A Survival Guide for Others
By Daniel Pearl

Alexandria, La.- Here's the price of peace: Closing a military base would wipe out one-third of the economy in Charleston, S.C., cut home values in half in Staten Island, N.Y., and leave 30% of Anniston, Ala., unemployed. Or so those cities say.

But people here think other communities are playing taps too soon.

This central Louisiana city (pop. 50,000) had braced for the worst, too, when early 1990 England Air Force Base appeared on a government list for possible closing. The local economy would be set back 15 years, one economist warned, and nearly 6,400 jobs would be lost, Retailers feared sales would plummet. Property values were slashed when the closing was announced. Development stopped cold.

Hysteria however, has given way to self-assurance. Like a person shaken to his senses, Alexandria's business leaders started preparing for life after England Air Force Base nearly a year before learning that the facility would close. They took pains to keep normally contentious politicians united. They applied political pressure to gain control of the base itself. And they forced their way through the military bureaucracy to get a major tenant working on the property before it even closed last December—a huge boost to the area's morale.

A Happy Banker

Today, housing prices in Alexandria are higher than they were in 1991. Job growth has remained steady, with 400 net jobs created last year, and hundreds more are expected. Instead of a drop in business, city officials have enjoyed a 10% increase in sales-tax revenue in the past two years. Roark Music sold more pianos in 1992 than it did in 1991, Caplan's Men's Store sold more shirts and jeans, and Turpin Pontiac sold more cars.

"We're all grinnin!" says Thomas Fowler, chief executive of Security First National Bank. Louisiana investors had enough confidence in the area to over-subscribe the Alexandria-based bank's $3.7 million stock offering last fall Mr. Fowler, who one year ago stood teary-eyed watching the last A-10 Thunderbolts fly off, now says the closing "may be a blessing in disguise."

Indeed, as the Federal Base Closure and Realignment Commission prepared to determine this month bases will get the ax this time around, Alexandria provides a powerful lesson: A city can survive a base closing—and even prosper—if it throws the same energy into re-using the base that it put into trying to keep it open.
In Victory Valley

"A military base is fairly stagnant facility," says William Laubernds, president of the National Association of Installation Developers, which helps communities convert closed military bases. If communities do "homework and hard work", he says, "they can not only reclaim the jobs, but position themselves to be very competitive in terms of growth."

Often, though, communities seem to sputter and stumble before finally replacing lost military jobs, largely because of internal squabbling. In Victor Valley, 60 miles northeast of Los Angeles, the small city of Adelanto sued its neighbors for control of George Air Force Base, and congressmen chose up sides. As the Air Force tries to decide what to do, job-starved Victor Valley has missed out on a Japan Air Lines crew-training center and a space-related theme park, according to Peter D'Errico, director of the Victor Valley Economic Development Authority. "The community is very discouraged," he says.

In other cases, communities focus only on keeping the base open instead of planning for the worst. Charleston, S.C., boosters have hired big-name Washington lobbyists to argue for the city's naval base, and are warning that defeat would be tantamount to a death sentence. But business people who have talked about using the base as a civilian port say community leaders have spurned them. "There's a herd mentality that we've all go to stand together and communicate the same message," says John Hassell, a former economic development official in Charleston.

Between Cotton and Crawdads

Alexandria itself isn't completely out of danger yet. Around the base, which abuts the city, businesses like the Socrates International nightclub remain shuttered, and some of the people whose paychecks were supported by England still may leave town. Some resident maintain the economy is really riding on temporary construction spending, because the long-delayed building of Interstate 49 has reached city limits. If the promised jobs at the former base-now dubbed England Industrial Airpark-don't materialize, consumer confidence could still wilt after all.

But Central Louisiana could easily have done worse. Alexandria, a sleepy city crisscrossed by muddy bayous and surrounded by miles of cotton and crawfish farms, was hardly a model of civic efficiency in the 1980s. Then-Mayor John K. "Tillie" Snyder won notoriety by trying to raise catfish in the city swimming pool (they died) and tooling around town in a police car. Even after reformers took control of City Hall, local governments rarely, got along. Alexandria Mayor Ned Randolph says the building of a new bridge between Alexandria and Pineville was stalled for eight years while the two cities and the county, Rapids Parish, fought over the structure's height.

England had been an anchor to the community since it opened in 1955. Before closing, the base employed 3,000 uniformed personnel and 1,000 civilians. In addition to hangars and brick
military buildings, the 2,600-acre grounds has nearly 600 housing units, a golf course, and a picnic and recreation area with a pond shaped like Snoopy. And there are hundreds of acres of undeveloped pine and oak forest.

When England first showed up on a list of bases that could be closed, local politicians and business leaders shelved their rivalries. Pooling funds and contact lists, leaders rallied 6,000 people-four times more than could fit into City Hall-to argue for the base at the first federal hearing.

A Portentous Event

But some began to wonder if the city was fighting a battle it couldn't win. They included James L. Meyer, a courtly Alexandria native who had joined the Air Force in 1957 but was judged to tall to fly and became a civil engineer instead. That gave him a bent for planning, and in 1965, when Chennault Air Force Base in nearby Lake Charles was closed, he urged Alexandria business leaders to draw up a contingency plan for England Air Force Base. But Mr. Meyer was rebuffed. In the 1970's he visited Chennault and was horrified to see boarded windows and unmowed grass; the base remained virtually empty for more than a decade.

By 1990, Mr. Meyer was president of the Central Louisiana Chamber of Commerce. That summer, he helped take a delegation of local business and government leaders to Washington to talk about England Air Force Base, on the same day, as it turned out, that Iraq invaded Kuwait. But any hopes that Saddam Hussein had saved the evaporated as top defense officials politely explained why small, single-use facilities like England were becoming obsolete. On the flight back to Alexandria, Mr. Meyer's colleagues agreed to start planning for an air base without the Air Force. Within weeks, a covert "Plan B" committee was formed.

Not wanting to undercut the Save the Base effort, the 19 members kept a low profile, meeting early in the morning over doughnuts in the chamber's office. After studying past base closings, members decided they had to get control of the whole air base-and quickly. Otherwise, any time Alexandria wanted a piece of land, it would have to wait for the Air Force to shop it around to various federal agencies first.

The City's Generous Gift

Immediately, barriers sprang up. A search of land records showed that Alexandria, like many cities, had donated land for the air base without requiring that it return to local hands if the Air Force left. Alexandria would federal legislation to gain England back. And who should actually get the land? Myrtle Beach, S.C., didn't confront that question until too late, and the city found itself fighting with the country for control.

The plan B committee decided to create an authority, with members appointed by the parish and city governments. But when some City Council members learned about the plans in the spring on 1991, they were furious. The city alone, the demanded, should develop the base. MR.
Meyer and others spent the next two weeks in private meetings, pleading with city and parish leaders to go along. They succeeded, partly because "we were the only people who had a plan ready," recalls Garland Lawrence, a local utility executive.

Indeed, by now, England Air Force Base was on the Defense Department's preferred list of bases to close, and time was precious. While political leaders kept fighting the base closing, the England transition team forged ahead. The pushed a bill through the state legislature within months to create and fund the England authority. The prodded the Air Force to make the authority the base's caretaker, so it could move into the base commander's office and earn fees for maintaining lawns and buildings they hired a consulting firm tot draft a formal redevelopment plan. Eager to avoid political blowups, MR. Meyer sometimes worked the telephone until midnight, making sure every "transition committee" member knew about each new development at the same time.

Dire Predictions

To stay motivated, Alexandria's business leaders assembled for a breakfast meeting to hear how the economy would collapse if the base wasn't re-used. Such predictions weren't hard to come by, even if they were less-than-scientific. For example, the Air Force itself had estimated each lost dollar of spending by the base would translate into $4.40 after rippling through the economy, and some Alexandrians argued the "multiplier" was as high as $5.50. But some Pentagon analysts say the multiplier for air bases is closer to $2, because the bases procure supplies mostly from outside the area, provide their own housing, and sell clothes and food at such discounts that soldiers sometimes buy goods for their civilian friends.

Alexandria's early start paid off. Because the Air Force, under pressure from Louisiana congressional leaders, had agreed to hand over the base to the England authority, Alexandria could start negotiating with tenants months before the base closed. J.B. Hunt Transport Service visited the base in the fall of 1991, and a year later agreed to open a terminal and driver's training school, with the promise of 500 jobs. When the base closed in December, the company was already setting up space on taxiway for yellow-trimmed trucks to practice backing up to loading docks.

In 1991, the England authority also persuaded the Army to consider the base as a place to fly in and assemble troops for maneuvers held 10 times a year at nearby For Polk. England eventually beat out to rival Louisiana air bases for the staging base, boosting plans for a 24 hour control tower and a civilian airfield. The Army wouldn't have considered England if the authority didn't already have a claim on the base, says Karen Nolan, a project manager for the Army. "This community was amazing. They were way ahead of the ballgame," she says.

A Red Lobster

There were other victories, too. With pleading and mountains of paperwork, the England authority was able to keep $20 million worth of movable equipment on the base for future
tenants—from pickup trucks to the balls and pins in the bowling alley. For good measure, the Air Force threw in the five fighter planes mounted on concrete pedestals at the air-base entrance.

England still faces bureaucratic obstacles. The Pentagon, nervous about environmental liability, has been slow to hand over former bases to communities. In the meantime, it is granting one-year leases for communities to bring tenants. The trouble is, it can take a year for a lease application to go through some 200 steps in the Air Force chain of command.

The England authority says it is awaiting approval of leases for 20 hopeful tenants representing 1,300 jobs—including a hospital, a golf course and a calibration-testing firm that would use electronic equipment left behind by the Air Force. The procedures "can and will be streamlined", says Paul Dempsey, who heads the Pentagon's Office of Economic Adjustment.

But business confidence is still high. General Mills Inc.'s Red Lobster chain just opened a restaurant in Alexandria, and Kmart Corp. is scouting locations to build a superstore. Michael O'Hadnot who just added a conference room to his Ramada Inn, intends to spend an additional $2 million to add 150 rooms, even though the base closing eliminated his contract to house visiting Air Force staff.

"This area" he says "will be better off, with the development they're doing now, than if they had kept the base intact."