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Finally this book is dedicated to all the men and women who served at Mare Island, and to the workers who build the things we use in our lives.

Foreword contributor Thomas V. Meyer is a San Francisco native. He served in the U.S. Navy on board the USS Bennington in the China Sea, and as Communications Officer in the Twelfth Naval District in New York City. Mr. Meyer co-founded Grapestake Gallery in San Francisco and is an art dealer and fine art advisor.



foreword

No matter how much you might know about Mare Island—and it's surprising how many Bay Area residents know little or nothing about it—the place is essentially mysterious, a kind of Stonehenge of the American empire.

Founded in 1854 by the legendary Admiral David Farragut and closed by an act of Congress on April Fools' Day, 1996. Mare Island was for over one hundred years the shipbuilding center of the western world. As many as 50,000 men and women lived and worked on Mare Island at any one time, building almost every kind of naval vessel imaginable, from the first submarines to the swift boats of Vietnam.

To be able to see Mare Island today as it once was—a vital cog in national defense, a bustling nerve center of naval experimentation and progress during two world wars and numerous international conflicts—takes far more imagination than to see it as it is now, or even how it might be someday in the future. For there are attempts to repurpose Mare Island—there's a college campus, some new housing, light manufacturing of different types. But it's the past that's intriguing, that's guaranteed to prompt so many questions in the imagination of anyone venturing off Highway 37 near Vallejo and into Mare Island, not the present or the future.

This little book is a narrative in words and pictures of one man's unexpected encounter with Mare Island. The author walks along, taking just enough time to be led by the place itself, letting questions of his own past come to him unbidden, watching the country he loves become a super-power right before his eyes. It's a modest act of preservation, mercifully free of the Technicolor romantic notions that often accompany historic documentation.

TOM MEYER, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 2016

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I was driving around on a Saturday morning in early March, on my way somewhere, I can't remember where, it doesn't matter whether I remember or don't remember where, when I first saw Mare Island. This kind of wandering was good for me then; I didn't have time for it then like I do now.

I remember this: I'd been reading a book about 'The Veda's, how they thought of the sky as the ocean and the ocean as their heaven. There were no fixed places in Vedic culture, and no trace of building survived their civilization. If they had a Parthenon it was, as one admirer wrote, 'made of words'.

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IT HAD RAINED IN THE NIGHT. THE BUILDINGS, WHAT REMAINED of them, were drenched, which made each building singular, as if being independent was much more important than being in relationship. Each building had a voice—*you're not from around here. You don't know what happened.*

Each building had worn out its past, each exposed its abandonment so completely, each abandonment seemed so sudden and irrevocable, as if a young boy had just thrown a rock through a window and had run away as fast as he could to tell his friends what he'd done.

It seemed that each building had left behind only the history of its impermanence, that impermanence has a great lesson to teach and that it is beautiful.

I PULLED OFF THE ROAD, GOT OUT OF THE CAR AND STARTED walking. Walking's the best way to see things, especially when you're not sure what you're seeing.

And what was I seeing? I wasn't sure, though I knew that what I was seeing had once been important, and was now a ruin, a modern ruin.

What I was seeing looked so American. All the signs were in English, everything had been left behind in both slow motion and in such a big hurry.





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It's all very strange, the buildings are empty but alive, there's none of the numbness that surrounds state capitols or other official civic buildings. Even though they'd been abandoned and are in various states of dilapidation, boarded up, fenced off with chain link, I could still imagine everyone who worked inside them going home for the weekend and coming back first thing Monday morning.





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COMMODORE DAVID FARRAGUT ESTABLISHED MARE ISLAND Shipyard in 1854. 513 ships would be built at Mare Island before it was officially closed, April 1, 1996.

Farragut's the man who said, "Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead," perhaps the most American of all American sayings.



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MEMORY IS WHAT THINGS USED TO LOOK LIKE WHEN PEOPLE always wore nice clothes to go downtown—hats and gloves for the ladies, preferably white gloves, and suits and ties for the men. You wouldn't be seen downtown in anything but your best clothes.

A definition of the past: the need to feel that you belong to history, as strong a need as the need for shelter, food, sex...



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DURING WORLD WAR II MARE ISLAND WAS THE LARGEST NAVAL shipbuilding yard in the world. 43,000 people were employed on the island. Workers in one shop worked 24/7 roasting coffee beans to send out on departing ships; in another shop workers made nothing but five-gallon paint cans.

The miracle of Mare Island is that it lasted as long as it did, the miracle of any empire.



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TO VISIT MARE ISLAND ON A NICE DAY IS TO MISS THE POINT. THE island's made for bad weather; it looks best in fog or just after rain or at dusk when the light of day is overgrown and you can almost see the old paint falling from the side of the buildings.

The best time is evening, when the tranquility is almost overwhelming, the kind of atmosphere that encourages you not to criticize but to understand.

