

THE JOURNEY INTO THE MAELSTROM



HIS MISSION BORDERED ON THE ABSURD. Yet, it was what he dreamed of doing. It was the most fantastic opportunity, although in pursuing it he would face his own mortality.

As a captain in the American Expeditionary Force, Ernest Peixotto would be expected to thrust his way into the front lines. He would be expected to come under fire, but, due to his unique mission, no one expected him to engage the enemy.

Peixotto blinked against the morning's bitter rain, the soft pitter-patter beat drumming against steel and wool, flesh and wood. It was an exceedingly raw Thursday—March 14, 1918—and the temperature would reach only into the lower forties. He blinked with bewilderment against the surreal chaos around him. Looming ominously above were hulking gray ships half hidden in the mist, the massive troop transports that had been luxury ocean liners before the war now moored alongside the Hoboken, New Jersey, piers. On the mud-died water dimpled by raindrops, barges filled with barrack bags and

bed rolls were unloaded. High overhead, long-armed cranes hoisted crates of equipment and supplies. Tons upon tons of the varied items would never be used, destined to be warehoused in France and then returned to be warehoused in the United States. This was just one element of war's numbing madness that Peixotto would witness.

Eyes shifting to beyond the piers, Peixotto gazed at the shadowy, jagged Manhattan skyline. While the city had been his home since just after the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, it now seemed so very distant and unreachable through the rain. Just a week ago he had been a mere citizen on that island, just one of many New Yorkers who lined Fifth Avenue—renamed Avenue of the Allies—to cheer the thousands of departing soldiers who marched so confidently. Any man in uniform received a kiss from the young ladies. All along the boulevard flags flew from the windows. And, in restaurants and theaters, bands played the national anthems of the allied countries. It was festive sending boys to war.

Peixotto knew that his wife, Mary, was somewhere in the city, in their East 66th Street apartment, perhaps. They had married in January 1897 and were inseparable. Both were students of art, both were artists, and both shared the same soul. Mary and Ernest had no children; they had only each other. Together they had traveled extensively across the United States and Europe, studied art in Paris, and lived part of every year in Europe since 1899, until the war. Illustrating how difficult the separation would be, before Ernest even boarded his assigned ship, Mary had penned a letter to him, a letter of longing.



Ernest Clifford Peixotto

After her husband left that morning, Mary sat at his desk for an hour, quietly meditating, and then she began to write. While she affirmed what a proud moment it was for her to write to him using his new title of captain in the army, she immediately became reflective: "You have been so splendid all these wonderful years of ours. What radiant and happy years. And you will be more splendid in these years to come." However effusive she was, she still had to convince herself of such a future. "Dear one—

you know all the things I am thinking of—they all are—you—you—you . . .” Every few days she would write him a letter and—like millions of other lovers, wives, and mothers—she would not know if those letters reached him until long afterward.

Her pain was all the more poignant when that Thursday evening a package arrived from Ernest’s mother, who lived in San Francisco; it was a pair of gray socks knitted by his aunt Georgie. Yes, he was still their little boy. Knowing what Ernest would face and desperate to keep her faith, Mary prayed for him each morning and evening, and she spoke to him, spoke to him in her own mind.¹ She also worried about his health, which had been fragile at times. Peixotto was only five foot five inches and 130 pounds—with a narrow face, high cheekbones, and piercing eyes—not exactly the bruising soldier type. At forty-nine he was old for the soldiering business. But he was not without courage; in fact, he had applied to join a camouflage unit in the Engineering Corps, only to be rejected because of his age, which had left him deeply discouraged.² He said good-bye and good luck to younger fellow artists, including Homer St. Gaudens, whose enlistments were accepted. St. Gaudens would suffer a head wound and another friend, Everett Herter, would be killed. As for the fortunes of a disenchanted Peixotto, they would soon change for the better.

You cannot make war without making propaganda. So, on April 14, 1917, a mere eight days after the United States declared war on the Central Powers, President Woodrow Wilson issued an executive order that created the Committee on Public Information, to package the war for the American public’s consumption. The word *committee* sounded democratic, but its purpose was purely autocratic; it was a machine driven by a man who assumed a great deal of power. Placed in charge of the committee was the very earnest looking and devoutly patriotic George Creel, an investigative journalist and the editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, who unabashedly declared his desire to create “a passionate belief in the justice of America’s cause that would weld the American people into one white hot mass instinct with fraternity, devotion, courage and deathless determination.”³

Subsequently, the committee created the Division of Pictorial Publicity, this subgroup to be in charge of generating posters and other artwork that supported the war effort, supported everything from selling

war bonds to recruiting volunteers. The artists who became involved quickly pointed out that the British and the French armed forces had recruited official artists to work in the war zone right alongside the soldiers, their stirring work used to aid their respective country's war efforts. Shouldn't the American Expeditionary Force do the same? What they failed to note was that the first hundred British artists sent into the combat zone had been forced to take up arms after their army had been routed at Ypres. Many of those artists would be killed, too. Not to be outdone by their European counterparts, the General Staff in Washington agreed that official artists should be appointed. While this appeared to be an enlightened decision, it would soon become apparent that art and war are not compliant companions.

Not until late 1917 did the plan coalesce, when the respected illustrator and painter Charles Dana Gibson, who had been placed in charge of the Division of Pictorial Publicity, was asked to recommend artists. Gibson just happened to be friends with Ernest Peixotto, and thus Peixotto, who had been turned away by the army, found himself one of eight artists recruited to go to France. Peixotto was commissioned as a captain in the Engineer Reserve Corps because its chief, Major General William M. Black, had championed the artists' cause. While his friend Gibson certainly showed him favor, Peixotto was a fine artist, painting landscapes and human-interest scenes that were reproduced in books and popular magazines, as well as being shown in salons and galleries. Also accomplished artists, the other seven made a living as book and magazine illustrators. Their deft skill as illustrators would come into play, as they would have to make quick sketches of their battlefield subjects and move on.

On February 21, 1918, the General Staff issued a press release explaining the selection of the artists who were part of a "plan for making a complete pictorial record of the American Army's participation in the war."⁴ At the time that was exactly how the artists understood their mission: to make a "pictorial record of the war" for posterity. In letters the artists received before shipping out, their duty was reiterated: it was to prepare "oil paintings, portraits, sketches, etchings, etc., within the war zone for historical purposes."⁵ There was no mention of sensationalism and propaganda. The men in Washington would soon change their

purpose, however; the General Staff wanted to use the art to help fulfill Creel's vision of "deathless determination." This latter desire would quickly bring the artists into conflict with Washington.

Once Peixotto received news of his commission and passed his physical exam, events moved quickly: he had just two weeks to put his personal business in order. He arranged for \$60 a month to be forwarded to his wife, Mary, beginning in March, the month he would ship out. In case tragedy struck, he prudently took out a \$7,500 life insurance policy with the Treasury Department, Bureau of War Risk Insurance, as well as a permanent disability policy that would pay out \$43.13 a month.⁶ On March 5 he received his military Certificate of Identity, the document stating his age, eye and hair color, height, and weight. It also included his photo, a fingerprint of his right-hand index finger, and his signature. He then had to be vaccinated for typhoid and paratyphoid. The entire process was too efficient; it was like being pushed through a Ford assembly line at double-time.

Peixotto was ordered to report for duty on March 12 in Hoboken, at which time he was ordered to report to the officers' gangway, vessel number 33, pier 1, at 10 A.M. on March 14, at which time he would receive further orders. Yes, he had entered the bureaucratic maze of the American Expeditionary Force. And now here he stood, gazing across the pier jammed with supplies, stevedores, and soldiers. At the moment there were some fifteen thousand khaki-clad soldiers—a modest town's worth of human beings—lining the Hoboken piers, having been funneled from across the country to this port of embarkation. How many of these men would he see in the war zone? How many would come home in one piece? How many would not? Peixotto would lose good friends, both American and French, and it was this loss of a friend or a loved one that truly defined war's consequences.

Organized in tight columns, the troops were checked by their officers and then dispatched to the gangplanks extending from the dangerously seductive ships. More than 2 million American soldiers would eventually find themselves in France, so many of them young men who'd never left the state they were born in. Regardless of their varied backgrounds and past experiences—farmers, factory workers, fishermen, office clerks, college boys, from the Louisiana Bayou to the mountains of Montana,

from the depths of Nevada's silver mines to the New York City skyscrapers—Peixotto was certain they were all about to embark on their greatest of adventures. He felt intense excitement, trepidation, and a sense of camaraderie among these strangers.

Any trepidation was certainly justified. For anyone with time to peruse the *New York Times* that morning, the front-page headlines blared: "Zeppelins Again Make an Attack on English Coast" and "German Troops Now Occupy Odessa." The British and French mood was particularly gloomy this spring because their Russian allies had capitulated to the Germans, signing a peace treaty on March 3, which meant that German divisions once occupied on the eastern front were free to strengthen their western front. Behind the capitulation was the Bolshevik Party, which had seized power in November 1917, and in July 1918 would execute the Russian royal family. In the face of this troubling development, the United States's attitude—either cocksure or foolish—was "So what? We're going to get enough men there to win." The Allies would win, of course, but not before total battle deaths surpassed 7 million.⁷

After hours of waiting, Peixotto climbed the officers' gangway to the *Pocahontas*, formerly the *Princess Irene* of the North German Lloyd fleet. The ship had been launched in June 1900, then seized by the United States once it entered the war, refitted as a transport, and assigned to the Cruiser Transport Force of the Atlantic fleet. Capable of holding three thousand men, the ship would complete eighteen round-trips to Europe by 1919.⁸

As an officer, Peixotto found himself assigned to a relatively spacious stateroom. After settling in, he met up with an acquaintance, Wallace Morgan, the one other artist assigned to the *Pocahontas*. Morgan was a New Yorker through and through; he had been born in the city and returned there to study at the National Academy of Design. At the turn of the century, Morgan quickly settled into the Bohemian scene of Greenwich Village and cavorted with friends at a small studio on West 23rd Street. They shared the studio with an eight-foot king snake, a bathtub full of eels, and more cats than could be counted. Young and prone to whims, Morgan and friends on occasion enjoyed a rousing visit to a local beer garden followed by skinny-dipping, which tended to outrage the neighbors.⁹ Now, more than twenty years into his career, at age

forty-five and with thick round glasses, Morgan was a man who had cultivated superior tastes and only drank Scotch. Like Peixotto, he was the antithesis of a lean doughboy thrilled to kill the kaiser. In spite of the dangers, these two artists would enjoy each other's company and travel many of the battlefields together, both sketching and watching out for each other while under fire.

The day wore on—the grayness and the rain were relentless—and not until late afternoon were the hawsers cast off and did the transport ship, which was easy prey for Germany's submarines, swing into the current of the North River, into the wind and the misty mournful air. As evening commuters on ferries cheered the convoy, Peixotto and Morgan watched the majestic Manhattan skyline, with its cozy steam-heated buildings, slide slowly past. It was all very supernatural to Peixotto. "It was cold and dark when we reached the outer bay," he wrote, "but I could feel other boats about us though they showed no lights. There were strange flashes every little while wigwagging and blinking like huge owl's eyes, while along the horizon, mysterious flares appeared from time to time, and beams from searchlights lit great circles on the low-lying clouds."¹⁰ Everyone was tense, for there had been rumors of German submarines entering New York's harbor and rumors of a steel net sealing off the Narrows. Yet, safely they passed by the Statue of Liberty, through the Narrows, and into the wide-open Atlantic Ocean.

When Peixotto and Morgan went to the officers' mess for dinner that night, they discovered that among the two hundred officers aboard ship they were two of only five captains and there was only one officer who outranked them, a major who was in command. The two artists would quickly learn what it entailed to outrank almost three thousand young men. That first night Morgan was "dead tired and turned in with the chickens" at seven o'clock, as he explained in a letter home. However, at nine-thirty, the adjutant's orderly wakened him with an order that at seven forty-five the next morning he was to report as officer of the day. Yes, in the military's great wisdom, the inevitable had happened: on the first full disorienting day at sea, Wallace Morgan was to be OD.

Certain there had to be some mistake, Morgan dressed and, still half asleep, asked the commanding officer for an explanation. He received one all right: the ship was short of officers and both Morgan and Peixotto were expected to help out. Before dismissing Morgan, the CO



Wallace Morgan

kindly explained the job: for twenty-four hours his responsibilities would include posting forty sentries, ensuring that the few prisoners they had were under guard, and enforcing a myriad of regulations. It didn't matter that Morgan's only military training was this brief discussion. Not only did these artist-soldiers have no sense of military protocol, but their profession, by nature, was in direct conflict with military thinking: as artists they were accustomed to individual expression. A master of pen and brush, Morgan had had his own studio for almost ten years, his work in demand from the top magazines like *Collier's*, and he didn't see

himself answering very well to salutes and commands. Regardless, as Peixotto wryly observed, "the very lives of all those on board" depended on the proper enforcement of regulations. They were "in the Army now" which meant obeying orders.¹¹

Reveille was at 4:30 A.M.—an ungodly hour for Peixotto and Morgan—but at least they awoke to clear skies. After breakfast, Peixotto climbed to the promenade deck, which was reserved for the officers, and gazed in wonder at their convoy, which was accompanied by a big navy cruiser, the ships cutting through the endless ranks of waves. Two transports were camouflaged in the "dazzle system," painted in colored stripes to maximize light refraction and to blend in with the diamond sparkle of the ocean. Below Peixotto, gun crews were already at work, some polishing their six-inch guns while others practiced loading their shells. And the main deck was crowded with regulars, for the moment excited to be on the water, soon to be bored by the monotony of this endless desert of water.

Meanwhile, Morgan, along with two officers of the guard, went about his duty as OD. It included inspecting the posted sentries, this task alone made interesting as he negotiated the dark holds and the heaving decks, as the wind was blowing hard and the heavy seas were rolling the ship. While Morgan had always enjoyed the water and had his sea legs, the soldiers were clearly suffering. "Many of the men had never seen the ocean before," Morgan wrote to his sister Bess, "and were as much frightened as sick." It was an exceptionally long day, punctuated at

midnight by a sentry from Virginia who started shouting for help, his shouts heard over the waves crashing like brass cymbals and flaring snare drums across the deck. Morgan came running, thinking the frightened man was deathly sick, only to discover that the poor boy thought the ship was about to sink—he was posted in a very exposed position where the water was breaking over the deck. After reassuring him all was well, Morgan left. Not long after, the Virginian again shouted for help. This time Morgan found him “shaking all over nearly out of his mind with fear.” The fighting hadn’t even started yet.¹²

Whatever humor Peixotto found in Morgan drawing OD on day one was extinguished on day two when Peixotto assumed the duty. And what special skills did he bring to the job? Well, when evaluating the artist prior to his commission, Major General Black, chief of engineers, had noted, “25 years professional work for leading magazines and books as well as current exhibitions of paintings.” And at least he had “good appearance and address,” according to Black.¹³ At 8:15 A.M., Peixotto oversaw the mounting of the guard—135 men—to be relieved every two hours. Most of the guards’ responsibilities were mundane: keeping soldiers off the railings and the passageways clear, not allowing tobacco use in the holds, and preventing anyone from meddling with the life belts. Two of the more important tasks were keeping the garbage chutes and the latrines clean. And then there was the top priority: the vigil search for enemy submarines.

At 10 A.M., Peixotto accompanied the CO, the ship’s doctor, the chief police officer, and an officer of the guard for a complete inspection of the ship. Their final destination of the inspection was the holds aft—the bowels—where the “colored troops” were quartered, or rather stowed. These soldiers hoped for glory like any freedom-loving white soldier; however, with the regular army wholly segregated and bigoted, they would be given the most unpopular jobs in France. Helping to set the divisive tone, racial jokes were commonplace in the military’s *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, which was simply giving its readers what they wanted. Many blacks would become marginalized members of the Service of Supply (SOS), which supported the combat divisions by handling mail and freight, shipping ammunition and rubber boots, building railroads, and raising encampments. Or worse, they would be assigned to the Quartermaster Corps Graves Registration Service, destined to gather the dead, organize the corpses, swing them into coffins, and bury them.¹⁴

There were two black combat divisions, the 92nd and 93rd, both of which would manage to spill blood with proficiency equal to that of their white counterparts.

As Peixotto later inspected some forty sentry posts, he kept an eye out for drinking and gambling, popular means of distraction during wartime. At night he made three more rounds into the poorly ventilated soldiers' quarters, which reeked of sour-smelling vomit. It was an eerie, foreshadowing experience: "Forward, in the fo'castle, I found the crew sleeping in hammocks suspended from the deck above, rolled like cocoons in their blankets. In the holds the soldiers' bunks, in double tiers, were placed as close together as possible, leaving just space enough between for a man to pass. From them, as I passed in the darkness, an arm, a leg, a foot, or a hand would protrude, inert, and in them I caught glimpses, in the ghostly blue light, of pale faces turned up, with eyes closed in a death-like sleep."¹⁵ Their bunks were as snug as coffins—just another aspect of less-than-ideal living conditions.

Back on the deck, as the rain fell in torrents, Peixotto could barely distinguish the silhouettes of the submarine watches, who were tense and alert. Beyond them, the ocean water rolled in great billows. The high sea continued to take its toll on the boys, whose stomachs convulsed in protest. Peixotto listened to the sympathetic sailors who said in jest, "Don't worry; you won't be sick coming back; you'll be in a wooden kimono."¹⁶ It was grim, morbid comfort. Their sense of security was hardly reinforced when not long into the journey, everyone was ordered to put on his life belt and to keep it on for the remainder of the trip. Through it all Peixotto played the part of soldier as best he could. "I admit the dismay I felt—an artist suddenly turned soldier," he wrote, "in a uniform scarcely three weeks old—at being thus suddenly thrown into a position of such responsibility, giving and carrying out orders, trying to conceal my real feelings, 'throwing out my chest' as I was advised to do, and striving to 'look the part' to the grizzled old sergeants."¹⁷ Yes, that was his soldier training, "throw out the chest."

Peixotto and Morgan were not the only artists who would fumble through officer of the day duties. In a following convoy, George Harding was on the SS *Philadelphia*—a passenger liner with twin smokestacks built in 1899—part of a seven-ship convoy led by the cruiser *Montana*, which, on April 16, departed out of Hoboken.¹⁸ A handsome man with

a chiseled chin, the thirty-five-year-old Harding was ideally suited for the job of artist-soldier; he was filled with the adventurer's spirit: a half dozen years earlier he had made a two-year journey around the world that took him to Egypt, Arabia, India, Australia, China, and numerous exotic locales in between. He traveled by steamer, sailboat, stagecoach, and camel. Before that he had lived for a time in a lighthouse in Cape Race, Newfoundland. The lighthouse had suited him: as his fellow artists would discover, he was a loner who kept his thoughts to himself. Prior to his recruitment, Harding had been teaching art at the University of Pennsylvania, and his wife, Anita Cotheal Nisbett, and he, having recently purchased a house in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, were eager to start a family. Yet, despite having settled down, he couldn't resist this escapade and would take great risks to capture the war as it was fought in the trenches, in the countryside, and in the towns.

Harding shared a stateroom with a Major Allen, who gave him all of five minutes of advice before the artist went on duty as OD their second day at sea, the artist jotting down his responsibilities on three-by-five-inch sheets of notepaper, which would become his war diary. Two hours into his stint as OD—at 4 P.M.—the sky was black, the rain was pelting down, and towering swells were tossing the ship. His face coated with sea salt, Harding had difficulty finding the covered hatches to get below for inspections, but with wry humor he wrote in his diary, "On first inspection I see more bare feet in rows of bunks in ten minutes than a chiropodist sees in a lifetime. My sergeant says to me: 'I don't mind the smell of the other fellow—its when I stink myself it gets me.' Had first gas training overseeing cleaning out of clogged toilets in stern of ship. The pitching finally clears them—into the ship." It was also disconcerting to Harding to discover that some of the guards were recent immigrants who spoke no English and many were illiterate. Completely overwhelmed, Harding suffered through his entire watch without a decent meal.¹⁹

Aboard ship, dinner was served at five, and then afterward the officers would sit



George Matthews Harding

in a dark saloon listening to the Victrola—rousing tunes by Henry Burr, the Peerless Quartet, Shannon Four, and the Columbia Quartet: “We’re All Going Calling on the Kaiser”; “I’ll Come Back to You When It’s All Over”; and “Over Yonder.” Even during such relaxation there was tension. Absolute darkness was essential—all flashlights were to have been given to the adjutant—and there was no smoking on deck. There was only a faint glow from the portholes and the men’s wristwatches and a few blue lightbulbs near the floor in the corridors. To further protect convoys from snooping German U-boats, nothing could be thrown overboard—not a scrap of paper, not a cigarette butt—nothing the subs could use to track the transports. When it came to subs, the *Philadelphia’s* chief engineer, who, Harding noted, was just twenty-three years old with two young children at home, had already come under attack once.²⁰ As he did with the chief engineer, Harding made it a habit to jot down names of those who made an impression on him, their age, whether they had children, these observations making the war very personal for him. Another character he made note of aboard ship was a Captain Carter, who confided in the artist that he was engaged to be married, but he had just written to his fiancée to tell her “she is free.”²¹ The implication was all too clear: he didn’t expect to return.

The fear of submarines came to the fore during the daily abandon-ship drills. These drills—summoned by the bugle—further exposed the artists as somewhat inept officers in charge of soldiers who had suffered boot camp. At his assigned lifeboat, Morgan found himself commanding sixteen regulars and four lieutenants, which boded well—surely the trained officers would know the order of action. As it turned out, all four lieutenants were doctors and as clueless as he. Over at collapsible boat number 13, Peixotto was relieved to find he had a regular army officer with him—a lieutenant—but then to his dismay he discovered the officer was an ornithologist—more fit for matters of the air than of the sea. To his further dismay, he realized that of the fifteen men under them, most were raw-boned soldiers from the Kentucky mountains who’d never seen the ocean. With their transport heaving in the seas, their lifeboat swung out over the water, then back, out and back like a carnival ride. Each time it smacked the ship’s side, the men scrambled to grab the boat, missed, and tumbled into piles of legs and arms. This fine slapstick was far from amusing at the time.

When the *Pocahontas* entered the danger zone—off Ireland’s coast—there was much talk of subs in subdued tones, and everyone jumped each time the ship rolled or a door slammed. It was easy to justify any paranoia. Just over a month ago—on February 5, 1918—a U-boat had torpedoed and sunk the transport ship *Tuscania*. It was hit while the men were at supper; of the some 2,500 men on board, 182 perished. And since October 1917, the enemy had torpedoed 2 U.S. destroyers with 65 killed, and 2 converted yachts, often used by the navy as decoys or transport ships, with 24 killed. In this same time frame, 14 other naval ships and 28 merchant ships had been sunk or damaged from a variety of causes: collision, fire, mines, or their seams simply splitting open, resulting in over 500 deaths.²² Against this foreboding backdrop, Morgan felt moved to write his sister Bess, who doted on him, who organized his bohemian lifestyle, and who protected his interests.

Morgan wanted to tie up some loose ends, to put his personal matters in order for his own peace of mind, in case the worst should happen. Even his tailor’s bill nagged at Morgan, who instructed his sister to pay it off over time. Most important, he wanted her to review the life insurance policy he’d taken out with Aetna. If Bess thought the premium was too much, she was to just drop it; after all, he also had a \$10,000 government policy for her benefit. To alleviate any concerns on her part, he concluded his letter with: “I’m in tip top condition. Don’t worry about me I’ll take care.”²³

At the time her husband, Ernest, was entering the danger zone, Mary Peixotto sat under a tree in Central Park, dutifully writing to him. She updated him on her activities, which included war relief work and a trip to the theater to see *A Pair of Petticoats*. In a letter two days later—March 22—she expressed a strong desire to also come to France, to return to the home they still owned in Samois-sur-Seine and to work in the hospital there. This would put her in harm’s way, too, but it didn’t matter to Mary. She desperately wanted to be closer to her husband; she worried about him and warned him to take care of himself: “Don’t over tax dear one. You know the emotion alone to be on French soil again is very great. And all of your nerves are ready to be played upon as are the strings of Casaderus and violi d’amour.” To further comfort herself, she had begun to read the psalms of David at night before bed, from her husband’s French-language copy of the Old Testament. And she

continued to talk to Ernest, too: "The nights are wonderful—and we have the moon . . . I speak always into the night to you."²⁴

Little did she know that a romantic moon was absolutely anathema to Peixotto and his shipmates. A moonlit night was "an excellent night for Fritz"—a good night for getting "a tin fish in you"—for U-boats could easily spot the transport's silver silhouette while the U-boats stayed hidden among the diamond shapes shimmering on the water's surface. On day nine at sea, Peixotto and Morgan's convoy was met by a dozen destroyers that were to escort them into port. The coloring of these warships caught Peixotto's eye; they were "brilliantly camouflaged like wasps, queerly striped with black and white, with spots between of yellow, gray-blue, and water-green"—the softened tone of Monet's paintings. "Like wasps too they darted about us," he wrote, "zigzagging across our bows, dropping astern, watchful, then, with a burst of speed, forging up ahead again."²⁵ Because the probability of an attack was high, that night no one was allowed to sleep in the lower holds; soldiers slept on decks, wrapped in blankets against the bitter headwind. It was a beautiful moonlit night.

Destroyers also met George Harding's convoy on day nine, five of the naval vessels converging on them from different directions. Everyone broke out in grins, assuming they had made it safely. "An hour later," Harding noted in his diary, "we pass half dozen bodies in life preservers and an upset life boat."²⁶ Why hadn't they climbed back into the lifeboat? Why hadn't they saved themselves? No doubt the moment they capsized in the high seas, the struggle to survive commenced. But the shock of the icy water triggered involuntary gasping and a sure swallowing of water that added to the panic—any man's blood pressure and heart rate would then skyrocket. With the frigid March water sucking the heat from their bodies, their core body temperature immediately began to drop and soon their ability to think clearly was impaired. After being in the water for a half hour, some of the men died—within a couple of hours they were all dead, victims of hypothermia. Harding wondered what catastrophe had caused them to take to the lifeboat in the first place.

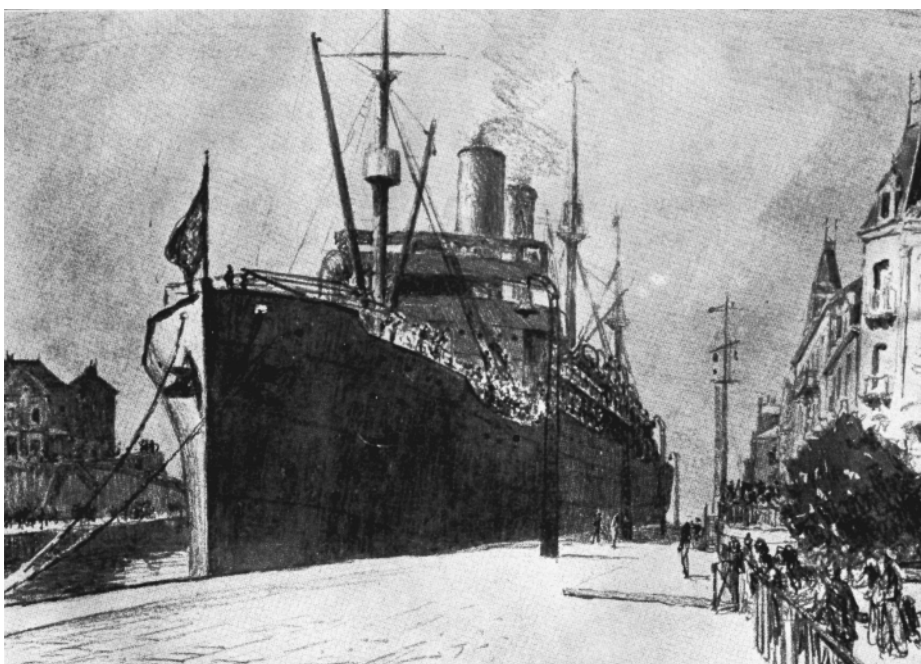
A U-boat! Later that afternoon, lookouts on Harding's transport spotted one. "Sirens—gun fire—depth bombs on port side; eight were dropped by destroyers. The pile of water boils up like a full rigged ship

under full sail," he wrote in his diary, and then added sarcastically, "The enlisted man who reported sick this morning was the first to reach deck after the alarm." The men were on edge, the tension palpable. Gun crews zeroed in on a whale, two black ducks, and even a floating box.²⁷ Not long after and without further incident, on April 26, they reached their destination: Liverpool, England, a port city on the island's west coast.

There Harding was outfitted with a handsome trench coat, a Sam Browne belt, rubber boots, and a sleeping bag—now he was feeling like a soldier. Then it was to Southampton, through beautiful countryside, with Harding taking note of the fields filled with dandelions and daisies and the hedgerows of hawthorn. The last leg of his journey to France took him across the channel. Aboard his transport were a number of Australians who had fought at Gallipoli, a failed attempt to open a passageway to the Black Sea. They kindly informed him that of the twenty-two thousand men in their 1st Division, only seven thousand remained. Nevertheless, with anticipation growing, in his diary Harding jotted, "A free ticket to the greatest fight in the world."²⁸

On their final night, a moonlit night, Peixotto's convoy, which bypassed England, made a mad dash for the port of Saint-Nazaire, France, on the south coast of Brittany. As day broke over them, they passed by the rocky cliffs of Belle-Île-en-Mer, where the renowned stage actress Sarah Bernhardt kept a summerhouse. While one destroyer piloted the convoy up the channel to the port, an aeroplane appeared overhead to watch for submarines. Eager to go ashore, Peixotto searched the countryside with his binoculars and studied the houses with blue-slate roofs standing among the evergreens. From one house a girl waving a bright American flag came running across the lawn toward a white gate at water's edge.

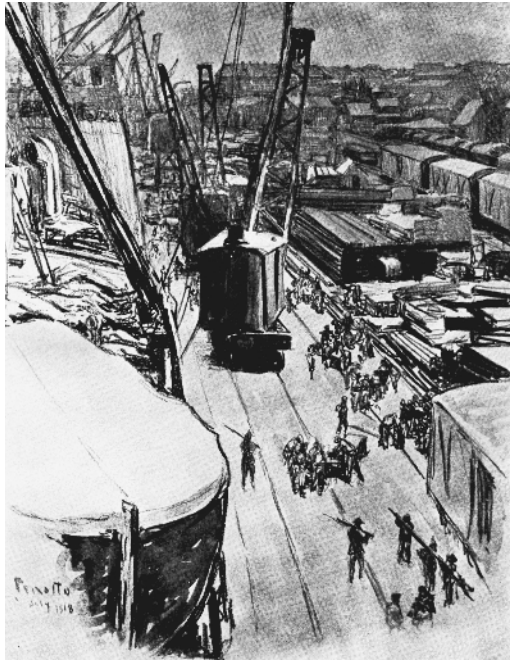
Even though American soldiers had been arriving for months, the people of Saint-Nazaire, including the many streetwalkers, had not tired of greeting them. Peixotto took in the scene as an artist would, noting the subtle details and the emotions: "At one side of the lock a crowd of ragged urchins scrambled for the coppers that the soldiers threw them. At the other side a dense crowd stood silent, watching our packed decks. Women and children predominated, many of them in deep mourning." Standing out among the people: a French captain holding his daughter tenderly and a naval officer standing alongside his tired-looking wife on



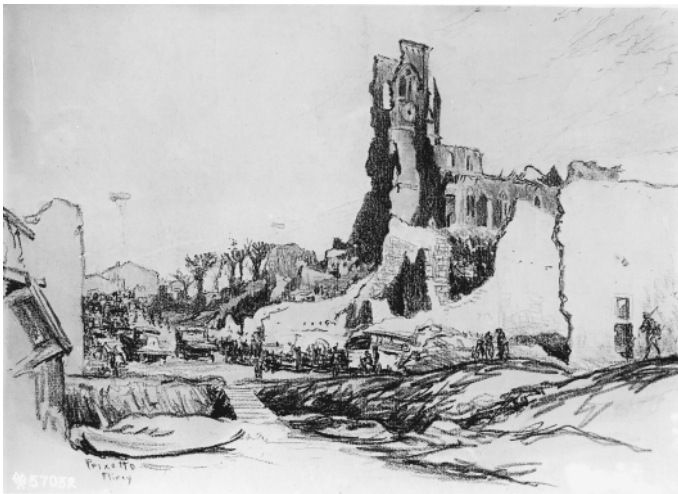
A Transport with Troops by Dunn. A troop transport ship coming through the lock at Saint-Nazaire, the port city completely Americanized.

a balcony. There was little French atmosphere, however, as this port had been transformed into an Americanized city.²⁹

It was six in the evening before the ship was tied to the dock, which meant one more long night aboard. At seven o'clock the next morning the troops marched down the gangplanks, their heavy heels drumming hollow against the wood, and formed up on the dock. By eight o'clock they had disappeared. The soldiers had marched away quietly, not knowing to where they marched. Peixotto and Morgan—left to their own means until their orders arrived—strolled along the docks, through the weak, thin light of March. The huge mass of the vessels so impressed them that they took time to make drawings, the lines and geometry sketched with a heavy hand to capture the weight of the ships. They also rendered the rows of steel cranes, like great oak trees lining a boulevard, unloading American war material. There were the German prisoners put to work straining under the watchful eyes of bored guards, and the “Negroes” from “way down South” hefting equipment. And there were



Ships Unloading American War Material by Peixotto. While trapped in Saint-Nazaire, Peixotto captured the controlled chaos of unloading war material.



Flirey by Peixotto. Eager to push to the front, Peixotto would soon discover a different and destructive kind of chaos that left him unsettled, as was the case in the once picturesque village of Flirey.

the shrill whistles of trains, the rumble of trucks, and the spluttering of motorcycles as troops, weapons, and supplies were rushed to the front. As a contrast to this scenery, Peixotto studied the trees that were just beginning to bud; the daisies, tulips, and primroses blooming bright colors; the birds nesting and the cats prowling along the piers. And April, that cruelest month, was rapidly approaching.

The war remained distant for Peixotto, not yet real. For the British soldiers positioned in northwest France, however, the war couldn't have been more immediate. After the collapse of Russia, the German general Erich Ludendorff had determined, "Our general situation requires that we should strike at the earliest moment . . . before the Americans can throw strong forces into the scale. We must beat the British."³⁰ If the Brits could be rolled into the sea, the Germans could then turn on the French with their full fury. On March 21, the Germans opened their spring offensive along a fifty-mile front against the British Fifth Army and quickly penetrated almost forty miles in some sections. Ludendorff's plan appeared to be working brilliantly: over the next six weeks the British would suffer 280,000 casualties.³¹ To stave off a complete collapse, units of the AEF would be ordered into the battle posthaste.

Certainly Peixotto and his fellow artists would not lack subject material upon their arrival at the front. They would witness all major American combat. They would witness man's inhumanity to man, which prompted Wallace Morgan to determine, "We have the duty of showing up fraud and pomposity and to get across human frailty."³² In war there was plenty of fraud, pomposity, and frailty, as well as heroics. Using their heightened powers of observation, the artists would indeed not only record but also expose history as it unfolded. It was a historic time on many levels: it was the first world war; there were new weapons and tactics; and it was the first time the U.S. armed forces had ever deployed official artists. While they were pioneers, they were expendable like all soldiers, and, as educated men, they fully comprehended that odds were one or more of them would not return home. There were simply too many hazards in a war zone—particularly for men who wore soldier uniforms but were not soldiers.