



**Benjamin Wilde, 5, glanced at a shrunken cup that was subjected to the stress of the Dolphin's last deep sea dive.**

# A FAMILY, NOT A SHIP

## About 400 bid farewell to Navy's oldest sub, Dolphin

**By Steve Liewer**  
STAFF WRITER

**W**hen John Benya first laid eyes on the USS Dolphin in 1967, the diesel submarine lay in three pieces at a New Hampshire shipyard, still months from its launch.

A newly minted engineer working for the Navy, Benya had little clue this ship would become his life. Thirty-five years later, he retired from the Space and Naval Warfare Systems San Diego, having supervised hundreds of experiments involving sonar, communications, weapons and electronics on the Navy's only dedicated research submarine.

He lived a science geek's dream.

"I could have left if I wanted to, but I was

having too damn much fun," said Benya, 64, of San Diego.

Benya joined about 400 other members of the Dolphin's extended family of former crewmen and civilian scientists yesterday for the ship's deactivation at Point Loma Naval Base.

After 38 years, the Navy's oldest sub, and its last remaining diesel-electric powered ship, was retired.

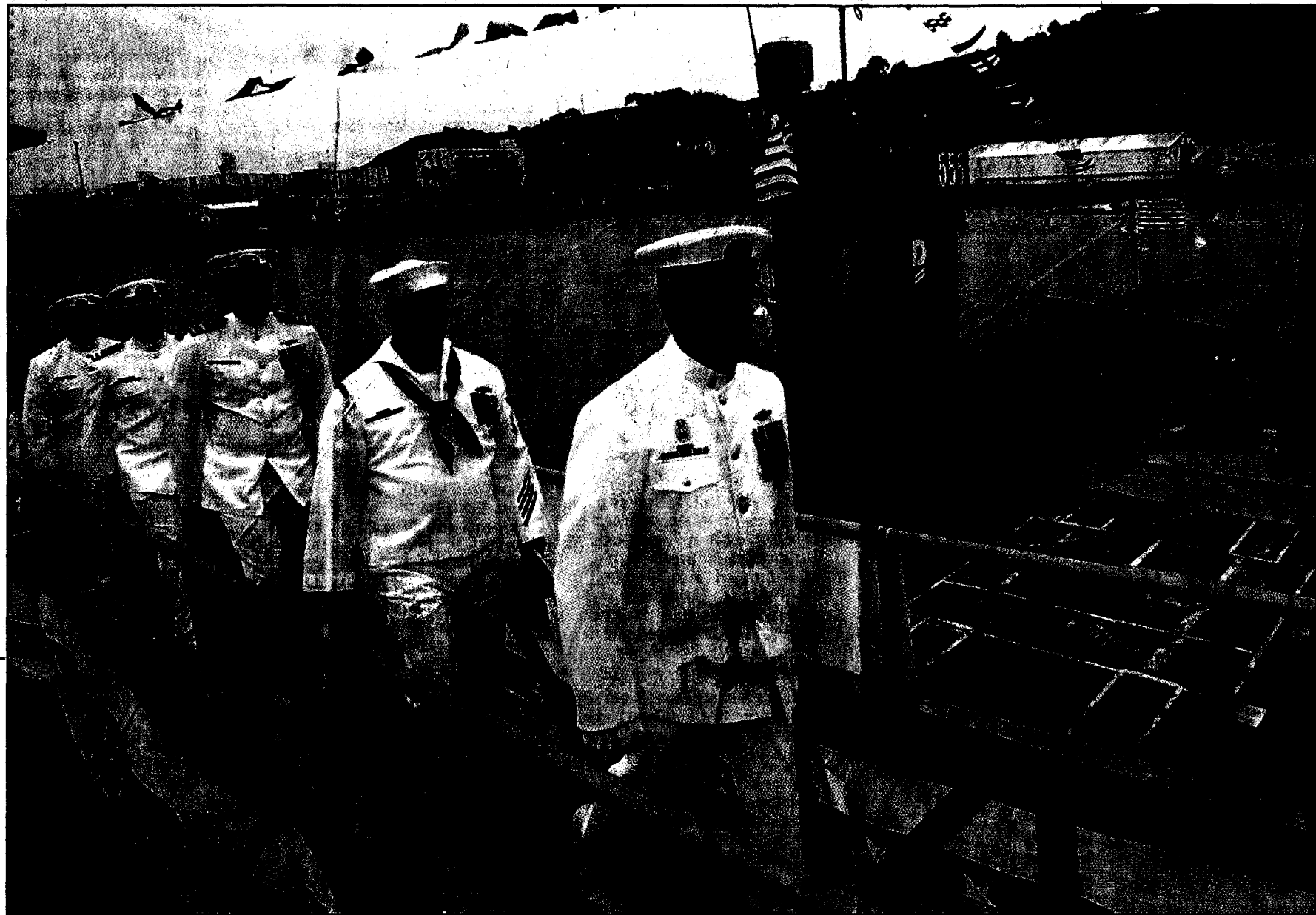
"We're going to have a wake," Benya said. "We're going to celebrate a life, and let it go."

The Dolphin rocked gently at its pier as a stiff breeze whipped the pennants flying from its sail. The boom of cannon fire from a 17-gun salute echoed across the harbor.

"The heavens are getting ready to shed a tear as we say goodbye to a wonderful sub, the Dolphin. Today, her mission is accomplished..."

**JAY COHEN,**  
*a retired Navy admiral*

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**Joseph Eller, chief of the boat, led the last of the Dolphin crew off the ship at Point Loma Naval Base yesterday. Following him were Petty Officer Douglas Sharp, Lt. Cmdr. Edison Henry, Lt. Michael Church and Chief Petty Officer Tony Endquist. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune photos**

## ► DOLPHIN

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# Some sailors believe sinking is dignified exit

Cloudy skies made it seem as if rain were about to fall.

"The heavens are getting ready to shed a tear as we say goodbye to a wonderful sub, the Dolphin," said Jay Cohen, a retired admiral who now serves as the Navy's undersecretary for science and technology. "Today, her mission is accomplished, and her crew will go on to other assignments."

Within months of its launch in 1968, the Dolphin plunged more than 3,000 feet below the ocean's surface to break the deep-diving record. It has fired torpedoes at a greater depth than any other sub, pioneered undersea-to-air communications, and tested all the Navy's sonar systems.

But what made the ship special, Dolphin vets said, was the intimacy of its 50-member crew, one-third to one-fifth the size of nuclear subs.

"The Dolphin is a family, not a ship," said Wayne Peterson, 58, of Silverdale, Wash., the sub's skipper from 1988 to 1990. "This is the Dolphin — all these people."

The ship nearly foundered

the night of May 21, 2002, when 12-foot waves battered its hatch and flooded an electronics bay during an exercise 100 miles southwest of San Diego. The crew saved it from sinking.

The Dolphin returned to service 10 months ago, brought back to life after \$50 million and tens of thousands of hours' worth of sweat.

So it hit the Dolphin family like a belly punch last spring when they learned the Navy planned to scrap the sub. The move will save \$18 million a year.

"It was a terrible day for me," said Paul Lampley, 62, a civilian project supervisor for the Dolphin from 1992 to 1999. "I wrote all my retired admiral friends and told them it was a stupid idea."

Benya said the ship's funding had been tucked safely in the Navy's research-and-development budget, the baby of the service's scientists and engineers.

That all changed after the 2002 accident. Lumped in with the nuclear fleet, the Dolphin looked like an aged ugly duckling. It didn't last long in a military strapped by commitments in Iraq.

"Call it a war casualty. That's the best way to explain it," Benya said bitterly.

The news arrived this month that the Dolphin would be sunk as part of a future naval exercise — a "sinkex," in Navy jargon.



Wayne Peterson (right) greeted Ron Testa at the ceremony. Peterson was commanding officer and Testa was executive officer on the Dolphin in the late 1980s. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune

gon.

"I was kind of shocked when I heard that," said Petty Officer 1st Class Douglas Sharp, 37, of Sweeny, Texas, a Dolphin sailor. "I was hoping it would go to a museum."

Some sailors, though, at least believe it's a dignified exit.

"If the Dolphin's going to go, better to go in a sinkex than chopped up into little pieces," said Lt. Cmdr. John Vlattas, the ship's current executive officer.

Ironically, the sub's crew frequently conducted burials at sea.

## "We're going to have a wake. We're going to celebrate a life, and let it go."

**JOHN BENYA**, who supervised hundreds of Dolphin experiments

"We've scattered a lot of cremains over the years," Peterson said. "I guess it'll be joining them."

But Capt. Zoltan Kelety, who commanded the Dolphin during and after the 2002 accident, said the ship's fate isn't yet seal-

ed. He said at least two groups are working to buy it for a museum.

He would like to see it on the San Diego waterfront.

"If I could think of the perfect spot," Kelety said, "it would be right over next to the Midway."