


HIDDEN IN THE NESTS

How the Mothball Fleets preserved our surviving Battleships, Liberties, and Victories

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USS *Iowa* fires a full broadside of her nine 16/50 and six 5/38 guns during a target exercise near Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, on 1 July 1984. Note concussion effects on the water surface and the 16-inch gun barrels in varying degrees of recoil. (USN/ Alan Elliot)

Many of today's surviving World War II-era ships escaped the ravages of war and then avoided the scrapper's torch by being hidden in the mothball fleets. They sat in the mothball fleet waiting for the right time and the right people to restore them to their former glory.

The Merchant Ship Sales Act of 1946 sold off a large number of ships built for the war and at its peak held more than 2277 vessels in case they were needed to meet the demands

of a future emergency. Those ships held for future use were managed under the Maritime Commission's National Defense Reserve Fleet. In 1950, the Maritime Commission was reorganized into the Maritime Administration (MARAD), which today is part of the Department of Transportation.

The initial Reserve Fleets were held in eight locations: Mobile, Alabama; Benicia, California; Stony Point, New York; Wilmington,

North Carolina; Astoria, Oregon; Beaumont, Texas; Fort Eustis, Virginia; and Olympia, Washington. Through the years, the National Defense Reserve Fleet has held a variety of ship types, everything from *Liberty* and *Victory* ships, to ice breakers and oil tankers, to the once super-secret Hughes *Gloimar Explorer* and the HMB-1 barge used to recover a Russian submarine, as well as the proof-of-concept *Sea Shadow* stealth ship.

By the end of April 2021, MARAD's Reserve Fleet only held 86 vessels. Of those 86, only one was built during WWII — a barracks barge (FB-62, ex-USS APL-24) that is used as a Reserve Fleet support ship at the Suisun Bay mothball fleet site. The Reserve Fleets of today hold Roll-On/Roll-Off cargo ships, crane ships, and break bulk carriers. Long gone are the vast fleets of WWII-vintage ships.

One of the last examples of a WWII ship removed from the

mothball fleet to become a floating museum is the *Iowa* (BB-61), now cared for by the Pacific Battleship Center and displayed in Los Angeles Harbor.

Iowa was laid down on 27 June 1940 at the New York Naval Shipyard, Brooklyn, New York, and launched 26 months later on 27 August 1942. *Iowa's* sponsor was Mrs. Henry A. Wallace, wife of the then-serving, 33rd vice president of the United States. The ship was

commissioned in February 1943, and began its first war patrol on 27 August headed for the North Atlantic. The battleship carried President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Tehran Conference in November and December of that year. In preparation for this mission, *Iowa* gained a square bathtub for Roosevelt's use in the Captain's In-Port Cabin on the 01 Level (first deck above the main deck).

In 1944, *Iowa* was transferred to the Pacific Theater, and sailing with the