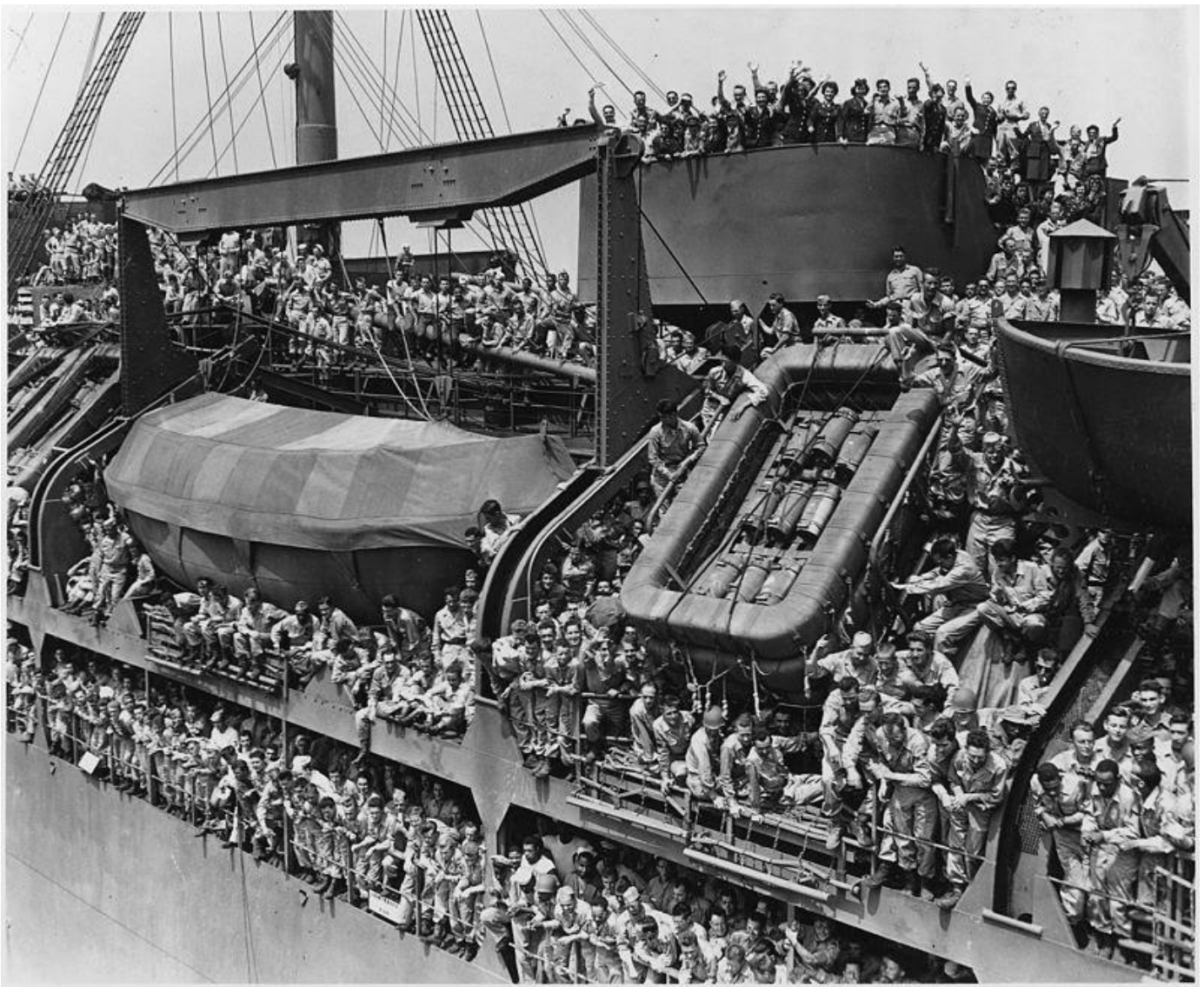


Returning the troops home after WWII was a daunting task... but Operation *Magic Carpet* brought everyone home.

In 1939, there were only 334,000 American servicemen in uniform, not counting the Coast Guard. Six years later, in 1945, there were over 12 million Americans in uniform, including the Coast Guard.

At the end of the war, over 8 million of these men and women were scattered overseas in Europe, the Pacific, and Asia. Shipping them out wasn't a particular problem but getting them home was a massive logistical headache. Back in 1943, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall had already established committees to plan for the task.



Soldiers returning home on the USS General Harry Taylor in August 1945.

When Germany fell in May 1945, the US. Navy was still busy fighting in the Pacific and couldn't assist. The job of transporting 3 million men home from Europe fell to the ships of the Army and the U. S. Merchant Marine. 300 Victory and Liberty cargo ships were converted to troop transports for the task.

During the war, 148,000 troops crossed the Atlantic west to east each month; the rush home ramped this up to 435,000 a month over 14 months.



Hammocks crammed into available spaces aboard the *USS Intrepid*.

In October 1945, with the war in Asia also over, the Navy started chipping in, converting all available vessels to transport duty. On smaller ships like destroyers, capable of carrying perhaps 300 men, soldiers were told to hang their hammocks in whatever nook and cranny they could find.

Carriers were particularly useful, as their large open hangar decks could house 3,000 or more troops in relative comfort, with bunks, sometimes in stacks of five welded or bolted in place.



Welded Bunks aboard the Army transport *USAT Pennant*

The Navy wasn't picky, though: cruisers, battleships, hospital ships, even the slow flat-bottomed LSTs (Landing Ship Tank) were packed full of men yearning for home. Two British ocean liners under American control, the *RMS Queen Mary* and the *RMS Queen Elizabeth*, had already served as troop transports before and continued to do so during the operation, each capable of carrying up to 15,000 people at a time, though their normal, peacetime capacity was lonely less than 2,200.

Twenty-nine ships were dedicated to transporting war brides: women married to American soldiers during the war.



Troops performing a lifeboat drill onboard the *RMS Queen Mary* in December 1944, before *Operation Magic Carpet*

The Japanese surrender in August 1945 came none too soon, but it put an extra burden on *Operation Magic Carpet*. The war in Asia had been expected to go well into 1946 and the Navy and the War Shipping Administration were hard-pressed to bring home all the soldiers who now had to get home earlier than anticipated.

The transports carrying them also had to collect numerous POWs from recently liberated Japanese camps, many of whom suffered from malnutrition and illness.



U.S. soldiers recently liberated from Japanese POW camps

The time to get home depended a lot on the circumstances. *USS Lake Champlain*, a brand-new *Essex*-class carrier that arrived too late for the war, could cross the Atlantic and take 3,300 troops home a little under 4 days and 8 hours. Meanwhile, troops going home from Australia or India would sometimes spend months on slower vessels.



Hangar of the *USS Wasp* during the operation

There was enormous pressure on the operation to bring home as many men as possible by Christmas 1945. Therefore, a sub-operation, *Operation Santa Claus* was dedicated to the purpose. Due to storms at sea and an overabundance of soldiers eligible for the return home, however, Santa Claus could only return a fraction in time and still not quite home but at least to American soil.



The crowded flight deck of the *USS Saratoga*.

The *USS Saratoga* transported home a total of 29,204 servicemen during *Operation Magic Carpet*, more than any other ship.



Overjoyed troops returning home on the battleship *USS Texas*

All in all, though, the get-them-home-by-Christmas deadline proved untenable. The last 29 troop transports, carrying some 200,000 men from the China-India-Burma theater, arrived in America on April 1946, bringing *Operation Magic Carpet* to an end, though an additional 127,000 soldiers still took until September to return home and finally lay down the burden of war.

The nation's ground transportation network was overloaded, trains heading west from the East Coast were on average 6 hours behind schedule and trains heading east from the West Coast were twice that late.

After finally arriving back in the United States many freshly discharged men found themselves stuck in separation centers but they also faced an outpouring of love and friendliness from the locals. Many townsfolk took in freshly arrived troops and invited them to Christmas dinner in their homes. Still others gave their train tickets to soldiers and many others organized quick parties at local train stations for men on layover.

A Los Angeles taxi driver took six soldiers all the way to Chicago; another cabbie took a carload of men from the west coast to Manhattan and the Bronx, Pittsburgh, Long Island, Buffalo and New Hampshire. *Neither of the drivers accepted a fare beyond the cost of gas.*

God bless AMERICA'S GREATEST GENERATION and all those that have served this Great Nation ...and God bless America