
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the February session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is Doug Most, author of *Launching Liberty*, which tells the story of how the US Government partnered with private industry to defeat the Axis powers around the world.

Wars are not only won on the battlefields, but in the rear areas where the factories and fields churn out the needed supplies of war. The process of getting the accoutrements of war to where they are needed is called logistics.

Logistics – most often thought of as the supplying of beans and bullets to the combat troops – is also a strategic choice: depriving the enemy forces of supplies, weapons, recruits, and other resources necessary to their functioning and the supplying of men, munitions, fuel, food, and weapons to your own forces. Strategic choices are contingent on the movement possibilities of the contending forces and their relative staying power based in their supply chains. Similarly, tactical choices are shaped by the organization, weapons, supplies, and manpower available.

Conceptually, the continental United States is the “logistics base area” (base) where production, recruitment, and training occur. American armed forces rarely fight within or even in close proximity to their base. Instead, we have the problem of a “remote base” area, meaning all men, materiel, weapons, food, and fuel must be transported across long distances and then distributed to the fighting forces. This necessitates the large logistical “tail” that dwarfs the fighting “tip of the spear.”

After the attack on Poland, the *Kriegsmarine* deployed its 27 U-boats in commerce raiding, and the British Admiralty responded fairly quickly by assembling merchant vessels into convoys with naval escorts. Concentrating the targets in a larger group made it difficult for a single U-boat to find them. As the Germans built many more submarines, they assembled them in “wolf packs” under Admiral Karl Dönitz’s direction. He was able to control the packs using the “unbreakable” Enigma machine and radio.

The concentration of ships in convoy and the wolf packs are both examples of “concentration in space” to provide greater strength at the point of contact. Convoys are

defensive, while the wolf packs are offensive and are examples of the tactic. Among the tactics developed by the British and the Americans was the use of land-based aircraft to scout for and attack surfaced submarines. Airpower was so useful that escort carriers were developed using merchant vessel hulls carrying 24-30 aircraft of varying types. The ongoing contest between discovering and hiding U-boats accelerated after 1943, although the U-boat threat peaked in May of 1943 and German losses increased thereafter while Allied losses declined.

A small island, Britain depended on imports of food and most industrial inputs to maintain her people and her industry. By mid-1940, the Germans had seriously reduced British imports by sinking so many ships. The United States began producing significant amounts of critically needed supplies – we were becoming the logistics base for the British war effort. The Germans expended their U-boat campaign to our east coast – OPERATION DRUMBEAT – sinking ships within sight of our coastal cities, another concentration of forces in space and time.

As the growing U-boat fleet sank increasing numbers of cargo ships in the “Battle of the Atlantic,” it became obvious that American shipyards would need to vastly increase the numbers of ships produced and the speed of construction. Unfortunately, we had too few shipyards and their rate of production was woefully inadequate. We needed new yards capable of mass producing the ships in the numbers needed.

The vessel that would get the supplies to the Allies around the world was known as the Liberty Ship. A British-designed cargo vessel, it was intended to be a cheaply manufactured mass-produced vessel with a five-year expected life. The US Maritime Commission modified the British design to suit American production methods to make it even cheaper and faster to build. Welded rather than riveted construction, oil-fueled rather than coal-fired steam-powered engines, the ships were built in modules that were assembled in the slipways, launched, and fitted out.

To meet war demand, 18 new shipyards were built and workers were trained to build the ships. The standard Liberty Ship nominally carried 10,000 long tons of cargo in five holds. Two versions carried tanks or boxed aircraft, and there were collier (coal haulers) and tanker versions. Some became Navy hospital ships, troop transports, and other service vessels in the logistics “fleet train.”

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Liberty ships were slow (11 knots) and easy prey for U-boats and they were prone to hull fractures. Still, 2710 were built. The expectation was that one voyage to Europe fully loaded covered costs. Usually, 41 sailors crewed the vessel and a 21 -40 man US Navy Armed Guard (USNAG) contingent to man the guns. At 441 feet in length and ~57 feet in beam, the basic ship cost \$2 million and took about 39 days from preparing the slipway to launching.

Unfortunately, a design flaw called for a steel that was prone to become brittle in the very cold North Atlantic waters. Brittle steel suffers cracks, and in a welded hull, the cracks spread catastrophically. One ship broke in half while in harbor. While only three Liberty Ships broke in half, the crack problem was severe.

By 1943, a new design, the “Victory Ship” was approved. Bigger (455’ by 62’) and faster (15 knots), more cargo capacity with more booms and winches, sleeker, more stable, and with stronger hulls (better, thicker steel, not affected by cold), they were designed to be easily converted to post-war civilian use. The Victory ships cost \$2.5 million and had a crew of 62 merchant marines plus the USNAG contingent. Both ships were armed, the Liberty with a 4” stern gun and machine guns, the Victory carrying a 5” stern gun, a 3” bow gun, and 20-mm machine guns for anti-aircraft use. 531 were built, 414 for cargo carrying and 117 for troop transports

The Liberty Ship became the symbol of US wartime industrial output. Ship-loving President Franklin Roosevelt called them “ugly ducklings” but the insult didn’t stick. They delivered everything from automobiles and tanks, food and munitions, and starting in 1943, troops. Manned by Merchant Mariners, the ships were not fighters, although one, the SS *Stephen Hopkins* did sink the German commerce raider *Stier*. Liberty Ships traveled to every part of the globe carrying supplies to where they were needed.

Much like other goods manufactured by American factories, like the Sherman tank, Liberty Ships may not have been the best but they were plentiful. In the world of warfare quantity surpasses quality every time. While they may not have won any medals, the cargo ships made it possible for the men to win the war.

FURTHER READINGS:

- Doug Most, *Launching Liberty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2025) .
- David Dworak, *War of Supply: World War II Allied Logistics in the Mediterranean* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2022).
- Maury Klein, *A Call to Arms* (New York: Bloomsburg Press, 2015).
- A.J. Baime, *The Arsenal of Democracy* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).

Paul A.C. Koistinen *Arsenal of WWII: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1939-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

Announcements:

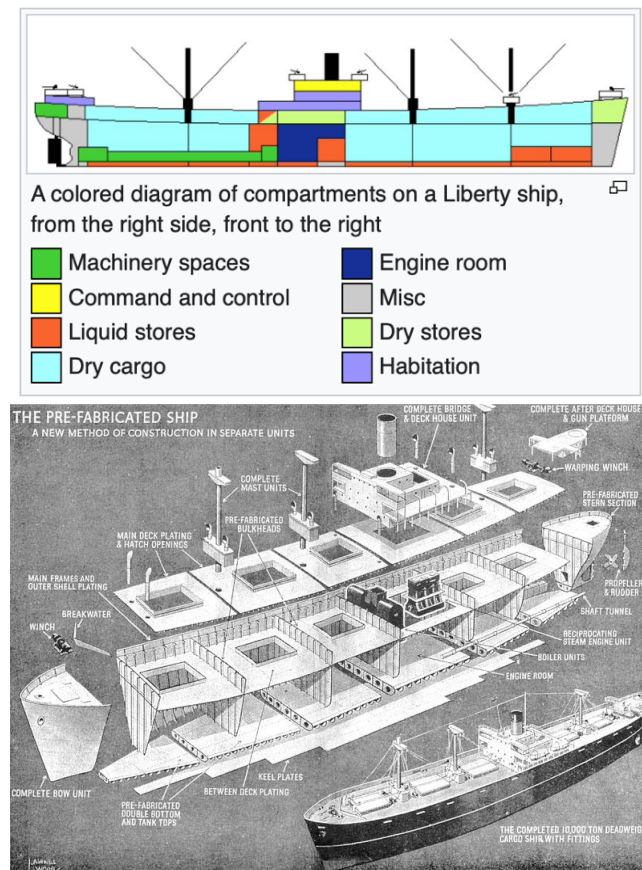
- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 17 Feb. 2026– *Victory at Stones River 1862-63* – www.tccwrt.com – e-mail: info@tccwrt.com
- Minnesota Military Museum(, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345. 320-616-6050. <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>.
- 8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, 2nd & 4th Wednesdays at 1100. <https://www.8thmn.org>.
- Friends of Ft. Snelling - www.fortsnelling.org
- Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - www.afmns.org
- Friends of the National WW II Memorial – <http://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org.US>
- Pittsburg Veterans Breakfast Club - <http://www.vbcphg.org>.
- Western Naval Historical Association – info@wnha.net
- WWII Discussion Forum – [wwiif.org](http://www.wwiif.org)
- History Happy Hour** - Sundays, 3 pm - www.historyhappyhour.com
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafmn.org
- Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - jkysr45@gmail.com

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2026

- 10 Mar. War in Sicily: Operation HUSKY
- 24 Mar. A Journalist in 1930s Nazi Germany
- 14 Apr. Doolittle Raid – Plane No. 8
- 28 Apr. Mil. Intell. Japanese Lang. School**
- 12 May Eisenhower’s Leadership

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