EPIDEMIC AT SEA

USS LEVIATHAN

29 September to October 7, 1918

HISTORICAL FOOTNOTE

World War I claimed an estimated 16 million lives. The influenza epidemic that swept the world in 1918 killed an estimated 50 million people. In late spring of 1918, the first phase of this disease, known initially as the “three-day fever,” appeared without warning. Few deaths were reported. Victims recovered after a few days.

When the disease returned that fall, it was far more severe. Some victims died within hours of their first symptoms. Others succumbed after a few days. The influenza epidemic of 1918 did not discriminate. It was rampant on all land masses, and even at sea. Young adults, usually unaffected by such types of infectious diseases, were among the hardest hit, including soldiers, packed like sardines onboard the USS LEVIATHAN.
Originally a German ocean liner named the VATERLAND, when completed in 1914 she was one of the largest ships in the world. Laid up in Hoboken, New Jersey when World War I began, she was seized by the United States Navy when America entered the war. Refitted as a troop ship, she was placed in commission in July of 1917 as the USS VATERLAND. Her name was changed to LEVIATHAN two months later. In late 1917 she began to carry troops to Europe. At times, she carried as many as 12,000 soldiers and a US Navy crew of 2,000-plus.

By the time World War I ended, she had transported almost 120,000 servicemen to the European war front. After the November 1918 Armistice, she made nine trans-Atlantic crossings; returning thousands of wounded and weary veterans home to America.

Following the war, she was transformed into an ocean liner once again. Retaining the name LEVIATHAN, she sailed the Atlantic in that capacity...albeit unprofitably...until the early 1930’s. After being laid up again in Hoboken for a few years, she was scrapped in 1938.

When the vessel was transformed from luxurious passenger service to troop transport duty in 1917, her public spaces, passenger staterooms and even some cargo holds were modified to create ‘barebones’ berthing areas for thousands of servicemen. Extensive facilities were also created to provide for a large medical department.
MEDICAL DEPARTMENT AND FACILITIES

When the huge German-built ship was converted in July of 1917 to become a troop transport, her elegant First Class Social Hall was chosen as the location for the ship’s expanded medical facilities. This once-popular gathering spot for passengers covered more than 4,100 square feet of deck space, featured a raised orchestra stage, depicted here, and an ornate vaulted overhead. As part of the renovation effort, the grand piano was taken off the ship and the stage cut down to deck level.

Once the social hall was stripped of all its furnishings, medical, surgical and isolation wards were installed that had a total of 182 beds. The orchestra stage area became two operating rooms and a sterilizing room. A sick call station was added at the forward end of this space, and a large dispensary aft. Adjacent spaces were converted for use as supporting medical facilities.

The ship’s medical department initially had five doctors onboard. This was later increased to seven and eventually nine, as experiences underway dictated the need for more such resources. They were initially assisted by four pharmacists and 130 navy hospital corpsmen.

In July of 1918, the LEVIATHAN began transporting wounded American soldiers back home. To help care for them, the ship’s medical personnel were augmented by the addition of navy nurses. These ladies were amongst the first...if not the first...members of the US Navy’s Nurse corps to be assigned to a duty onboard a vessel that routinely traveled in harm’s way. Their addition to the LEVIATHAN staff came just in time to help meet the vessel’s greatest medical emergency.
During her wartime service, most of the LEVIATHAN’s crossings were relatively uneventful. There were U-boat scares and storms and seasickness to be encountered…and suffered through by hundreds, if not thousands of landlubbers in khaki. But those kinds of dangers and discomforts paled to insignificance as a different threat appeared even before her September 29, 1918 departure from Hoboken.

**OUTWARD BOUND**

As thousands of troops embarked, there were ominous signs of what they would be faced with, once at sea. Several already sick soldiers lined up on the pier awaiting their turn to go onboard collapsed and had to be taken to a local hospital.

Others, once onboard, exhibited classic…and rapidly worsening…signs of influenza. They were removed from the ship before she sailed. In peacetime, those early indications of an impending epidemic would have likely halted the ship’s departure. But there was a war on…and orders were orders…

When the LEVIATHAN left New York Harbor, crowded by other maritime traffic, the skies were clear and the seas were calm. Her passenger manifest included over 8,100 members of the US Army. In addition to 260 officers and 8,873 enlisted men, the ship’s military passengers that trip included…fortuitously, as it would later become evident…two army medical units that included several doctors and 191 army nurses.

The ship was manned by a navy crew of 2,222. All in all, there were 11,800 jam-packed souls onboard. That many people, in such a relatively confined space, made the rapid spread of the highly contagious influenza easy…and deadly.

How many of the army personnel embarked, or navy crew returning to the ship from Liberty or leave that day were beginning to show symptoms of influenza is, of course, unknown. But soon after leaving port, scores of army personnel began to report to the sick bay. By the next morning, all available beds in the ship’s hospital were filled. One of the sailors in the ship’s crew had also taken ill and had been isolated before the ship left port. His influenza turned into pneumonia, and he died on September 30th.

Arrangements were hurriedly made to move 200 passengers from a nearby compartment to create more sick bay space. Within hours all of the bunks in that compartment were filled with very ill soldiers. In some cases, incapacitated men were found lying on the ship’s decks. They had to be manually carried below by the ship’s sailors, exposing their caregivers to the rapidly spreading epidemic.
During the next two days, more berthing compartments were transformed into sick quarters. Their previous occupants were crowded into other, already fully occupied troop berthing areas. This created an additional 878 bunks for the seriously sick…and dying. But because those bunks were never intended for patients, the topmost bunks were too high to be reached by caring nurses.

Sanitary conditions in these spaces rapidly deteriorated. In other troop berthing compartments, the combination of continuous close contact and inadequate ventilation contributed to the spread of the deadly disease. Frequently, soldiers were discovered lying comatose in their bunks, unable to move and uncaring as to their condition. Their comrades carried them to the sick bay, and thereby exposed themselves…

**MEDICAL CRISIS, MID-OCEAN**

By the time the ship had reached the middle of the Atlantic, conditions had worsened considerably. The number of seriously sick had overwhelmed the ship’s medical department. On October 1st, the colonel in charge of the army medical units onboard arranged for his people to assist the navy medicos…but then was forced to retire to his stateroom, stricken by influenza himself.

The ship’s medical staff concentrated their efforts in the LEVIATHAN’s normal sick bay areas, caring for those affected at the onset of the voyage. In spite of what became rudimentary precautions, several of them were also swept up in the epidemic, and had to be cared for in their quarters. There was simply was no room for them in the ship’s sick bay.

To make matters worse, several cases of mumps and measles were diagnosed. Those patients had to be isolated from those with influenza. Otherwise, their weakened condition and exposure might have resulted in contracting the more serious infectious disease.

The army doctors, nurses and corpsmen attended to the hundreds that lay sick in the temporary quarters that had been provided for their care. Some of these caregivers also became infected and incapacitated, and had to be confined to quarantined quarters until the ship made port.
Those that remained healthy throughout the ordeal somehow managed to do so in spite of working long hours. Some pulled 24-hour watches; other worked for 48 hours. Soldiers were pressed into duty to help clean up the hospital spaces. Many of them, overcome by the sights, the sounds and the smells deliberately drifted away at the first opportunity, leaving the hard-pressed nurses and corpsmen to deal with that dirty duty.

For the first four days into the trip, the sea was calm. But on October 4th the sea turned rough and the ship rolled heavily. Hundreds of soldiers, both sick and healthy, succumbed to seasickness. There was little relief available for any of them, and those that were bed-ridden and could not get to fresh air…or a ship’s rail…suffered the most.

Many of the influenza victims developed severe cases of pneumonia…and died. Before reaching landfall, at least 2,000 cases of influenza were diagnosed and treated onboard the LEVIATHAN. In spite of the combined efforts of both military branches’ medical personnel, almost a hundred deaths resulted from the influenza epidemic.

When a victim was pronounced dead, they were embalmed and placed in navy standard caskets. The need to care for the living and to reach port as rapidly as possible prevented any burial services from being conducted at sea.

On October 7, 1918, the LEVIATHAN docked in Brest, France. Bed-ridden patients were disembarked as quickly as possible; 966 in all.

**THE DEADLY TOLL**

The first death of a soldier was recorded on the third day after leaving America. During the last three days at sea, the number of deaths rose alarmingly. On October 5th, ten deaths were recorded. The next day 24, and the third day 31. Had the voyage been any longer, it’s anyone’s guess how many more poor sick souls might have passed away.

Even so, in the days after the ship arrived in port, 15 of the LEVIATHAN’s passengers that had been transferred to a shore side hospital shore passed away. The final count of deceased was 99. Ninety-six were army personnel and three were navy crewmen.

Fifty-six of the influenza victims were buried in France. The ship transported thirty-three back to the United States for burial, and seven were buried at sea. The ship’s historical record provides no information regarding why or by whom those choices were made.
AFTERWORD

If there’s any consolation at all to be had in these morbid statistics, at least none of the ship’s or the army’s medical personnel died. A minor miracle, at the least, considered the multiple exposures to disease that they faced for seemingly endless days.

Members of the ship’s medical staff and other crew members who had contracted influenza during the trip remained onboard, treated by their comrades until they could return to duty. Suffering members of the army’s two medical units were moved ashore to hospitals, along with the hundreds of other army personnel that required treatment.

As each afflicted crew member became well enough, he or she joined others in disinfecting the ship’s sick bay and the berthing compartments that had been pressed into service as makeshift hospital wards. That onerous task kept them busy for days.

LEVIATHAN got underway on October 9, 1918, and returned to New York to continue her mission to transport thousands of doughboys to the warfront in France…and then home again. She made fourteen more trans-Atlantic round trips before being decommissioned. But on none of these subsequent voyages did the men and women of the LEVIATHAN’s crew ever experience another epidemic of such epic proportions.

Shortly before being decommissioned, the entire crew assembled in dress uniform for a photograph, as was common in those days. What was uncommon, however, was to see several nurses in their starched white uniforms positioned in the forefront of the assemblage…but appropriate due to their earlier positioning in the forefront of caring for the sick and dying during LEVIATHAN’S Epidemic at Sea.

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January 2015