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Once hailed as the largest aircraft carrier ever built, the USS Forrestal will be recycled to build new ships, but not until some of its sailors say one last goodbye.

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Pride of the U.S. Navy Takes Final Tour

LESTER HOLT, anchor:
Finally tonight, hundreds of people gathered at the Port of Brownsville, Texas, this weekend for a final salute to a trusted old friend. When she was launched six decades ago, the USS Forrestal was the biggest and most advanced aircraft carrier in the fleet. Over the years, she would see both triumph and tragedy, as we hear from NBC’s Gabe Gutierrez.

GABE GUTIERREZ, reporting:
Tony Sandoval hadn’t laid eyes on her in nearly half a century.

TONY SANDOVAL: I remember when she would knife her way across the open sea.

GUTIERREZ: Launched in 1954--

MAN #1: All Engines ahead.

GUTIERREZ: --The USS Forrestal was hailed as the biggest ship ever built- more than 1,000 feet long, as tall as of 25 story building.

SANDOVAL: I try not to get emotional but, you know, you remember these things and you remember the men you served with it, and it’s heartbreaking.

GUTIERREZ: Burned in to Sandoval’s memory is the fireball on the flight deck in the Gulf of Tonkin near Vietnam in 1967, a misfire missile triggered an inferno that ended up on the cover of Life magazine.

SANDOVAL: You know, we were hearing screams and yells and-- and I knew-- and I knew men were dying left and right.

GUTIERREZ: One hundred thirty-four sailors died that day, even more injured included then Lieutenant Commander John McCain.

SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN: I turned around and saw another pilot who was leaving his aircraft. And saw these people trying to put out the fire around the bomb, the bomb exploded. And it was a horrific.

GUTIERREZ: After repairs, she was the pride of the Navy with deployments across the Mediterranean until being decommissioned in 1993 due to budget cuts.

NIKHIL SHAH (All Star Metals President): It is the largest ship ever to be recycled in U.S.

GUTIERREZ: Her final voyage has now ended here at this Texas scrap yard, where it shall be dismantled.
over the next year and a half.
SHAH: It’s going to be re-melted and made into a new ship, a new building, a new tank, and it’s going to be part of our history again.
MAN #1: Hi.
MAN #2: Good to see, you buddy.
GUTIERREZ: This weekend, Navy veterans and their families came to say goodbye.
MAN #3: It just looks worn out. Old and worn out like me.
SANDOVAL: This would live forever in our hearts and memories.
GUTIERREZ: For Tony Sandoval, one last salute to history. Gabe Gutierrez, NBC News, Brownsville, Texas.