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Interest in El Toro jetsam soars

Demolition crews at the closed Marine base are finding some treasures among the trash. Much of it could end up in military museums.

By David Reyes
Times Staff Writer

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When the work crews started pulling down the old buildings and barracks at the closed El Toro Marine base, they expected to find old appliances, faucets and hardware that, if they were lucky, might be worth salvaging.

But the unexpected turned up: a painting of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima, mess hall recipes calling for pounds of butter for shortbread cookies, faded photographs and street signs bearing the names of fabled military battles such as Inchon and Midway.

In some of the buildings, the Marines had taken everything. But in others, there were items that, aside from dust, looked as if the soldiers had left just yesterday.

"I was walking through a large office and found these recipes sitting there as if someone just had been working on them," said Carol Schroeder Wold, a community affairs official with Lennar Corp., which is razing the base for private development.

It's as if Wold and Habitat for Humanity workers, who are salvaging the sprawling 4,700-acre facility, opened a door into "The Twilight Zone" instead of drafty Marine barracks and warehouses.

"It's eerie sometimes," said Jason McKinstry, president of Habitat's resource center in Corona. "I remember walking into a classroom, and the desks were still there lined up, and there was chalk on the blackboard.

"It's like they had class on Thursday and decided not to return."

The base, which was officially closed eight years ago, is set to begin life anew as a community encircling a vast urban park that is expected to cost more than \$1 billion.

During the demolition of the base, workers have come across Civil Engineer Corps plaques, ornamental signs listing each commandant since 1943, boxes of old radio parts, even ladders used by ground crew to service A-6 Intruders.

Habitat for Humanity workers found the Iwo Jima painting, which was used as a glass partition separating an aircraft ground equipment maintenance office from a conference room.

The Marines apparently had viewed the see-through glass as a distraction and in 1994, with a projector and knives, outlined the famed image and hand-painted the flag-raising, Habitat officials said.

The painting and hundreds of other items are being inventoried and stored for a proposed museum at the site.

Over the last year, Habitat has gleaned dozens of former military offices, buildings and homes, extracting more than 3 million pounds of materials. Doors, windows, appliances, cabinets and other abandoned items have been recycled to nonprofits, Habitat officials said.

Officially known as Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, the base opened in 1943 and became the permanent center of Marine aviation on the West Coast.

But after 50 years, it was targeted for closure during the 1993 Base Realignment and Closure process. Military operations ceased in July 1999.

The El Toro aviation museum was moved to Miramar Marine Corps Air Station in San Diego County.

In a telephone interview, Tom O'Hara, curator of the Flying Leathernecks Aviation Museum at Miramar, expressed interest in the discoveries at El Toro.

"Some of these things don't look important to the average person," O'Hara said. "But it's stuff that doesn't get re-created. Those ladders and that painting, I'd like to take a look at them."

The Miramar museum already has an extensive collection of military memorabilia, including 45 airplanes. Items for inclusion, O'Hara said, are assessed on historical significance and provenance.

Lennar paid the U.S. Navy \$649.5 million for the base in 2005 and then transferred more than 1,000 acres for the Orange County Great Park to Irvine.

The developer has approval to build 3,500 homes and about 5 million square feet of commercial and retail space. The park will be at the center of the massive development.

The salvage and recycling operation is being called one of the largest in the United States. Part of the work includes ripping out El Toro's four concrete runways to recycle materials to build new streets and sidewalks for Lennar's development.

Demolition of the former base is scheduled to end in 2012.

The job represents the second time that Lennar has teamed with Habitat for Humanity. Habitat did similar work at the former Marine air base in Tustin, where Lennar and other developers are building homes.

At El Toro, more than a dozen nonprofit groups, including the Boy Scouts and food banks, have benefited from the recycling job. For example, a Navajo reservation in Arizona that will receive 20,000 reference and children's books reclaimed from the old library, McKinstry said.

Wold, who likes to cook, saw the recipes that called for gargantuan portions of sugar and shortening, and was immediately intrigued.

Only later did she find a clue in a small sign proclaiming the pride in service from the "Marines of Mess Hall 364." Their slogan: "We Proudly Serve Seconds."

For Kevin Donohue, 53, now with Morgan Stanley in Orange County, hearing about mementos and El Toro brought back memories. He was stationed there in an A-4 Skyhawk squadron in the early 1980s.

"I'm sure some of the artifacts being found might be considered junk, but a lot of it has important meaning to me and others who served there," he said.

Saddened when the base closed, he kept an eye on the intense, decade-long fight to decide whether the base would become an international airport. When pro-airport forces lost their battle, it was a tough decision to accept, he said.

"I told myself I'll believe that's not going to be a commercial airport when I see a hydraulic poker carving up the runway," he said. "That happened recently."

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