



Newark Air Force Base: Employees remember camaraderie



Forrest Stedman, left, Shirley Kagle and Rick Steele, former employees of the Newark Air Force Base, reflect on its privatization in 1996. (Kevin Graff, *The Advocate*)

Privatization forced many to move on

Editor's note:
One Sunday 10 years ago, Licking Countians awoke to news that a major employer, Newark Air Force Base, was on a list of military installations that might be closed by the federal government to cut costs.

Today concludes a special two-day series by *The Advocate* on the effect the Newark Air Force Base's closure and its subsequent privatization has had on the community since 1993.

By **DAVID GILLIGAN**
Advocate Reporter

HEATH — Over three years.

That's how long it took to complete the Air Force's departure from the Newark

base and the base's subsequent privatization.

"It was a stressful three years," said former Air Force civilian employee Sandy Gartner. "We lost a lot of friends in those three years."

Like Gartner, many of the 1,500 civilian employees at the base were faced with tough questions when base commander Col. Joe Renaud on March 12, 1993, announced that the Newark Air Force Base would shut down and its work load would be privatized by October 1996.

Would their jobs be there when private industry took over? Would employees — many of whom had lived in

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Port Authority plays key role at former base

BAE called business success story

By **DAVID GILLIGAN**
Advocate Reporter

HEATH — The Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority has aggressively increased its pursuit of expansion at the Central Ohio Aerospace and Technology Center in the past year or two.

Perhaps the most prevalent business success story at the base revolves around BAE Sys-

tems' Platform Solutions Inertial Products business sector, a subcontractor of The Boeing Co.

When it was awarded its first contract during the base's privatization in 1996, the company had just three employees, said Al Bonacci, general manager for BAE Systems' local operations.

Now, nine years and several facilities later, the
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the community for years — be willing to uproot their families if they were lucky enough to get a transfer? Would the government retirement package for eligible employees be enough to sustain them?

"Government officials don't care about people," said Gartner's husband, Tim, who also worked at the base. "They just look at the numbers on a piece of paper."

Sandy Gartner, 57, rolled the dice and was fortunately offered a job at the Air Force Metrology and Calibration program — a small unit of government operations that continues to operate at the base long after the Air Force officially pulled out in 1996.

Tim Gartner, 55, retired in 1996 after his 26 years at the base, while his wife finally retired in 2000.

However bleak the situation may have appeared, many employees at the Newark base lived in denial, said Rick Steele, a former Air Force civilian employee. The back-room conversations and debate over defense spending in Washington seemed a world away for many local workers, he said.

"For three years, people didn't

know how (privatization) was going to affect them, so a lot of people didn't even think about it too much for a long time," Steele said.

"The hardest thing that I ever went through was the first layoffs after privatization," he added. "There were tears rolling down everyone's cheeks then."

Steele, 56, did not want to move his family, so he also gambled and secured a job with Rockwell International Corp., which was later bought out by the current primary contractor The Boeing Co. After 31 years of government service, he still works there today.

Shirley Kagle, 60, didn't have the option to retire, but hoped she could at least earn a transfer to another government installation in the area. Her prayers were answered when she was transferred to Defense Contract Supply Co. in Columbus, where she continues to work today.

"It's amazing how things turn out — how things can be a blessing in disguise," she said.

Forrest Stedman, 57, agreed. He was able to secure a job in contract execution with Rockwell International (now Boeing) and said the efficiency of the work load has improved since the pri-

vate sector took over.

"I went from being a government manager where money wasn't an issue to a private contractor where we finished contracts under budget," he said. "I learned real quick how it works in the private sector."

The uncertainty of closure and privatization eventually ended for the best for the Gartners, Kagle, Stedman and Steele, but others weren't so lucky.

"It was probably the hardest on those people who worked 23 or 24 years who couldn't get retirement," Tim Gartner said. "Some of those people's lives were ruined."

So, did privatization work for former Air Force civilian employees?

It's hard to say, the group decided. Some people were crushed, while some people found their silver linings.

But one thing remains true: The Gartners, Kagle, Stedman and Steele said they will always remember the camaraderie among employees at the base.

"It was kind of like a family here," Sandy Gartner said.

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company's ownership has changed hands several times in recent years. The company has 52 employees repairing, maintaining and upgrading equipment for the Peacekeeper and Minuteman III missiles. The company is also the original equipment manufacturer for certain components inside the missile.

Bonacci credits unparalleled

customer service to an increase in the amount of work loads it receives from the Air Force. The more work loads BAE Systems is given, the larger the company must expand.

"The work we did really was a cost-savings measure for the government," he said.

BAE Systems recently expanded operations at its COATC facility to include the replication and

upgrading of guidance system test equipment, and Industry Research and Development. This allows the company to pursue leading-edge technology for the defense industry, Bonacci said.

Its local success has drawn praise from defense industry leaders, including a recent national award for completing 100 percent of its work load on time with no defects, he said.