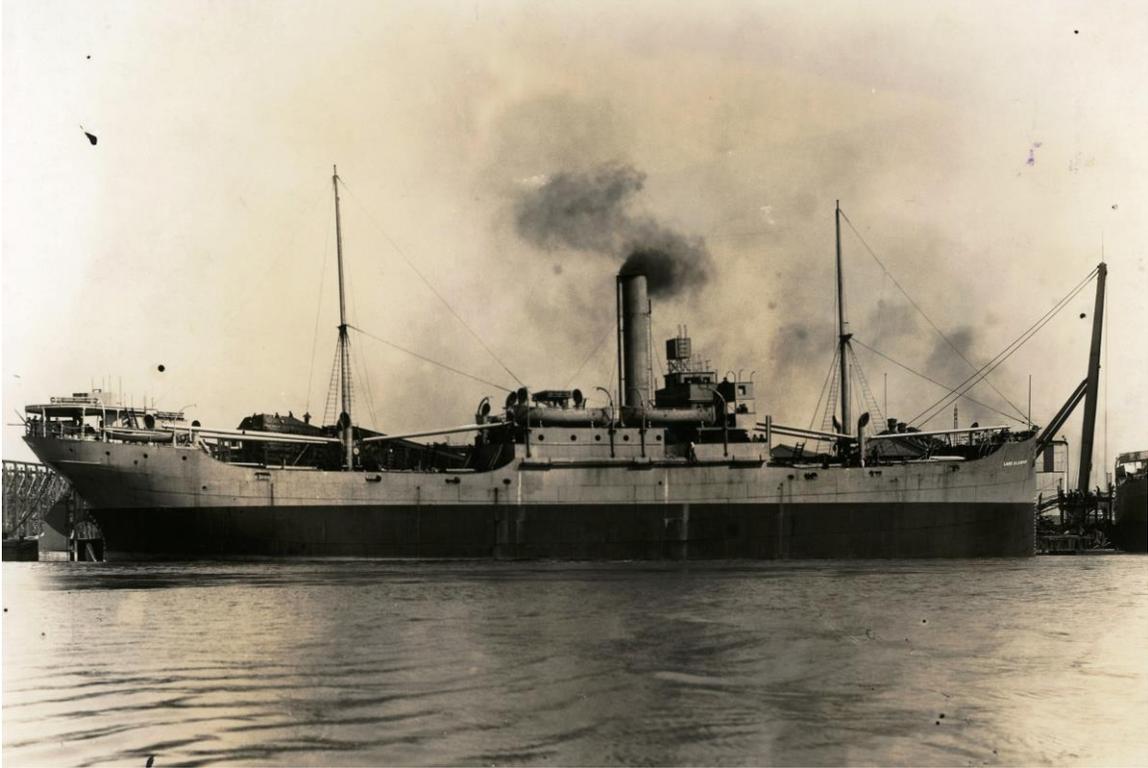


World War I and the USS Lake Elsinore, ID #3675B

by Rick Reiss, August 2018



PREFACE

By Franklin D. Roosevelt
Assistant Secretary of the Navy

THE Navy was known during the war as the "Silent Service." Little appeared in official dispatches or in the public press regarding the operations of the United States Naval Forces either in Europe or on our own coast. In fact, in only a handful of instances, where a transport was torpedoed or where an enemy submarine was definitely accounted for, was any mention made of our naval work. Generally speaking, the people at home knew only that their Navy was successfully manning the transports and escorting the troops, munitions, and supplies in safety to the shores of France.

How very much more these operations involved is only now coming out. On our entrance into the Great War in the spring of 1917, steps were immediately taken by the Navy Department to build up an organization to be based on the French coast, primarily for the purpose of keeping the famous "Neck of the Bottle" as free as possible from German submarines. The distance from Bordeaux to Brest is a comparatively small one, and almost every ship entering the French ports from the United States had, of necessity, to pass through a narrow strip of sea. This small area had proved a famous hunting ground for enemy submarines, and it became our obvious task to send over every possible means of assistance to work with the French Navy.

The story of what our officers and men did in those early days is the best illustration of the all-round efficiency of the Navy. A large proportion of the officers and men came from civil life, but were quickly and successfully indoctrinated into their naval duties by the regular officers of the service. The tools with which they had to work were, in large part, makeshift. Yachts were hurriedly converted to naval purposes; all kinds of equipment were taken over for possible use in France. From small beginnings the organization grew until by the summer of 1918 the whole western coast of France was guarded by a string of surface vessels and aircraft.

Not only was the "Neck of the Bottle" made safe for our troop and supply ships, but the operations were extended from the defensive type to the offensive, and the very existence of enemy submarines was rendered extremely unhealthy long before the armistice came.

To the men who took part in this great work too much credit cannot be given. Extraordinary physical endurance was called for, and more than that, imagination and a genius to meet new conditions with untried weapons was essential to success.

During the summer of 1918 I had the pleasure of visiting these French bases and of seeing the work at first hand. No part of our naval activities deserves higher credit than the part they took. They have the satisfaction, at least, of knowing that the Navy and the country are proud of them.

Washington, D.C., April 25, 1919



At half-past two p.m. on September 13, 1918 the United States Navy took possession of the USS Lake Elsinore and commissioned the cargo ship into the Naval Overseas Transportation Service, or N.O.T.S., during the twilight of "The Great War." The ship was promptly re-fitted and re-furnished in accordance with Navy standards and protocols.

While construction of the cargo ship began a little more than a year after America had entered World War I, in May of 1918 German U-boats had been detected in U.S. waters for the first time. On May 25, the German submarine U-151 sunk the schooners Hattie Dunn, Happauge and damaged the schooner Edna off the coast of Virginia. These were the first U-boat attacks off of the U.S. coastline.

In the European Theater of the War, the spring 1918 German offensives on the Western Front had yielded continued stalemate and then an ultimate German retreat during the The Second Battle of Marne. French and American forces repelled the offensives and launched counter-offensives thereby continually pushing back German forces for the remainder of the war. Just as the USS

Lake Elsinore was commissioned into service, U.S. General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing and his American doughboys attacked and routed retreating German forces at the Saint Mihiel salient and broke through German lines to capture the fortified city of Metz.

Coincidentally the USS Lake Elsinore entered service at the height of the 1918 Pandemic Flu. The international mass movement of millions of troops combined with the perils of trench warfare and the mass migration of millions more as refugees exacerbated the spread of the flu virus resulting in an estimated 50 million worldwide casualties. In the United States, approximately 675,000 perished during the flu outbreak. Some of the most contagious areas in America were the military “boot camps” and bases where large congregations of servicemen from geographically widespread American areas were concentrated into small fortress like conditions.

While the Allied armies were on the offensive and racking up victory after victory against the Central Powers, the Allies were voracious in their need for food, logistics, ammunition and weapons, and of course, coal. “King Coal” ruled the era, powered the Industrial Revolution, fueled the Naval fleets and Army supply trains, and provided the heat needed for the troops driving eastward on the Western Front.

Such were the conditions that the officers and crew found themselves facing when they commissioned and manned up the USS Lake Elsinore on that early autumn day in Montreal Canada.



The American Shipbuilding Company, a pre-eminent shipbuilder throughout the Great Lakes and based in Lorain Ohio, designed and built the SS Lake Elsinore. The United States Shipping Board (USSB) contracted American Shipbuilding to construct the Lake Elsinore and similar ships through a government run entity then known as the Emergency Fleet Corporation.

The USSB itself, now an obsolete and non-existent government board, was created in the early 20th century to re-vitalize America’s Merchant Marine infrastructure. The mission of the shipping board was radically changed upon the United States’ entry into WWI in April 1917. At this time in history, America’s Navy was quite diminished. The greatest needs of the Allied armies in the war theaters were for soldiers and logistics. This included a high demand for coal, which cargo ships like the USS Lake Elsinore provided for in steady and reliable abundance.

To meet these logistical demands, the USSB created the Emergency Fleet Corporation and proceeded to launch a massive shipbuilding program the likes of which had never before been seen in history up until that time. America’s WWI shipbuilding program would later serve as a blueprint for an even grander shipbuilding program when the U.S. would enter World War II just a few decades later.



By the time the Armistice was declared on November 11, 1918, the United States had constructed some 3000 ships for the war effort at a cost of \$5 billion. These ships were constructed in 150 shipyards located throughout the country while employing an estimated 300,000 workers.

The Emergency Fleet Corporation Design 1020 ships were built at the Great Lakes facilities and became widely known as the “Lakers” as the U.S. Shipping Board named all 35 ships in this class after American lakes. The 1020 design ships were specifically designed to fit and transit through the confines of the Welland Canal connecting Lake Erie (site of the Lorain Shipyard) to Lake Ontario. From Lake Ontario the newly built Lake Elsinore transited to Montreal where she was commissioned and manned by US Navy sailors.

The specifications of the USS Lake Elsinore classify the ship as a collier, i.e., a coal transport, type of ship with an overall length of 261'; a beam of 43' 6"; a single smokestack; two-single masts; three-raised hull islands; two-coal fired Scotch boilers rated for 180 psi steam; a reciprocating piston steam-driven main engine with a single screw (propeller) with a pitch of 12' 3" and a top speed of nine knots. In addition, the ship had a York refrigerating unit capable of producing one ton of ice per day, and a single 3" 50 caliber gun mounted on the aft deck of the ship. The ship's roster from December 3, 1918 reveals the ship's complement was ten officers and fifty-three enlisted crewmen. This roster would change and dwindle until the ship was de-commissioned and returned back to the USSB in October 1919.



Four days after commissioning, the USS Lake Elsinore deployed to Sydney, Nova Scotia on September 17, 1918. The collier was under the command of Lieutenant Commander Gustave Ernest Wiebe, USNRF, a Swedish emigrant and (presumed) naturalized American. The ship's Executive Officer and second in command was Lieutenant Roswell E. Spicer; the Chief Engineer was listed as Lieutenant James Joseph Fox. The remaining crew was composed of junior officers and an array of enlisted men with a variety of specialty ratings.

On October 8, 1918 the USS Lake Elsinore departed Nova Scotia and steamed ahead to Nantes, France arriving there on October 21. The Lake Elsinore was home ported at the U.S. Naval Base Cardiff, located in Wales. The ship delivered coal and other supplies via the English Channel by steaming from English ports such as Cardiff, Barry Road and Belfast to a variety of French ports and destinations including Roscanvel, Brest and Tonnay Charante.

The deck logs of the USS Lake Elsinore indicate that the ship delivered a total of 2439 tons of cargo to Europe during her deployment. There is no record of the ship encountering any hostiles or engaging any enemy combatant ships. Available ship's deck logs indicate that the Lake Elsinore carried out her missions with no incidents beginning from her deployment date of October 8 until the Armistice was declared in effect on November 11, 1918.

Yet, there was one post Armistice Day incident that occurred on the morning of November 23, 1918. While steaming up the Charante River the USS Lake Elsinore collided with the French steamship SS Vidar. The collision left virtually no damage whatsoever to the Lake Elsinore, but the Vidar sustained more moderate damage as the ships collided at an estimated 120-degree angle (from the vantage point of the Lake Elsinore). Subsequent investigations and US Navy boards of inquiry placed the blame on the Vidar for obstructing the channel while connected to an onshore cable while other reports concluded that both ships were at fault.

In the end, there was no disciplinary action taken against anyone. The incident had crossed the desk of then Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Delano Roosevelt as memorandum indicating that he had reviewed and signed off on the paperwork in his then current position, and as Acting Secretary of the Navy. Other documentation indicates that the French had pressed the US Navy for damages and compensation but US government officials denied the request citing the collision investigation reports and results of the inquiry boards.

It was likely that diplomacy ruled the day in regards to this collision at Tonnay Charante. The damages to both ships were minimal; in the case of the Lake Elsinore the damage was actually negligible. As the United States and France were both allies in The Great War, it seems evident that this incident faded quickly as there were more pressing issues for the Allies as Europe and the Middle East faced a post-war recovery and a massive political re-configuration.



For her service to the war effort, the USS Lake Elsinore was awarded with the World War I Victory Medal. After The Great War, the medal was simply referred to as The Victory Medal. After World War II, the medal was re-designated as the WWI Victory Medal. Those officers and crewman who were with ship's company up until Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, received the award and were authorized to wear the medal. The Lake Elsinore's officers and crew were also entitled to wear a Navy operational clasp on the medal in which the metal bar would read "TRANSPORT."



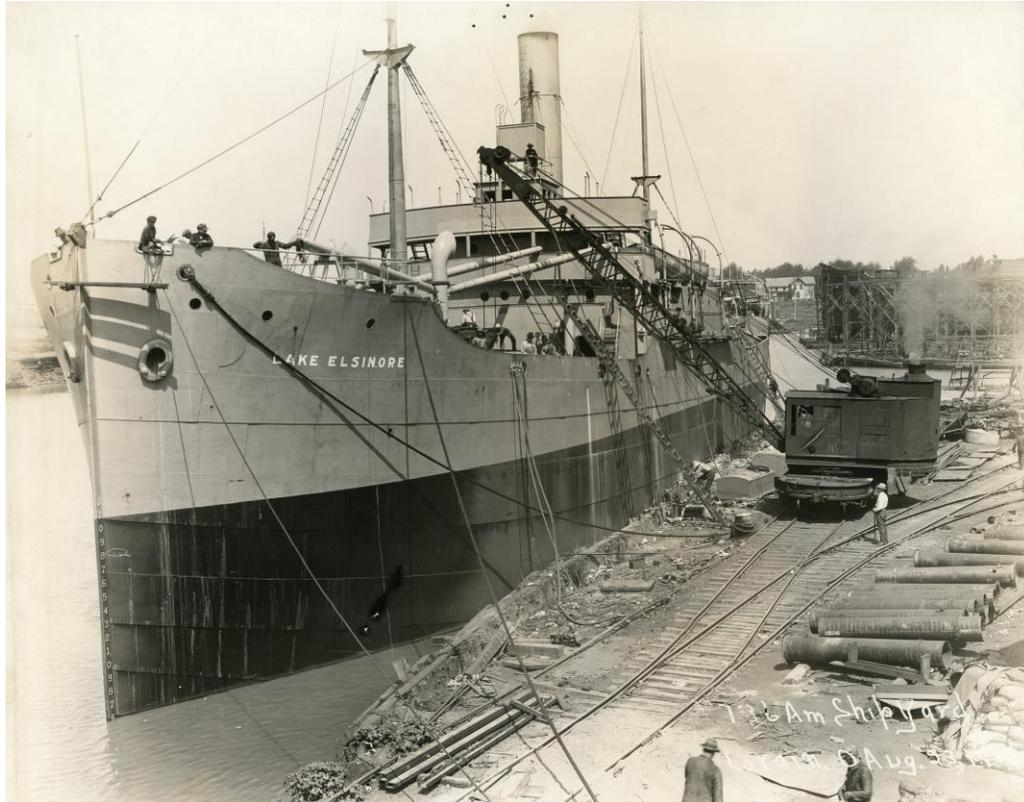
On May 5, 1919 the USS Lake Elsinore was transferred to an Army account from which she continued transporting coal and other materials for the war recovery and de-mobilization effort. Sometime during the early summer of 1919 Lieutenant Commander K.J. Powers replaced the Lake Elsinore's commanding officer Lieutenant Commander Wiebe. It was left to Captain Powers to oversee the de-mobilization and de-commissioning of the "Laker" class collier.

On August 26, 1919 the USS Lake Elsinore departed US Naval Base Cardiff for Saint Nazaire, France for her last war related supply run. On September 10, 1919 the Lake Elsinore departed Saint Nazaire with orders to report to the N.O.T.S. shipyards in Brooklyn, New York. The collier arrived in New York on September 25, 1919 upon which the ship was then inspected and inventoried.

On October 4, 1919 the USS Lake Elsinore was officially de-commissioned from the US Navy and returned back to the inventory of the U.S. Shipping Board. As she was no longer a Naval vessel, her

name reverted back to SS Lake Elsinore. Little more is known of the collier's fate other than in 1926 she was sold to the Ford Motor Company for scrap.

The officers and crew of the USS Lake Elsinore performed their duty with honor, efficiency and ingenuity. In the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: *"To the men who took part in this great work too much credit cannot be given."* For the people of Elsinore California, the USS Lake Elsinore should easily come as a source of pride and reverence for a namesake ship that diligently answered the call of our nation in time of war.



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