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## saved from closure 20 years ago: 'It's worth dying for'



**Ian Lenahan**

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### Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

In 2005, the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard was saved from closure after a commission removed it from a recommended list.

The shipyard's survival was credited to its efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and strong community and political support.

Since avoiding closure, the shipyard's workforce has grown from 4,800 to over 7,700 employees.

A 20th-anniversary celebration for saving the shipyard is planned in Portsmouth's Albacore Park.

KITTERY, Maine — They showed up in force and en masse, thousands of [Portsmouth Naval Shipyard](#) workers donning yellow shirts with a fighting spirit.

Twenty years ago, in 2005, a U.S. Department of Defense-appointed commission [voted to remove](#) Portsmouth Naval Shipyard from the list of potential military bases to close, saving thousands of jobs for Seacoast residents and sparing the generational shipyard from death.

Paul O'Connor, president of Metal Trades Council union at the shipyard at the time, remembers the yard received a Navy commendation for “sustained, superior performance” on May 12, 2005. The next day — Friday the 13th — then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld released a list of recommended base closures throughout the country, touting a projected \$48 billion in savings over the coming 20 years. Portsmouth Naval Shipyard was on the list.

That lit a fire for many. “It’s hard to really describe it without having been there — the energy, the passion,” O'Connor recalled. “Thousands of men and women, and

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The Pentagon's plan to shut the shipyard down never came to fruition. In July 2005, shipyard workers piled into a 75-bus convoy to Boston for the regional Base Realignment and Closure commission hearing. The following month, BRAC commissioners voted to take the yard off the recommended base closure list, securing victory for thousands of workers, congressional delegation members from Maine and New Hampshire, local and state elected officials, area businesses and supporters who had rallied for months.

## **Celebrating 20th anniversary of saving shipyard**

The milestone moment will be celebrated in a Sept. 27 celebration from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in Portsmouth's Albacore Park, an open-to-all event that includes free admission into the USS Albacore.

O'Connor and longtime friend John Joyal were major players in the 2005 "Save our Shipyard" movement. Both retired, O'Connor and Joyal now sit on the board of directors for the Seacoast Shipyard Association, an advocacy group that is not officially affiliated with the yard. They work closely with Alana Schaeffer, now the board's chairperson, and the current president of the Metal Trades Council, which remains the largest union at the yard.

"I remember back then, and I stated many times (then), that I would lay my body down on the railroad tracks to stop the government from steamrolling through our shipyard. I meant every word of it, and I mean it today," Joyal said. "The shipyard is worth fighting for. It's worth dying for."

The New England Public Policy Center at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston published a report on the BRAC commission's deliberations and recommendations in 2005. The report notes the Pentagon's original list of New England bases targeted for closure would have negatively impacted the region's economy and job market.

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latest in returning ships to the fleet, it saves the Navy an estimated \$55 million per year; and it is one of only four public shipyards licensed to repair nuclear submarines,” the center wrote in 2005. “Supporters of the shipyard had also argued that the actual environmental cleanup costs would top \$200 million, as much as four times the original estimate from the Pentagon. Earlier in the process, BRAC commissioners had actually considered adding the Pearl Harbor Shipyard in Hawaii to the closure list in place of the Portsmouth facility, because of the greater efficiency and military value of the latter. Ultimately, both shipyards remained off the final closing recommendations.”

## Shipyard went from near closure to 'gold standard'

Anthony Principi, chairperson of the 2005 BRAC commission, and several commissioners visited the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, forced to pass through a crowd of several thousand workers and supporters for their tour. Principi later became the first to call the yard the Navy’s “gold standard” among the U.S. public shipyards, a term used often by elected leaders and advocates today.

The 2005 BRAC round took place during President George W. Bush’s administration. It occurred after previous BRAC processes in 1988, 1991, 1993 and 1995.

Some military bases weren’t as fortunate in 2005. In Maine, Naval Air Station Brunswick was closed in 2011 after the BRAC commissioners voted to shutter the base six years prior.

Since being removed from the closure list, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard civilian employees have overhauled and returned 58 nuclear submarines back to the naval fleet.

“We were the first to prove that performance should be considered as a criterion for closing shipyards as far as national security implications,” O’Connor said. “We

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through the canal and back into the Pacific Ocean, with a better quality submarine and less money and faster than the West Coast shipyards.”

Last year, according to the Seacoast Shipyard Association, the shipyard registered a \$1.6 billion regional economic impact.

**More:** [Portsmouth Naval Shipyard economic impact report with payroll in each city and town](#)

In 2005, the shipyard employed roughly 4,800 civilians. Today, over 7,700 employees work on Seavey Island, with more being hired in the near future.

By the end of the fiscal year, the yard needs to hire nearly 800 more workers, according to Schaeffer.

## What if the shipyard had closed, despite the outcry of thousands?

“I think that the implications to national security (were) huge,” Schaeffer said. “It's no secret that the Navy already has a backlog of both submarines that need to be built and ones that need to be modernized and overhauled to meet the Navy's demand.”

“National security started on that shipyard. That's where it started, in 1800. It's in the people,” Joyal said.

The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard is in Joyal's bones. His son is a fourth-generation civilian shipyard employee, and Joyal himself followed in his father's footsteps by taking a welding apprenticeship there after his high school graduation in 1974.

Joyal stated the Trump administration should reopen the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in California, the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard and the Charleston Naval Shipyard to support naval fleet needs.

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Threats to federal civilian employees at the onset of the second Trump administration this past winter leave Schaeffer worried about workforce retention and recruitment. Schaeffer additionally feels concerned about the government shifting work to private industry.

## Could a future BRAC process threaten Portsmouth Naval Shipyard?

“I will say in the ebb and flow in politics as we see them, we never know what we’re going to wake up and see the next day,” Schaeffer said. “We literally never know what we’re going to wake up (and see). We have seen things that we didn’t believe that we would see. There’s so much unpredictability right now that there is really no way to know what’s going to happen.”

“A great way to create the allure to privatize is to make the federal sector so inefficient, which is what they’re doing,” O’Connor said.

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