Memorial Day and Liberty ship nostalgia

By Bill Buddenbrook and Sydney Kowar

The nostalgia was thicker than the usual summer fog in San Francisco. The Jerome O'Brien, last of the Liberties, eased her way away from the pier at Fort Mason and hiked into the bay for a half-mile memorial cruise.

There were a few youngsters in the crowd that chided about the World War II vintage freighter but most of the passengers had spent a good deal of time on their youth sailing aboard Liberty ships as troops or as crew, or meeting them across the perilous waters toward the war fronts. The class time of 2,500 of the largest class of ships ever built represented something of a miracle of American industrial production, which is arguably impossible ever to happen again.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized an emergency shipbuilding program in 1941 to replace the ships that were being sunk by the Axis each week by enemy submarines.

The design was modified from the classic British ship that had been used for simplicity and economy, and the first vessel, the SS Patrick Henry, was completed and at work after only 246 days, an extremely quick time.

By the end of the war the average construction time was brought down to an average of two months, and the record was eight days from first laying to delivery, accomplished at the Kaiser Richmond shipyard.

The production effort created vast and unceasing social changes as thousands of women went to work in shipbuilding and related tasks, including welding, riveting, and painting. Hundreds of thousands of people left rural homes for the shipyards and other war production plants and huge "temporary" housing projects were built to house them, some of them still in existence as shacks.

All of the old Liberties are gone now, sunk or scrapped, but the Jerome O'Brien is preserved by the Maritime Administration as a floating monument to those who built them and those who sailed in them.

She was brought down from the San Francisco Port in 1979, where her own power, and the process of restoration was begun with the assistance of volunteer labor and voluntary donations.

Today she crossed the bay, steamed up the Oakland Estuary, then sailed out the Golden Gate to drop 20 donated wreaths in memory of the marines killed in Korea prior to returning to Fort Mason for a luncheon.

The 600 or so passengers paid $50 each toward the restoration fund.

Back on shore, meanwhile, Mayor Feinstein planned to introduce a $50,000 honor for World War I and seven other holders of the Congressional Medal of Honor at the City's special service marking Memorial Day at Cow Palace this morning.

The mayor called it "a great honor and privilege" to have one of the nation's 25 living recipients of the highest award for bravery assembled in San Francisco.

"Their service beyond the call of duty and their truly incredible heroism stand as an inspiration to all who cherish democracy and who love untarnished Liberty," Feinstein said in prepared remarks. "Our city is proud to pay a richly deserved tribute to these heroes and to salute the efforts of all who have fought and died in order to preserve and to protect our nation."

These were her special guests:

- Former Sgt. Philip C. Katz, a native San Francisco, who at 83 is the dean of America's Medal of Honor corps. He was decorated by Gen. John J. Pershing for rescuing a wounded comrade and carrying him to safety.
- Maj. Gen. William F. Dean of Berkeley, described by the mayor as the "most decorated United States Army leader who showed outstanding courage and ability during the Korean War."
- William Badger, former Navy chief machinist's mate, decorated for extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty during the rescue and salvage of the submarine USS Sealion, which sank in 1943.

- Lt. Col. Edward S. Michael, U.S. Air Force, retired, honored for an "incredible act of courage" on a bombing mission over Germany in April 1944. This involved the safe return of his crew and critically damaged plane to England, though he was seriously wounded.
- Col. Mitchell Page, Marine Corps, retired, decorated for extraordinary heroism in the Solomon Islands in May 1942.
- Col. Charles W. Davis, U.S. Army, retired, decorated for outstanding courage in the Battle of Guadalcanal in World War II. He is the president of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

"These men have earned not only the highest possible military honor of the United States," Feinstein said, "but they also have our everlasting gratitude and profound esteem for their complete willingness to give everything, including life itself, to serve our nation. We are forever indebted to them."

The memorial service included music by the Sixth Army Band and formal presentation by the Liberty Power Corporation of 18 flags that will fly from the restored Cow Palace.

"San Francisco is proud to fly these flags where both veterans and residents alike may see and appreciate the more than 200 years of America's rich history which they symbolize," the mayor said.