-15-years from now, if then.

The comment about work being shifted to newer military facilities implies that 200-year-old facilities are antiquated. In our case, the opposite is true. Portsmouth Naval Shipyard possesses the most modern facility to perform its primary business of any other shipyard, public or private.

Mr. Haberman's characterization of the shipyard's environmental issues is also inaccurate. "Toxic chemicals" are not "leaching into the Piscataqua River ... at an alarming rate," as he would have you believe. He refers to the shipyard as a "275-acre toxic waste dump." The image of a Love Canal at the shipyard is a gross distortion obviously intended to inflame people not knowledgeable of the facts. Such emotion charged distortions only serve to undermine his credibility. The fact is that the Navy is resolving the shipyard's environmental issues associated with universally-accepted past practices.

We are working in accordance with the United States Environmental Protection Agency's cleanup process and closely with the community through the shipyard's Restoration Advisory Board. The people who work at the shipyard are "the Navy" and are as concerned about the "health and safety of the residents of the communities that surround it" as anyone else because we are the residents of the communities that surround it. Placing ourselves and our neighbors at risk for the sake of keeping an industrial facility alive is ludicrous.

Also, having had the benefit of touring the shipyard first-hand as our invited guest, we are amazed that Mr. Haberman would refer to our hazardous waste transfer facility as our "hazardous waste treatment and storage facility." He, of all people, based on his background, should know the difference and should have accurately characterized it as such.

The "painful to watch ... work force decline from 8,000 to the fewer than 4,000 employed there now" is the reality of the current defense industry business environment. It does not mean "the shipyard could not sustain itself with a work force the size of what is there now." The fact that the shipyard is continually recognized as the Navy's premier site for overhaul, maintenance, and refueling of nuclear-powered submarines at its current size and with a reduced man-day rate, speaks for itself.

The statement that "it is time...to put the old yard out of its misery" assumes that it's in misery now. To the contrary, the shipyard is vibrant. Under its leadership stands ready to meet and adapt to the changing business environment. Creative initiatives, including leasing underutilized facilities, make good business sense and place the shipyard in a favorable competitive position to meet future challenges. Being good stewards of the taxpayers' dollars and not "creative bookkeeping" has carried the day and will stand up to anyone's scrutiny.

Lastly, about the only point on which Mr. Haberman and we agree is that our congressional representatives do need to know how you feel about the shipyard. If you are inclined to write, we only ask that you speak factually and that you not depend on someone bent on unsupported characterizations and emotionally inflammatory statements to speak on your behalf.

Representing the dedicated work force at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, we are:

- John Murtagh, president, Naval Civilian Managers Association;**
- Terry Eleftherion, president, International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers;**
- Thomas Ducharme, president, National Superintendents Association;**
- Arvard Worster, president, American Federation of Government Employees;**
- Joseph Freda, president, Federal Managers Association;**
- Michael Regan, president, National Association of Naval Technical Supervisors;**
- Robert Burleigh, president, Metal Trades Council;**
- Donald Shaw, president, International Association of Firefighters.**