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Aboard the ghost fleet

Three urban explorers find a way to sneak into a well-guarded piece of Bay Area history P12

USS Sperry from the crew's nest of the USCGC Glacier
PHOTO BY SCOTT HAEFNER





Jon Haeber (left, center photos) delighted in exploring the interior of *SS Export Bay*. Scott Haefner captured weeds aboard the deck of the *USCGC Glacier* (right).

Ghost Fleet wanderers

How three nighttime photographers snuck aboard the abandoned ships of Suisun Bay

By **Rebecca Bowe**
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Scott Haefner, Stephen Freskos, and Jon Haeber aren't the types to stand out in a crowd. Haefner is a web developer, Freskos supervises projects for an engineering firm, and Haeber has a desk job at a company that helps businesses hit high on Google — three straight-laced Bay Area professionals who blend readily into the corporate world.

But everyone's got their thing — a way to break out of bounds, or scratch the itch of some incessant curiosity.

For these three friends in their late-20s to mid-30s, their thing entails prowling around in rundown deserted places by the light of the full moon, at times taking great pains to avert detection by security patrols. "We go into places that most people don't go," Haefner says. They've been traipsing into the unknown and documenting their discoveries together for years, motivated as much by art as adrenaline.

This past May, after weighing the consequences, they publicized one of their boldest excursions yet: Sneaking aboard the Mothball Fleet in Suisun Bay to spend entire weekends roaming the bowels of

the mildewed vintage ships, while dodging the beams of patrol-boat searchlights.

Unlike many nocturnal wanderers magnetically drawn to abandoned spaces — squatters, taggers, or scrappers, for instance — they don't break in, vandalize, or steal. Instead, they adopt the same sense of reverence in decaying, chemical-laden industrial places that conscientious hikers assume on backwoods trails. They shoot night photos with professional quality gear, occasionally using flashlights to achieve a technique called light painting.

Haefner, Freskos and Haeber consider themselves advanced practitioners in the art of urban exploration (a.k.a. urbex or UE), an underground activity that's grown trendier as it draws in adventure-some novices. Now that they've publicized their caper aboard the Mothball Fleet, however, they've also come under the watchful eye of the feds.

EXPIRATION DATE

At first they thought it was a pipe dream. Doubting their ability to access the Mothball Fleet was saying a lot, considering they'd once snuck onto the Vandenberg Air

Force Base and wandered amid abandoned missile silos, absorbing the gravity of the military history those Cold War artifacts represented. Another time they'd managed a nighttime excursion to Neverland Ranch, the famed private amusement park of the late Michael Jackson.

But the ghost ships moored at Suisun Bay seemed out of their league. The rows of hulking, government-owned vessels were locked up and berthed offshore, surrounded by a security headquarters and a shoreline barricade plastered with "No Trespassing" signs. Patrol boats equipped with searchlights circled the docks 24 hours a day, and the prospect of climbing aboard without being spotted seemed crazy.

But then they got word that the last of the aging ships would soon be towed away and destroyed. For Haeber, the history nut of the bunch, this changed everything. "It was about the urgency of making sure these ships were documented," he explained. "Getting them in the current state that they're in is so important."

Alternatively known as the Mothball Fleet and the Ghost Fleet, the ships are part of the

National Defense Reserve Fleet, a collection of cargo ships, tankers, and military auxiliaries overseen by the U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD). Created in 1946 to be ready for deployment in case a national emergency arose, the fleet consisted of 2,277 ships at its height in 1950, strategically stationed at eight anchorages nationwide. For most of the vessels, the call to service never came, and they declined into obsolescence. By April, the entire fleet had dwindled to just 178 ships, at dock in Suisun Bay; Fort Eustis, Va.; and Beaumont, Texas.

The ships that have been moored at Suisun Bay for decades have long since deteriorated, and now they're being hauled off to the scrap yard bit by bit, though the spot will continue to serve as an anchorage for newer additions to the National Defense Reserve Fleet.

Some were constructed in the World War II era, while others date back to the 1960s and 1970s. While many are tankers or merchant vessels, there are also warships, relics of history deployed in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Operation Desert Storm.

Many of the roughly 70 dilapidated ships have become ecological hazards, leaching toxins and heavy metals into the tidal estuary, which flows into San Francisco Bay. The monumental task of removing and dismantling them began late last year, providing badly needed blue-collar jobs on Mare Island, in the economically depressed city of Vallejo.

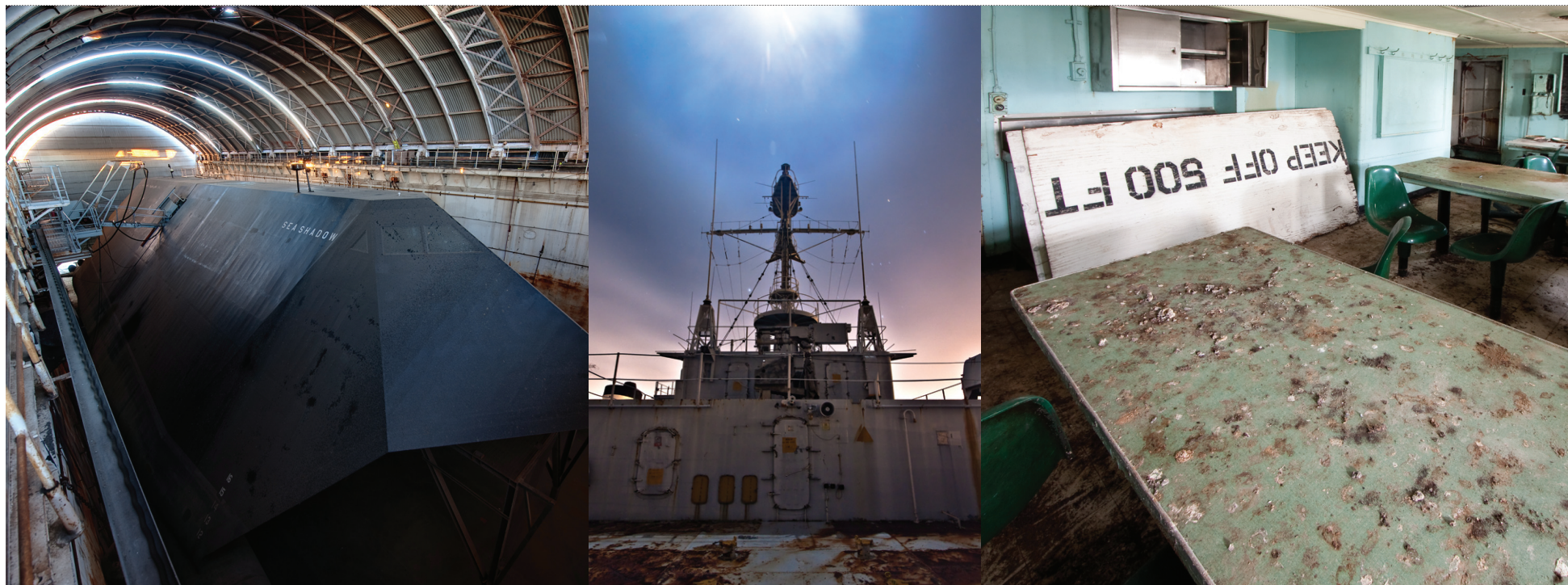
By 2017, the last of the ghost ships will have met with torch cutters. At least one will be salvaged: the *USS Iowa* (BB-61) — a 1938 lead battleship that shuttled President Franklin D. Roosevelt to and from the Tehran Conference during World War II — will be donated and turned into a museum.

Aside from being scrapped, outmoded ships meet with a variety of fates. Some are donated for educational use while others are deliberately sunk to create artificial reefs. Still others are used for target practice in the Navy's sink-at-sea live-fire training exercises program (SINKEX).

"We saw that these things were going to be gone," Haefner said. "So we planned it out."

Haeber examined satellite imagery on Google Earth. Freskos, who'd spent time at sea, studied the tidal patterns. The three scoured the Internet for online photos of the Ghost Fleet. They conducted a scouting mission with binoculars in hand, and gained a sense of when they could take advantage of windows of opportunity between the 30-minute patrol boat rounds.

Long before they even discovered a navigable slough that snaked through a marsh into Suisun Bay or spotted the Craigslist post advertising an inflatable raft for sale, Freskos went up to shoreline gate where the "No Trespassing" signs were posted. He peered through at the tantalizing rows of mothballed ships, and hollered as loud as he could. Nobody responded.



Haefner snapped this rare photo of the *Sea Shadow* (left), and Stephen Freskos shot the tower of the *Point Defiance* (center) and the interior of the *USNS Mission Santa Ynez*.

DECAYED TIME CAPSULES

After the months of planning left them confident that it was indeed possible to access the Mothball Fleet, the trio of photographers set out for their first visit, with about 700 pounds of gear in tow. They split the cost of a 12-foot inflatable Fish Hunter raft with a Minn Kota trolling motor. They carried the raft and their gear through a muddy expanse to a marshy spot where the low-profile craft could be set into a narrow slough, safely out of view.

“We always went on or exited at nighttime,” Haefner said. “We would go on nights near the full moon so we could take pictures. It makes it look even more ghostly.”

Their first target was Row F, a line of ships docked in a straight shot from where the slough filtered into the bay. They maneuvered down the narrow channel in their raft, dodging submerged obstacles along the way. Keeping tabs on the whereabouts of the security boat, they started rowing once they reached the open water, and managed to bridge the 800-foot distance to the first ship.

“Our plans were kept secret to all except our loved ones,” Haeber wrote in an online account of that first excursion. “Nobody, other than my girlfriend, knew exactly where I was that weekend. For all intents and purposes, I was on a fishing trip with some friends.”

“Keep Off” signs announcing an invisible 500-foot barrier that was not to be breached were affixed to the hull of every ship.

The intruders maneuvered their raft between two Coast Guard cutters, *Planetree* and *Iris*, and tied up.

“It can be kind of a challenge getting on,” Haefner explained. “We’re risking ourselves, obviously, but we also brought a bunch of expensive camera gear.” He was the first one to climb aboard the *Iris*, reaching high to grab onto a bumper that he could then pull himself up on to gain access to the ship. While Freskos kept watch, Haeber handed the gear up to Haefner bit by bit. Once all three were aboard with their backpacks and camera equipment, they hauled up the raft and deflated it.

The *Iris* was commissioned in 1944. In 1970, it responded to the scene of an oil-rig fire in Galveston, Texas. In 1987, it assisted with cleanup operations in Prince William Sound after the Exxon-Valdez spill. It was decommissioned in 1995, so their entrance likely marked the first time anyone other than MARAD employees had been aboard in 16 years.

A handy feature of ghost ship exploration is that once aboard a ship, it’s possible to access any ship along the entire row, thanks to gangplanks connecting the vessels. So while many of the mothballed vessels were completely secured, there was always the chance that the next one down would have an unlocked entranceway. Part of the ethos of urban exploration is to avoid breaking anything, so they only accessed the interiors of unsecured ships. “They are fairly vigi-

lant about keeping doors locked up tight,” Haefner said. “But there are just so many doors.”

Haeber found a single open door on the *SS Exxon Gettysburg*, a mammoth oil tanker constructed in 1957, and entered the ship alone, enthralled. The interior, he later wrote, smelled like a mix of mold, benzene, and soggy newspaper. He turned on his flashlight and began tiptoeing through the corridors and peering into the cabins. “They were like time capsules, untouched since the 1970s,” Haeber said.

“Some of the ships were 15 stories deep, like a maze,” Freskos said. “We’d get lost inside.” The trio split from Row F before sunrise and managed to get back to the slough without any mishaps, but they returned on a handful of other occasions with sleeping bags and enough food and water to last a weekend. On those subsequent journeys, they’d seek out places to sleep, often crashing in the once-luxurious captain’s quarters. They slept by day, so that entire nights could be devoted to wandering in awe of the decayed, post-apocalyptic industrial environs, shooting hundreds of photographs.

They visited rooms where crews once hung out playing board games, still littered with cigarettes. They photographed molded interiors, dark cavernous stairwells, engine parts, navigational equipment, and abandoned cabins with peeling wallpaper. “We found personal letters, cards, things people left,” Haefner said. “We were always

looking for signs of life.” They wandered through mess halls, engine rooms, bathrooms, galleys, even chilling places with operating chairs and overhead spotlights. They climbed around on the decks in the open night air, wandering through derricks and cranes.

The old ships would make eerie creaking noises when the tide rushed in, and there was always that mild sensation that one experiences on a boat, of things not staying still. “It was like a cacophony of sound when the current was coming in,” Freskos recalled. Hawks, osprey, and owls nested aboard some of them, so the creaking noises were sometimes accompanied by screeching birds of prey.

“The place is steeped in history,” Freskos said. “I’d always think of what this room was used for, or what went on here, when people were experiencing the suffering, craziness, and nervousness of war.”

HIGHLIGHTS AND HAIR-RAISERS

A highlight of their journeys aboard the Mothball Fleet was stumbling across the sleek black *Sea Shadow*, a stealth ship, which was ensconced within a barge on Row G. Shrouded in secrecy, the angular vessel was developed by Lockheed for the U.S. Navy to test how low of a radar profile could be achieved, and it served as inspiration for a stealth ship featured in a James Bond film. According to the MARAD website, “*Sea Shadow* was constructed and tested under a high

degree of secrecy; until the Navy made its existence public in 1993, all tests were conducted at night.” The ship entered the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet in September 2006.

They also found their way aboard the *USS Iowa*, which bears the distinction of being the only U.S. Navy warship ever outfitted with a bathtub, so FDR could have a soak while crossing the Atlantic. While they didn’t manage to go inside, an eerie photograph of three enormous guns on deck conveys the magnitude of the battleship.

One of Haeber’s most cherished discoveries was a three-story-tall mural he photographed inside the *SS President Lincoln*, an American President Lines ship constructed in San Francisco in 1961. An early version of a containerized cargo vessel, the *Lincoln* doubled as a cruise ship catering to a small number of elite passengers, and remnants of the elegant interior décor remained. The ship has since been hauled to the scrap yard.

It wasn’t always smooth sailing for the three urban explorers. Once they narrowly dodged a work crew aboard a ship — “but we saw or heard them before they saw us,” Haefner said. Another time, while paddling back to the slough, they discovered their raft was punctured and had to manually pump air into it as they traveled. Then, at the tail end of their final journey to the Ghost Fleet, they found themselves fully illuminated by the dreaded patrol-boat searchlight for a full

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Ships CONT. »

10 seconds. They froze, convinced they'd been caught. But nothing happened, so they powered up and rowed like hell to get back ashore, and never returned.

Of course, posting interior photographs of the Mothball Fleet all over the Internet and delivering a public slideshow about their sneak-
 aboard escapades has attracted the attention of the federal government. "The Department of Homeland Security has been looking into it," said Haefner, who can tell by monitoring web traffic on his blog. "I know that they know." He also noticed hits from the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Department of Justice, but so far, none have come knocking.

In response to a Guardian request for comment about the Mothball Fleet photographers, Kim Riddle, a spokesperson for MARAD, e-mailed an official statement. "We were aware of the intrusion," she wrote. "We are concerned about the safety of individuals onboard our ships. This is a dangerous industrial site, and we take significant precautions for our own workers when they are onboard the fleet to make sure that areas are safe for them to enter. While trespassing on federal property, these photographers put themselves in a very dangerous position and could have been severely injured or killed from a fall or by entering an enclosed space that doesn't have enough oxygen. Since learning of this incident, we took additional security steps, reviewed our procedures, and reinforced training with our employees to stop these kinds of intrusions."

Freskos touched on the safety issue in an online discussion about the project. "There were many long discussions about oxygen-deprived spaces such as anchor chain lockers and ballast tanks," he wrote. "There were contingency plans made for injuries. We carried a medical kit, we wore [life jackets], and took many other precautions." He also responded to those who questioned the wisdom of publicizing their late-night excursions to the Mothball Fleet.

"I think I speak for the three of us when I say that we are well aware of the consequences," Freskos wrote. "But it's a passion of ours, and it's worth it." **SFBG**