

# Borrowing from the Enemy

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**“The quickest route to peace is by employing the maximum effort,”  
Secretary of War Newton Baker transports an Army to  
France and redefines “maximum effort.”**

**O**n 28 May 1917, General John J. Pershing left New York City for France aboard the USS *Baltic* to establish the advance headquarters for the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Accompanying him were 191 soldiers and Marines. Although their departure was considered top secret, one of the coast artillery batteries fired a salute as the ship sailed by. It was an inauspicious start for what many of the Allied leaders from France, Italy and Great Britain hoped would be a fast rising flood of American soldiers. They were to be very disappointed. Not only was the American Army of 1917 extremely small, less than two hundred thousand soldiers, it was more equipped and trained to fight the 1898 Spanish-American War than take on the extremely modern Imperial German Army in the trenches of France.

Although the US government was beginning to recruit, equip and train a large modern army, it would take time and a lot of transportation capability to move it across the Atlantic to France. Unfortunately, as the Army started to round into size and shape, much of the transportation capability needed to move the force was littering the bottom of the ocean. The German Navy's surface raiders and submarine fleet had ravaged the shipping fleets of the Allied and Neutral countries to the point that they could not replace half of their losses, even with a massive shipbuilding program. By July 1917 British Admiral Lord Charles Beresford expressed his fears quite clearly by reporting he was “distressed at the fact that it appears... impossible to provide enough ships to bring the American Army over... and, after they are brought over, to supply

*Top: The USS Covington, formerly the German ship Cincinnati, shown here just before sinking after being torpedoed on 2 July 1918. Fortunately for the Americans, the major transport ship losses all took place on the homeward voyage with relatively empty berthing spaces. Courtesy US Navy.*

the enormous amount of shipping which will be required to keep them full up with munition, food and equipment.” The German General Staff agreed completely. In their opinion, the American Army would not be able to cross the ocean in sufficient numbers or in time to impact the fighting on the Western Front. Many American planners also felt that shipping was an unsolvable problem. Nevertheless, President Woodrow Wilson had committed the United States to war. His Secretary of War, Newton Baker, was determined to end the “Great War” by bringing it to a quick and victorious conclusion. Facing him, however, were some harsh truths:

1. The German submarine fleet, although primitive by the standards of the fleet that Germany would field in the Second World War, was proving an effective tool in greatly reducing the flow of transatlantic shipping.
2. The American shipping fleet was large but, being focused almost exclusively on local North American trade, was totally unequipped to move the thousands of men General Pershing needed in France.
3. What remained of the useable French and British commercial shipping fleets came with a price tag. The Allied commanders wanted the American Doughboys to fill the manpower gaps that the Germans had ripped in the Allied armies and therefore they were determined to dictate what kind of soldiers and equipment would be transported in their countries’ ships. Their insistence on restricting passage to only infantrymen would defeat Pershing’s unshakeable desire to field a completely American army serving under American leaders.

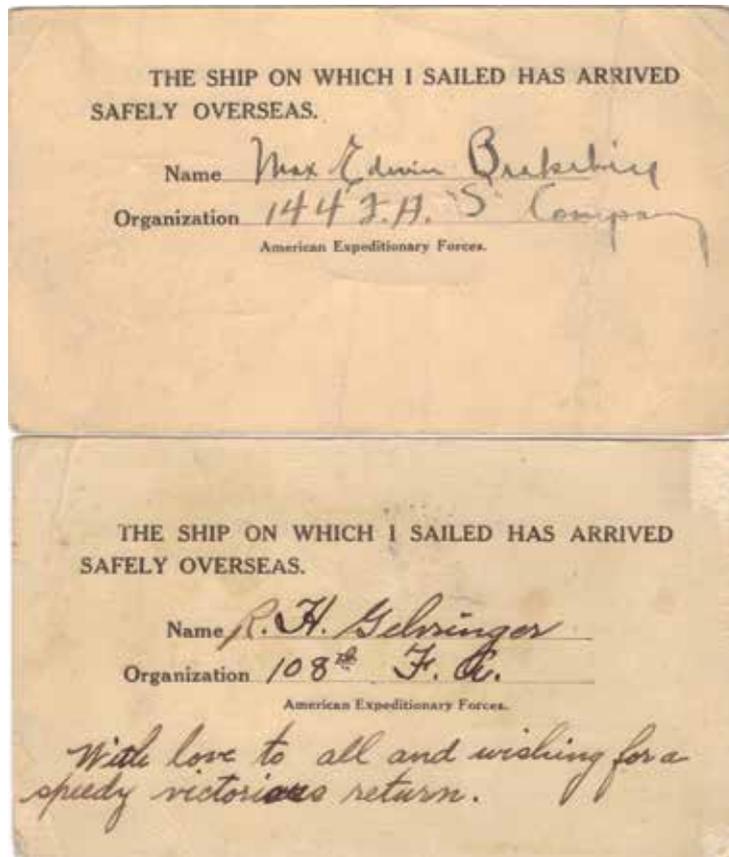
Given this list of problems, Baker could be forgiven if he were discouraged. Fortunately, he was made of sterner stuff and therefore decided to attack the problems head on. With the Navy’s assurance that their warships could protect the trans-

port ships through the use of convoys and vigorous anti-submarine tactics, Baker checked the first problem off his list. The Navy proved as good as its word. The majority of the American fleet was transferred to the Atlantic seaboard and careful coordination with the British fleet helped to maximize the number of anti-submarine vessels assigned to convoy protection. It also helped that the Navy had begun conducting “refueling at sea” operations just a few months before and was now able to ex-

Army would end up as a feeder system to the Allied forces. Holding the line against most of the French and British attempts to take over his soldiers, and carefully cooperating at other times, Pershing managed to keep the American Army in one piece as a cohesive fighting force.

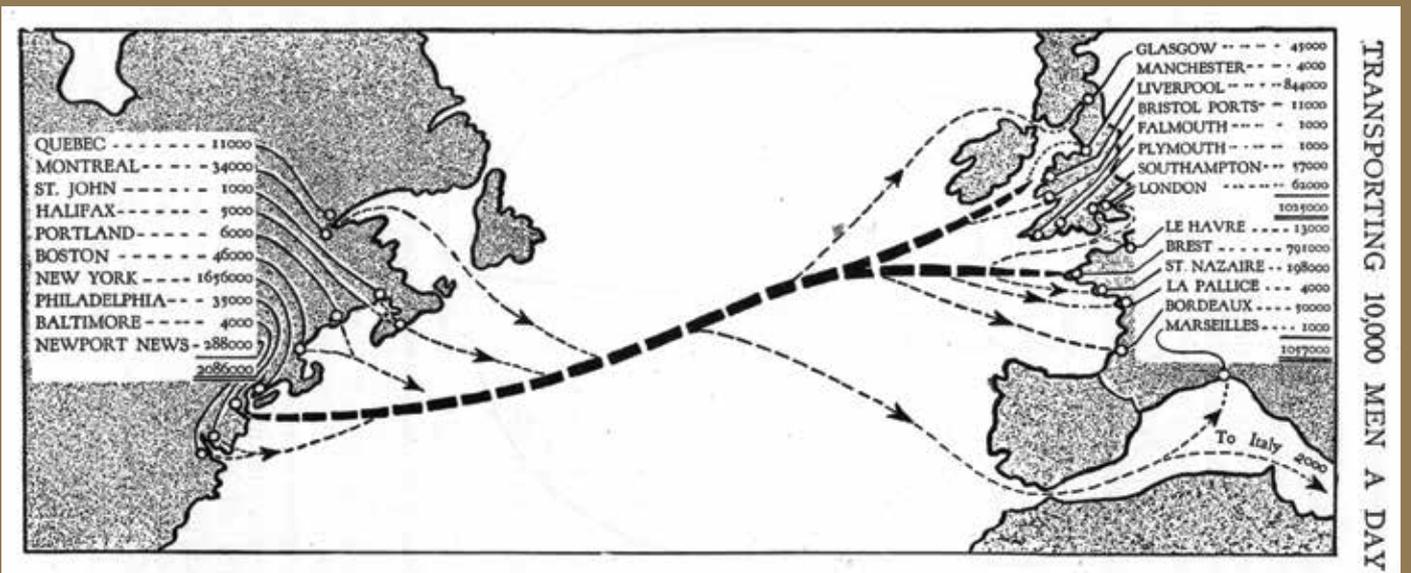
Baker was left with the lack of US transport ships as his biggest problem. Needless to say, he had other major headaches. One was the huge amount of rail resources required to move soldiers from their training camps scattered throughout the country to the East Coast ports of embarkation (POE). This proved to be a real challenge as every troop train heading eastward meant one less coal train delivering heating fuel to the large cities of the country. Without coal to run the industrial blast furnaces and to heat homes, it was feared that the houses and factories in much of the most populated areas of the country would soon be turning cold and dark. Even nature seemed against Baker as the winter of 1917-1918 proved to be one of the coldest on record. Mayors of some large cities found themselves forced to hijack coal shipments as they passed through their railyards to provide fuel for their homes and factories.

Yet the truly vexing problem was ships. The US maritime fleet had many ships but very few of them were trans-Atlantic voyage capable. The few ships that were capable and available were loaded with soldiers and dispatched to France under the new convoy system but at nowhere near the speed or efficiency the other Allies expected or hoped for. The lack of shipping capacity continued to be the chokepoint or bottleneck of the logistical and deployment pipeline. The rapid movement of troops by rail from the camps to the eastern seaboard sometimes compounded the problem. There simply weren’t enough ships to get the Doughboys across the Atlantic Ocean and now thousands of Doughboys were being crowded into transit camps near the ports. Adding to the dilemma, winter storms at sea had



tend the sailing distance of the newer ships in the destroyer fleet.

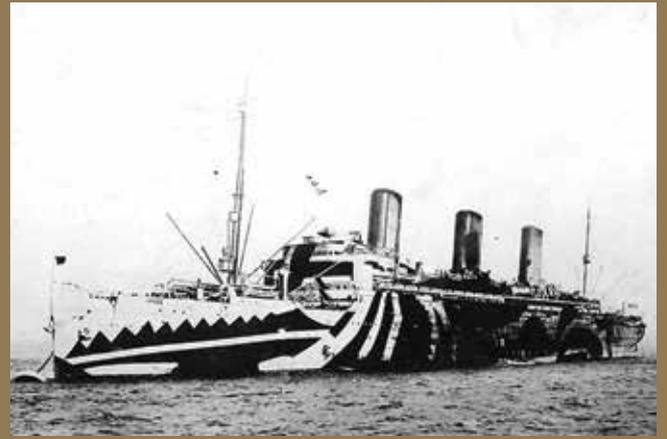
Baker also knew that Pershing had the complete backing of President Wilson when it came to Army decisions. Therefore, he left the American commander and his staff to deal with the Allied efforts to piecemeal the American force into their armies. Pershing and the US Army staff had developed a strategic and tactical concept that centered on a “million-man field army” structure. This force would consist of thirty divisions divided into, and controlled by, five corps with six divisions each. Inside of each corps there would also be a number of corps-owned units such as heavy artillery, long range-signal, aviation and observation balloon units, and engineer specialty units. If reduced to only shipping infantrymen, the American



Top: Soldiers of the 42nd "Rainbow" Division crowd the deck of the President Lincoln while en route to France in October 1917. Among the very first of the Doughboys to deploy, these soldiers would participate in a number of hard fought campaigns. The President Lincoln was torpedoed and sunk in May 1918. Courtesy US Navy.

Bottom: An interesting graphic depiction of the American and Canadian ports of embarkation and the arrival ports in France and England. The figures next to each location name represent the total number of Doughboys transiting that port. Courtesy US Army.

Opposite: Two samples of the safe arrival cards sent home by the Doughboys. These cards were filled out at the transit camps and turned in to the port authorities as the Doughboys boarded their ship. When news of the ship's safe arrival in Europe was telegraphed to the port of embarkation, the post cards would then be sent home to the soldier's family. Courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes.



*Top left: Another of the impounded German ships: the USS Huron, formerly known as the Friedrich der Grosse. During the war the Huron would make 8 voyages and carry almost 21,000 Doughboys to France. Courtesy US Navy.*

*Top right: The USS Leviathan, formerly the Vaterland, painted in camouflage and making one of her nine voyages to France. Courtesy US Navy.*

*Middle: Another view of the Leviathan as she arrives in Brest, France. The official caption that accompanied this picture provided the information that 12,000 soldiers, 4,000 sailors, 200 nurses and 700 officers were on board the ship during this voyage. Courtesy US Army.*



*Bottom: US Navy destroyers in Brest harbor in between convoys. In the Second World War many of these same destroyers would be "lend-leased" to Great Britain to serve again as convoy escorts. Courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes.*



slowed the departure and passage of the ships that were loaded and under way to France and Britain.

The Germans saw what was going on in the US and were adding to the problem by aggressively attacking all along the Western Front, threatening to win the war before the Americans could make a difference. Having victoriously ended their war against Russia, the Germans were moving their Eastern Front forces westward towards France. Struggling to get the AEF moving towards the front, US Army General Tasker Bliss wrote in exasperation to Secretary Baker that the Army had reached the point “where it is evident that if we do not send enough troops promptly, we must face the probability of losing the insufficient numbers that we may have sent.” Bliss had already taken his best shot and attempted to organize the ports through a centralized embarkation office directly under his control. He had even commandeered the massive German-owned Hamburg American Lines port facilities in Hoboken but it still was not enough.

The Americans needed more ships than were readily available but where could they come from? Playing the last card in his hand, Baker authorized that German ships interned in US ports since the outset of war could be used as troopships. This solution turned out to be more of a challenge than expected because of the German captains and crews of the captive ships. Rightfully fearing that their vessels would be used against their Fatherland, German sailors carried out a program of deliberate sabotage. A US Navy admiral later wrote of his personal shock at this effort: “To a man who really loves his ship, malicious injury to her by her own captain seems almost impossible; but the Teutonic mind is utilitarian rather than sentimental, and so...the captains of these ships...set to with sledge and chisel to wreck and destroy.”

Fortunately for the Americans, the Germans “blundered in the job.” The German sailors had underestimated the American skills with ship repair and electro-welding. Most of the deliberate damage had been to the vessels’ engines. The Americans quickly set to work, either creating new parts or welding the old parts back into place. Working around the clock seven days a week, the repair crews brought the ships back on line and made them seaworthy. By the time they were finished, the Americans had repaired and placed back into commission eighteen German ships. In most cases,

on completion of repair work the ships were given new names. The repaired vessels were:

<b>Original Name</b>	<b>New Name</b>
<i>Grosser Kurfurst</i> .....	<i>Aeolus</i>
<i>Kaiser Wilhelm II</i> .....	<i>Agamemnon</i>
<i>Amerika</i> .....	<i>America</i>
<i>Neckar</i> .....	<i>Antigone</i>
<i>Cincinnati</i> .....	<i>Covington</i>
<i>Prinz Eitel Friedrich</i> .....	<i>De Kalb</i>
<i>George Washington</i> .....	<i>George Washington</i>
<i>Fredrich der Grosse</i> .....	<i>Huron</i>
<i>Vaterland</i> .....	<i>Leviathan</i>
<i>Koenig Wilhelm</i> .....	<i>Madawaska</i>
<i>Barbarossa</i> .....	<i>Mercury</i>
<i>Kronprinzessin Cecile</i> ....	<i>Mount Vernon</i>
<i>Princess Irene</i> .....	<i>Pocahontas</i>
<i>Hamburg</i> .....	<i>Powhatan</i>
<i>President Grant</i> .....	<i>President Grant</i>
<i>President Lincoln</i> .....	<i>President Lincoln</i>
<i>Rhein</i> .....	<i>Susquehanna</i>
<i>Kronprinz Wilhelm</i> .....	<i>Von Steuben</i>

While most of the repair work was performed at the New York City port complex, the ports of Boston, Norfolk and Philadelphia also repaired some of the ships. It was a major success for the US, adding greatly needed shipping capacity to support the movement of the soldiers to France. Particularly important were the *Leviathan*, noted to be the largest ship in the world at the time, the *President Grant*, and the *George Washington*. Another German ship, the *Princess Alice*, was impounded in the Philippines, was renamed the *Princess Matoika* and put into service. Very quickly the impounded German ships proved to be worth the efforts made to repair them. Of the twelve ships noted for carrying the most soldiers to France, the top six were former German vessels. The number of soldiers they transported is phenomenal: *Leviathan* carried 119,000 soldiers in 9 trips, *George Washington* 48,373 in 9 trips, *President Grant* 39,974 in 8 trips, *America* 39,768 in 9 trips, *Agamemnon* 36,097 in 10 trips, and *Mount Vernon* 33,692 in 9 trips. These six ships alone delivered the equivalent of fourteen of Pershing’s 28,000-man divisions. Only two original US-owned ships, ironically enough both named for US railroads, were in the top 12: *Great Northern* transported 28,248 in 9 trips and *Northern Pacific* 20,711 in 9 trips.

German origin or not, the impounded ships became targets for the German submarines. Of the eighteen newly American ships, three were torpedoed. All three were on west-bound return voyages and empty

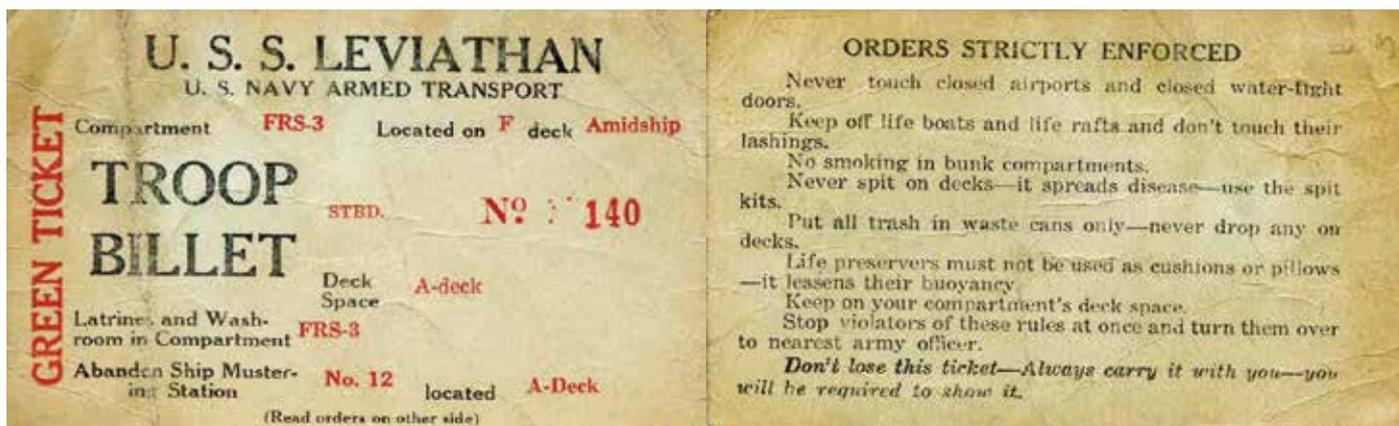


Top: The uniform coat of a Quartermaster Corps Lieutenant assigned to the New York Port of Embarkation unit. The port of New York also included the piers of Hoboken, Newark, and Elisabeth City, New Jersey. Uniform courtesy of Randy Kaliszewski.

Bottom: The work uniform belonging to Petty Officer 2nd Class Thomas Edward Cavaness assigned to the USS *Kansas*. The *Kansas* was a Connecticut-class battleship that conducted convoy escort duties and after the Armistice also served as a troopship, bringing home more than 7,000 Doughboys. Uniform courtesy Mary Kelly.



*Typical of the Doughboys undergoing training in the States, this soldier poses for a portrait in a studio near Camp Johnston in Florida. Courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes.*



The boarding pass provided to a soldier prior to boarding the Leviathan. By late 1918, with the onset of the Spanish Flu, the warning to not spit on the deck became as critically important as knowing the abandon ship mustering station. Courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes.

of soldiers. The Covington and President Lincoln were sunk and the Mount Vernon was damaged but repairable.

Always seeking to add even more vessels to speed up the deployment of the AEF, Baker directed Herbert Hoover, the Director of Food Administration (and future President of the United States), to hand over to General Bliss some of the vessels being used for subsistence shipments to Europe. Baker also dispatched his staff to investigate means of speeding up the loading and unloading of ships when they were in harbor. He recognized that faster turnaround times could further maximize the tonnage and personnel capacity of the fleet of transport ships. With all of these efforts to his credit, it is important to remember that that Wilson had been criticized by pro-war US leaders for selecting Baker, a well-known pacifist, as his Secretary of War. On the other hand, Baker's selection had been seen favorably by many pacifists or isolationists who strongly opposed America's participation in the war being fought in Europe. They believed Baker would help keep the U.S. out of the fight. Unfortunately for Baker, the day after he was sworn into office in March 1916, Pancho Villa attacked Columbus, New Mexico. The attack immediately put Baker's personal anti-war beliefs to a difficult test. It didn't get any easier, and by April 1917 the US was at war with Germany. Even with these challenges, Baker maintained as much as possible his pacifist leanings and wrote "the quickest route to peace is by employing the maximum effort and every possible facility to the fullest extent at the earliest possible moment."

However, until the German ships could be repaired and begin their shuttle to Europe as part of the nation's maximum shipping effort, the situation in France remained

bleak. When Pershing left for France, he was accompanied by his staff and barely enough soldiers to hold a decent formation. He was counting on the War Department to start sending him the troops he would need to build his army from the ground up. With each passing week a few more American soldiers appeared in France and were transferred to training facilities where they became acclimatized to France and the dreary European weather. More than one Doughboy would write home saying that "sometimes it doesn't rain in France."

By the end of the autumn of 1917, Pershing had four divisions training in France. The 1st Division had been joined by the

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26th Division, organized from the units of the New England National Guard. At the same time, the 2nd Division was being built out of separate Regular Army and Marine Corps units. This was a unique composite unit with one infantry brigade of soldiers and the other of Marines. The 1st, 2nd, and the 26th Divisions were joined shortly thereafter by another National Guard unit, the 42nd "Rainbow" Division.

Pershing's four divisions were suffering from the harsh European winter of 1917-1918 as much as the citizens back in the States. In response to a letter complaining of a shortage of shoes for soldiers in the 1st Division, former US President Teddy Roosevelt paid for and shipped two hundred

pairs to his son Archie's regiment. Many other soldiers were still wearing the lightweight summer uniforms in which they had deployed to France. It's no wonder that the Doughboys in France began to refer to their plight as being a "Valley Forge winter."

In spite of the arrival of more American units in France in late 1917 and early 1918, the Doughboys' contribution to the fighting had actually been minimal to this point. Pershing's casualty report to the War Department in April 1918 reflected that. He reported a total to date of 317 soldiers killed in action, 200 killed in accidents, and 947 died of disease. Even counting the 118 who died of wounds and an additional 49 fatalities from gas, his total was less than 2,000.

Even so, despite the relative lack of fighting and the low number of casualties, the number of Doughboys arriving in France was finally starting to become significant in the early spring of 1918. During a war in which the opposing sides sometimes counted their daily or weekly casualties in the thousands, the American contribution started to become apparent in March 1918 when almost 85,000 soldiers arrived in France. The next month the number was almost 120,000. It more than doubled in May to 245,000. In June, it was 300,000. The next month, even more would arrive. Some of the most effective propaganda leaflets dropped on the German lines were those that boasted "Everyday 10,000 American soldiers arrive in France." By the signing of the Armistice on 11 November 1918, there were slightly more than two million Doughboys in France. The irony is that in a very large part, it was the former German vessels that made this claim possible.

Bringing them there had been a massive coalition effort; ultimately British ships had carried 48 percent, French ships two



No one was safe from the Spanish Flu, even on navy ships. This somber photograph reflects part of the ceremony for a burial at sea of shipboard flu victims. Courtesy Peck Family.

## The Spanish Flu Pandemic

Along with thousands of Doughboys, the large transport ships carried an unwelcome passenger: the Spanish Flu. Its impact was exacerbated by the close quarters in the densely packed ships. The flu killed or sickened hundreds of the soldiers crossing the Atlantic. One voyage of the *Leviathan* proved particularly deadly as the ship became a floating hospital filled with a thousand sick and dying victims. The 57th Pioneer Infantry Regiment, travelling on the *Leviathan*, buried 200 soldiers in the Brest cemetery after arrival and before even leaving the port. Under better conditions, the ship's movement could have been stopped and the soldiers quarantined on the East Coast until healthy. Unfortunately, the Meuse-Argonne campaign was taking place exactly at the same time as the worst of the flu epidemic and the need for replacements for battle casualties in the combat divisions was critical. And so the ships continued to sail. In the end, more Doughboys would die from the flu and related diseases such as pneumonia than would be killed by German gunfire.

percent, Italian ships three percent and US ships (including the impounded German vessels) had carried 47 percent. The British contribution is notable; they finally agreed to allow the AEF to set shipping priorities in return for Pershing allowing some of his complete divisions to train in the British sector and later conduct combat operations in conjunction with the British Army. It took thirteen months to deliver the first half-million Doughboys but only six months to bring the remaining million and a half. Knowing that there remained another two million Doughboys in training in the United States and awaiting transportation helped drive the Germans to the Armistice table.

Undoubtedly, the use of impounded German ships proved to be a critical element

of transporting the US Army and Marine Corps to battle. Recognizing the accomplishment, Vice Admiral Albert Gleaves later wrote that it was no exaggeration that “the raising, transporting and supplying overseas of this army of two million men will be finally ranked as one of the greatest achievements in the annals of history.” That it was accomplished under the direction of an ardent pacifist and using vessels “borrowed” from the enemy, makes the achievement that much more remarkable. *DTJ*

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For more information about the deployment of the AEF to France see Alexander Barnes' *To Hell with the Kaiser; America Prepares for War 1916-1918*.