

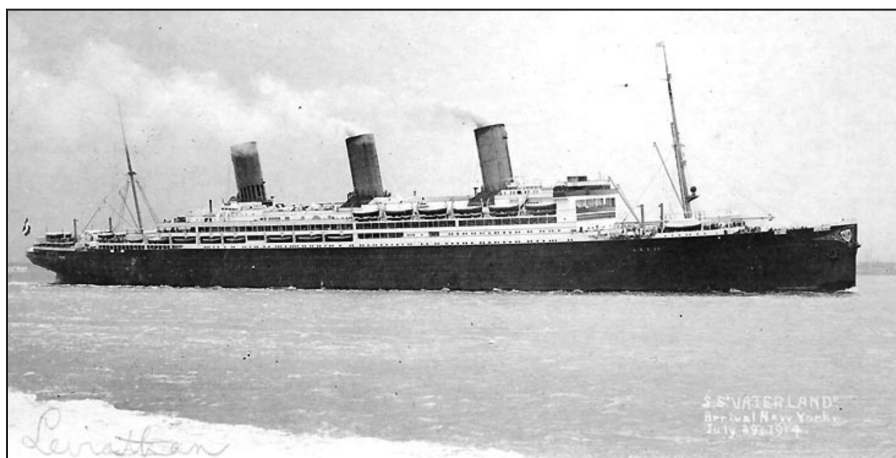
“We Built Her to Bring Them Over There”

The Cruiser and Transport Force in the Great War

by Salvatore Mercogliano, PhD

On 23 May 1914, German ambassador Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff hosted a luncheon reception on board the newest and largest transAtlantic liner upon its first arrival in New York City. It was just two short years since the catastrophic loss of the previous holder of that distinction, RMS *Titanic*, foundered in the North Atlantic. On this day, the second of three *Imperator*-class liners of the Hamburg-America Line (HAPAG), under the leadership of its chairman, Albert Ballin, completed its maiden crossing. While the new ship could not compete with Cunard’s *Mauretania* for the Blue Riband, in terms of size, this contender was larger than even her sister ship. On board was an invited guest, US Navy Captain Albert Gleaves, commandant of the New York Navy Yard, who engaged in a discussion with one of the HAPAG officials. Gleaves inquired about the potential for the ship to carry troops in case of war. The German quickly touted the capability of the new liner: “Ten thousand, we built her to bring them over here.” Gleaves retorted, “When they come, we will be here to meet them.”¹

Both men proved partially correct. The Americans were indeed there to meet the liner when she arrived back in New York in July 1914, and then interned the ship for nearly three years. The ship, SS *Vaterland*, did transport troops, and on several occasions carried more than ten thousand at a time. She did not, however, to quote the German official, “bring them over here,” but instead transported American doughboys to fight the Germans, in the words of George M. Cohan, “Over There.” Renamed USS *Leviathan*, she was one of forty-five American ships in the US Navy’s Cruiser and Transport Force, which delivered over the two-million-person American Expeditionary Force to France a century ago. *Leviathan*, along with the ships and crews



SS *Vaterland* arriving in New York, 29 July 1914.

that made up this fleet, was instrumental to American and Allied success during the First World War.

When Congress enacted President Woodrow Wilson’s call for war, American customs officials—backed by Federal marshals and troops—seized the ninety-one German ships in port in American harbors. Included in this number were nineteen passenger liners; two of them had sailed as auxiliary cruisers—SMS *Kronprinz Wilhelm* and *Prinz Eitel Friedrich*. The latter had come into port at Newport News, Virginia, then a neutral port, for repairs after destroying the schooner *William P. Frye* on 27 January 1915 in the South Atlantic. The schooner was the first American merchantman lost in the First World War.² Considered enemy combatants, the German ships were moved to the Philadelphia

Navy Yard, under military surveillance, and were taken over by the US Navy and converted into USS *Von Steuben* and *De Kalb*—named for two “good” Germans who had helped the United States obtain its independence during the American Revolution. The remaining seventeen vessels were scattered in ports such as the Philippines, Norfolk, and Boston, with the largest concentration along the docks in Hoboken, New Jersey, across from Manhattan. As commercial vessels, these liners were not as closely monitored, and their crews were afforded the time to sabotage the vessels to make them unavailable to the United States should it decide to use them in the war against the Kaiser.

Shortly after America’s entry into the Great War, missions from Britain and France arrived in the United States to make



A US Navy destroyer keeps a watchful eye on German ocean liners interned at Hoboken, New Jersey, 4 April 1917.

¹ Albert Gleaves, *A History of the Transport Service* (NY: George H. Doran Co., 1921), 189–190.

² Navy Department, *American Ship Casualties of the World War* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1923), 7.

appeals to their new ally. In early 1917, the situation appeared bleak for the Entente Powers. Germany was about to knock Russia out of the war, following a series of revolutions that led to the rise of Lenin and the Communists. The Italians suffered many setbacks, culminating with the Battle of Caporetto, that required Allied support. The French Army refused to conduct any offensive actions after the ill-conceived Neville Offensive. The worst was the decision that ultimately led to American entry, the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1917. The German goal was not necessarily to provoke the Americans, but to force a British collapse by cutting them off from their empire and supplies before the US could respond. Almost immediately, German U-boats achieved their objective of sinking more than 600,000 tons per month. The Allied mission to America had many requests, but the most famous was that advocated by the head of the French delegation, General Joseph Joffre, the hero of the Battle of the Marne. His top three items were: “Men, Men, and Men!” For the United States, the issue was not just training and equipping an army of over two million—when its pre-war force numbered only 133,000—but the successful transportation of this new army across the Atlantic.

The US Army immediately dispatched four regiments from the Mexican border and loaded them on railcars for the piers in New York. To transport the troops of the new 1st Expeditionary Division, the Army Transport Service of the Quartermaster Corps mobilized the commercial merchant marine. Nearly two decades earlier, when the nation found itself at war with Spain and needed to ship forces to both Cuba and the Philippines, it was the Quartermaster Corps that was tasked with finding suitable ships. To achieve this goal, the Army chartered 61 vessels of the American merchant marine, from companies such as Mallory, Plant, Ward, and Pacific Far East Lines, to meet its initial needs. With the decision to maintain a presence in these lands when the war with Spain ended, and as the commercial companies withdrew their ships from charter, the Army purchased vessels and renamed them

for famous Civil War Union generals. The operation of craft like US Army Transport (USAT) *Grant*, *Sherman*, and *Sheridan*, provided the US Army with experience in outfitting and operating troopships.

When America entered the war in 1917, the ships of the Army Transport Service were concentrated in the Pacific, maintaining and rotating forces in the Philippines, Hawaii, and Alaska. Much as it did in 1898, the Quartermaster Corps once

again chartered private ships—this time fourteen—to transport the first units of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), supplemented by the Navy’s only two transports and the refitted USS *DeKalb*, the first of the German liners. Unlike the Spanish-American War, a substantial threat to these ships existed in the form of German U-boats in the Western Approaches to the English Channel. Rear Admiral Albert Gleaves, promoted from commandant of



Rear Admiral Albert Gleaves, by Alphaeus P. Cole; c. 1920 (oil on canvas, 40" x 31")

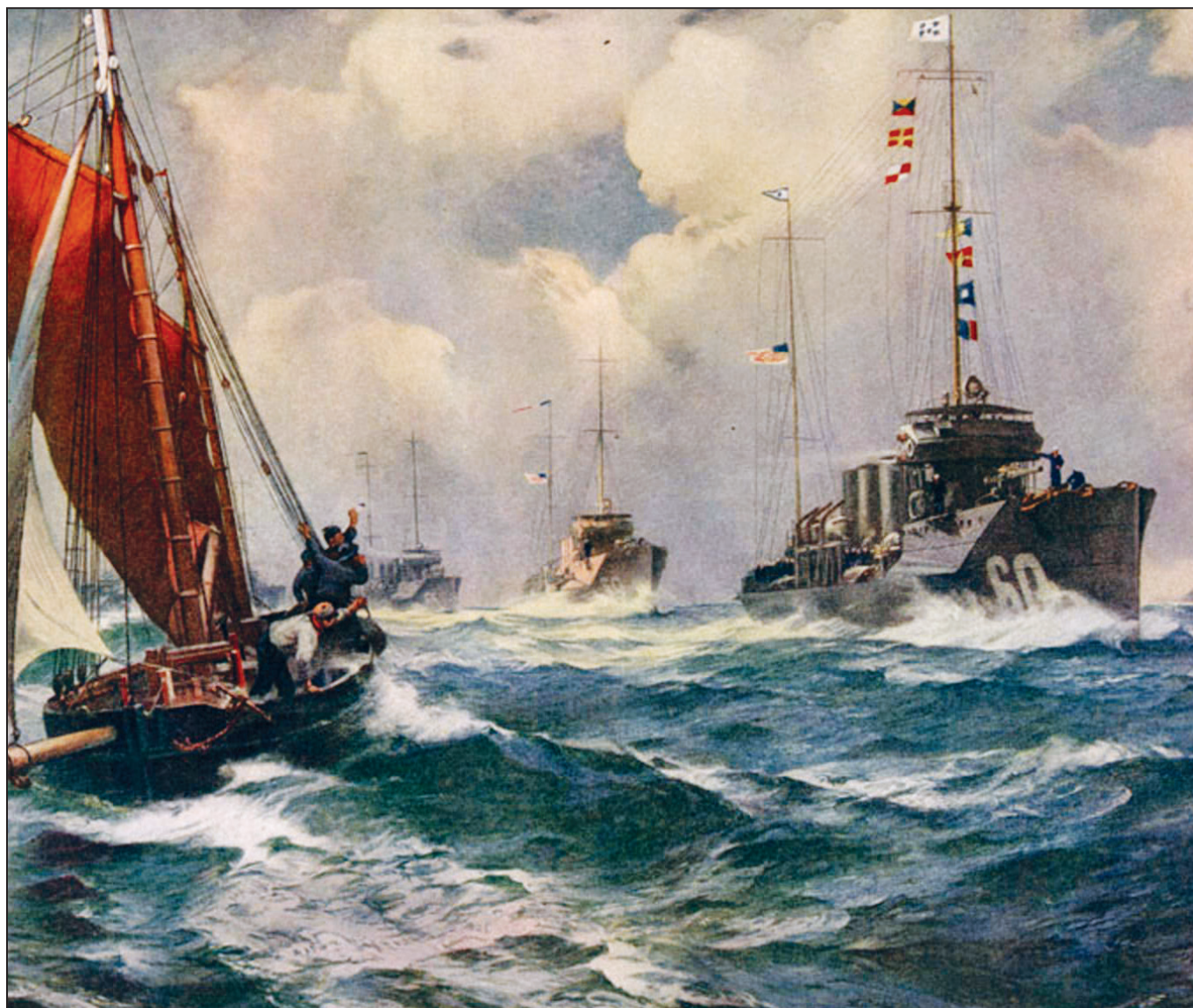
In this portrait, the point of Admiral Gleaves's pencil is on the French coast in the vicinity of La Rochelle, the arrival point for many of the troops of the American Expeditionary Force.

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the New York Navy Yard to the commander of all destroyers in the Atlantic Fleet, received a secret order from Chief of Naval Operations Admiral William S. Benson to escort the Army troopships, augmented by US Navy vessels carrying a regiment of Marines to France, and ensure their safe arrival.³ Convoying proved the solution to thwarting individual attacks by German U-boats. Under the leadership of American Admiral William S. Sims, the Allies adopted this tactic and substantially reduced ship losses.

The first commercial transport came on hire on 24 May and the last, US Army Chartered Transport (USACT) *Finland*, on 2 June. Initial orders called for the transportation of 12,000 troops and 3,000 horses, with a goal to be underway by 3 June. Due to the delay in bringing ships on charter and the need to modify these ships with berthing areas in the cargo holds, the inclusion of washrooms and water closets, cooking facilities, and armament, the first of the four convoys were not ready to depart New York until 14 June.

Three of the four convoys departed that day, with the last putting to sea three days later. Each sailed to a rendezvous point with the tanker USS *Maumee* in the central Atlantic Ocean, so that escorting destroyers could replenish their fuel. Completing that task, each of the four convoys followed different tracks to their port of debarkation, St. Nazaire, France. As they neared the European coast, they were met by American destroyers that had been sent ahead, operating from a new base in Queenstown, Ireland. All the ships arrived safely, al-



The Return of the Mayflower, by Bernard Gribble; c. 1920 (watercolor, 10.5" x 16")

The first division of US Navy destroyers on their approach to Queenstown, Ireland, in May 1917. Leading the line of destroyers of Division 8, Destroyer Force, is USS Wadsworth (DD 60), flagship of Commander Joseph K. Taussig. The other destroyers of the division include USS Porter (DD 59), USS Davis (DD 65), USS Conyngham (DD 58), USS McDougal (DD 54), and USS Wainwright (DD 62).

³ https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/wwi/june-1917/rear-admiral-william-3/_jcr_content.html#

though there were numerous reports of submarine and torpedo sightings, particularly as they neared Europe. There is some debate if these attacks occurred, or were the result of false sightings.

Rear Admiral Gleaves sailed with the first convoy on board his flagship, the cruiser USS *Seattle*. Upon the safe arrival of the last convoy, he wrote a glowing report on the transit, except for one topic.

The merchant officers of the transports were, on the whole, a highly efficient and capable body of men. Of the crews, little good can be said. These men were mostly the sweeping of the docks, taken on board just prior to sailing. They were shipped as regular merchant crews, and were not enlisted in the Army Transport Service. Men of all nationalities were shipped, and it is extremely probable that many spies were among the number. In one case a member of the crew of *Momus* of German extraction, openly threatened the safety of the ship. The crews of these transports at all times formed a serious menace to the safety of the convoy.⁴

It appeared that Gleaves was not overly fond of the Army's method of hiring merchant mariners. His view was echoed by Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, as demonstrated when he removed the civilian crews from the colliers and oilers of the Naval Auxiliary Service on 7 May 1917. Shortly thereafter, on 12 July, when the issue of the German passenger liners arose, Admiral Benson and Secretary Daniels, along with the Army Chief of Staff, the Secretary of War, and with the concurrence of President Wilson, agreed that the Navy, in lieu of the Army, would operate these ships. The Navy oversaw the repair of the ships, the fitting out and crewing, and then controlled their movement from port to port. The Army's mission entailed the movement of troops from fort to port, and from port to front. Specifically, the sixteen liners were designated for operation by the new Cruiser and Transport Force (CTF), under the command of the newly promot-

ed Vice Admiral Albert Gleaves. They joined ships of the American merchant marine and the Army Transport Service, until those vessels could also be commissioned into the CTF in early 1918.

Before this could happen, German crews sabotaged the liners by smashing pumps and cracking cylinder casings. At a cost of almost \$7 1/2 million dollars, US Navy yards repaired the damage by utilizing electric welding, a new technique. Elements of the Army's 26th Division marched up the gangways of the former German ships SS *Friedrich der Grosse* and *Prinzess Irene*, renamed USS *Huron* and *Pocahontas*, and departed on 7 September. This was less than two months after the Navy took over the vessels. Each of the ships could carry more than 2,000 troops. The last of the sixteen German liners, SS *Barbarossa*—renamed USS *Mercury*—sortied on 4 January 1918. One other German liner and an Austrian ship joined them, along with the two German auxiliary cruisers. These twenty ships were instrumental in carrying over a quarter of the American Expeditionary Force, 557,788 personnel, in a total of 164 voyages. The smallest of the ships, USS *DeKalb*, could transport 800 troops; the largest, USS *Leviathan*, handled a maximum of 12,000.

Within the US Navy, the CTF ships proved unique. First, the ships were not renamed until after their commissioning. So, for a brief period, the US Navy fleet included a ship named USS *Kaiser Wilhelm II*. It is unlikely the Navy would react well today to having a ship in its ranks named for the political leader of the nation's enemy. Next, the ships' names did not follow any set pattern. Some retained their original names, such as *President Lincoln*, *President Grant*, *George Washington*, and *Martha Washington*. Some received only minor revisions, *Amerika* became *America*, and *Cincinnati*—because there was already a cruiser with that name—was redesignated *Covington*, the name of the city located across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. There was a mix of geographic and historical names, such as *Madawaska*, *Susquehanna*, and *Mount Vernon*. Early American historical figures appeared, such as *Powhatan*. Some received the names of Greek

mythological figures, including *Aeolus*, *Antigone*, and *Agamemnon*.

The last was the name assigned to *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, and it portrays a bit of humor. Agamemnon was the leader of the Mycenaean Greeks who led his people into a long and protracted war against Troy for the innocuous reason that his sister-in-law ran off with the Prince of Troy. The king was willing to sacrifice his own child to achieve a favorable wind to set sail; it took ten years to finally achieve his goal, but in the process, he laid waste to both sides. It was upon his return home that he found that his wife had fallen in love with a suitor and had Agamemnon killed. It would be interesting to note Kaiser Wilhelm's reaction to the renaming of the ship.

By the end of the war the Cruiser and Transport Force included twenty-four cruisers, forty-five transports, 3,000 officers, and 42,000 enlisted sailors on its rolls. The entire pre-war US Navy had only consisted of 60,000 personnel. The ships, larger than any dreadnought in the fleet, garnered the attention of some of the best and brightest captains in the Navy, including William Leahy, captain of USS *Princess Mataoika*, the last of the German liners taken into American service. She completed six voyages and transported 21,216 men. Leahy continued to advance in rank until becoming the first five-star Admiral of the Fleet in 1945. Among the ranks was a young eighteen-year old sailor, who enlisted in the spring of 1918. Later in his career he would run a nightclub in Morocco, sail as chief mate of a Liberty ship on the dreaded Murmansk run, and command a destroyer minesweeper through a Pacific typhoon that led to a mutiny. Of course, this was after Humphrey Bogart left the Navy and became an actor in Hollywood, but during World War I he was an enlisted sailor on *Leviathan*.

By Armistice Day, 2,079,880 American troops had landed in Europe from America. Cruiser and Transport Force ships transported forty-five percent of that total, with American allies, predominately the British at forty-nine percent, carrying the rest. A quarter of all troops travelled across the Atlantic aboard the twenty interned

⁴ Senate, 66th Congress, 2nd sess., *Naval Investigation* (Washington, 1921), 2125–2135.

liners. The transport effort was not without casualties. While no American ships were lost in the transit to Europe, several were lost on the return, including two of the ex-German liners. On 30 May 1918, a day after departing Brest, France, and after shedding their destroyer escort, USS *President Lincoln* and three other transports were attacked by the German submarine U-90. She fired three torpedoes at the ship. The first two hit on the port side under the bridge, and the third about 120 feet forward of the stern. Within five minutes, the fate of *President Lincoln* was sealed and Captain Percy Wright Foote ordered the ship abandoned. She sank twenty-five minutes after the first explosion with most of the crew escaping into lifeboats. After a harrowing confrontation with the U-boat, Foote removed all indication of rank from his clothing to avoid being made a prisoner, but the Germans removed a lieutenant from one of the other boats. Later that night, destroyers arrived and rescued the crew. Out of 715 on board, four officers and twenty-three enlisted were lost from the ship's company.

A month later, on 1 July, USS *Covington*, under the command of Captain Raymond D. Hasbrouck, was in a convoy with seven other transports and a like number of destroyers when U-86 attacked. On the bridge, the executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Marshall Collins, sighted a torpedo 200 yards off the port beam and ordered the helm hard right. The torpedo struck on the forward engine room bulkhead. The ship quickly took a 20-degree list to port, and with the threat of foundering, or another torpedo, the captain ordered the crew to the boats. Out of 780 crew, only six were lost in the initial explosion. After the rescue of the crew, a salvage team boarded the ship and took her in tow. Captain Hasbrouck remained aboard the destroyer, but the following day the list increased and the rescue team abandoned the effort shortly before *Covington* sank. Captain Hasbrouck's actions became a point of controversy after the war; he was the only commanding officer of a troopship not awarded a Navy Cross, raising some doubt about his actions.

To assist in the repatriation of the AEF, nine German ships augmented the CTF.

Included was USS *Leviathan*'s sister ship, *Imperator*. The British, devoted to returning their troops and those of the dominions home, and the need to reestablish themselves along the world's trade routes, diverted many of their ships from transporting the AEF. This left Vice Admiral Gleaves in a dilemma, as without those ships, it would take much longer to return the two million doughboys. Gleaves pressed into service his cruisers, backed by pre-dreadnoughts, and impressed seventy-one freighters from the Naval Overseas Transportation Service as makeshift transports. In the span of a year, he repatriated 1.9 million Americans, eighty-seven percent aboard ships of the CTF. The eighteen remaining German and Austrian liners, supplemented by the nine war prizes, transported a total of 590,142 troops in 173 voyages. For his actions, Gleaves received a promotion to command the Asiatic Fleet and, while in the Philippines, pen his wartime history in a rather one-sided account, titled *A History of the Transport Service: Adventures and Experiences of United States Transports and Cruisers in the World War*.

With the return of the AEF, demobilization in full swing, and prospect of the United States being an active part of the League of Nations, the need to move troops again appeared a likely prospect. With the disbanding of the CTF in 1919, the Navy transferred control of the former German liners, and other ships, to the Army. The Army Transport Service intended to lay the ships up in anchorages around the United States and maintain them in a reserve capacity; however, the cost proved prohibitive and many of the ships were made available to the US Shipping Board for commercial service.

The three large *Kaiser*-class liners, *Agamemnon*, *Mount Vernon*, and *Von Steuben*, were all laid up. The last was scrapped in 1923, and the other two remained at anchor off St. Michael's, Maryland, until 1940, when they also were recycled. The five *Barbarossa*-class liners—*Mercury*, *Huron*, *Pocahontas*, *Powhatan*, and *Princess Matoika*—all were used by commercial firms, but most not for long. *Huron*, renamed *City of Honolulu*, caught fire on her maiden voyage under the new name; after her crew and passengers were rescued, she

was sunk by the Coast Guard to avoid the hulk becoming a hazard to navigation. *Princess Matoika*, after stints with United States Lines and American Palestine Lines, was renamed *City of Honolulu* (II). After three years of operations, she too caught fire, this time in Honolulu harbor, and was deemed a total constructive loss. *Pocahontas*, after a very dubious and eventful commercial career, was sold to the North German Lloyd Company, the only one of the ships that returned to the German flag. She sailed as SS *Bremen* until relinquishing that name for a new transatlantic liner being built, and was later scrapped. Other ships also met their ends after only a few years of service, such as *Aeolus*, *Antigone*, *Susquehanna*, *DeKalb*, and *Martha Washington*.

A few of the ships remained active until the Second World War. Two were used throughout the interwar period by the Army Transport Service as USAT *Republic* (ex-*President Grant*) and USAT *US Grant* (ex-*Madawaska*). *America*, after being laid up in St. Michaels, and *George Washington* resumed operations as USAT *Edmund Alexander* and USS *Catlin*. All told, the nineteen German liners and auxiliary cruisers and single Austrian liner proved a tremendous resource for the United States during the First World War, in the inter-war period, and even into World War II. *Leviathan* remained the most famous, sailing as the flagship of United States Lines, until she was scrapped in 1938. Her replacement, SS *America*, lost her commercial name and sailed during the Second World War as USS *West Point*. The interned liners proved a windfall for the United States and were instrumental in the successful transportation of the AEF to France during the First World War. †

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