

BENICIA

-- The ghostly congregation of ships known as the Mothball Fleet floats silently on Suisun Bay. Huddled together bow to stern, they wait for a call to duty that may never come. The fleet may look like just a lonely, floating junkyard, but hidden among the discards are some nautical treasures and old heroes. One is the Navy tugboat Hoga, which during the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941 rescued dozens of sailors, fought onboard ship fires, and pulled the battleship Nevada to safety. The Golden Bear, a 1939 passenger liner that later became a training ship for sailors, and the World War II merchant ship Red Oak Victory also dwell in the fleet. Organizations are hoping to save all three vessels. The chipping paint and rusted hulls of most ships in the fleet belie its vital role in the country's military arsenal. Fleet Superintendent Joe Pecarero bristles at the nickname ``Mothball Fleet," preferring the proper name: the National Defense Reserve Fleet. ``When I think of mothballs, I think of a garment hung in a bag in the back of the closet, never to be worn again." Pecarero said. ``That's not the case here." The Mothball Fleet is the largest single collection of ships on the Pacific Ocean. The 78 cargo ships, tankers, Victory ships, missile cruisers, barges and tugboats have accumulated more than 2,000 years of total active service. They have sailed every sea, been to thousands of ports and served in every foreign war and military conflict since World War II. Though many of the fleet's ships are slated for scrap, most are being maintained for possible use in the future by America's military and humanitarian organizations. Every year, the number of merchant ships flying the U.S. flag shrinks. The ships kept in reserve by the Maritime Administration ensure that the country will not have to depend on foreign ships or build new ones if a war or humanitarian need arises. ``This is more of an active place than people think," Pecarero said. ``And it's more than a bone yard." Every day, 71 Maritime Administration workers inspect the ships for leaks, oil the engines and make sure only dry air circulates inside the ships'

hulls. A low-voltage electrical system keeps corrosion from forming under the waterline. They don't do cosmetic work, such as painting the hulls. Some of the best-conditioned ships are part of the Maritime Administration's Ready Reserve Force, which includes ships in Suisun Bay; Beaumont, Texas; and James River, Va. With no advance notice, they can be brought to duty and manned in as little as four days after a call from the Pentagon or the President. During the 1991 Gulf War, 79 ships of the Ready Reserve Force, including two from Suisun Bay, were used to transport tanks, helicopters and ammunition for U.S. troops fighting Iraq. ``The Ready Reserve Force did nearly a quarter of the sea lift movement of military cargo in Desert Shield," said Captain Frank Johnston, Western Regional Director of the Maritime Administration. ``Without the RRF, the Desert Storm victory would not have been possible.' 'While waiting for a call to duty, ships in the Mothball Fleet do not sit idle. The Coast Guard uses them to train firefighting crews and oil spill response teams. Marines from all over the country practice storming Mothball ships with small craft and helicopters. Marines who trained on the ships helped enforce the United Nations' Iraqi shipping blockade during the Gulf War. On a more peaceful note, the ships also provide ideal protective cover for the Bay's sturgeon and striped bass population. Every few weeks a newly retired merchant or Navy vessel joins the fleet. When it has no other use, it will be sold to the scrap yard. The money earned will be used to support other ships. Over the years, the Mothball Fleet has included some famous and infamous seacraft.

A crew of near-ancient mariners sailed the Liberty Ship Jeremiah O'Brien out of the Mothball Fleet and later across the Atlantic Ocean to the 50th anniversary of D-Day. To date, she is the only ship ever to leave the Mothball Fleet under her own power. The GloMar Explorer, which recently was removed from the fleet to be re-outfitted for oil exploration, was built for the CIA in 1974 by Howard Hughes in a failed attempt to recover a sunken Soviet missile submarine off Hawaii. Ship lovers hope the Hoga, the

Golden Bear and the Red Oak Victory will be turned into museums, saving them from the fate that awaits most of the fleet - the scrap yard. Until they are, workers will take care of them. They know the Mothball Fleet is more than a bunch of rust buckets. ``Rust is superficial," Pecarero said. ``What really counts is the working machinery down below, and that's what we work to maintain."

Pat Walsh, Chronicle Staff Writer