

## Air Force Print News Today

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### Demolition begins on March hospital building

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3/29/2011 - **MORENO VALLEY, Calif.** -- Demolition began on the March hospital building during a deconstruction ceremony yesterday. Chris Dickinson, superintendent of the project for U.S. Demolition, said the complete destruction of the building will take 20-30 days.

The hospital, along with the remaining buildings on former March Air Force Base property, are being leveled to make way for the \$3.3 billion March LifeCare campus.

"It's always sad to see the demolition of a local landmark, but a future for the hospital building wasn't feasible," said Col. Karl McGregor, 452nd Air Mobility Wing commander. "It will be replaced in kind with the new March LifeCare project that will continue the tradition of caring for people."

At the deconstruction ceremony, government officials, project developers and medical leaders spoke to members of the community, veterans and representatives from local and state agencies. The ceremony opened with the March Field Blue Eagles Total Force Honor Guard posting the colors, and midway through the ceremony, three March Aero Club T-34 Mentors flew in formation across the top of the hospital.

Colonel McGregor had the privilege of dropping the first wrecking ball through the roof of the hospital building. The 5,000-pound ball made a spectacular crack as it fell from where it was suspended on a crane, high above the five-story building's roof. Afterward, the colonel joked that the task was "a little too much fun," but was quick to refer to the significance of the day's ceremony.

"Even though it has been closed for many years, there's still a strong connection between the base and the hospital," he said. "Decades of medical Airmen trained at the hospital. March alumni and their families were treated there, and the children of many current Team March members were born there."

"As neighbors to the March LifeCare property," he continued, "we will remain involved as construction progresses. The project is filling a great need in the community, which is important because, as reservists, we live and work in the community."

The March hospital was built in 1965 and closed in 1996, following Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommendations in 1993. During its 30-year history, the hospital went through several changes in name and operational chain of command, but it always served Southern California as a regional referral center. The hospital treated Air Force patients whose needs exceeded the capabilities of the 20-bed clinics at bases like Norton, Vandenberg, Edwards and George, said Gary Fitchman, who was a medical services specialist at the hospital from 1976-1980 and a superintendent of patient services from 1987-1993.

"It was a busy, busy place," he said.

In addition to being a general hospital, Fitchman said the March hospital offered a full range of inpatient and outpatient clinical and surgical subspecialties, such as orthopedics, optometry, a dental clinic, obstetrics, and even a psych ward. Additionally, the hospital was a Clinical Level II training center for Air Force medics in the fields of nursing, lab and X-ray.

After it closed, the hospital came under the administration of the March Joint Powers Authority. Lori Stone, March JPA executive director, said the Riverside County Coroner's Office, the Department of Veterans Affairs and several other organizations considered inhabiting the building, but the costs to bring it up to standards were prohibitive.



A 5,000-pound wrecking ball sits ready for work as the shell of what used to be the March Air Force Base Hospital stands for the final time in the background. Demolition began on the March hospital building during a deconstruction ceremony Tuesday, March 22, to make way for the \$3.3 billion March LifeCare campus. (Photo courtesy of Matthew Smith)

"It just didn't pan out," she said.

After auctioning the hospital's furniture and equipment, the JPA allowed temporary use of the building for projects that included shooting student films and training for the Riverside sheriff and fire department.

"We put it to as much use as possible until it was time to demolish it," Stone said.

Walking though the empty hospital over the years, Stone recalled being impressed by how many types of services were offered in the one location.

"Any kind of medical care you needed was right there in one building," she said. "You just don't see that in the 'outside' world."

But in the future, that kind of easy access to medical care will return to the site of the former March hospital in the form of the March LifeCare campus, which will house a 550-bed hospital, medical office buildings, retail, a continuum of services for seniors with more than 700 beds, ambulatory care facilities, skilled nursing services, a healing institute and research and training facilities.

Marion Ashley, Riverside County Supervisor, JPA chairman and supporter of the LifeCare project was one of the speakers at Monday's ceremony.

"Our citizens will benefit tremendously from this project with new jobs and better healthcare for the region," he said. "This project is bringing a better quality of life to our residents. With the focus on education, research and training, we'll be building a strong workforce for many generations to come."

Ashley described the realignment of March Air Force Base as one of the blackest days in the history of the region.

"We went down and we didn't recover for almost a decade," he said.

Ashley emphasized the importance of redevelopment projects on former military installations, saying the March LifeCare project "is a shining example of an appropriate use of that tool and what a redevelopment agency can accomplish with a public/private partnership."

Paulette Brown-Hinds, spokesperson for March LifeCare, said the deconstruction phase of the project is expected to last until the beginning of summer and will be followed by infrastructure construction. She said the project will create 12,700 jobs over the course of all phases of construction, which is slated to take less than 10 years. Once the project is complete, it will provide 7,200 full time healthcare and related jobs.