



AP photo

Dennis Conner handles a wave as well as he did those in Australia.

Conner's homecoming captivates San Diego

By Dean Nelson
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SAN DIEGO — Not since Ronald Reagan appeared in his final campaign stop here in 1984 has the city decked itself out to welcome a hero in such lavish fashion.

In fact, the Reagan contingent would have been swallowed up in the more than 30,000 San Diegans who jammed the B Street pier yesterday to welcome their latest hero and candidate for everything, Dennis Conner, his crew and the America's Cup.

With Conner's arrival, San Diego proclaimed itself the sailing capital of the world.

The courtyard outside San Diego Bay's cruise ship terminal filled by noon with a crowd waving "Dennis Conner for President" signs and displaying enough enthusiasm to withstand a 90-minute delay of Conner's plane.

The pier had a state fair atmosphere, with clowns, a 40-foot inflatable Statue of Liberty, brass and Dixieland bands and a vintage Civil War cannon. The crowd patiently listened to the jazz band from Point Loma High School, Conner's alma mater, play tunes popularized by Duke Ellington, Herbie Hancock and, of course, the Beach Boys. The band was accompanied by Point Loma cheerleaders. In fact, the whole city became one big cheerleader.

Life-size cutout photos of Conner were everywhere, in case spectators couldn't get their photo taken with the real thing.

When it was announced that Conner's plane could be seen descending, the crowd's noise level didn't subside until the Conner contingent arrived 30 minutes later.

His plane, a donated Continental Airlines DC-10, arrived at an obscure maintenance terminal at 1:37 p.m. (PST). A crowd of about 300 dignitaries and a Marine Corps band greeted the sailors at the tarmac as they descended from the plane, wearing navy blazers, khaki pants, red-white-and-blue ties, deep suntans and bleached hair.

Conner, looking very tired and with bloodshot eyes, was one of the last off the plane, but was the first to take a bottle of champagne and spray it across the Stars & Stripes decal on the plane, all to the delight of the greeters.

At B Street, it seemed that all of San Diego, a city painfully aware of its lack of sports heroes, was ready to make Conner king. Pleasure boats surrounded the pier and brass bands played patriotic marches as well as "Who's Sorry Now?" dedicated to the defeated Australians. When the announcement came that the motorcade was on its way to the airport, the crowd noise reached a fever pitch and filled the air with their miniature flags.

Mary DeBoard, a Boston native who has lived in San Diego for six years, said she hoped that the whole country appreciated this event as much as San Diego.

"I hope the people of Boston, as intelligent as they are, take this seriously," she said. "If they don't, they're slipping. As President Kennedy said, 'Ask what you can do for your country.' Dennis Conner won this for America."

Horns from nearby ships nearly drowned out the cheering as the crew arrived at the pier with Conner in the lead, holding the America's Cup over his head.

"It's a little bit awesome for a couple of hometown boys to be here," said Malin Burnham, a local businessman who headed the fund-raising for Stars & Stripes.

Mayor Maureen O'Connor presented Conner a key to the city along with a promise to do everything she could to see that the next America's Cup competition would be held in San Diego.

The US Navy also made a presentation to Conner, calling him "The World's Greatest Sailor."

The final touch of the spectacle was a performance of the Stars & Stripes theme song from the fund-raising video, "What Goes Down Must Come Up." And on a serious note, the crowd sang the ballad "The Stars & Stripes Anthem" from printed chorus sheets.

With that, the crew departed for a brief news conference, then returned to the airport for the next leg of their celebration journey — Washington, D.C. — for lunch with the man whose appearance in San Diego they overwhelmingly eclipsed — Ronald Reagan.