The Guns of August and the 1914 European Cruise of USS Tennessee (ACR-10)

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USS Memphis (CA-10)

In 1966 Captain Edward Beach Junior, US Navy, wrote The Wreck of the Memphis, a book published first by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, and then republished in 1998 by the Naval Institute Press as part of its "Classics of Naval Literature" series. The reprint's introduction by the author marked the eighty-first anniversary of the loss of the armored cruiser USS Memphis mid-afternoon Tuesday, August 29, 1916, on the south side of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. She was pushed on shore at Santo Domingo by great waves and quickly battered to death on a rock ledge there, a fate narrowly escaped by USS Castine, a small gunboat anchored in the same roadstead when the terrible seas—the product of a distant hurricane or a submarine earthquake; it's still not agreed which—hit.

When she died, Memphis was under the command of Captain Edward Beach, USN, the father of the author (who was born two years after the wreck). The idea that a tsunami killed Memphis was congenial to young Beach; it made his father the victim of an unforeseeable act of God, rather than guilty of a fatal lapse in readiness for sea that cost Beach Sr. his ship. Hispaniola lies atop one fault and very near the intersection of two tectonic plates. It's in a high risk earthquake and tsunami area; however, there's no other evidence of a Caribbean earthquake that day and the source of the surge remains controversial.

Still, such an extraordinary grounding would not have been unprecedented. A tsunami lifted the screw sloop of war USS Monongahela high atop Frederickstadt, St. Croix, in the Virgin Islands, in November 1867. At rest on the sands generally intact, she was refloated and restored to duty in 1868. In August that same year the storeship USS Fredonia was destroyed by another such "tidal wave" off Arica, Peru, drowning all but five members of the bark's crew.

After launching in 1904 and until mid-1916 the ill-fated Memphis had been the USS Tennessee (ACR-10). Changing her name to "Memphis" that May freed up "Tennessee" for BB-43, the lead ship of the small Tennessee-class of battleships scheduled to be laid down at the New York Naval Shipyard a year later, reserving the names of the states for the navy's capital ships. For the same reason six months later the armored cruiser USS Washington (ACR-11) was renamed Seattle. USS North Carolina (ACR-12) and USS Montana (ACR-13) were also rechristened Charlotte and Missoula, respectively.

Captain Beach and roughly eight hundred and fifty members of Memphis' crew survived the wreck, but forty-three did not. Some two hundred crewmembers were injured. Naturally the loss was exhaustively investigated, promptly by courts of inquiry and a board of inquest and beginning in December by Captain Beach's general court martial, on board USS Connecticut in port Philadelphia, on three charges. That court martial found him guilty of two, and recommended clemency. The sentence as finally approved in February 1917 by Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels was the loss of five places on the lineal list, all five later restored. Beach Senior's subsequent assignments, including command of USS New York (BB-34) during World War I suggested that his career was not seriously retarded by the catastrophe. That said, Beach (1867-1943, USNA '88) was not selected for flag rank, and retired in the grade of captain in 1921.

So did his son and namesake in 1966, despite a superb navy career that included submarine service during World War II (the Navy Cross and two Silver Stars), command of USS Triton on her 36,000 mile submerged circumnavigation of the world in 1960, and four years as naval aide to President Dwight Eisenhower. The junior Beach (1918-2002, USNA '39 and second in his class), is probably best known today as the author of the award-winning Run Silent, Run Deep, published in 1955. In 1958 the novel, with its faint hints of Captain Ahab's pursuit of the great white whale, was made into a movie starring Clark Gable and Burt Lancaster, then Hollywood's A-list male stars.

Beach wrote twelve other books. His and his father's names identify the hall on the Naval Academy's Hospital Hill that holds the offices of the U. S. Naval Institute.

USS Tennessee (ACR-10)

Her future, of course, was unknowable when the new USS Tennessee was launched into the Delaware River across from Camden, New Jersey, by her Philadelphia shipbuilders, William Cramp and Sons. Launched into the river on a cold December 3 morning in 1904, Tennessee became the first of four new 14,000+ ton, four-stack combatants that would constitute the U.S. Navy's new Armored Cruiser Squadron.

Cramps had recently finished the first two of the six Pennsylvania-class cruisers, Pennsylvania and Colorado, when they got the contract for the slightly larger, heavier-gunned (ten-inch guns versus the eight-inch ones of the Pennsylvania-class' main battery), and heavier

armored Tennessee. This experience in hand, it wasn't surprising that Tennessee passed her acceptance trials in early 1906 and was delivered on schedule to the navy that July, in exchange for the final few of the fifty progress payments metered out to the builder since contract award.

As the younger Beach described it, Tennessee and her sister ships were products of a lesson learned in the Spanish-American War, that a big (504 feet long and 14,500 tons), fast (by contemporary standards, 22 knots), and long-gunned cruiser (four 10-inch guns, with a secondary battery of thirty-eight 6- and 3-inch guns on two decks) could outfight anything it couldn't outrun, including the battleships of her day. All of this pushed along by twin 26-foot screws driven by two four cylinder, triple-expansion steam engines fed by a pair of boilers in each of eight fire rooms. An ideal combatant for an antiquated navy on the cusp of a renaissance, with big plans but not yet a big budget.

Taking away lessons from that war was a high risk proposition, however, given the condition of the Spanish Navy in the Caribbean and the Pacific at the end of the century, and so this particular lesson was true only until HMS Dreadnought put to sea in 1906. The new British all-big gun (12-inch), 21 knot, steam turbine-powered battleship almost instantly made all other capital ship designs obsolete, including the Tennessee-class armored cruisers, although it took ten years for their demotion to take full effect. The proud American armored cruiser squadron had been caught in the same kind of sharp technology shift that had pushed aside overland canals (slowly, by the railroad) and the pony express (quickly, by the telegraph), and in time would displace Viscount and Electra turboprop passenger aircraft (also quickly, by Boeing's 707 and Douglas' DC-8 turbojets).

But even in gray war paint in 1914, replacing the elegant white, buff, and black scheme that had also ornamented the Great White Fleet of American battleships on its 'round the world cruise in 1906, behind the handsome scroll on her bow and beneath her towering masts and four stacks, Tennessee looked imposing… never mind that her last assignment had been as the receiving ship in Brooklyn, purgatory.

"The Guns of August"

Barbara Tuchman's brilliant 1962 book with that title, about Europe's descent into the First World War, describes an almost mindless, mechanical process through which six great Eurasian empires suddenly found themselves fighting desperately in the late summer of 1914, either implementing or responding to a strategy seemingly paced entirely by schedules sending German troop trains flowing first to the country's western and later to its eastern borders.

In the fifty years since, and especially during last year—that war's centennial—many other scholars have examined the history of the war, and sought anew to identify whose was the guilt and what were the motives for starting it; to describe what happened on its several fronts, and why. Among the most notable are six writing in English: Christopher Clark, Charles Emmerson, Max Hastings, Dominic Lieven, Margaret MacMillan, and Sean McMeekin. The current answer—much more complex than the Treaty of Versailles' assignment of blame exclusively to Germany—reads like a riff from Agatha Christies' Murder on the Orient Express: everybody did it. All six were responsible. Still, others are not convinced. Isabel Hull's A Scrap of Paper (Cornell, 2015) supports the "Germans as bad guys" stance.

Everything about World War I was a surprise (which says something about war planning, confirmed before and after many times): Its stunning beginning; its great length; the horrible loss of life in the trenches; the use of poison gas; the invention of tanks; the role of submarine warfare; the participation of the United States; the treaty provisions at the end, and their grim consequences a generation later.

Among the most surprised when the fighting started on the Western Front, with the move of huge German armies toward France, were American tourists and expatriates in Europe (The New York Times estimated as many as 40,000), who soon found themselves stranded far from home without money anyone would accept. Many goosey hoteliers, restaurateurs, and shopkeepers on the Continent were unwilling to take dollars or travelers checks because of fears about paper money in general and the dollar in particular. Moreover, with the abrupt interruption of transatlantic passenger service, these marooned Americans had no way to escape the conflagration.

European tourism in the teens of the last century was reserved entirely for the wealthy in America. (The flow the other way was largely working class immigrants.) So it's no surprise that the uncomfortable plight of these influentials quickly attracted official attention. But soon less well-heeled refugees joined them, many thousands of American citizens who lived on the Continent because their business or heritage was there. Their numbers quickly threaten to overwhelm the resources of a hastily-improvised "Committee for American Residents in London for Assistance of American Travelers," chaired by Herbert Hoover, then a consulting mining engineer living in the British capital. [1]

It became Tennessee's unique mission to solve both problems: to carry government and privately-owned gold to Europe, the latter to pay off travelers' checks and letters of credit, and to move American civilians across the Channel to ports in England where they could board chartered vessels back to the United States. [2] Twelve hours late in the evening of August 6, 1914, and one day out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Tennessee steamed from her overnight anchorage off Staten Island for Falmouth, England, with nearly $6 million in gold cached in nearly 100, sealed 300 hundred pound kegs stowed below in compartments D-23 and D-24, a small fortune that had been amassed by Benjamin Strong Junior, the new president of the Banker's Trust Company, of New York, and nine other titans of American banking.

Also on board together with the crew was a constellation of official passengers heading for Europe (including Assistant Secretary of War Henry Breckinridge with a covey of his aides, as well as Ambassador Joseph Willard and eight consuls), and a coterie of bankers to baby-sit the specie—a condition of the treasure's commercial insurers. Ambassador Willard, the senior diplomat assigned to the American mission in Madrid, took the flag cabin. Tennessee's officers' country and wardroom mess must have featured standing room only for the crossing for all her other civilian visitors on board, who necessarily displaced the fifteen officers assigned to the ship. A host of Treasury, Fiscal, and Red Cross personnel filled out the mix of ship riders hitching a ride to Europe in Tennessee. Others rode in Tennessee's sister ship, USS North Carolina, (ACR-123) rushing at the same time to Europe on a relief mission.

Captain Benton Decker, USN, took command of Tennessee on August 5, the day after he was detached from the Naval War College. From her new executive officer (Lt. Cdr. Earl Jessop, USN, until then CO of USS Benham, DD-49) on down, Tennessee was sailing with something of a pick-up crew. As a receiving ship for the past three months she'd not had a full

complement assigned, and so her departure was made possible only by hasty impressment of officers and enlisted sailors from along much of the Atlantic Coast. USS Utah's crew and crews of torpedo boat destroyers under repair at the Brooklyn Navy Yard were especially hard-hit by the levee, as Jessop's urgent reassignment proved. Approximately 700 sailors were aboard when Tennessee got underway. She arrived in Falmouth on Sunday, August 16, hours behind USS North Carolina, sent to Europe on the same refugee rescue mission but minus the kegs of gold.

In New York bankers were careful to emphasize that this initiative wasn't merely to serve clients of the ten banks which were represented on the committee that had pushed it through, but that "all holders of American travelers' checks and letters of credit issued by responsible concerns will be recognized, irrespective of whether the issuers are contributors to the fund or not. The sole object of this shipment is to provide for all who are in need and to give them the means of securing the funds necessary to maintain them in London and to furnish them with money for their return to the United States at the earliest possible moment." [3]

Captain Decker was on the bridge that August night as the lights of New York fell behind, the start of what became an unusual near-year-long cruise that saw his ship arrive in Europe to deliver the bullion, ferry tourists and refugees across the English Channel from Le Havre and Rotterdam (where the Dutch apologized fulsomely that neutrality regulations required them to insist that Tennessee anchor outside of the three mile limit) to London and then sail to the Eastern Mediterranean to move other refugees between Turkish ports in Ottoman Syria and Alexandria, Egypt.

Finished with her English Channel shuttle, Tennessee steamed from Rotterdam to Brindisi, and then further east into the Aegean, a move triggered by Ottoman Turkey's secret

alliance with Germany on August 2 and its active entry into the war on the side of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) in late October. [4]

Her only real excitement came on November 16, off Izmir, when a 3- inch shore battery apparently fired on Captain Decker's gig as he headed toward land to pay a call on Turkish officials. Decker's coxswain immediately reversed course while his skipper stewed in the stern sheets. American papers quickly reported the outrage, and equally quickly reported the Turks' explanation. The rounds were blanks fired to alert the gig that the waters ahead had been mined.

Early in the war Turkish belligerency stirred up waves of refugee movements from Jaffa, Syria, to Egypt, soon to become a British protectorate. As she had across the Channel months earlier, Tennessee moved these thousands—expelled from their homes in Palestine—"gratuitously," meaning for free. By mid-January 1915 The New York Times estimated (perhaps too generously) that some 6,000, many of them Jews rightly suspected by the Turks of favoring the allies over the Central Powers, had been relocated. According to type-written manifests attached to her deck log, between December 1914 and June 1915 Tennessee transported seven ship-loads of stricken refugees. Most appear on the manifest under a last name and nationality only, and many apparently travelled with no national identity papers of any kind.

Her humanitarian mission completed in early summer, Tennessee left Jaffa (now Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel) flying a 610 foot-long pennant to mark her homecoming. The New York Times cautiously described it as "the longest that ever trailed astern a modern man of war," apparently unwilling to expand the claim to cover ancient combatant ships. Just before departure, reportedly, the crew sang its own version of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." The first and last verses,

Back to New York City where I was bred and born,

Back to New York City, where they taught me right from wrong.

Of all the countries I have seen, have nothing on Broadway.

I long to drink my crème de menthe in a New York cabaret.

Since we've performed our duties in these Oriental lands,

I hope to see us sailing soon for dear old Yankee land,

For there my friends are waiting to greet me by the hand,

And I'll surely appreciate New York town when I get there again.

Out of Barcelona on July 15 and through the Azores not long after, Tennessee entered the port of New York on the last day of July, 1915. A few days short of one year after leaving New York Tennessee was back.

And just about one year after that, in her alter ego as USS Memphis, following cruises to Haiti and Uruguay and around South America, she was on the reef at Santo Domingo with her bottom torn out. By then the fighting in Europe on both fronts had been going on for two years, and the combatants were nearly through sacrificing the leading edge of a generation of their young men, with much of the rest of that generation to follow.

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[1] Soon Hoover expanded his volunteer humanitarian efforts to chair the Commission for Relief in Belgium. He did an outstanding job, successfully feeding the small nation under almost impossible conditions. Fifteen years later he became the thirty-first president of the United States, his first elective office. Hoover's hapless response to the Depression made his a one term presidency and delivered the White House to the Democrats for the next two decades.

[2] Impelled, perhaps, by lurid scenarios posed by authors of genre fiction or by the fears of the Royal Defense Corps, the government in London prepared for an invasion of the home islands by, among other things, moving the gold reserves of the United Kingdom to North America. Beach wrote that when Tennessee finally returned home she surreptitiously brought with her to North America the gold reserves of the United Kingdom, where they could lie safely in Canadian vaults while the war raged on. Edward L. Beach. The Wreck of the Memphis. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press (1998), 18. British reserves were also moved to Canada during World War II, but this second time in His Majesty's ships.

[3] The New York Times, August 7, 1914. "Tennessee off with $5,867,000." The Times' digital archive for 1914-15 contains substantial reporting on Tennessee's European cruise. USS Tennessee's deck logs for 1914-15 are held at the National Archives in Washington in Record Group 24.

[4] In time, Istanbul's decisions would prove to be exceptionally unwise. In 1922, after more than 600 years of often glorious history and in the reign of Mehmet VI, the thirty-fifth sultan after Osman I, the Ottoman Empire joined the other three imperial casualties of the war, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Tsarist Russia.

Andrew Jampoler is the author of a number of Naval Institute Press books and writes often for "Naval History." His Horrible Shipwreck! was published by the Naval Institute Press in 2010. Jampoler's fifth book, about the short life and miserable death in 1891 of Lieutenant Emory Taunt, USN, on the Congo River, was published by NIP in 2013, a year after he returned from a research trip to the Congo. Embassy to the Eastern Courts, America's Secret First Pivot Toward Asia 1832-37, will be published by the Naval Institute Press this November.