

THE VATERLAND / LEVIATHAN

by Eric Beheim

The morning of April 3, 1913, saw the city of Hamburg, Germany in a festive mood; the new \$6,000,000 ocean liner *Vaterland* was ready to be launched. Towering eight stories above the Blohm & Voss shipyard, the 950-foot *Vaterland* was the largest liner that had yet been built. The amount of raw materials that had gone into her making was mind-boggling: 24,500 tons of rolled steel, 2,000 tons of cast steel, 2,000 tons of cast iron, and 6,500 tons of wood. Four mammoth propellers, each nineteen feet, seven inches in diameter, would drive her over the Atlantic at 23 knots. As she gracefully slid down the ways and into the water, steam, generated by the friction, gave the *Vaterland* an almost mythological appearance.

Another year was required to complete the superstructure, erect three 64-foot smoke stacks, and install the 50½ ton rudder. During the final stages of outfitting, a crew of 1,234 was shipped onboard including an engineroom black gang of

403, and 60 chefs, bakers and under-chefs to man her eight kitchens. On May 15, 1914, the *Vaterland* departed for New York City on her maiden voyage. On board were 1,600 passengers—less than half of her 4,050 capacity.

When she arrived in New York six days later, some 25 harbor tugs were required to maneuver her huge bulk into place against her Hoboken pier. While departing for Germany five days later, backwash from her huge props damaged two small steamers and swamped a barge loaded with 800 tons of coal.

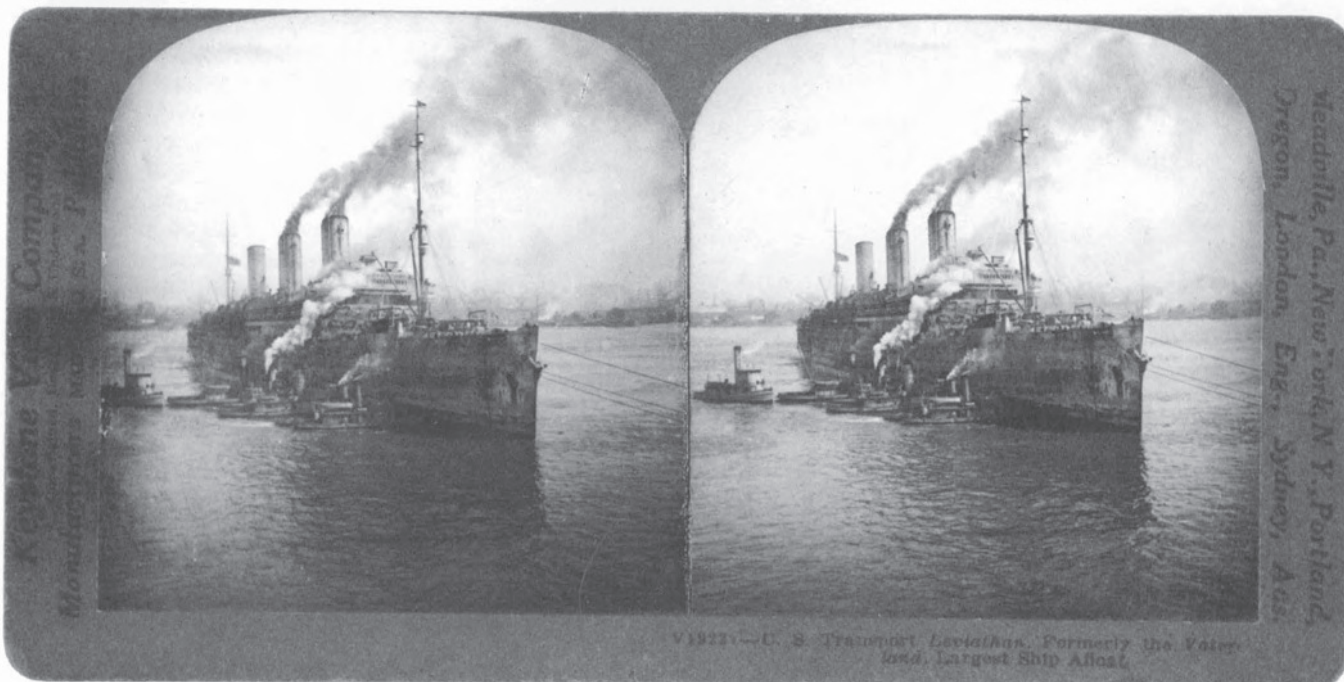
Despite these early mishaps, the *Vaterland's* performance during the next three months was smooth to the point of being uneventful. Then, on July 28, 1914, while she was

again westbound for New York, Austria-Hungary declared war on tiny Serbia.

Four days later, as she was preparing to depart New York for Hamburg, the *Vaterland* received a message from Germany ordering her to remain in port pending further instructions. On August 3, declarations of war were exchanged between Germany, France, and England. World War I had come to Europe.

Fearful of having its prized liner captured at sea by the British Navy, Germany kept the *Vaterland* tied to her Hoboken pier "awaiting orders." Months passed. By the spring of 1917, only a skeleton crew of 300 still remained aboard. On the eve of America's entry into the war, U.S.

KEYSTONE V19237 U.S. Transport *Leviathan*, formerly the *Vaterland*, Largest Ship Afloat. Germany's prize liner was in New York harbor when war was declared between Germany and Great Britain. She remained there, safe from the British Navy until the United States declared war on Germany, whereupon she was seized and converted into a troop transport. Re-named *Leviathan* by President Wilson, she ultimately transported some 100,000 American troops to Europe.



Treasury agents boarded and seized the giant liner. Renamed the *Leviathan* by President Woodrow Wilson, her palatial interior was gutted, and berthing accommodations were installed for 10,000 troops. Seven months after being seized, the *Leviathan*, painted Navy gray, began her new career as a U.S. troop transport.

Nicknamed "The Big Train" by American doughboys, the *Leviathan* could make a round trip run to Europe and back in 27 days. On one voyage, she carried 14,416 troops, the greatest number of human beings that had ever before sailed on a single ship. Of the two million American troops transported to Europe during the war, some 100,000 travelled on the *Leviathan*.

Following the war, almost \$9,000,000 was spent rebuilding the

Leviathan as the flagship of the United States Lines. In July, 1923, she returned to the trans-Atlantic service as one of the largest, most palatial passenger vessels afloat.

Throughout the 1920's, the *Leviathan's* sailing lists included the rich and famous of the day: Gloria Swanson, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Jascha Heifetz, the Duc and Duchesse de Richelieu, and Queen Marie of Rumania. Despite all this glamour, however, the *Leviathan* operated at a loss and required a government subsidy to meet expenses.

In 1927, she carried a record number of passengers for a single crossing—2,741. That year, the first mailplane to be launched from a liner took off from a 100-foot ramp built on top of her bridge. During

one crossing, she set a distance record of 625 miles for a single day's run.

The *Leviathan's* days of glory ended with the stock market crash of 1929. Within a year, the United States was in the grip of the Great Depression, and ocean travel was a luxury which only the very rich could afford. It was not uncommon for the *Leviathan* to make a crossing with just 700 or 800 passengers. During one voyage, only 301 passengers in all classes were on board.

In June, 1934, the *Leviathan* was overhauled one last time. After making five round trips to Europe, all of them at a loss, she returned to her Hoboken berth, where she remained idle and neglected for years. In January, 1938, she made one last voyage . . . to Rosyth, Scotland, where she was turned over to the salvage men who dismembered her and cut her up into small, unrecognizable pieces of metal. And so passed a once-proud lady of the sea. ■

KEYSTONE 26511T *The Leviathan, Originally the Vaterland—a Palatial Ocean Liner with a Notable War and Peace Record. Following the war, almost \$9,000,000 was spent to restore the Leviathan to her pre-war opulence. Although her sailing lists included some of the major celebrities of her day, the Leviathan operated at a loss and required a government subsidy to meet expenses.*

