For a mid-summer night, the evening of Wednesday, 3 July 1918, was chilly along the waterfront of Superior, Wisconsin. Normally the town would have been asleep by midnight, but this evening was different, as it was soon to be all across the United States. At the yard of the Superior Ship Building Co., all was abustle as legions of shipyard workers scurried about preparing for one of the most momentous events in shipbuilding history. At precisely 12:01 AM on the Fourth of July, it all began as a great steel prop-driven cargo ship, of 3,400 deadweight tons, slipped down the ways with grace as those about her watched and cheered. Built as Hull No. 537 and christened Lake Aurice, the new pride of Wisconsin was the first off the ways in what was to become the greatest single day’s ship launchings ever recorded.

Over the next twenty-four hours, on the Great Lakes alone, no fewer than fifteen ships would be launched in eleven cities bordering their shores. Indeed, by midnight 4 July, no fewer than ninety-four steel and wooden merchant ships would slide down the ways of American shipyards, as would six new US Navy destroyers—all built under the direction of a newly minted US Shipping Board for wartime service in the United States Merchant Marine. All across the America, from Puget Sound, San Francisco Bay, Los Angeles, the Columbia River, the Gulf of Mexico, the Delaware, Chesapeake Bay, New York Bay and all the coasts of New England, Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, the Detroit River and Lake Erie, the shores would be laved by the backwash of the great ships of the Liberty fleet rushing into their proper element.

To understand what set this now all-but-forgotten great event in motion, it is first necessary to go back to August 1914, when the world was set ablaze in a clash of empires, a conflict called, prior to 1939, “The War to End All Wars.” The horrific conflict, which would claim more than 37 million military casualties, and millions more civilian lives, also saw enormous innovative technologies applied to warfare—on the land, beneath the seas, and in the air. One of the most frightening initiatives employed was that of the modern submarine, which was brought to deadly perfection by the Imperial German Navy.

America’s march toward engagement with the allies of the Triple-Entente in the war against the Central Powers—Imperial Germany, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires—need not be relived here. Yet, it is important to review the impact of German submarine warfare as it pertains to America’s overnight ascension to the role of greatest shipbuilding nation in history, symbolized by the events of 4 July 1918.

In the first three months of 1917, just before President Wilson’s national call to arms, more than 1,685,000 deadweight tons of merchant shipping—over 200 ships per month—had been destroyed by Germany’s campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. By the end of April 1917, the rate of loss to German submarines had exceeded more than 100 ships a week, and barely 20,000,000 tons of shipping remained for all of the allied nations combined. To place this in proper perspective, we have to go back only two years earlier to 1915 when the merchant tonnage for the entire world was reported at 49,262,000 tons. Of this tonnage, 43.5 percent was British, 12 percent American.

Thousands of propaganda posters were commissioned by the US government during WWI to sell the war to the American public.
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America was, unfortunately, as is often
the case, entirely unprepared for immediate
engagement in every arena. The US Army
deployed from March 1916 to April 1917
against Pancho Villa in Mexico, numbering
just 15,000 men, and the National Guard
comprised 156,000 part-timers, spread all
across the nation, but primarily in the west.
There were only 285,000 Springfield rifles,
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whom could fly. Of the fifty-five planes,
fifty-one were obsolete. The US Navy was
in better shape, but still considerably
behind the Allied and Central powers, and
unprepared to meet the submarine offensive.
The logistical, organizational, and industrial
demands to field a major army of millions
overseas was, of course, enormous. Even
more daunting was the challenge of simply
how to get them there and keep them—and
the Allies—fed and supplied.

As General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing so clearly pointed out: “To
maintain an army of 1,000,000 men with
supplies, including munitions (guns,
ammunition, and aviation), would call for
the daily delivery in France of at least
25,000 tons of freight and continuous
berthing for 20 to 25 vessels...Many new
berths had to be built...and we expected
to expand our force to 2,000,000 men.”
From a largely rural national population
of just 92,000,000 Americans, the demands
to field an army, and the means to get them
to the front and keep them, as well as our
allies, fed and provisioned, would be
challenging to say the least.

San Francisco attorney and Democratic
Party leader William Denman had been
selected by the president to head the USSB.
Within hours of the declaration of war
against Germany, Denman announced a
goal of producing no fewer than 1,000
wooden steamships—all supposedly built
cheaply and easily—in eighteen months to
meet the crisis head on. Acting under
provisions of the 1916 Shipping Act, the
USSB formed a stock corporation, the
Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC), with
$50 million in capital (which quickly grew
to $3 billion). The planned fleet was
heralded as “Pershing's Bridge to France.”

There were incredible organizational
problems from the start, not the least of
which was bureaucratic in-fighting between
Shipping Board Chairman Denman and
General George Goethals, the famed
builder of the Panama Canal and now
general manager of the EFC, charged with
the actual construction program, over
whether to build wooden or steel ships.
After months of delay caused by the
Denman-Goethals clash, both men were
replaced. Edward N. Hurley, a Chicago
insurance man, became head of the USSB,
and Admiral Washington Lee Capps, chief
constructor for the Navy Department, was
named general manager of the EFC.
Though fraught with myriad organizational
and logistical obstacles, the program finally
pressed forward.

Innovations in methodology, training,
and standardization became the order of
the day. The industrial concepts and
innovations pioneered by Ford, Firestone,
Edison, and others were hastily adopted
and perfected, despite difficulties with the
emerging national labor movement. From
a labor force of fewer than 50,000 men
engaged in any shipbuilding or related
industries nationwide, the war emergency
now required no fewer than half a million
men who had to be trained in the art of
ship construction, fabrication, and
replication, not to mention another half-
million men in building and operating the
lumber and steel mills, machine shops, and
other industries in order to provide the
shipyards with the materials for
construction. New rail lines had to be built
to provide access to remote mines and forests from which the iron and wood was to be secured. Recruitment programs, training facilities, and whole new communities and transportation systems had to be erected across the nation to just get things moving. But first they would have to build countless new shipyards from scratch and many hundreds of shipways, and design a standardized cookie-cutter format for both wood and steel ships to bring production time down from a year per ship to less than a few months. Despite recurrent German sabotage at a number of sites, the program was soon underway, albeit not as fast as hoped for.

When Admiral Capps was forced to retire owing to ill health, he was replaced by industrial organizational genius Charles Schwab, president and CEO of the giant Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Schwab was a “Dollar-a-Year Man,” whose role has largely been forgotten in American maritime and social history, but in 1918 he changed the world.

When America went to war, more than eighty percent of mariners serving on the few merchant ships flying the American flag did not speak English. Problems were legion. By the time Schwab assumed the leadership of the EFC, the turnover rate among the new shipyards’ workforce was staggeringly high. Many of the newer shipyards were hastily assembled just days before laying the keel for their first ship. Others, such as the Jahncke Corporation yard, erected in a remote, mosquito-ridden bayou near Madisonville, Louisiana, were all but inaccessible except by foot or animal carriage. Roads and rail systems had to be constructed to reach them. Entire towns (among the first wholly planned communities in twentieth-century United States) had to be designed, replete with schools, shopping facilities, churches, recreation centers, transportation systems, and so forth to house new workers being recruited across the nation. Incentive awards and motivational programs, including competitive sports between shipyards on a regional and national basis, were designed to keep workers happy and productive. It was, in effect, one of the first great social engineering experiments ever undertaken in American history on a national scale. All to build ships, ships, and more ships.

On 1 December 1917, the first wooden bottom in the program, the 4,000 deadweight-ton North Bend, was launched at the Kruse and Banks yard at Seattle, Washington. A few months later, having survived a sabotage attempt, the 3,500-ton steamer Coyote was launched at the Passaic River shipyard of the Foundation Company on 18 March 1918, the first USSB wooden vessel launched on the Atlantic coast. Soon, both steel and wooden ships were being launched from all of America’s coasts.

Despite problems and political charges of inefficiency, poor design, mechanical difficulties and cost, ships began to slide down the ways at an ever-accelerating pace. In the meantime, owing to limited tonnage capacity and shortages of coal in European ports, which caused interminable waits before return voyages could be undertaken, a decision was made to employ the smaller vessel launched on the Atlantic coast. Soon, both steel and wooden ships were being launched from all of America’s coasts.

Soon another 1,500,000 men would follow. Under Hurley and Schwab’s leadership, the program had grown by the day. During the first six months of 1918, the tonnage produced by and for Uncle Sam totaled 1,333,297. Before the United States entered the war, a full year’s time was spent in building a vessel of 6,000 tons, yet the steel-hulled Tuckahoe, of 5,500 deadweight tons, was completed in thirty-seven days. On the Pacific Coast, the builders were averaging 100 days to a ship, on the Great Lakes 124 days, and on the Atlantic Coast 209 days. Records would continue to be broken until October when the steamship Aberdeen was launched into the Pacific in just seventeen days. The June output had been 280,400 tons, a new record for the United States. Now, for the Fourth of July, it was set to launch a tonnage total of 466,386 tons in a single day.

It was to be a festive day in the shipyards across America. At the Sun Shipbuilding Company yard at Chester, Pennsylvania, beginning at 9AM, before the first launch, athletic events would begin among workers and families, including the foot races for young and old, shot-put, boxing and wrestling. Inter-department relays and tug-of-war contests—riveters vs. boilermakers, steel handlers vs. caulkers—and a baseball game between the teams of the Sun Shipyard and Chester Ship yard were planned. At almost every shipyard across the nation, similar celebratory events were held, along with patriotic speeches by company presidents, officials of the Shipping Board, local politicians, and other notables. There
was food, music, and picnics for all.

Philadelphia was the nerve center of the nation’s wartime way of celebrating its birth. As each ship, freighter, transport or destroyer splashed its way into the water, a miniature vessel sped over a glistening wire extended from the tower of City Hall to a window in the new United Gas Improvement Company Building, each one cheered by the crowds of thousands of celebrants below.

By midnight, when it was all over, more ships had been christened and launched in a single day than in the twelve months before the war, greater in tonnage than in any two average years prior to 1915 in the United States. The single day’s output more than offset the entire shipping loss of the United States through German submarines and, as one newspapers stated, “ripped the teeth from the Kaiser’s policy of sea frightfulness.”

The ships put into the water represented almost half as much as Great Britain had built in a whole year. And while the merchant ships—colliers, refrigerators, tankers, cargo carriers—were tumbling into the water, six destroyers were launched from four yards on the Atlantic and Pacific.

It was indeed an American triumph like no other, the launch of the “tidal wave” that moved the nation from a status of third-world isolationist to one of international maritime leadership.

Congratulations flowed in from the allied leaders of the world, and from General Pershing himself.

Only four months later, and well before anticipated, the war was over; many of the Emergency Fleet vessels were already obsolete. Most, nevertheless, were soon engaged in coastal and South American trade and operations to Northern European ports, as well as on the “Pineapple Express” runs between Pacific Coast states and Hawaii. Some, such as the steamer *Alanthus*, earned substantial fame having conducted the first rescue of a sunken submarine crew in history, after the tragic sinking of the S-5 off Cape Henlopen, Delaware. Others, such as *Kickapoo*, were engaged in relief efforts to places like the Black Sea, where war still raged between Bolsheviks and White Russians. As for the wooden steamers, however, their lives would be short. There were now few overseas markets to keep the ships working. The western world, with the exception of America, was bankrupt. Russia was in the throes of civil war, and the Far East was in turmoil. It was determined that the wooden fleet would have to be disposed of as quickly as possible, and most were simply sold off for scrap. Some 236 wooden and composite steamers were purchased by the Western Marine and Salvage Company in 1922 for just $750,000 and moved to the Potomac River for reduction. All had already been written off by the same men who had authorized them, the US Congress, as America’s greatest white elephant.

Today, the remains of an even 100 of those same wooden steamers, including

**Aerial view of Mallows Bay.**
Alanthus, Kickapoo, Aberdeen and North Bend, lie in and near a tiny, remote alcove of the Potomac River called Mallows Bay, thirty miles below Washington, DC, in Charles County, Maryland, where they have rested, abandoned and forgotten, for nearly a century. Sprouting trees from their hulls, serving as rookeries for birds, nurseries for myriad animals of every stripe, and spawning grounds for fish, the ships in Mallows Bay have transformed into a veritable paradise of life sprung from the detritus of war.

On 15 September 2014, the Mallows Bay “Ghost Fleet,” as it is called, and a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century vessel sites lying about them, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the 14-square mile Mallows Bay-Widewater Historic and Archaeological District. Little more than a year later, on 5 October 2015, President Barrack Obama announced the nomination of that same area as eligible for designation as America’s fifteenth National Marine Sanctuary, the first in more than two decades, and the only one of its kind in the Western Hemisphere.

Many of the ships therein were born on the Fourth of July, 1918, in the “tidal wave” that changed the world. Donald Grady Shomette is a historian, marine archaeologist, and author of seventeen books. His most recent naval history book is Privateers of the Revolution: War on the New Jersey Coast, 1775–1783 (Schiffer Publishing, 2016—see book review on pages 51–52). He is a principal participant in the Mallows Bay-Potomac River National Marine Sanctuary initiative. (http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/mallows-bay/)