Scraping ships, sacrificing men

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The curious captains of a reckless industry

Salvage:
As the Navy sells off obsolete warships at the end of the Cold War, a little-known industry has grown in America's depressed ports. And where the shipbreaking industry goes, pollution and injured workers are left in its wake.
Widow: When Raul Mendoza died after a shipyard accident in Brownsville, Texas, he left his wife, Oralia, three children and medical bills of more than $40,000. (photo by Perry Thorsvik: Sun Staff)

Dirty work: A worker in Baltimore cuts up the aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea. Like those who built the nation's warships years ago, the men now tearing them apart are being exposed to asbestos, which can cause lethal diseases. (photo by Perry Thorsvik: Sun Staff)

--First in a series

Raul Mendoza knew that scrapping ships was dangerous, knew about the smoke and the fumes and the accidents. He'd worked in Baltimore, where asbestos clouded the air, and North Carolina, where oil spilled into a river, and California, where workers were told to lie to government inspectors.

But he needed a job. So, on Dec. 22, 1995, in Brownsville, Texas, he climbed into the hold of the USS Yukon, an old Navy tanker. Working in total darkness without safety equipment, he walked across a girder. Then came the scream.

Mendoza had fallen 30 feet into a tank, straddling a cross beam in a blow that split his pelvis. He flipped off the beam and landed on his chest. He was pleading for help. Untrained in shipboard emergencies, rescuers took three hours to extract him. By Christmas Eve, he was dead.

Raul Mendoza is just one of the casualties of a little-known industry called shipbreaking. Spurred by the Navy's sell-off of obsolete warships at the end of the Cold War, the business has grown up overnight in some of America's most economically depressed ports. And almost everywhere the industry has arrived, harm to human health and the environment has followed.

A yearlong investigation by The Sun has found:

- Workers have been toiling in air thick with asbestos dust. In Baltimore, laborers scrapping the USS Coral Sea ripped asbestos insulation from the aircraft carrier with their bare hands. At times they had no respirators, standard equipment for asbestos work. Inhaling asbestos fibers can have slow but lethal consequences, as men who built the ships now being torn apart have learned. Tens of thousands of former shipyard workers in Baltimore and elsewhere have died of asbestos-caused diseases.
- Mishandling of asbestos has been covered up. In Terminal Island, Calif., 20 laborers were fired when they told federal investigators how asbestos was being improperly stripped from Navy ships. In Baltimore, workers were ordered to stuff asbestos into a leaky barge to hide it from inspectors.
- Laborers with little training, supervision or equipment have been killed or maimed. Like Raul Mendoza, workers have been victimized in falls, explosions and accidents that could have been prevented.
- Dangerous substances from scrapped ships have polluted harbors, rivers and shorelines. A scrapyard along the Northeast Cape Fear River in Wilmington, N.C., was contaminated by asbestos, oil and lead. "That site looked like one of Dante's levels of hell," says David Heeter, a North Carolina assistant attorney general.

Ship scrappers frustrate regulators by constructing a maze of corporate names and moving frequently. The Defense Department has repeatedly sent ships to scrappers who have records of bankruptcies, fraud, payoffs to government inspectors, and environmental and safety violations.

The Navy and the Defense Department make no serious effort to oversee the scrapping, even though the Navy retains ownership of the vessels. Until recently, only one inspector with little training and experience kept watch on scrapping operations for the entire country. Concerned about his safety, he refused to board the Coral Sea on one visit; the next day, a deck plate collapsed under a worker, leaving him maimed.

Cutting corners

Workers, mostly Mexicans, often have to pay kickbacks to get their jobs and are sometimes cheated of their pay. Unable to speak English or read warning signs, they have no one to turn to with complaints. "They look for us first because we don't know the law," says Juan Chavez. "If the boss or foreman says you have to do something, what can we do?"

Now, the problems threaten to get worse as the Navy and its sales agency, the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Service, accelerate the scrapping program, with 111 vessels designated for breakup.
The Navy's downsizing promised to be a bonanza for the dozen or so shipbreakers who have opened yards since 1991. For amounts ranging from about $15,000 for a destroyer to more than $1 million for an aircraft carrier, they buy the rights to Navy ships, then sell the salvaged metal. They run lean operations, and their pattern of cutting corners to ensure a profit has often proven disastrous.

Cutting steel:
Cutting torches roar aboard the USS Iwo Jima at International Shipbreaking Ltd. in Brownsville, Texas, where two men were killed within a year. The men often work in darkness and suffocating heat as they cut steel for scrap. (photo by Perry Thorsvik: Sun Staff)

Because of environmental violations and other issues, the Navy has had to take back 20 ships from yards in North Carolina, Rhode Island and California in the past 14 months. Of 58 ships sold for scrapping since 1991, only 28 have been finished.

"You've had problem after problem," says David Peck, a Richmond shipbreaker who is one of the few voices calling for reform. "How many fatalities and environmental disasters do you have to have?"

Faced with a scrapping program that clearly has been a failure, the Navy has yet to find a satisfactory solution. It could break up its old ships in Navy yards, as it does with nuclear vessels. It could ask Congress to subsidize the scrapping so that reputable private companies would dismantle them properly.

But what the Navy appears most likely to do is send its ships to South Asia. In recent years, the global shipbreaking business has migrated to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, where labor is cheap and regulation virtually nonexistent.

While American scrapyards employ hundreds of workers and primarily dismantle U.S. Navy ships, tens of thousands labor in the industry in South Asia, breaking up everything from Russian destroyers to Greek freighters to Japanese tankers.

In Alang, India, the world's busiest scrapping site, 35,000 workers tear ships apart on a beach under conditions far worse than any seen in the United States. Deaths or crippling accidents are everyday occurrences. The sea is foul with asbestos, oil, toxins and human waste. Workers live in makeshift huts in a colony rife with disease.

Until now, U.S. naval vessels have been dismantled at home to ensure that dangerous materials are handled properly, that warships not fall into the wrong hands, and that ships on which American servicemen fought and died be treated with dignity. But recently that policy was quietly dropped.

Even though the Navy would risk criticism for exporting its ships laden with hazards to the Third World, the move would generate more revenue because of the higher prices South Asian yards pay for old ships. And, perhaps more important, it would allow the Navy to send its scrapping problems far away from American ports.

Along the Texas border

The Texas border town of Brownsville, convenient to Mexican steel mills and Mexican labor, is the nation's shipbreaking center. On the Rio Grande, Brownsville is a transit point for drugs and laundered cash as well as men and steel. Young men coming out of the Mexican countryside, desperate for any kind of job, settle in the "colonias" in the dry flatlands by the port. Over the past quarter-century, more than a dozen scrapyards have come and gone.

Santiago Martinez, now 64, remembers the first day he showed up at a scrapping company called
Transforma. The boss handed him a hard hat and some shoes (the cost of which was deducted from his pay) and told him to get to work.

The boss, Martinez said, explained the job this way: "He told me, 'Give me a piece of the ship. Cut it.'"

It's hot work in one of the hottest places in the country. The cutting torches burn with a sort of back-of-the-throat roar. Swinging cranes lift large pieces of deckhouse off the ships. Sparks fly where steel is being burned, and an acrid, choking smoke billows up when a torch sets off insulation or oil or something else flammable. The men on board ships work at times in near-total darkness and suffocating heat.

"You'd go home you'd cough and your whole chest was hurting all the time," said Jorge Corpus, 22. "You'd blow your nose and black stuff would come out from all the smoke you'd be inhaling all day long."

If the building of a ship is a case study in planning and precise execution, shipbreaking is just the opposite.

Ships are slashed and burned as workers cut out metal to be resold as scrap; eventually, they are hacked down to the keel. Smoke-stained junk is strewn everywhere.

On board, workers find pipes and boilers shrouded with asbestos. PCBs, linked to cancer, are in everything from electrical insulation to ventilation gaskets to fluorescent lights. Lead-based paint covers the hull plates. Toxic chromates slosh around in ballast tanks.

"This is a dirty industry, you know," said Emilio Sanchez, a longtime buyer of government ships. "It's not an ice cream factory."

It's dangerous, too. The experience of one yard, International Shipbreaking Ltd. in Brownsville, illustrates the hazards of shipbreaking. Two men were killed there within a year.

In December 1995, Raul Mendoza got work at International after stints in Baltimore, Wilmington, N.C., and California.

A slight but muscular man with a dark mustache, he didn't like the dangerous work. But he had a family to support in Brownsville, and his parents in Matamoros, Mexico, needed help, too.

Mendoza's family said that he was hired at $250 a week, but had to pay a weekly $50 "mordida," or kickback, to Guadalupe Casanova, the yard superintendent.

Right after reporting to work on Dec. 22, 1995, Mendoza and his foreman, Appolonio Lucio, went below deck, into the bow of the USS Yukon, a tanker that had been used for refueling warships at sea. A compartment by the bow needed to be drained of water.

Neither man was wearing a safety harness, though harnesses were available. They decided to cut a hole in the compartment so the water could drain into one of the ship's 30-foot-tall tanks. It was cramped and dark. Mendoza adjusted his torch so the flame would burn yellow and cast more light.

He made some cuts, but the water drained slowly. He decided to walk across a beam to the other side of the tank, to make another cut.

Lucio said later that there was no need to rush; while the two men were waiting, they could have burned cables a reference to the illegal practice of burning the PCB insulation off copper cables.
Little training: Lorenzo Lopez, an illegal immigrant from Mexico, was temporarily blinded and suffered burns to his neck and chest after a cutting torch ignited vapors.
aboard ship at Sigma Recycling in Wilmington, N.C. "Just look at me," he says. (photo by Perry Thorsvik: Sun Staff)

"My eyes bother me," Lopez said. "I have problems with my legs. They hurt. I can read a little. ... If a friend asks me about taking the job I am going to answer, 'Don't take it. Just look at me.'"

A soft-spoken 28-year-old who doesn't speak English, Lopez came to this country from Guanajuato, Mexico, in search of opportunity, picking oranges, apples, and tobacco across the Southeast before finding work in the shipbreaking yard. Before the accident, he said, he would send $1,000 home so that he might someday be able to return to a better life. Now, unable to work, he has few prospects.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited the yard for safety violations. The company failed to have an experienced employee check that no gases were present before any cutting began.

Lopez's was the second serious accident at the North Carolina yard in less than a year. On Feb. 24, 1995, worker Daniel Contreras was killed when a piece of metal flew out of a pipe-splitting machine and tore through his skull. OSHA determined that the accident could have been prevented if the machine, called an alligator shear, had the required safety guards. Like most efforts to enforce safety and environmental laws in the shipbreaking industry, the OSHA actions were taken only after the harm was done.

A common enemy

The ships now being torn apart at yards around the country were built with pride. Shipbuilding was a solid trade back then, and it paid well. The men who built the ships of the U.S. Navy men like Charles Fort of Dundalk and William Hooper of White Marsh had the satisfaction of doing a job right, of contributing to the nation's defense and of bringing home to their eastern Baltimore County communities a regular pay envelope.

Their lives could hardly be more different from those of men like Fermin Castillo, who today break apart Navy ships. Separated by time, culture and circumstances, they are linked by a common enemy: asbestos.

"Picture yourself going out in the morning and it's just starting to snow," recalled Hooper of his years building ships. "We're down below welding. This damn stuff was flying around like snow."

That was at Maryland Drydock. Across the harbor at Bethlehem Steel's shipbuilding division, Fort's experience was the same. "Everything was covered with a white dust, from the top of the engine room to the bottom," he said.

Even when Hooper, now 77, and Fort, 75, were young men, asbestos manufacturers and the Navy knew the material used for insulation and fireproofing could cause fatal lung diseases, but they kept that knowledge a secret, according to court records and congressional hearings. Because of concerns about disrupting the war effort during the 1940s, the Navy did little to protect the workers.

"If we tried to do all the things that might have protected these people, we would have gotten no ships built and that seemed to me a more important concern," Dr. Leonard J. Goldwater, a Navy industrial health officer during World War II, said in an asbestos lawsuit.

When inhaled, asbestos can cause diseases that develop decades later. Asbestosis results when scar tissue forms on the lungs, leading to breathing difficulties. Lung cancer is especially common among shipbuilders who also smoked. Mesothelioma is a cancer that attacks the lining surrounding the lungs, the heart and the abdominal organs, and is incurable and fatal.

Despite mounting evidence about its dangers, asbestos continued to be used extensively until the 1970s. The result was that thousands of men around the country died needlessly, many of them becoming ill decades after being exposed. Others, like Fort and Hooper, are sick today. Their misfortunes have been documented in courtrooms across the country, with more than 200,000 claims against asbestos manufacturers either resolved or pending.

Today there are stringent federal standards designed to protect workers from asbestos. The Navy, of course, is painfully aware of the need for such rules. But time and again it has turned its vessels over to shipbreakers who show contempt for the regulations.

At Terminal Island, Calif., for example, Southwest Recycling Inc. sent employees to asbestos-handling classes, but then ordered them to ignore the procedures to save time, according to OSHA documents. "They (workers) were told to lie to the OSHA investigators if asked about work practices and not tell how it was really being done," a 1993 OSHA memo states.

In Wilmington, N.C., Sigma Recycling failed to train workers in proper asbestos removal methods, supply protective suits or provide medical screening, according to OSHA records. Workers shoveled asbestos debris into storage bins, which is prohibited by federal law, and did not wet down asbestos to limit dust.

In Baltimore, things were even worse. Over the past four years, the Coral Sea's dismal end has been marked by stubborn fires and dumping of oil into the harbor, by lawsuits and repeated delays but most
of all, by the mishandling of asbestos.

Fermin Castillo, recruited from Brownsville to the Seawitch Salvage scrapyard in Baltimore, said he could see asbestos fibers in the air around him while he worked. Castillo watched as men nearby, dressed only in work clothes with no protective gear, stripped asbestos out of the aircraft carrier. "There was asbestos all around us," he said. "At first they just stacked it on top of the ship. There was always a lot of dust in the air."

Enrique Mora, who worked as a supervisor at the yard in 1993 and 1994, said workers often tore insulation from pipes with their hands. He said he worked for four months before being provided with a respirator and that even then, fresh filters were often not available.

Workers said the only times they could be assured of having adequate protective gear was when inspectors or visitors were coming. "When investigators come, suddenly we get good equipment not gloves with holes," said Dionicio Huerta, a laborer.

Epifanio Rodriguez, 36, said part of his job was to knock a piece of pipe against a wall or bulkhead, so the asbestos would fly off.

Huerta described what happened next. To keep inspectors from finding the pieces of loose asbestos, Huerta said, he was told to stuff it through holes in the deck of a derelict barge. The barge was full of leaks and awash in harbor water. "Sometimes whole pieces of insulation go into the water," he said. "You're handling all this insulation, and sometimes you inhale it, and then you cough up all this trash."

The mishandling of asbestos was so serious that it led to federal convictions for Seawitch Salvage and its owner, Kerry L. Ellis Sr., last May. Workers testified during the trial that Ellis had repeatedly assured them that they weren't being exposed to asbestos. They were worried, they said, but feared losing their jobs if they complained about the unsafe practices.

"People just do what they're told to do and keep their mouths shut," Huerta, 22, said in an interview. John King was the same age as Dionicio Huerta when he was first exposed to asbestos while working on the Coral Sea a half-century ago at Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co. in Virginia.

He worked as a pipe coverer, putting asbestos on boilers, pipes, air ducts and other hot surfaces for five years. King, now 75 and a widower living in Charlotte, N.C., suffers from asbestosis.

King believes the shipbuilders of his generation were sacrificed, and he's indignant that today's shipbreakers are no better protected.

"They should be warning them," King said. "Some subcontractor is hiring people just like I was hired, and dumping them down there to do this nasty work. All they want them to do is hurry and get through with the work. It's the same deal the same deal."

"I'm a common sense man but this just shouldn't have gone on," he said. "We need to get it stopped. It's not right to put people out there and you're killing them."

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