

The greatest seelift in the history of mankind began with Germany's surrender in May 1945 when the American populace cried out to "Bring the Boys (and Girls) Home" from Europe's far-flung battlefields. Within a year's time, more than 8,000,000 overseas-based American troops were safely Stateside By Owen Gault

With these words the lights went on again not only aboard every ship in the Atlantic but in every city across continental Europe. After six long stultifying years of war and a cost of untold millions of lives, the conflict that had gripped the entire western world was at last at end - The Allies had emerged victorious. With the chiming of thousands of church bells, the Nazi dream of conquest had transformed into the nightmare of defeat as the news of Hitler's suicide and the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany was announced.

In the struggle that had ensued Hitler's maniacal quest for glory, the Allies - Great Britain, France, Russia and the United States - had fielded armies of more than 30 million men and women. The war had cost the United States alone nearly 300 billion dollars and put more than 16 million Americans in uniform; 73% of whom served overseas.

However, many proclaimed that VE-Day was really only the beginning of the end; that the war was only half-won, for the war in the Pacific against Japan was still raging. Nevertheless, an American populace weary of wartime sacrifice was eager to see their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters brought home. With peace at last a reality in Europe, the cry to "Bring the boys home" could no longer be ignored by Washington's bureaucrats. With the average American serviceman and servicewoman having been overseas 16.2 months, little excuse could be found to keep this awesome army encamped thousands of miles from home. Bring the troops home and do it NOW became the clarion call the high priority "Order of the Day" at the Pentagon.

So began in earnest Operation Magic Carpet - the awesome task of bringing home more than eight million American servicemen and women scattered across 55 theaters of war spanning the globe. It would become history's greatest seelift; an unparalleled effort set into motion by the War Shipping Administration (WSA) in remarkably short time.

At its height late in 1945, this massive worldwide effort utilized more than 700 ships, including the giant British "Queens"- Mary and Elizabeth - plus hundreds of passenger liners and 300 Liberty and Victory ships hastily converted to passenger carriers. The war won, every GI Jane and Joe uttered a common plea: to go home - RIGHT NOW! As Gen. George C. Marshall later told Naval historian Samuel E. Morison, "It was not a demobilization, it was a rout!"

As early as mid-1943, the Army recognized that, once victory was won. demobilization would be a major problem. Chief of Staff Gen. Marshall immediately set about establishing committees to cope with the vast logistics required. With the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine and WSA pressed for answers by politicians eager to please their constituents, methods of organizing so great an operation received high priority. Eventually it was deemed prudent to leave the organizational development of this all-out effort up to the highly-experienced War Shipping Administration.

With Nazi Germany on its knees by late 1944, it was predicted the war in Europe would end within six months thereby releasing virtually millions of no-longer-needed soldiers, sailors and marines from the combat zones. The time had come for detailed demobilization planning. Such an immense undertaking would require every transportation resource the various services could muster. The Army would utilize its vast wartime fleet of troopships; WSA its huge armada of cargo carriers; and the Coast Guard its force of assault troopships. Time was of the essence, as was the importance of establishing a vast network of inland rail transportation to meet the ships as they reached American ports and expeditiously move the GIs to separation centers all across the country.

Only the Navy and its tremendous force of attack transports and warships would be excluded from the initial European sealift. The Navy's war was far from being finished in the Pacific. Faced with preparations for the invasion of Japan - expected to be the most complex and costly battle of the war - the Navy begged off making a major commitment to use its warships to carry homeward bound troops from Europe. Until the Pacific war was won, ferrying GIs westward would be the sole responsibility of the Army and Merchant Marine.

While it had taken four years of strenuous effort to get the armies to Europe, the task now became one of returning them in the quickest possible manner. Anything that could float would be utilized. To assist the temporary troop lift, the WSA ordered the immediate conversion of 300 Liberty and Victory cargo ships into transports. Placing towering tiers of bunks in the cargo holds and adding necessary sanitary, messing and recreational facilities was no easy task in vessels designed to haul dry cargo.

Shipyards were still turning out warships and landing craft. Repair facilities were crowded with ships worn out or damaged by the rigors of war. Adequate port and docking facilities were also serious considerations along with getting the veterans to demobilization camps after they reached America's shores. Yet, despite each of these obstacles what came to be known as Magic Carpet operations would soon be in full swing. WSA miraculously would have 546 vessels engaged in returning overseas troops soon after VE-Day.

With Germany's surrender on 8 May 1945, the stage was now set to put the massive trans-Atlantic troop haul into action. After the heady initial jubilation of victory, the GIs were restless to get home. Many veterans had been overseas away from families for more than three years. They had fought long and hard to end Axis tyranny and now they wanted to get on with lives and return to civilian pursuits.

Helping place impetus to the troops' return was the Pentagon's awareness that a gigantic army without a foe to fight could fast become an unwieldy disciplinary problem, especially an army weary and strained from the long and bloody march to Berlin. Returning the battle-hardened veterans Stateside with all due haste made good sense especially since there was every possibility their units might yet be called upon to join the war still raging in the Pacific.

The demobilization first began in mid-1944 by creating a point system aimed at producing a systematic transition to a peacetime military structure. Under the formula, so many credits were given each serviceman for months in service, months served overseas, for combat duty, awards,

war wounds, special service and even parenthood. The total number of points established priority for discharge from the service, and "point counting" became uppermost with every GI during his passage home. The more points one had, the quicker he would be back in civilian clothes, dancing with his wife or sweetheart, enjoying sights and delights so long denied him.

Unfortunately, the hue and cry to get the servicemen back into civilian life post haste scuttled the Army's plan for an orderly reduction in size and scope. Confronted with intense pressure from many levels to quickly return the troops to civilian life, the point requirements for early discharge were soon reduced despite Pentagon protests. Military leaders warned of the backlash of too fast a pull-back in military presence overseas, but their voices were muted in the euphoria of peace which now gripped the country.

By the end of 1945, the Army had already released more than half of its eight million men. What had once been the world's most powerful military force only remained a shadow of itself a year later with less than 700,000 still in uniform. The Navy too would feel the sting of rapid demobilization, reducing from a force of 3,380,817 in 1945 to 484,228 by 1947.

The net effect of this accelerated demobilization would have serious consequences. Overseas commands were often stripped of the key personnel needed to keep practical operating levels. Ships, planes and tanks suffered from the lack of trained mechanics to maintain them. Individual unit strength was often so depleted that morning roll call would bring forth only a few dozen men rather than a full company or platoon. With political uncertainty raging in many areas now free of Axis rule, the ability of the Army to maintain an effective occupation force was severely hampered. In the very near future, America would pay dearly in Korea for its rush to demobilize.

Despite fleeting attempts to keep much of America's army in Europe, the war-ravaged harbors of Liverpool, Southampton, Antwerp, Cherbourg, Marseille and Bremerhaven soon swelled with hundreds of thousands of soldiers ready to be shipped home for discharge. Entire units, brigades, battalions, squadrons and even whole divisions were trucked to hastily-established camps to await the unloading of ships that now were delivering relief supplies by the millions of tons for Europe's famished civilian populace. No one cared what the ship looked or smelled like, how big it was, or where he was to be berthed. All that mattered was that the vessel was heading west to the "Good Ol' US of A."

Former combat infantryman Jerry Martino of Hackensack, New Jersey, still vividly recalls his voyage home on a Liberty ship: "We were packed aboard like sardines; hundreds of us berthed in the holds. The air was putrid, the never-ending stench of vomit was nauseating with so many of us seasick most of the way. We had to queue up for everything from taking a pee to getting our chow. Sea water showers were a luxury and there was no such thing as privacy. It was more comfortable in a foxhole in Germany.

"Everyone was anxious, wondering what it would be like when we got back; if he could get a job - if we could adjust to civilian life again. There were crap games going on 24-hours a day in every part of the ship. Also, a lot of war souvenir swapping. I traded a German officer's Luger pistol for some Nazi regalia and medals. There wasn't much else to do except read and talk, sleep and dream about the future. Discipline at this stage was pretty relaxed and a lot of guys passed

the time drinking booze they'd smuggled aboard. We couldn't wait until we saw the Statue of Liberty again. And when we did, you could hear a pin drop on the deck. Home at last! God, that felt good."

Forty-eight hospital ships joined the victory parade; these filled with the more than half a million wounded who were well enough to travel. Even amongst those who had been horribly injured, burned, blinded or maimed, the excitement to return home was infectious. Many of these veterans would still face long months or even years of recuperation in Stateside military hospitals. The desire to forget the scars and grim memories of war filled the passage home with the hopeful expectation of once again returning to some semblance of a normal life.

The first homeward-bound ships left European ports in late June 1945. The few became the many and by November, the European sealift was at its height. Fortunately, in mid-October 1945 the US Navy was now able to get into the Magic Carpet operation with the newly commissioned carrier Lake Champlain quickly fitted with bunks for 3300 troops. She was joined in November by the battleship Washington and seven Navy hospital ships. The European lift in itself now included more than 400 vessels of every description. Dozens of famed ocean liners like the USS West Point (ex-SS America), Mount Vernon (ex-SS Washington) and Wakefield (ex-SS Manhattan) which had become wartime troop transports joined with lesser known liners like the USS Hermitage (ex-Italian liner Conte Biancamano) and Monticello (ex-Coreie Grande) to expedite the vast khaki-clad pilgrimage back to America's shores. Assisting them was a veritable armada of new ships like those of the war-built General-class transports, plus large numbers of pre-war tankers, ore carriers and cargo ships that had been pressed into wartime service. Some would carry as few as 300 while the large liners often squeezed 15,000 aboard in one haul.

Nor was the European exodus a one-way stream of humanity heading westward. Returning to Europe were the more than 450,000 German prisoners of war who had been brought to American detention camps. In addition, 53,000 Italian ex-POWs joined their former Axis compatriots in returning to their respective homelands. That they had been treated well during their prolonged captivity was attested to by the number of POWs who later returned to become citizens of the United States under postwar immigration quotas.

Although Magic Carpet operations primarily pertained to ships, the role of the Army's Air Transport Command (ATC) and the Navy's Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) also deserve mention. Bringing men back to the States from every corner of the earth, the ATC and NATS amassed millions of flying hours in transport/cargo aircraft that had been the backbone of the wartime aerial supply routes. Flying above some of the world's roughest terrain, pilots and aircrews took on inclement zero visibility weather, storms at sea, blazing desert heat and arctic gales with equal aplomb. Though the total number of personnel reaching Stateside by plane was miniscule in comparison to the numbers carried by ship, the ATC/NATS airmen played an equally important role in bringing the boys home.

Month by month the Magic Carpet numbers grew to astronomic proportions. Whereas American shipping had averaged the delivery of 148,000 soldiers per month to the European Theater of Operations (ETO) during the wartime build-up, the post VE-Day rush homeward would average more than 435,000 GIs per month for the next 14 months. From VE-Day to September,

1,417,850 were repatriated. From October 1945 to April 1946, this number swelled by another 3,323,395 more. By the end of February, the ETO phase of Magic Carpet was essentially completed. The last of the troops to return from the Pacific war zones (127,300) would arrive home in September 1946. With the world's greatest sea lift completed, the ships involved returned to their peacetime duties. The most vital aftermath of a global war had come to a happy and successful finale.

When the initial rush was over, the WSA and the Army converted 29 troopships into special carriers for war brides. Almost a half million European women had married American GIs. Though many were suspected of being motivated more with the wish to leave ravaged Europe than by Cupid's quill, they nevertheless came to America in droves on the heels of their returning servicemen husbands. Even the austere British lent the war-weary Queen Mary to this romantic assignment; its once-posh salons turned into impromptu nurseries or maternity wards where obstetricians kept busy around the clock.

With the surrender of Japan, the Navy moved into high gear both in reducing the size of its wartime fleet and bringing home hundreds of thousands of shore-based sailors and marines. Although - thanks to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki - the Pacific war ended much sooner than the Navy had anticipated, it quickly marshalled its tremendous fleet to bring home high-priority returnees. Vice Admiral Forrest Sherman's Task Force 11 would depart Tokyo Bay early in September 1945 with the battleships New Mexico, Idaho, Mississippi, North Carolina and two carriers plus a squadron of destroyers filled with thousands of homeward-bound servicemen from every branch of the military. Stopping at Okinawa, the scene of the war's last great Pacific battle, they would embark thousands more 10th Army troops eager for a ride back to the States.

Eager to make the Magic Carpet voyage a memorable experience, the Navy had hastily converted many of its warships into temporary transports - aircraft carriers being the most popular with the soldiers because their size made them more comfortable rides than a destroyer or Liberty Ship. Then too, the big carriers had entertainment facilities galore - movies on the hangar decks, gyms, spacious lounges for officer and enlisted personnel, well-stocked ship's stores, fresh food, hot meals and above all else - an abundance of ice cream. Shifting their planes ashore, three-to five-tiered bunks were installed on the hangar decks to provide accommodation for several thousand men in relative comfort.

These GIs were far luckier than those forced to crowd aboard slow-moving LSTs and small APDs. But despite the discomfort and tedious confinement, complaints were few.

By October 1945, Magic Carpet was operating worldwide with the Army, Navy and WSA pooling their resources to expedite the troop-lift. December 1945 became the peak month with almost 700,000 persons from every service returning home from the Pacific. A fleet of 369 ships including 222 assault transports, six battleships, 18 cruisers, 57 aircraft carriers and twelve hospital ships helped to make the dream of peace become a pleasant reality for those who had brought about ultimate victory. With the final arrival of 29 troop transports carrying more than 200,000 soldiers and sailors from the China-Burma-India theater in April 1946, Operation Magic Carpet came to its end.

Though this epic undertaking is little remembered today, it should go down in history as the greatest mass movement of humanity ever attempted or accomplished. Like so many other great feats of WWII, Operation Magic Carpet was a tribute to the skills and teamwork of the seamen and sailors who made the safe return of millions of servicemen and women from every corner of the world a reality. To a man, they all deserve a hearty "thank you" and "well done."

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