

TRANSPORTING THE AEF IN WWI FROM HOBOKEN TO BREST & the 100th Anniversary of the Torpedoing of USS COVINGTON (July 1918)

BY: CAPTAIN LAWRENCE B. BRENNAN, U.S. NAVY (RETIRED) ¹

“It was a pathetic sight. . . [reminiscent] of some huge animal, mortally wounded, yet struggling on.”

Commander William F. Halsey, Jr. United States Navy
Commanding Officer, USS SHAW (DD 68) ²

The famous New York City bar McSorley’s is best known for reportedly hosting Abraham Lincoln following his 1860 speech at Cooper Union and, a century later, for resisting female patrons until 1970.³ The bar’s first owner, John McSorley, emigrated from County Tyrone, in Ireland in 1851 and joined many relatives who came to New York throughout the 19th century.⁴ Founded in 1854, this establishment serves only two kinds of ale. By legend, the hands on its clock stopped when Admiral Dewey defeated the Spanish at Manila in 1898.⁵

Three McSorley men, who were my relatives, served on three United States Navy ships which were lost or combat-damaged in 1866, 1918, and 1944. A large number of McSorleys, probably from Linsarable, Clogher Parish, County Tyrone emigrated to New York during the nineteenth century. A fair number of them lived on Staten Island, before the incorporation of the City of New York in 1898.

On 2 January 1866, 21-year-old Eugene McSorley was a crewman on board USS NARCISSUS at Egmont Key, near Tampa, Florida, which was lost with all hands.

Fifty-two years later, 1 July 1918, 23-year-old John McSorley was a crewman on board USS COVINGTON when she was torpedoed by U 86, about 450 miles south and west of Brest and sunk the following day. He survived the sinking. He died at age 81 in 1976.

Twenty-six years later, 3 May 1944, 24-year-old Ensign Wilbur J. McSorley, USCGR was an officer on board USS MENGES (DE 320) which was torpedoed by U 371 off Djidjelli on the Algerian coast [37° 01’N, 5° 29’E]. He was lost at sea along with 30 other men and 25 others were wounded. He was survived by his wife, Ann F. McSorley, of Boston, Massachusetts who died 19 December 1993 at age 76. They had a son, John Wilbur McSorley.

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the WWI event, this article centers on the century-old story of my great-uncle, John A. McSorley, the only one of the three McSorley men to survive his ship’s casualty. Uncle Tiny, as he was known because of his diminutive size, regularly visited my grandparents after Sunday Mass. He was taciturn but kind, particularly to my father who served in the US Navy during World War II and the Korean Conflict. He smoked Piedmont cigarettes and drank Piels Beer after the R&H brewery on Staten Island was closed. My grandmother reserved a beer glass for his exclusive use which was confusing when I was a child. He was employed by the City of New York.

We never discussed the sinking of his ship or his naval service. His older brother, James McSorley, a World War I AEF veteran, was the father of Wilbur and a second son, James, who was a US Navy World War II veteran.

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Following the First World War, the United States Navy bragged that it had delivered the American Expeditionary Force (“AEF”) to Europe without loss. While that statement is factually accurate, Navy lost at least three large transports while returning to the United States from France. This article addresses the loss of one of those transports, USS COVINGTON (ex SS CINCINNATI).



Fig. 1: This photograph likely was taken in the harbor at Brest, France soon before the torpedoing. On the back is written "1917 USS Covington--July 1918 Torpedoed & Sunk."⁶

USS COVINGTON (ID-1409) was a U.S. Navy transport during World War I; she was torpedoed by U-86 1 July 1918 en route home from Brest, France and sunk the next day with the loss of six men of a complement of 776 officers and men. The coal-burning ship was built by F. Schichau, Danzig, Germany in 1909 as a passenger liner for Hamburg America Line and was named SS CINCINNATI. Renamed COVINGTON, after the city of Covington, Kentucky, she was 603 feet long with a beam of 63 feet. The ship displaced 16,339 tons and her quadruple expansion steam engines powered twin screws at 15.5 knots. She could carry 2,827 passengers (246 First Class, 332 Second Class, 448 Third Class and 1,801 in Steerage).

After five years of Atlantic service, in August 1914, when hostilities began in Europe, the German-flag liner took refuge in U.S. waters, and was seized and interned at Boston, Massachusetts along with Hamburg America line-mate SS AMERIKA. German Lloyd steamers KRONPRINZESSIN CECILIE, KÖLN, WITTEKIND, and WILLEHAD; and Hansa Line freighter OCKENFELS were likewise interned. In March 1916, all except KRONPRINZESSIN CECILIE and OCKENFELS were moved from their waterfront piers to an anchorage across the harbor from the Boston Navy Yard. Daily "neutrality duty" by U. S. Coast Guard harbor tug, WINNISIMMET, monitored these ships. Many crew members went ashore, were processed through immigration, and found employment, while a contingent of musicians from the vessels

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toured New England, frequently playing at department stores and restaurants, and drawing the ire of the local musicians. After the U.S. declared war on Germany, CINCINNATI and the other interned ships were seized 6 April 1917 and handed over to the United States Shipping Board (USSB), and moved to Hoboken.

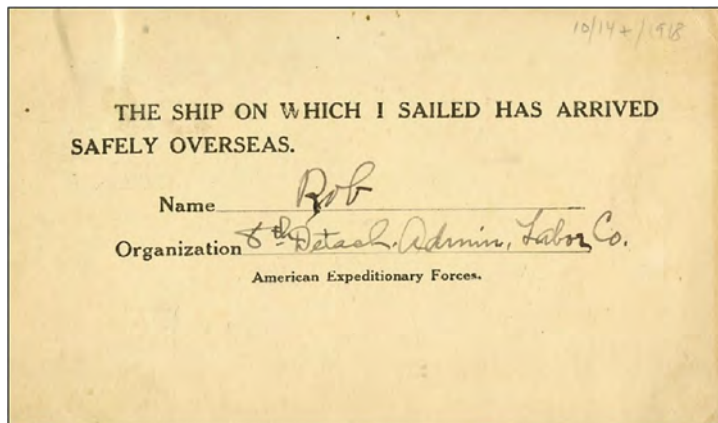


Fig. 2: "Upon leaving Hoboken, each man was handed this postcard to sign and address to whomever he pleased. These were held in New York until the safe arrival of the boat was cabled back and then were released for mailing.

*As J. Harold Thomson (RC 1918) explained to the Rutgers War Service Bureau: "We could not tell the name of boat, the date of the sailing, the name of the port, the number of the troops, where we were bound, or anything else that we wanted to write; but with a pleasant smile, [Uncle Sam] told us we could write home another letter later telling what a nice boat we went over on, how much we enjoyed the trip, and, best of all, that we had arrived safely 'somewhere in Europe.' Was not that forethought?"*⁷



Description from a catalog for the Rutgers Exhibit entitled "Heaven, Hell, or Hoboken."

*Fig. 2a: Typical Hoboken Eagle and Wavy Box cancel on the reverse of these Soldier's Mail cards, sent postage free from Hoboken on arrival of the ship at its destination.*⁸

COVINGTON was transferred to the Navy 26 July 1917 and commissioned 28 July 1917, Captain R. D. Hasbrouck, US Navy in command. Damage caused by the German crew was repaired and COVINGTON was converted into a troopship. The ship began her active war duties in mid-October 1917 when she left Hoboken for her first voyage carrying U.S. troops to France. Between 18 October 1917 and 1 July 1918, COVINGTON made six voyages between Hoboken, New Jersey and Brest, France, safely transporting 858 Officers and 20,871 soldiers to the American Expeditionary Force. The German liners' piers in Hoboken had been seized and became an integral part of the New York Port of Embarkation which was the major port for sending and receiving the AEF. After World War I, the Port of Embarkation became part of what has become the Port of New York Authority which was renamed in 1972 as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the bi-state billion-dollar behemoth.



Fig. 3: Showing embarkation point for AEF troops to Europe at Hoboken, New Jersey.⁹

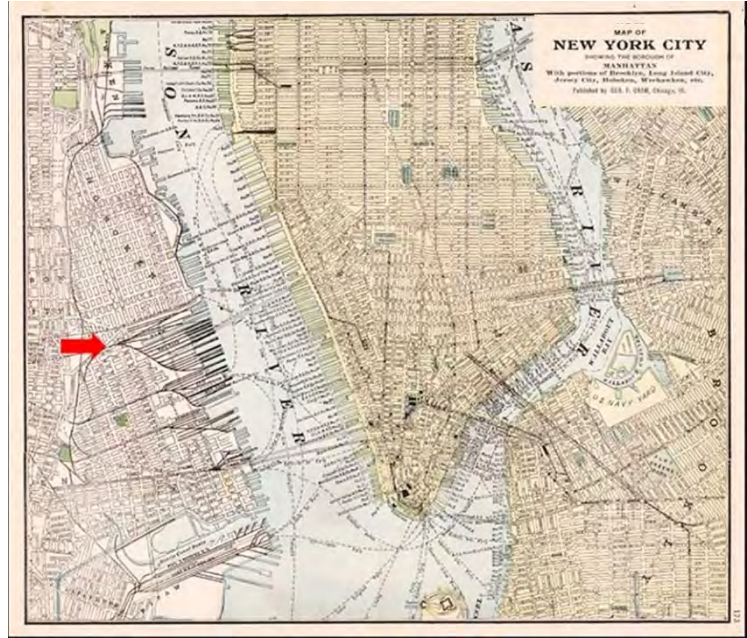


Fig. 4: Map of New York, with arrow indicating the Hoboken piers, once the property of German shipping lines, which were seized and used for the departure of troops to defeat the Germans in WWI.¹⁰

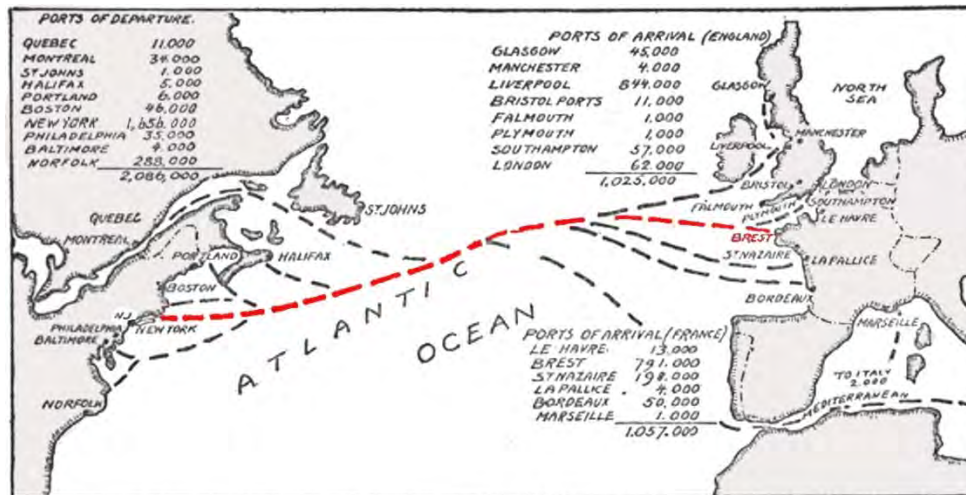


Fig. 3: Convoy routes across the Atlantic in World War I. between 1917-1918. The highlighted route is that of USS Covington. Note the number of troops that were transported from the New York (New Jersey) port of departure, compared to other ports.¹¹

During the early evening of 1 July 1918 COVINGTON was steaming in a U.S. Navy convoy of eight transports [USS DEKALB (ID 3010), USS GEORGE WASHINGTON (ID 3018), USS RIJNDAM (ID 2505), USS LENAPE (ID-2700), SS DANTE ALEGHERI,¹² USS PRINCESS MATOIKA (ID 2290), and USS WILHELMINA (ID 2168)¹³], escorted by seven destroyers [USS LITTLE (DD 79), USS CONNER (DD 72), USS CUMMINGS (DD 44), USS PORTER (DD 59), USS JARVIS (DD 38), USS SMITH (DD 17) and USS ROE (DD 24)], and was heading westbound approximately 150 nautical miles southwest of Brest, France, (47° 24' N., 7° 44' W) bound for port of New York. The sea was calm with good visibility, and all ships were

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zigzagging with lookout posted and guns manned. At 21:19 a torpedo from U-86 detonated against COVINGTON's port side; she was steaming second from the left in the convoy's first row of five transports. The explosion, below her forward smokestack, blew open the ship's forward boiler room, and she soon went dead in the water as the rest of the convoy split up and continued on course.

Two of the seven escorting destroyers, LITTLE and SMITH, remained with COVINGTON, which had developed a serious list to port. In the darkness, COVINGTON's crew took to the lifeboats while the destroyers, actively dropping depth charges in an effort to keep the submarine away, rescued 770 survivors. COVINGTON was still afloat early the following morning; it appeared that she might be saved. Captain Hasbrouck assembled a small salvage crew of 25 men which then re-boarded the COVINGTON to make preparations for a tow and to attempt to make her as seaworthy as they could. On the morning of July 2, the salvage tugs arrived from Brest and took her in tow but water from progressive flooding gradually penetrated her compartments. Her list increased and the ship sank in mid-afternoon 2 July 1918.

One sailor, Joseph Edward Roche, Fireman 2nd Class, USN, wrote a detailed account about his service on board COVINGTON which began less than a week after he enlisted. Apparently, he escaped the benefits of boot camp. Joseph Roche was a "steamer" who enjoyed liberty, authorized or not, and alcohol on board ship despite the recently-imposed prohibition under General Order 99 which made the US Navy dry. This Order was signed by Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, five years before Wilson's 18 November 1918 temporary Wartime Prohibition Act [enacted a week after the armistice but effective 30 June 1919, the day before the "Thirsty-First"] and the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment and enactment of the Volstead Act which became effective 17 January 1920."¹⁴

Fireman Roche's account covers the active service of COVINGTON from her sea trial through sinking. Coincidentally, after the loss of his ship, Fireman Roche was assigned shore duty at the Naval Post Office at Royan, France. "We called that the Vincent Astos Post Office. He (Astos) was the Post Officer and had a crew of eleven. Royan is a summer resort on the Gironde estuary." This is Roche's story from "Notes & Memos from the Diary".

September 29, 1917: Enlisted in the U. S. Navy at Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston. Sent to Commonwealth Pier for Training.

October 6, 1917: Transferred from Commonwealth Pier to U.S.S. Covington at the Charleston Navy Yard.

October 7, 1917: Steamed out of Navy Yard on trial trip. Cruised around Provincetown for forty-eight hours on a trial run. Everything was OK.

October 9, 1917: We anchored off Ninth Street on the North [Hudson] River in New York City and went ashore on a Liberty Party. I got steamed up and on my return to the ship, I fell overboard. Out of my foolishness, I got a bad cold.

October 15, 1917: The troops started to board the Covington at 9:00 p.m. and the Headquarters Troops of the 42nd Division got acquainted with a number of the boys from the Louisiana Calvary. One, Adrean Burrows had a good supply of liquor. We had quite a party that night!

October 18, 1917: Steamed out of Hoboken, N. J. at 11 p.m. on our first trip to France. (Covington sailed in convoy with the transports USS Henry R. Mallory, Tenadoes, Pastores,

President Lincoln and the President Grant. The convoy was escorted by one Cruiser and several Destroyers.) Had a very pleasant voyage of 14-days. Not much excitement but interesting for our first sea voyage. Landed in St. Nazaire, France at the beginning of November. At the Main Street pier, one could shake hands with the Frenchmen through a porthole. One of the soldiers got caught passing a letter to a man who later proved to be a German spy. We never found out what happened to them, but we could guess easy enough.

November 2, 1917: I was on the sick list with a bad case of Bronchitis and was told that I couldn't go ashore. After being at sea for weeks, I made up my mind that I was going regardless of the doctor's orders. I managed to get my pass with the help of my friends, Al "Mutt" Jennings and Ray Patteri. I got past the O. D. and was ashore and enjoying myself in due time. We saw some very interesting sights on our first visit on French soil. The one that struck us funny was seeing a Ford car. After looking over the town, we decided to have a few drinks. We did, and got in a jam with the Marines and were escorted back to ship. I, rather sore and with a cut lip. The outcome was the brig for "Mutt" and back to the sick bay for me.

No date given: On the return trip to the States we were attacked by a submarine the first night out or rather at 3:00 a.m. we were awakened by a blowing and shrieking sound. I jumped out of my hammock and landed in a couple feet of water. The scupper, or drain being blocked up, the water lodged there. My first impression was that we got hit and were sinking. Believe me, it didn't take me long to get up on deck, buckle on my life preserver on and then stand-by awaiting to hear the crash and then overboard! The sub fired three torpedoes, Thank God!, they all missed. We couldn't fire our own guns for fear of hitting one of our own ships in the convoy. After a half hour that seemed like years, everything quieted down and we were on our way. For the first time we realized what war really was and found out why one could turn gray overnight. We did not have any more excitement the rest of the way back. We arrived at Hoboken, New Jersey the day before Thanksgiving and sure had a lot to be thankful for as we put our feet on land in the good old U.S.A. I had forty-eight hours leave and spent Thanksgiving with my buddies.

The next four trips over and back were uneventful. We ran into a few severe storms and several encounters with subs, but there were no casualties on those nights.

In June 1918 we left Hoboken, New Jersey under cover of darkness, the same as usual, sneaking out like rats. The trip over was uneventful and we arrived at Brest, France in due time. We unloaded our cargo of freight and also had a human cargo of 5200 soldiers. We had a few hours of liberty and enjoyed ourselves and thought up plenty of stories for the folks back home.

We steamed out of Brest, France at 9:15 a.m. on July 1, 1918. Most of us "for some strange reason" with a feeling that we were never going to reach the good old U.S.A. as the submarine traffic was reported to be extremely high. Every topic of the day was subs. At the last point of land a French fishing vessel signaled us that a German sub was waiting for the good old Covington.

At 6:00 p.m. we heard a wireless warning to change our course, which we did. I had the 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. watch. I went on and when I came off at 8:00 p.m. I turned in to my hammock to sleep as I was all in. After lying down for a few minutes, I got up, took my life belt or vest and went down to the troops mess hall where there was a movie show in progress. I just got seated when there was a merciful explosion and crash so terrible that it cannot be put into writing. That was about twenty minutes after nine. It seemed as if the ship rose out of the water and then laid on its side. We could hear the rush of water below deck but couldn't see our hand in front of us. Complete darkness, cursing and praying. The events following couldn't be explained. It was a good hour before I managed to get on deck, cut and bleeding, nothing serious but enough to make it miserable.

I don't believe my buddy Paine ever saw the top side after the crash, at least no one saw him. We got away from the ship on a longboat raft and floated around until 3:30 or 4:00 a.m.

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when the destroyer USS Smith picked us up. Believe me, it felt good to have our feet on board a sea going ship headed for the nearest port, Brest. We arrived back there about noon the following day. I was taken to [unreadable], where a good feed, cigarettes, and drinks awaited us. I was then put in sick bay and remained there for the next three weeks, restless, sick and sore. We figured on being sent back to the United States but one of the crew came and told us that Captain Hasbrouck had tears in his eyes when he notified the crew that we were to stay in France. They needed all the trained men they could get, so they picked on us. That night, the brigs were full of men from the Covington, the bad news was the last straw. They broke loose and raised Hell!

Not just a ship but something to the crew that was almost human, a home, a pal that weathered the toughest storms of the Atlantic. When I look back on those events, it was not the USS Covington, but an old pal like Ambrose Ford and Paine, two buddies that went down with her. Ford was from Somerville, Massachusetts and Paine was from Staten Island, New York.¹⁵

The loss of COVINGTON was described in *Admiral Halsey's Story*:¹⁶

July 1st. At 10:30 P.M. received SOS from USS *Covington*, saying torpedoed and giving position about 450 miles south and west of Brest. Immediately headed for her at 20 knots and reported my action to C-In-C.

July 2nd. Found *Covington* about 8:30 A.M. in tow of three tugs, the [destroyers] *Reid* and *Wadsworth* standing by. She was towing easily, making about 5 knots, listing about 10° to port and slightly down by the stern. Everything went swimmingly until 2:30 P.M., when one of our tugs made signal to get all men off immediately. All hands were clear by 3:00 P.M. The *Covington* was listing further and further and rolling heavily, righting a little less each time. It was a pathetic sight. Reminded you of some huge animal, mortally wounded, yet struggling on. You hoped against hope that she would not go down, yet you knew she must. Finally, the new, large American flag dipped in the water. Shortly after this there was an expulsion of air from her aft, and the stern commenced to settle. She righted and her bow rose majestically, almost perpendicular, with about 200 feet of her hull sticking clear...As she started down, there was a black cloud given forth, probably due to the rush of air through furnaces and smokestacks. When her bow disappeared there was a bubbling on the water, as if from a depth charge. A surprisingly small mass of debris came to the surface.

The *Covington* had already been towed about 50 miles, a third of the distance we needed to make port, and I'd had every hope of getting her there, with the help of the perfect weather and the smooth sea. This was a real heartbreak!

My message to Admiral Bayly, simply informing him that I was proceeding to assist her, may sound presumptuous, but it would have been silly to request instructions. The Admiral himself always pointed out that a man on a spot had so much better information than the man at headquarters, it was impossible for HQ to give proper instruction. This was a lesson that has stood by me all through my naval career.

July 4th. All American ships and personnel in Queenstown received the following signals from Admiral Bayly: "The Commander in Chief congratulates the United States officers and men on the day and wishes them all success."

Such courtesy was typical of him.¹⁷

Within the week following the loss of the ship, an East Coast newspaper printed the following detailed report:

Bridgeport Telegram Bridgeport Connecticut, Saturday Morning, July 6, 1918

U.S. TRANSPORT TORPEDOED WHILE RETURNING - ALL BUT SIX RESCUED

Daniels Announces Sinking of Covington – U-boats projectile strikes steamer forward of engine room bulkhead, making it necessary to abandon her. – Vice Admiral Sims reports attack on Monday night. – Attempt to salvage vessel proves failure. – Missing men all members of crew. – All others accounted for, none seriously injured.

Washington July 5th 1918. - The American army transport *USS Covington*, homeward bound after landing several thousand soldiers in France, was torpedoed and sunk in the war zone last Monday night. Six members of the crew are missing all the other men, with the ship's officers, have been landed at a French port. No Army personnel or passengers were aboard.

The missing men are: Ernest C. Anderson, firemen, Lynn, Mass. Joseph P. Bowden, seaman, Mountain Lake, New Jersey, Ambrose C. Ford, firemen, Sommerville, Mass., William Henry Lynch Jr., firemen, Manchester, New Hampshire, Albert S. Payne, seaman, West New Brighton, Stanton [*sic*] Island,¹⁸ New York, Lloyd H. Silvernail, seaman Bainbridge, New York.

The Navy Department's announcement tonight of the torpedoing of the *Covington* said none of the officers and men landed was "Seriously injured." apparently some of them were hurt, but the number probably was not given in Vice Admiral Sim's dispatch.

Sub Not Seen

The *Covington* was struck at 9:17 o'clock Monday night while proceeding with a fleet of other transports convoyed by destroyers. The submarine was not sighted. The transport remained afloat until Tuesday when efforts were made by other vessels and two tugs to tow her to port, but she was too badly damaged to keep afloat.

"The torpedo struck forward of the engine room bulkhead," says the Navy Department's report, "and the engine room and the fire room were rapidly flooded. With its motive power gone, the vessel was helpless and, facing the possibility of the torpedoing of another ship in the convoy, the *Covington* was temporarily abandoned. This was done in excellent order and the officers and the crew were taken on board a destroyer. The submarine was not seen."

Unable to Salvage Ship

"At daybreak the captain, several officers and a number of members of the crew returned to supervise salvaging operations. Another vessel and two tugs took the *Covington* in tow in the effort to get her to port, but she was too badly damaged to keep afloat and sank. Vessels have been searching for the missing men and the Navy Department awaited the report of the names of those missing which were not received until today, before announcing the sinking of the vessel."

There was no explanation by the Department as to whether the six men were missing after the transfer of the crew from the troopship to the destroyer or after the transport actually went down. It was feared, however, that they either were killed by the force of the explosion or were caught by the inrush of water into the engine and fire rooms.

Former German Liner.

The *Covington* formally was the Hamburg-American liner *Cincinnati*, which was laid up at Boston and taken over when the United States entered the war. She was 608 ft. long and 16,339 gross tons and had a speed of 15 1/2 knots an hour.

The *Covington* is the second of the great German liners seized at the outbreak of the war to be sent down by Germany's sea wolves and is the third American troopship to be destroyed. All were homeward bound. The former Hamburg-American liner *President Lincoln* was sunk last May 31st and the *Antilles* formerly a Morgan liner, was sent down last October 17th.

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Joseph Patrick Bowden, mentioned above, was born March 1897. His family lived in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey. On 9 May 1917, Mr. Bowden enlisted in the United States Navy at Brooklyn, New York. Seaman Second Class Bowden was assigned to U.S.S. COVINGTON. He is listed amongst those who died on 2 July 1918.¹⁹ As the result of the rescue of the survivors, five Navy Cross medals were awarded to men aboard COVINGTON, SMITH, and USS REID (DD 21).

It took me a full half century of collecting naval postmarks and envelopes to find any USS *Covington* cover. While the ship was in commission for about one year, no postmarks were reported,²⁰ probably because she never had a name postmark for security reasons. Undoubtedly, the crewmen sent and received mail but collectors have reported few? no? covers over the past 100 years.



Fig. 9: The face of a cover sent to a member of the crew of USS COVINGTON before her first voyage from the United States to France. It is a Special Delivery cover postmarked at Hudson Terminal New York 28 September 1917. Two steel postmarks – similar to Locy type 6 hand cancels – dated Sep 28, 1230 PM, 1917, mark the three stamps (a yellow 10 cent stamp [Scott's number 510] and an unconnected pair of green 1 cent Washington stamps [Scott's number 498]). The cover was delivered to Frank Bossong on board COVINGTON in Boston 29 September 1917.

In addition to the postmarks, there are two faint auxiliary markings on the face of the envelope and the word "Boston" written in red ink in the lower left corner. In the lower right center a red rubber stamp reads, "Forwarded . . . NOT claimed/ . . . P.O. . . . STA". To the left of the typed address is a light purple rubber stamp with pencil markings that reads:

FEES PAID AT CHARLESTOWN STA. BOSTON, MASS., No. 1635, Dated 9/29, Time 1030 AM.



Fig. 10: The reverse of the cover in Figure 9. It bears a large circular rubber stamp postmark in red ink without killer bars. Around the circular device reads the words, “N.Y.P.O FOREIGN . . . NEW YORK, N.Y. RECEIVED”. In the center of the mark read the date and time, “Sep 28 3PM 1917” .



Photos shared by granddaughter of crewmember Jim Conway on *USS Covington* website.²¹
Fig. 11: This photo is Covington during her 10 May 1918 voyage. During this voyage she carried the Headquarters Company of the 65th Infantry (33d Division), 129th Infantry (33d Division) less the 3d Battalion and Company H and the entire 58th Artillery, CAC. This photo was one of Seaman Conway’s collection and he has written on it. “We took these soldiers over. Covington was torpedoed coming back.” Seaman Conway’s photos were shared by Shirley Conway-Algie, granddaughter of Seaman Conway.

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Fig. 12: Another photo from Seaman Conway: aft mast crow's nest and lookout.



Fig. 13: Another photo from Seaman Conway: One of her gun crews in action.

The following photographs courtesy of US NAVY HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND at <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/search.html?q=covington>:

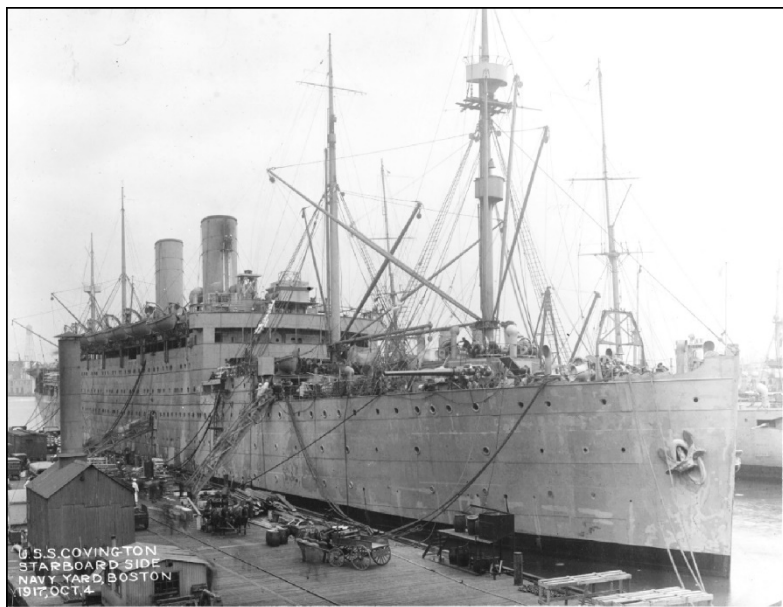


Photo #: NH 52857

Fig. 14: USS COVINGTON (ID # 1409), at the Boston Navy Yard, Massachusetts, 4 October 1917.²²

Given the identification number 1409, COVINGTON underwent repairs for “malicious damage” at the hands of her German crew. Converted to a troop transport at the Boston Navy Yard, she was commissioned there on 28 July 1917, Capt. Raymond D. Hasbrouck in command. She then steamed to Hoboken, N.J., to transport the troops of the American Expeditionary Force as part of Convoy Group No. 9.

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COVINGTON first departed Hoboken 18 October 1917 for Europe, carrying 3,385 troops. By the completion of her sixth voyage 27 June, 1918, COVINGTON had transported 21,764 troops of the AEF to France.

On 30 June 1918, now part of Convoy OR 51, COVINGTON and seven other transports, departed Brest heading westward toward the U.S., escorted by five destroyers. On 1 July, the convoy received a submarine warning from the Flag Office at Brest, ordering a course change. At 9:15 PM, a torpedo wake was noted, and within minutes COVINGTON was hit, destroying her main engines and flooding her largest compartments. She was able to lower 21 of her 27 lifeboats (in the dark and without the use of winches). It was in this effort that three of her crew were lost (including Seaman Bowden), who fell into the water and drowned.

Photo #: NH 41741

Fig. 15: COVINGTON'S crew boarding a rescue ship, likely USS Little or USS Smith who assisted in the rescue, saving all but 6 of a crew of 776.



Photo #: NH 1620.

Fig. 16: Originally described as a boatload of COVINGTON's survivors, this photo may actually have been of the 25-man salvage crew assembled to re-board the Covington to rig her for a tow on the morning of 2 July. This is known from the family of Chief John Thomas Cunningham who was part of the Engineer force.

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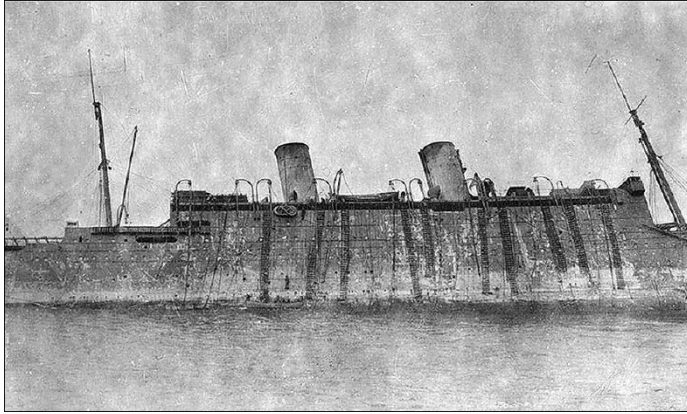


Photo #: NH 55507

Fig. 17: This photograph may have been taken in the late stages of abandonment, as a lifeboat is alongside by the aftermost survivor disembarkation ladder, with a few men visible above.

Photo #: NH 55504

Courtesy of Captain Wm Baggaly, USN.

Fig. 18: 2 July 1918. Note towing lines rigged from her bow. Just off the port side of COVINGTON can be seen a life boat with several men.

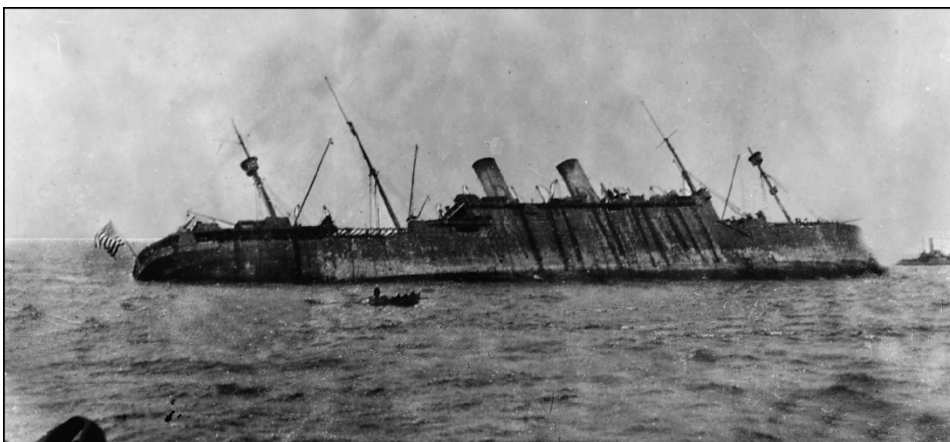
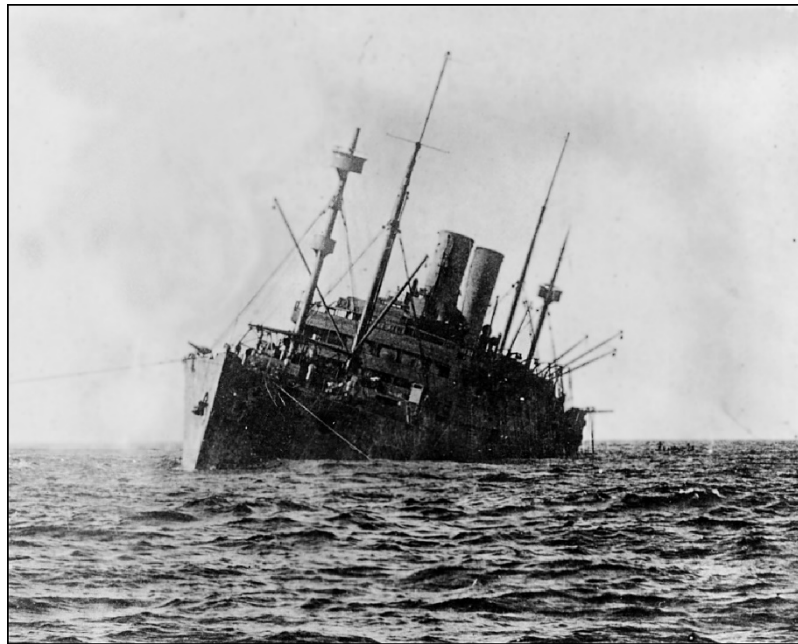
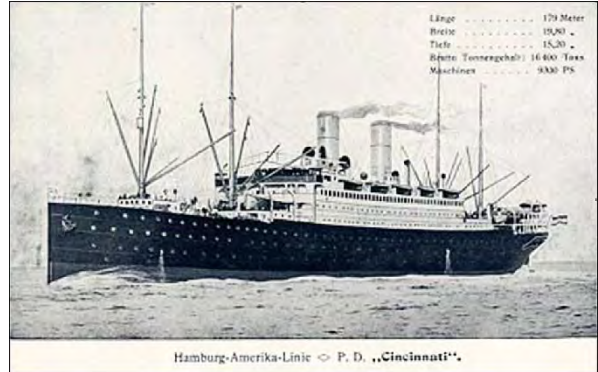
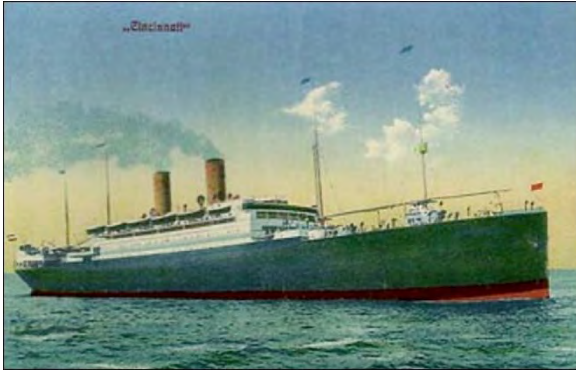


Photo #: NH 55508

Fig. 19 Note the National Ensign flying from her flagstaff, lifeboat in foreground, and tug at far right, and the ship's flag still flying from her stern, just above the water.

IMAGES OF A TROOPSHIP'S DEATH²³ (both images and captions from that web page have been used)



Contributed by Russ Davis

Contributed by Russ Davis

Fig. 20: A pre-war German Post Card of the S.S. Cincinnati. Later renamed USS COVINGTON when she was taken over by the US Navy for use as a Troop Transport.

Fig. 21: Another pre-war German Post Card of the S.S. CINCINNATI.

Fig. 22: This photo is of COVINGTON during her May 10, 1918 voyage. During this voyage she carried the Headquarters Company of the 65th Infantry (33d Division), 129th Infantry (33d Division) less the 3d Battalion and Company H and the entire 58th Artillery, CAC. On the back of this photo was written: “May 17, 1918. Aboard COVINGTON after target practice. Note the soldiers on deck. About 4500 on board.” This is a view of the stern area of the ship. During this voyage this was the area where the men of the 129th Inf. were bunked. The men of the 58th Artillery were bunked in the forecastle of the ship on this voyage. The mast on the right side of the picture is the mast that is the closest to the stern of the ship.



Fig. 23: Photo of USS COVINGTON at anchor after dropping off her last load of troops from the States. Likely taken in the harbor at Brest, France in the last few days of June, 1918.



Fig. 24: As day breaks 2 July, COVINGTON has been mortally wounded and several ships are assisting her. Here in this view looking down on her once proud bow shows her riding low in the water. The sea is nearly awash on her port side decks as she has only a few hours left. Behind her is a US destroyer standing guard. This may be the USS SHAW as she received an SOS from COVINGTON and rushed to her aid. On arrival the SHAW found that her survivors had been removed to another ship and that she had been taken under tow.

Fig. 25: These two views were taken from one of the ocean-going French tugboats. The one on the left shows COVINGTON's bow. The photo on the right shows the stern of the French tug with the tow line visible across the top of the deck of the tug. Coils of the tow line can be seen in the lower right hand side of this photo. Three French crewmen can be seen on the stern of the tugboat.



Fig. 26: This view is almost straight on with her bow. I believe that the French tug is getting ready to send a tow line to her. In the left background can be seen two US Destroyers probably USS LITTLE and USS SMITH, protecting the rescue operations.

Fig. 27: Another view of COVINGTON'S bow. A tow line can be seen with a US warship providing protection in the distant background.





Fig. 28: COVINGTON in her final moments before her death plunge, sinking stern first.



Fig. 29: The final view of the COVINGTON from the French Tugboat before the sea claims the ship for all time.

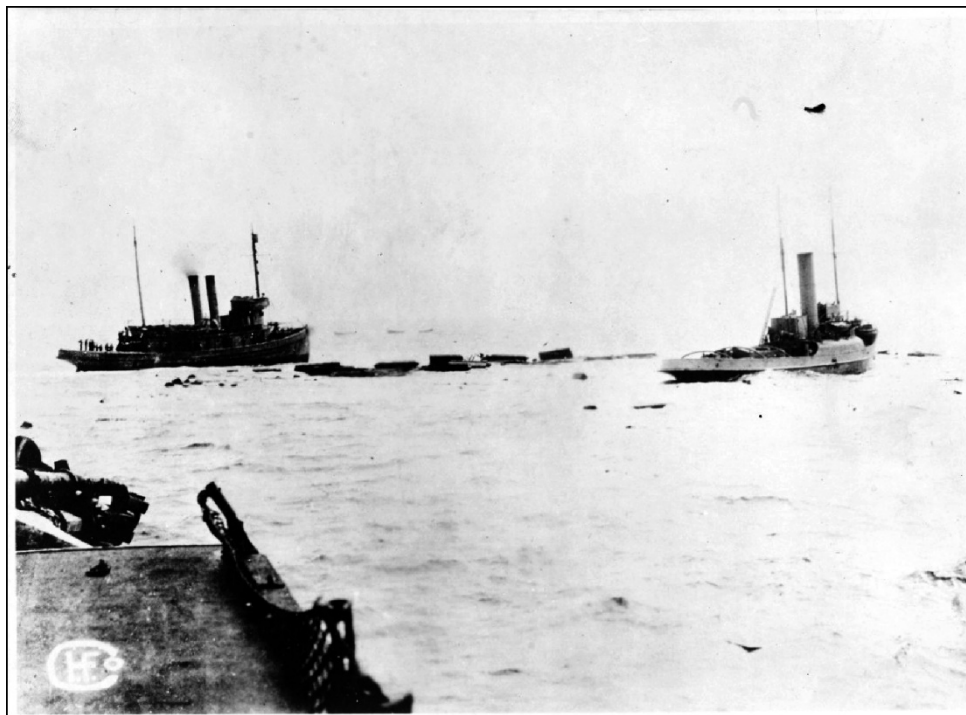
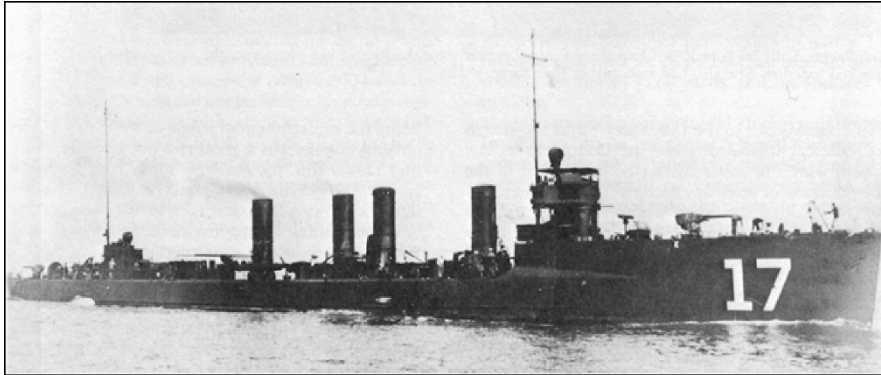


Fig. 30: The final remains of COVINGTON. The two tugs stand by to collect the wreckage. The tug on the right is the [location] where several of the above photos were taken from.

(Our apologies for the condition and quality of these photos, but they were taken under difficult circumstances.)

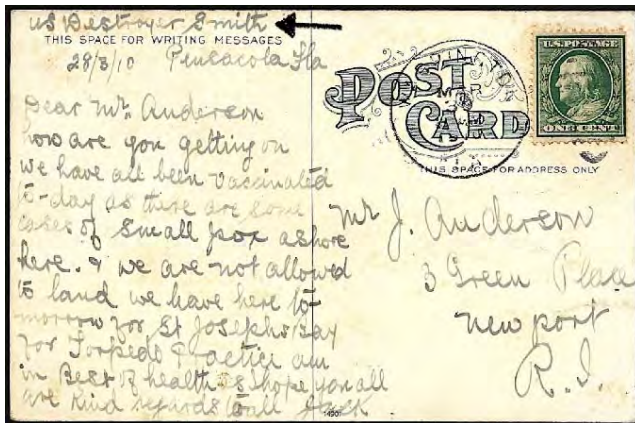
TRANSPORTING the AEF from HOBOKEN to BREST in WWI ~ Capt. Lawrence B. Brennan

Two escorting destroyers came to the aid of COVINGTON; they were USS SMITH (DD 17) and USS LITTLE (DD 79). Survivors were taken aboard both ships:



Courtesy of the Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, D.C.²⁴

Fig. 31: USS SMITH (DD 17) Securing from battle stations, just prior to entering New York Harbor in late March 1917.

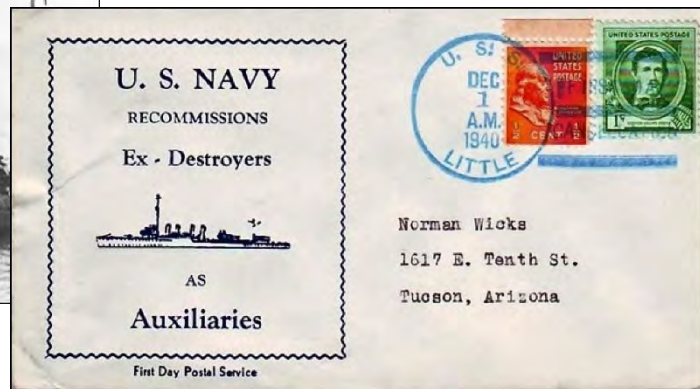
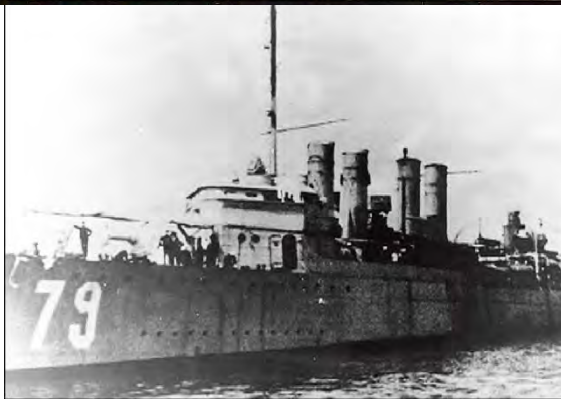


Courtesy, USCS Naval Cover Museum, John Germann [sic].²⁵

Fig. 32: A USS SMITH (DD 17) card postmarked ashore at Warrington, Florida, 30 March 1910 with USPO duplex postmark. SMITH was commissioned 25 November 1909 and decommissioned 2 September 1919. She was used as a target 20 June 1920 and sold 20 December 1921 to Joseph G. Hitner, Philadelphia. for scrap.

U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph.²⁶

Fig 33: USS LITTLE photographed c. 1919-20.



Courtesy USCS Naval Cover Museum File: Jon Burdett.²⁷

Fig. 34: USS LITTLE (APD 4 ex DD 79) Locy Type 3 "FIRST DAY CANCELLATION" 01 December 1940. LITTLE was converted to a fast-amphibious transport (APD) and was lost off Guadalcanal 5 September 1942, when sunk by Japanese surface forces. The ship initially was commanded by Commander Joseph K. Taussig, USN. After the armistice, she escorted President Wilson's party to Europe to attend the Paris Peace Conference.

Capt. Lawrence B. Brennan ~ TRANSPORTING the AEF from HOBOKEN to BREST in WWI

During December 1919 Captain Hasbrouck was involved in a dispute between some of the Navy's Admirals and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels. Vice Admiral Hilary P. Jones and Captain Raymond D. Hasbrouck had followed Admiral Sims in refusing to accept the medals awarded to them, disagreeing with the policy determining the officers to be rewarded for services during the war. Admiral Sims believed that the Navy Awards Board was too liberal in its awards. Vice Admiral Jones, who commanded the first Division of the Atlantic, wrote to Secretary Daniels declining the Distinguished Service Cross and protesting against certain awards to members of forces under his command during the war. Captain Hasbrouck, then commanding USS MINNESOTA (BB 22), requested removal of his name from the list of awards of the Navy Cross. On 26 December 1919, Secretary Daniel ordered Navy's Board of Awards to reconvene 5 January 1920 to revise their recommendations which were the source of a controversy brought to a head by declination by Admiral Sims of the Distinguished Service Medal.

According to the *Trenton Evening Times*, 1 November 1920:

(T)he matter was concluded by Secretary Daniels's Armistice Day announcement. That day, became the occasion for the belated distribution of the 2,624 decorations to members of the Navy and Marine Corps who served in the World War. The awards were sent to commanding officers of all ships, stations and posts for presentation with simple ceremonies. The Daniels-Sims controversy started when Sims refused his award and charged that Daniels had showed favoritism in distribution of others, finally led to a congressional investigation of the Navy's conduct of the war. Daniels reconvened the Naval Awards Board to make a new study of naval honors and the results of the board's second report and the secretary's final actions.

Sims again was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, which he formerly refused, but no effort will be made to present it to him. It will be held at the Navy Department for him along with the honors for two other officers who joined Sims in attacking Daniels. These officers are Captain Benton C. Decker, who was Naval attaché at Madrid during the war, and Captain Raymond D. Hasbrouck, who did not agree with Daniels policy in giving awards to officers who lost their ships, which, Hasbrouck himself lost a ship.

Daniels again refused to give the Distinguished Service Medal to Admiral Cary T. Grayson, President Wilson's physician, as recommended by the board. Grayson was given the Navy Cross. The Secretary stuck to his award of Distinguished Service Medal to Lieutenant Commander David Worth Bagley, his brother-in-law, and to Commander Percy Foote, his personal aide, which both men lost ships during the war. Daniels made a total of 29 changes in the original list of awards. The new naval awards include three Distinguished Service Medals, 311 Naval Crosses and 98 Commendations. In the Marine Corps there are two new Distinguished Service Medals and sixty-six Navy Crosses.

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the United States Navy 27 October 1925, coincidentally Navy Day and the birthday of President Theodore Roosevelt, the Navy League of the United States arranged that "a host of speakers throughout the country would inform the public, both in person and by radio. Naval vessels and shore stations will hold open house. Captain Raymond D. Hasbrouck was one of these speakers and gave talks before seven Rotary clubs in Montana on October 20-27, 1925." Captain Raymond DeLancey Hasbrouck died 19 March 1926 at the Naval Hospital in San Diego, California and he was buried at sea with full honors from USS CALIFORNIA (BB 44).

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For decades a magnificent, large painting of the sinking of USS COVINGTON was displayed at the Naval Reserve Center/Naval Armory in New Rochelle, New York. This corroborates her connection with the New York Naval Militia, a forerunner to the US Naval Reserve. When the New Rochelle Naval Reserve center was closed, a few decades ago, the painting of COVINGTON disappeared.

Fifty-two years before COVINGTON was sunk, on 4 January 1866, USS NARCISSUS ran ashore near Tampa, her boiler exploded and all hands (including Eugene McSorley) were lost. Nearly 26 years after COVINGTON was sunk, John McSorley's nephew, Wilbur John McSorley, who was lost at sea when USS MENGES (DE 320) was struck by an acoustic torpedo fired by U 371 3 May 1944 in the Mediterranean Sea. MENGES survived and was towed to New York where her stern was replaced by one removed from a sister ship.²⁸

All three McSorley men volunteered to serve the United States at sea during war. They were young men: Eugene was only 19 and single, John was 23 and also single; Wilbur was 25, married and the father of one son. The opening words of the Prayer of St. Brendan are a powerful reminder of sacrifice and service:

Help me to journey beyond the familiar
and into the unknown.
Give me the faith to leave old ways
and break fresh ground with You.

ENDNOTES:

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² William F. Halsey was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey 30 October 1882. He was graduated from the US Naval Academy in 1904. He commanded two destroyers during World War I and later earned his Naval Aviator's Wings at the age of 52, the oldest person to do so.

He commanded carriers in the Pacific including Doolittle's first raid on Japan. He then commanded the South Pacific Area in 1942-43 and was promoted to Commander, Third Fleet in 1944. He led the advances across the Pacific during 1944-45. The Japanese surrender took place on board USS MISSOURI (BB 63), in Tokyo Bay 2 September 1945.

Halsey was promoted to Five-Star Fleet Admiral (one of only five men to have held that rank) in December 1945. He retired from active duty in 1947, becoming President of International Telecommunications Labs, Inc. He died 16 August 1959 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

³ <https://player.fm/series/history-author-show/rafe-bartholomew-two-and-two-mcsorleys-my-dad-and-me> and Joseph Mitchell's famous 1940 piece in the New Yorker: "The Old House at Home".

⁴ The author's maternal grandmother, Catherine L. McSorley, was the daughter of John McSorley and Catherine Meade. Her paternal grandfather, Charles McSorley, was born in Ireland in 1848 and was a Civil War veteran, Company "D" 40th Battalion, NY Infantry. He was discharged in late June 1865 near Washington, DC. In 1866, he married Mary Mullen who had been born in Ireland in 1844. He died on Staten Island at age 38 in 1886, as the result of an industrial accident.

⁵ <https://player.fm/series/history-author-show/rafe-bartholomew-two-and-two-mcsorleys-my-dad-and-me> and Joseph Mitchell's famous 1940 piece in the New Yorker: "The Old House at Home".

⁶ Photo from USS COVINGTON archived web site hosted by rootsweb.com at <http://archive.is/w8P4>.

⁷ Heaven, Hell, or Hoboken, New Jersey in the Great War, a catalog of the exhibition at https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/scua/Heaven_Hell_or_Hoboken_Catalog.pdf. (10/25/2018)

⁸ As discussed in Robert G. Rose on his article on WWI New Jersey Military mail cancels, Whole # 206, May 2017 at <http://www.njpostalhistory.org/media/journal/206njphmay2017.pdf>.

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- ⁹ Northumbrian Gunner, a blogspot at <http://northumbriangunner.blogspot.com/2016/11/new-york-2016-hoboken.html>: (10/25/2018)
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Northumbrian Gunner.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, Northumbrian Gunner.
- ¹² She was an Italian-flag passenger ship chartered by the United States Navy and operated with US Navy Cruiser and Transport Force. In 1928, the liner was sold to the Japanese firm of Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK) and renamed ASAHI MARU. In 1937 she was converted into a hospital ship. In 1940, she had one of her funnels removed. On 24 January 1942, the hospital ship was hit by gunfire during the Battle of Java Sea from USS JOHN D. FORD (DD 228), during an incursion on Balikpapan. On 5 February 1944, SS ASAHI MARU was damaged in a collision in the Japanese Inland Sea. She was scrapped in 1949.
- ¹³ SS WILHELMINA was in Convoy HX 90, steaming from Halifax, to Liverpool 2 December 1940 when the German submarine U-94 sank her with two torpedoes.
- ¹⁴ Former resident of Lee, Massachusetts, Joseph Edward Roche who was born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts 27 January 1899. He was the son of James Roche and Margaret Navin. Joseph E. Roche would live the rest of his life in Massachusetts and would pass away 10 March 1976 in Arlington, Massachusetts. This story was written by Mr. Roche in a diary that he kept during his time in the Navy and was not brought to light until after his death.
- ¹⁵ <http://archive.is/w8P4>: This narrative continues with the fireman's assignment upon recovery at a Naval Post Office in France: "I left the sick in the later part of July and was transferred to the Typaux River [sp], a tug at Rochefort, France, Naval Base 20. I got as far as headquarters and was put in sick bay there. I stayed in sick bay for another week and then was made an orderly and stayed there until September 3. I was then transferred to the Naval Post Office at Royan, France. We called that the Vincent Astor's Post Office. He was the Post Officer and had a crew of eleven. Royan is a summer resort on the Gironde estuary. The Post Office was located on Boulevard Botten [sp] and two minutes' walk [sic] from the beach. We were living in high society and sure enjoying every outing with the French people and getting a \$2.00 a day substance. I was beginning to think that being a shipwrecked sailor wasn't so bad after all. I surely enjoyed this life until three weeks after the Armistice...when I was shipped back to headquarters at Naval Base 20, in Rochefort."
- ¹⁶ Commander William F. Halsey, Jr., US Navy was awarded the Navy Cross for his service as Commanding Officer of two destroyers during World War I. (<https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/10313>).
AWARDED FOR ACTIONS DURING World War I
Division: U.S.S. O'Brien & U.S.S. Shaw
CITATION: The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Commander William Frederick Halsey, Jr. (NSN: 0-5035), United States Navy, for distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of the U.S.S. O'Brien and the U.S.S. SHAW, engaged in the important, exacting and hazardous duty of patrolling the waters infested with enemy submarines and mines, in escorting and protecting vitally important convoys of troops and supplies through these waters and in offensive and defensive action, vigorously and unremittingly prosecuted against all forms of enemy naval activity during World War I.
- ¹⁷ *Admiral Halsey's Story*, page 34.
- ¹⁸ Should read *Staten* Island. Payne and my uncle were from West Brighton or West New Brighton, Staten Island, New York. It is probable that they knew each other as the population of Staten Island at that time was modest. After the opening of the Verrazano Bridge in 1964 the population exploded from about 60,000 to half a million.
- ¹⁹ Mountain Lakes Memorial at <https://morriscountynj.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/World-War-I-Soldiers.pdf>
- ²⁰ David A. Kent, editor-in-chief, *USCS Postmark Catalog* (5th ed. 1997) p.C-28.
- ²¹ Loss of the USS Covington, at <http://archive.is/w8P4>: The story of Seaman Horace V. (Jim) Conway These photos were shared by granddaughter of Seaman Conway, Shirley Conway-Algie. An excellent history.
- ²² Naval History & Heritage Command at <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/c/covington-ii.html>.
- ²³ USS COVINGTON: this archived page is originally from roots.web.com, and is of COVINGTON:
<http://archive.is/w8P4>.
- ²⁴ USS SMITH, from <http://www.navsource.org/archives/05/pix1/0501701.jpg>
- ²⁵ Courtesy John Germann at the Naval Cover Museum - see
https://www.navalcovermuseum.org/w/images/3/39/JohnGermann_Smith_DD17_19100330_1_Front.jpg
- ²⁶ USS LITTLE, from www.navsource.org/archives/05/pix1/0507903.jpg.
- ²⁷ USS LITTLE cover courtesy John Burdett, at
www.navalcovermuseum.org/wiki/File:JonBurdett_little_apd4_19401201.jpg.
- ²⁸ The story of all three McSorleys is available on the Naval History Foundation web site (with only one picture) at this address: <https://www.navyhistory.org/2018/07/the-loss-of-uss-covington/>.