



What started out as a 40,000-ton headache in 1915, became a 40,000-ton gift from the Germans in 1917. Both ships are shown while they were operating under the American flag. USS Von Steuben (ex-SMS Kronprinz Wilhelm) is shown at left and USS DeKalb (ex-SMS Prinz Eitel Friedrich) is shown at right. (Naval Historical Center photos)

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cruiser off the Virginia Capes, HMS *Glasgow*, might have also helped make up his mind. On April 28, a U.S. Navy crew boarded *Kronprinz Wilhelm* and took her down to the Norfolk Naval Shipyard for internment. The crisis of the German raiders was over.

The German sailors were allowed to stay with their ships while the vessels were tied up to the piers. With little else to do, the industrious sailors asked for and received scrap metal and other materials from the Naval Yard. They then constructed a typical German village next to their ships. The village was complete with a telegraph office, a police station, and a chapel. Named "Eitel Wilhelm," the village became a tourist attraction for the locals.

The Navy eventually moved both ships from the Norfolk Naval Shipyard up to the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, U.S. Customs officials announced to the Germans that their ships were now prizes of war and their crews prisoners-of-war. The Navy ordered the Germans to take down the village and to enter a POW camp.

Workers in Philadelphia immediately set out to refurbish the cruisers as the Navy desperately needed them. When war was declared, the Navy and Congress discovered several deficiencies in the Atlantic Fleet's composition.

Among the more publicized problems was the lack of destroyers. But an equally serious problem was the lack of transport vessels. For all of the spending on battleships and building the Navy in the image of Alfred Mahan's

grand vision, the Navy had exactly two troop transports. This left the Navy and the Army scrambling to find means of transportation for the Army's newly formed American Expeditionary Force (AEF) bound for the trenches in France.

While cleaning out the ship, workers discovered several interesting items in the hold of *Friedrich*. Among them were several dozen kegs of German beer. The presence of so much alcohol might just explain both Theiren's overly positive attitude about his chances of escape from Hampton Roads and his captured captains' positive opinion of their captivity. All of the remaining beer was dumped overboard, but enthusiastic sailors piled on all the empty kegs on the pier for a portrait.

The Philadelphia Naval Shipyard completed the overhaul on both ships within two months. On May 12, 1917, the U.S. Navy commissioned *Prinz Friedrich* as USS *De Kalb*. They named her after General Baron De Kalb, a Prussian general who served as an agent to and as a senior officer in the Continental Army. *Kronprinz Wilhelm* was commissioned on June 9 as USS *Von Steuben*. Von Steuben also was a Prussian military officer who served in the Continental Army and is most remembered for bringing Prussian military discipline to the American soldiers.

While both ships were transports, they kept their designation as "auxiliary cruisers." The Cruiser and Transport Division of the Atlantic Fleet placed both ships in the First Cruiser Squadron, Third Division, joining the cruisers USS *Columbia* (C-12) and USS *Minneapolis* (C-13). Armed with 15 guns and depth charge racks, both ships had outstanding careers

during the war.

DeKalb left from New York under escort for France on June 14, 1917, carrying the first American soldiers of the AEF. Over the course of the war, *DeKalb* made 11 eastbound trips, out of both New York and Hampton Roads, to France carrying over 11,000 soldiers without incident.

Von Steuben had a significantly more busy tour under the American flag than *De Kalb*. Like *De Kalb*, *Von Steuben* made several successful trips to France. While returning back to the United States, she came across lifeboats with British sailors in them. While the American vessel approached the sailors, a submerged U-151 lined *Von Steuben* up for an attack. A common U-boat tactic was to sink one merchant ship and then attack any future rescue ship.

While the American ship picked up the sailors, U-151 pounced. *Von Steuben's* lookouts spotted a torpedo wake and the captain gave a frantic "full astern" order. The torpedo missed by only a few yards. *Von Steuben* counter-attacked with depth charges and succeeded in driving off the German submarine.

After several New York/Norfolk to Brest, France runs, *Von Steuben* was taken out of service a year after the war ended. *De Kalb* was taken out of service a couple of days earlier.

Both ships initially caused major headaches for Naval and civilian authorities due to their brash German commanders, their Allied hunters, and other diplomatic complications. But they were also a welcome gift and help fill a gap in an imbalanced World War I American Navy. 🚢