



Mission: History

Studiorum Historiam Praemium Est

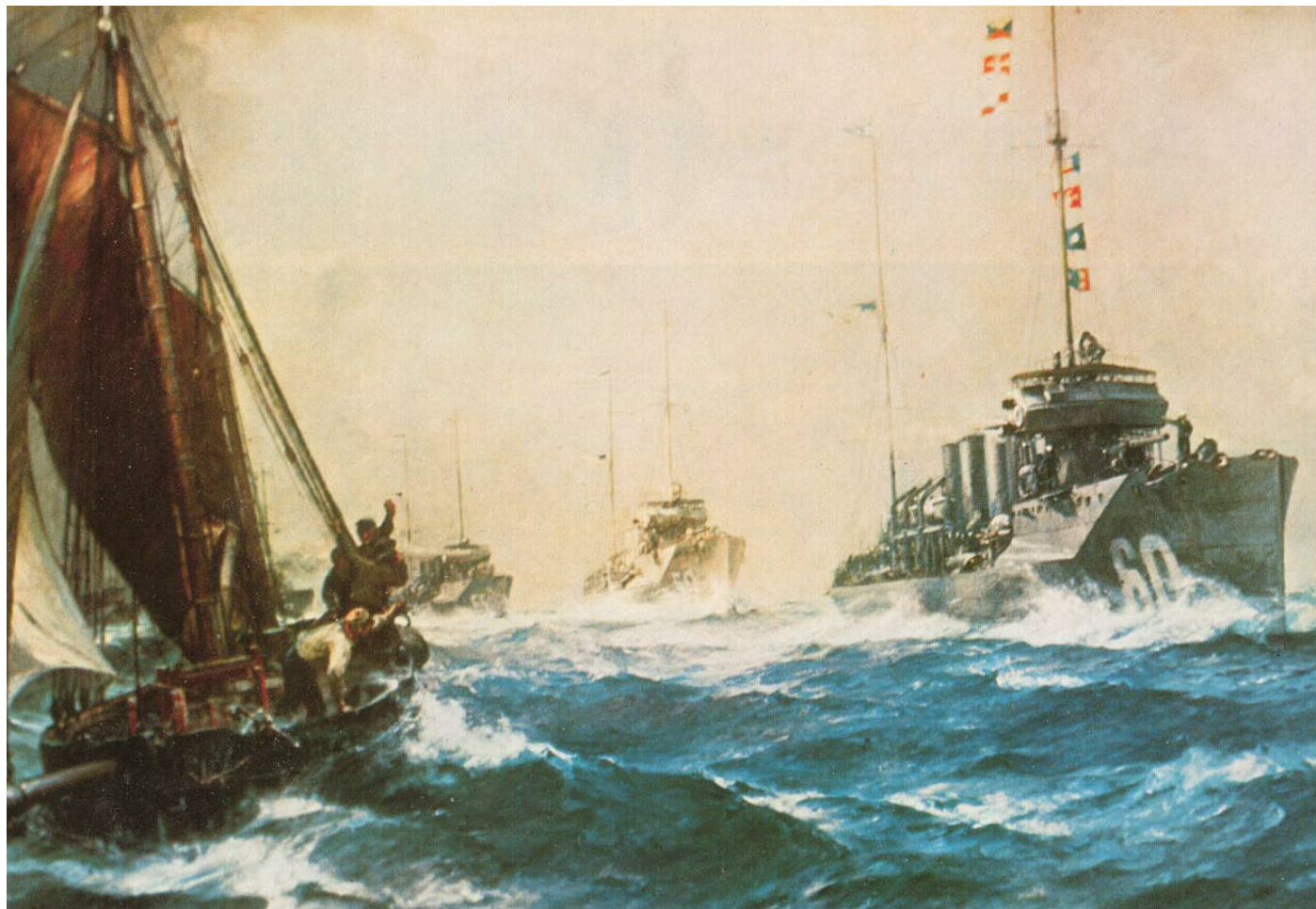


1 May 2000

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Volume 2, Number 5

1917: *The Return of the Mayflower*



BERNARD GRIBBLE, better known for his paintings of trench warfare in the Great War and for his later career as a film designer, captured in this painting he named *The Return of the Mayflower* the welcome felt in the British Isles for the ships of Destroyer Division 8. When the destroyers dropped

anchor in the harbor of the Royal Navy base at Queenstown, Ireland, the green hills of Cork echoed with the sounds of church bells, steam whistles and cheering people. Britain was on the point of being driven from the war by shipping losses to U-boats. DesDiv 8 helped turn the tide.

U.S. Admiral Sims Presses Admiralty to Adopt Convoy System. It Works

According to an exhaustive study of maritime losses following World War I, German U-boats sunk around 300,000 tons of British shipping in each of the last months of 1916. This shipping, between England and the Empire and the New World, was the life-line of the island nation, and the Germans knew that 300,000 tons a month was not enough to

force Great Britain out of the war.

On 9 January 1917, German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Holweg reluctantly acceded to demands of the submarine force that it be allowed unrestricted warfare, meaning that any ship in any designated "war zone" was fair game for the U-boats — even ships flying the flags of neutral nations. Unre-

stricted submarine warfare would commence 1 February 1917.

The results were dramatic, as British shipping losses doubled to about 600,000 tons per month. One of the most successful German submariners was Otto Steinbrinck, captain of *UC-65*. In the first three months of unrestricted submarine warfare, he sailed from Flan-

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First Sea Lord: 'They Will Win Unless We Can Stop Them Soon'

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ders four times, sinking seven ships with an aggregate tonnage of 72,311 tons and damaging another 51,000 tons. Among the ships he damaged was a passenger liner of the neutral United States, the *SS New York*, which struck a mine laid by *UC-65*. Aboard the *New York*, on his way to observe the British Royal Navy at war, was U.S. Rear Admiral William Snowden Sims, traveling in mufti, under an assumed name and with a single aide.

On 31 January 1917, The German Ambassador to the United States visited U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing to deliver a diplomatic note announcing the beginning, on the morrow, of unrestricted submarine warfare. Four days later, in a speech to Congress, President Woodrow Wilson said he was severing diplomatic relations with Germany and asked lawmakers for permission to arm U.S. merchant vessels for protection against submarine attacks. That request was defeated in the Senate by a filibuster led by Sen. Robert M. La Follette. Wilson immediately got a State Department ruling that he had authority to arm the ships on his own.

During the time the merchant vessel matter was being argued in Congress, the State Department released for publication an intercepted telegram from the German Minister for Foreign Affairs to his ambassador in Mexico. Should the U.S. go to war with Germany, Mexico was to be offered an alliance with Germany. The so-called "Zimmerman telegram" offered to Mexico the opportunity to regain its lost territories in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. It also urged the German ambassador to Mexico to do what he could to bring Japan into the war on the side of Germany.

These events ushered in the month of March, and still Wilson hoped to avoid war. The sinking by U-boats of several U.S. merchant ships, with the loss of American lives, pushed him over the edge. On the evening of 2 April 1917, Wilson delivered his famous War Message to a special joint session of Congress, bitterly commenting on Germany's disregard for neutrality. "We will not choose the path of submission," he said, "We are glad now that we see the facts with no false pretense about them." He concluded by saying "The



ADMIRAL WILLIAM SNOWDEN SIMS before his 1922 retirement. The only U.S. naval officer to win a Pulitzer Prize in letters, he is termed by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "the most influential officer in the history of the U.S. Navy."

world must be made safe for democracy." The Senate, by a vote of 82 to 6 on April 4, and the House by a vote of 373 to 50 on April 6, approved the declaration of war against Germany.

'Is There No Solution?'

Admiral Sims, in London as an observer, now became an ally of Britain. On 10 April, he called on the Admiralty and met his friend the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, who told him that during the first three months of 1917 1.3 million tons of shipping had been sunk, or 6 percent of all Allied and neutral shipping. In April, Jellicoe said, the

toll was expected to reach 900,000 tons, and Britain was perilously close to being starved out of the war. Sims told Jellicoe that it appeared as though the Germans were winning the war. "They will win, unless we can stop them and stop them soon," was the reply. "Is there no solution for this problem?" the American asked. "Absolutely none that we can see now," answered a grim Jellicoe.

Admiral Sims was a scholar — he would become the only U.S. naval officer to win a Pulitzer Prize in letters, a naval innovator and a keen observer. He had served as naval attaché in St. Petersburg and Paris and a paper he had written for then-President Theodore Roosevelt changed the way the U.S. Navy fired its guns, and Sims was made inspector of naval target practice. In early 1917, before sailing for England, he had been promoted to Rear Admiral and placed in charge of the Naval War College.

After the meeting at the Admiralty, Sims spent a few days learning all he could about British anti-submarine operations. He found that merchant ships sailed unescorted because the Royal Navy held the opinion that they could not be managed in convoys. Senior British naval officers painted a picture of hard-headed, marginally competent masters incapable of maintaining a fixed speed and of collisions in the night. Moreover, they said, destroyers were needed to screen the Grand Fleet.

Sims set to work convincing junior officers of the Royal Navy that a convoy system would work. With the help of Prime Minister David Lloyd George, he was able to persuade the Admiralty to give convoys a try, though the British brass remained unconvinced. But convoys would require escorts, and the Royal Navy's destroyers were screening the Grand Fleet.

When Sims cabled the U.S. Navy Department asking for every destroyer that could be spared, Chief of Naval Operations Rear Admiral William S. Benson was less than enthusiastic. Benson had served as a junior officer aboard the frigate *USS Constitution* and there were signs that he might harbor anti-British sentiments. Shortly before Sims left for England as an observer, Benson had warned him, "Don't let the British

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How to Get in Touch

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Submissions are not encouraged because of constraints on the time available for editing. If such are sent, they should be sent as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word 6.0 or as typewritten copy, double-spaced, accompanied by a 3½-inch diskette containing the submission in MS Word 6.0 for Windows.

Quite welcome, however, are suggestions of events for coverage. Please offer suggestions two months ahead of the anniversary of an event.

1919: U.S. Navy's NC-4 Aircraft in First Trans-Atlantic Flight

Four Planes in Original Plan;
Three Make the Attempt;
One of Them Gets Across

The news of man's first powered flight — Orville Wright's 12-second flight on the morning of 17 December 1903 at Kill Devil Dune near Kitty Hawk, N.C. and his brother Wilbur's 59-second flight that afternoon — failed to attract much attention in the United States, but it set off a wave of enthusiasm in Europe.

Though it wasn't until 1907 that a European flew an aeroplane for more than one minute, two years later on 25 July 1909 Louis Blériot flew his machine across the English Channel. Channel hops became almost commonplace and by 1913 *The Daily Mail*, an English newspaper, was asking "If the Channel, why not the Atlantic?" The publisher put up a prize of £10,000 — perhaps a half-million dollars in today's money — for the first flight to cross the ocean.

The first world war intervened, but *The Daily Mail* renewed its offer in 1918, with the added proviso that the flight be non-stop. Aviators on both sides of the Atlantic thirsted for the prize and the U.S. Navy decided to be first across, prize or no prize. The Navy would go by way of the Azores.

Plans were laid to fly four huge flying boats across, planes designed by aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss and built by the Navy, with their designation "NC" standing for Navy-Curtiss. They were soon called "Nancys." They were numbered NC-1, 2, 3 and 4.

The Nancys were powered by three Liberty V-12 engines of 400 horsepower but a fourth was added for the flight. As the planes were being readied, damage to NC-1 resulted in the cannibalizing of NC-2. Three would attempt the crossing.

On 8 May 1919, NC-1, NC-3 and NC-4 flew from Rockaway, Long Island, to Halifax, Nova Scotia, but NC-4 didn't make it. Her two center engines failed so she landed in the sea and sailed to the Chatham, Mass., Naval Station for repairs. She would be a few days late. The crossing was to begin from Trepassey, Newfoundland, so NC-1 and NC-3 flew thither on 10 May and NC-4 arrived on 15 May. With good weather promised



'FIRST ACROSS THE POND' by Stan Stokes, a prolific Palm Desert, Calif., artist whose aviation art hangs in almost every important museum of contemporary work. Stokes' painting shows NC-4 touching down in the mouth of the Tagus River in Portugal — the first aircraft to cross the Atlantic.

for the 16th, the night of the 15th was spent fine-tuning the planes and making sure of navigation. The Navy had stationed 21 destroyers on a line between Newfoundland and the Azores, but we must remember that radio was just as new as aviation.

On the evening of Friday, 16 May, the three Nancys lifted off Trepassey harbor and headed into the night. The planes did not fly in formation for fear of collision, but the night passed uneventfully, with the reassuring passing of one destroyer after another. Sunrise on the 17th was followed immediately by fog, which meant no more comforting sightings of destroyers.

Cdr. John H. Towers, squadron leader and commander of NC-3, spotted a ship on the horizon and took it to be a destroyer. By the time he found out it was a cruiser on an unrelated mission, he was far off course and decided to land on the ocean and get a proper navigational fix. The seas were heavy, and a rough landing collapsed the supports for the two center engines. NC-3 would reach the Azores as a surface vessel.

The fog also led Lt. Cdr. Patrick N. L. Bellinger in NC-1 astray and he, too, decided to land and get his bearings like a sailor. Lt. Marc Mitscher (yes, that Mitscher) put the plane down gently, but the seas were so high she couldn't be flown off. Pummeled by the waves, NC-1 was in danger of sinking when the

Greek freighter *Ionia* loomed out of the fog and rescued Bellinger and his crew.

Above NC-3 and NC-1, Lt. Cdr. Albert C. Read bored through the fog in NC-4. Aboard her, Ens. Herbert Rodd was able to pick up bearings from the destroyers hidden below. After some 15 hours of flight, a spot of land appeared through a hole in the fog. It was the western Azores island of Flores. Read turned east for Fayal island and landed in the port of Horta shortly before noon. Read went aboard the cruiser *Columbia*, base ship in the Azores for the Nancys.

After being pinned down by weather for almost three days, NC-4 headed for Portugal on 20 May. As she flew over the destroyers, each radioed the plane's progress and the message was relayed to Washington. At 1939, Read spotted the Cabo da Roca light — the westernmost point of Europe. Read said everyone on board realized that "No matter what happened..., the trans-Atlantic flight, the first in the history of the world, was an accomplished fact." Twenty minutes later, NC-4 landed in the Tagus.

After being feted for a couple of days in Lisbon, the crew of NC-4 got back on the aeroplane and headed for England. Mechanical problems caused a one-day layover in El Ferrol, Spain, but on 31 May, NC-4 went on. Early in the afternoon, NC-4 picked up three Felixstowe F-2A flying boats of the Royal Air Force and was escorted to Plymouth harbor.

Convoy System Cuts Shipping Losses by One-Third in First Month

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pull the wool over your eyes. It's not our business to pull their chestnuts from the fire."

Sims applied pressure on Benson directly and to him through high-placed friends, with the result that on 14 April Cdr. Joseph K. Taussig, commander of Destroyer Division 8, was ordered to prepare his unit for "long and distant service." In London, Sims was unaware of his success and on 28 April declared "We cannot send too many and we cannot send them too soon." But DesDiv 8 was on the way.

It was not an easy crossing. In the first place, a destroyer is not an ocean liner and in the second place, the six ships picked up a gale that crossed the Atlantic with them. The destroyers rolled and pitched the entire way, to the extent their crews were forced to eat with their meals held in their laps instead of on a mess table. Some were so sick they couldn't eat at all.

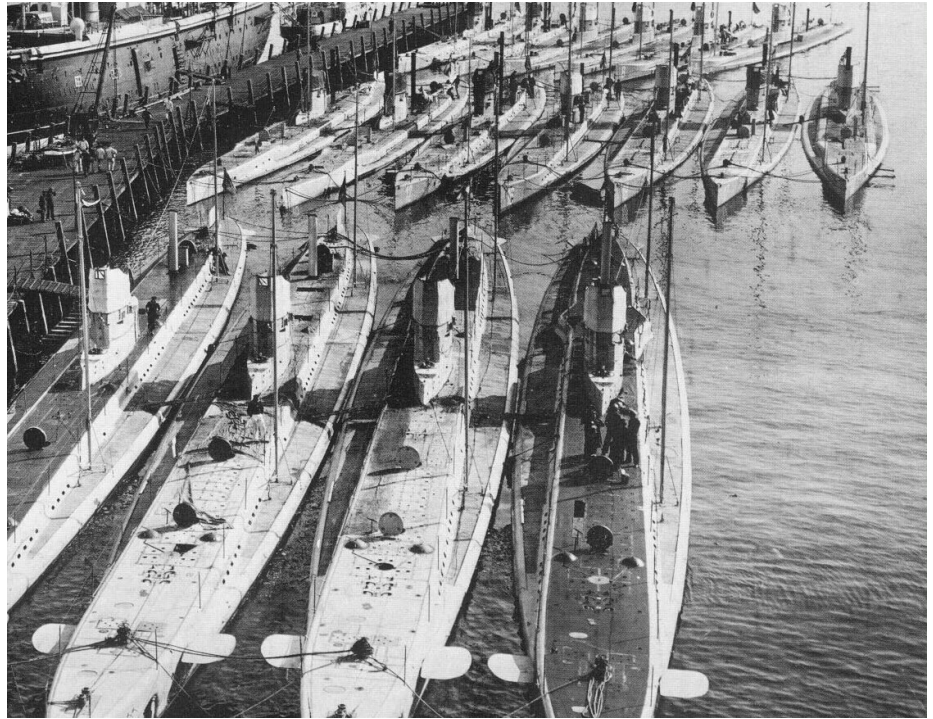
Taussig was able to dress his ships as they steamed into the Western Approaches, where they were greeted by Irish and English fishermen in a scene captured by artist Bernard Gribble on a canvas he called *The Return of the Mayflower*. On 4 May, only three weeks after Taussig was ordered to ready his ships, DesDiv 8 steamed into the British naval base at Queenstown, Ireland, now called C  bh. When the ships dropped their hooks, the hills of Cork echoed with the sound of church bells and steam whistles — and even the cheers of the people were heard.

Taussig went ashore immediately to report to Vice Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly, commander of the Western Approaches and his new boss. Bayly greeted him warmly, but wasted few words. "At what time will your vessels be ready for sea?" he asked in what would become a famous straight line.

'We Are Ready Now, Sir'

"We are ready now, Sir," responded Taussig, in a phrase that inspired confidence in the untried U.S. Navy both in Britain and at home. On 10 May, DesDiv 8 began patrolling the Western Approaches as a dedicated anti-submarine warfare unit.

By July 1917, five more destroyer



U-BOATS TIED UP AT KIEL BEFORE THE WAR. There are seventeen submarines in this picture, 85 percent of Germany's U-boat fleet at the outbreak of war. By August 1917, the Germans were able to boast of 101 U-boats, the only month in the war in which 100 was surpassed.

divisions and two tenders were based at Queenstown, for a total of 35 destroyers. Before the end of the war, Sims had 85 destroyers operating in European waters. But it was his convoy system that kept war materiel and the necessities of life flowing to Britain.

After the Admiralty reluctantly agreed to give Sims' convoy system a try, experimental convoys were assembled at Gibraltar and at Hampton Roads in the U.S. When all of the ships reached England safely, with the exception of a single straggler that had fallen out of formation, the British brass was at last convinced. Sinkings by U-boats in April had nearly matched Jellicoe's gloomy forecast, as the Germans put 860,000 tons on the bottom. But in May the total dropped to about 600,000 tons and continued to decline thereafter. Moreover, German U-boat losses mounted until they exceeded their rate of replacement. The U-boat was beaten by the convoy.

When the U.S. entered the war, Sims was promoted to vice admiral and named commander of U.S. naval forces in Europe during the Great War, eventually commanding all classes of ships. By the end of 1917, five battleships, *Delaware*, *Florida*, *New York*, *Texas* and

Wyoming were designated Battle Squadron Six of the British Grand Fleet. They were coal-burners, less powerful than newer ships with oil-fired boilers. Britain had coal mines, but no oil, and petroleum products were needed for the land forces in France.

Operationally, the American forces fell under the command of the Royal Navy, and the system worked well. Sims noted that the British had three years' experience in modern naval warfare. "The only choice was to amalgamate our ships and serve under the British commander-in-chief."

Following the war, Sims resumed his position as head of the Naval War College, reaching full admiral before retiring in 1922. During this period, he and Burton J. Hendrick wrote *The Victory at Sea*, published by Doubleday, Page & Co. in 1920. They won a Pulitzer Prize in Letters in 1921. The most recent edition of the *Encyclop  dia Britannica* devotes three short paragraphs to Sims but, in one sentence, identifies him as "an admiral whose persistent efforts to improve ship design, fleet tactics, and naval gunnery made him perhaps the most influential officer in the history of the U.S. Navy."