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America's First Shot in the World War

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Corporal Micael Chockie, whose rifle
shot opened the war

IN a sun-bathed harbor of a Pacific island where the peace of the tropics breathed its soothing charm over calm waters and palm-fronded shore line there was staged one Spring morning five years ago a short scene in a drama that was holding the attention of the whole world. Riding at anchor in the harbor was a gray battleship that flung to the breeze a banner of red and black. Suddenly this ship heeled over and began to sink by the head. In a moment the decks, which before had been almost deserted, swarmed with men. Singly and in groups these men ran to the rails sprang upon them, and pausing in flight to shout hoarse cries leaped headlong into the sea.

A handful of launches and small boats were churning the waters of the harbor at the time, filled with men in uniform. From one of these small craft the crack of an American rifle sounded, followed shortly by a second shot. Neither of these shots was heard 'round the world but they signalized a turning point in history.

A battered old soixante-quinze gun that still wears the war paint of its combat days in France has found a resting place of honor at the United States Military Academy at West Point with other relics that remind the youthful warriors in Uncle Sam's national school of the gallant deeds their predecessors have performed in all the wars in the Republic's history. A plate on the gun informs the world that it is the gun with which Americans fired the first shot in the World War after our entry. When General Pershing led the old First Division up Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington on its final review September 12, 1919, a canvas banner lashed to the gun told the same story to the applauding thousands who lined the sidewalks in wild welcome.

This gun belonged to Battery C, Sixth Field Artillery, First Division, and at the time the history-making shot was fired the battery was commanded

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America's First Shot

by Captain Indus R. McLendon. On the morning of Oct. 23, 1917, Battery C had just arrived in position in the Lunéville sector, 400 meters east of Bathlémont. The First Division, after months of training in France, had taken over a section of the front from the French and everybody in the division was keen to have a shot at the enemy. It does not appear that Battery C had any particular target to shoot at and there is lacking any clear explanation as to how the thing came about, but official records show that at 6.05 a.m., October 23d, the gun now at West Point was aimed in the general direction of Berlin and banged away with a shell that went screaming over to the Boche outfits holding the St. Mihiel sector to notify them that a new enemy had appeared on the Western Front.

Among Americans who haven't forgotten the war the "first shot" at Bathlémont is fairly well known. It was prominently featured in the press in those days. Since our military traditions are carried on so largely through the graduates of the West Point Military Academy the old gun of Battery C, Sixth Artillery, is destined, no doubt, to bear through the years to come the honor of having fired the first shot of the war. But there was that other American shot fired much earlier in our participation which deserves honorable mention before the "forget the war" slogan is completely realized.

The scene had an historic setting. This time it was the Navy that played the chief rôle. That was fitting, for in the same waters American sailors and those of other great maritime powers had been making history from time to time through four centuries. The Portuguese Magellan, sailing under a Spanish warrant, had discovered the place March 6, 1521. In 1565, Legaspi had planted the banner of Castile on the shore and had taken possession in the name of Spain, and there on the morning of June 21, 1898, the U. S. S. *Charleston*, after a short bombardment, had hauled down the Spanish ensign and run up the Stars and Stripes. The place was Guam.

On April 6, 1917, the interned German warship *Cormoran* swung at anchor in the tropic waters of Guam harbor. That day the President of the United States had signed the resolution of Congress declaring a state of war with Germany but Guam was 9,000 miles from Washington and the German crew got no other news from the outside world than that which came over the American cable.

The first message that flashed from Washington to Guam that day was an order from the Navy Department to seize the *Cormoran*. The electric spark that carried the message leaped across the American continent to San Francisco, dipped under the ocean to Honolulu and hurtled along the cable thence to Guam where, because of the difference in time, it arrived at 6.30 a. m.

Guam, with its 200 more or less white and 12,000 native population, is ruled in Uncle Sam's name by a governor appointed from the Navy. At this time Captain Roy C. Smith held sway as potentate of the little island. When the decoded message was handed to him he ordered a prize crew to take possession of the interned ship in the name of the United States Government. This crew, under command of Lieutenant W. A. Hall, U. S. Navy, left the

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U. S. S. *Supply* and proceeded to Piti with orders to follow the governor's aide, Lieutenant Commander Owen Bartlett, U. S. Navy, in the governor's barge. Bartlett had been charged with the duty of demanding the surrender. Included in the prize crew was a Marine guard of fifteen men commanded by Corporal Micael Chockie. After the prize crew had started the U. S. S. *Supply* got under way and took up a position outside the reefs where her guns could command the *Cormoran* and make sure that the German would not attempt to dash for the high seas, and liberty.

With a white flag of truce flying in the bow the governor's barge went alongside the *Cormoran*. Shortly thereafter those who were watching from afar saw the imperial emblem of Germany being hauled down. Scarcely, however, had the black and red flag disappeared from view than the onlookers were astounded to see it being hoisted back to place as if in challenge to combat. There was a scurry to quarters by American gunners ashore and afloat but they were not left long in doubt as to what the Germans had in mind. One minute after the Germans rehoisted their flag the *Cormoran* blew up. Across the sparkling blue water were heard loud cries of "Hoch Deutschland," Hoch der Kaiser," as the members of the *Cormoran* crew dived overboard and swam away from their rapidly sinking ship.

While these scenes were taking place aboard the *Cormoran* interesting events were occurring nearby. As Lieutenant Hall's prize crew stood down the channel from Piti to the harbor where the *Cormoran* lay they saw coming toward them a German launch with a cutter in tow. In the stern sheets of the cutter sat a commissioned officer of the German Navy. Lieutenant Hall ordered a Marine to fire a rifle shot across the German's bow to heave her to and demand surrender. When the order to fire was given Corporal Chockie, in charge of the Marine detachment, jerked up his rifle to firing position and pulled the trigger.

The bullet he sent across the German cutter's bow was the first recorded hostile shot fired by the armed forces of the United States after the declaration of war. The time was about 8 a. m., April 6, 1917, the day war was declared.

This first shot was apparently not understood by the new enemy for his cutter continued to advance. Lieutenant Hall thereupon ordered another Marine to fire. This time the shot was brought close to the German. He understood and obeyed the message, hove to and surrendered. Victors and vanquished now headed back for the *Cormoran* which was settling rapidly after the explosion. All the other American craft in the harbor were making for the sinking ship where the rescue work of picking up the German crew began. The water was full of Germans, swimming complacently about waiting to be salvaged. They seemed to be filled with pride over the blowing up of their vessel after its surrender. Some of them were inclined to be a bit boastful but the comments of a few American sailors and Marines who understood German quieted in short order the inclinations of the gobs of the Kaiser's navy to voice their pride in a deed which a German admiral was not too proud to imitate wholesale at Scapa Flow.

Whatever abhorrence the Americans may have felt over the action of the German crew they did not allow it to interfere with the duty that faced them of fishing their struggling enemies out of the water. While the work of rescue was going on, however, the *Supply* kept

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her guns trained on the spot, and when the enemy launches started for the shore a Marine detachment covered the boats with a battery of six-inch rifles and four machine guns. The captured prisoners refused to tell how they had sunk their ship but it is believed that a composition of coal dust and gasoline was tamped in her bilges. All explosives had been removed from her by order of Governor Smith when the *Cormoran* had first sought safety in the then neutral harbor of Guam, fleeing from British and Japanese pursuers in the Pacific.

Corporal Chockie's rifle has not been preserved for an exhibit in any of our war museums. When he fired the "first shot of the war" our soldiers and sailors had not learned to value souvenirs as highly as they did later on in France.



The Literary Digest for May 5, 1917

OUR FIRST SHOT



SHE FIRED OUR FIRST SHOT IN THE WAR.

42d anniversary of Lexington the armed American freighter *Mongolia* sank a German submarine with one shot off the English coast.

AMERICA'S FIRST SHOT in the war has sunk a German submarine, and beyond the thrill felt by editorial observers that this event should have occurred on the 142d anniversary of the Battle of Lexington, April 19, at 5:24 A.M., there is a grim sense of the necessity that we sink more and more U-boats if we are to be of present service to our Allies. With the news of our first shot comes a report of the British Government that the German U-boats made their high record since February 1 by sinking sixty-five British craft in one week. England is frankly alarmed over their increasing effectiveness, and a London dispatch to the *New York Times* speaks of a statement by Lord Devonport that official rationing of at least two food-staples is contemplated by the Government. To offset the tremendous loss of tonnage through Germany's ruthless warfare, the press inform us that the Shipping Board and the special committee on shipping of the Council of National Defense have petitioned Congress for immediate legislation giving the Board speedy control over all the shipping resources of the nation. We are told further that reports indicate that 25,000 tons of coastwise shipping will be ready for service in the North Atlantic within thirty days and that the wooden cargo shipping program is proceeding satisfactorily, and plans are well under way to begin the supplementary construction of steel ships. Incidentally, twelve of the seized German merchant ships are said to be ready and will at once be put into service for shipping food and other munitions to the Allies.

The ship whose name will go down in history as having fired our first shot in the war is the American freighter *Mongolia*, Capt. Emery Rice, and she was on her second journey through the barred zone. The skipper is quoted in London dispatches as saying that when the *Mongolia* left this side with guns and trained gunners, he no longer felt "like an old woman with a well-filled purse going out among brigands," as he had felt before she was armed. For five days and nights he had not had his clothes off and a big force of lookouts had been kept on duty all the time, when at 5:22 in the morning of April 19 the submarine was sighted. At 5:24 she was sunk, which shows, as Captain Rice relates, that "the whole affair took only two minutes." The officers commanding the gunners were with him on the bridge, where they had been most of the time throughout the voyage, and he is quoted as saying in part:

"There was a haze over the sea at the time. We had just taken a sounding, for we were getting near shallow water, and we were looking at the lead when the first mate cried:

"'There's a submarine off the port bow.'

"The submarine was close to us, too close, in fact, for her purposes, and she was submerging again in order to maneuver in a better position for torpedoing us when we sighted her.

"We saw the periscope go down, and the swirl of the water. I quickly ordered a man at the wheel to put it to starboard, and we swung the nose of the ship toward the spot where the submarine had been seen.

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"We were going at full speed ahead, and two minutes after we first sighted the U-boat it emerged again about 1,000 yards off. Its intention probably had been to catch us broadside on, but when it appeared we had the stern gun trained full on it.

"The lieutenant gave the command and the big gun boomed. We saw the periscope shattered and the shell and the submarine disappeared.

"That's about all the story, excepting this: The gunners had named the guns on board the *Mongolia* and the one which got the submarine was called Theodore Roosevelt; so Teddy fired the first gun of the war, after all."

Captain Rice declares he can not speak too highly of the gallant manner in which Lieut. Bruce R. Ware, Jr., U. S. N., handled his crew of gunners. The lieutenant knew before the shell struck the submarine that its aim was accurate, for "there is no guesswork about it, but a case of pure mathematics." The lieutenant had to consider the speed of the *Mongolia* and the speed of the submarine, and, "computing these figures with the distances we were from the submarine when it was first sighted and when it appeared the second time, it can be shown that the lieutenant had his guns sighted to the inch."

Under date of April 25, the Admiralty's weekly statement of vessels sunk as given in London dispatches reads as follows:

"Weekly shipping returns: Arrivals, 2,586; sailings, 2,621.

"Sinkings, by mine or submarine, over 1,600 tons, forty, including two sunk in the week ending April 15; under 1,600 tons, fifteen, including one sunk in the week ending April 1.

"Vessels unsuccessfully attacked, twenty-seven, including one attacked the week ending April 8.

"Fishing vessels sunk, nine, including one sunk the week ending April 15."

The *New York World* totals the record of sinking since February 1, when the German Government announced resumption of ruthless submarine warfare, as follows:

	Over 1,600 Tons	Under 1,600 Tons
For first three days of February	5	3
Week ending February 10	33	19
Week ending February 17	17	10
Week ending February 24	27	18
Week ending March 3	14	9
Week ending March 11	13	4
Week ending March 18	16	8
Week ending March 25	18	7
Week ending April 1	18	13
Week ending April 8	17	2
Week ending April 15	19	9
Week ending April 22	40	15
Total to date	237	117

(Trawlers and vessels under 100 tons are not included in this list.)



Gun crew of the USS Mongolia

The Erie County Independent

April 8, 1937

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U. S. First Shot of Worlds War Fired by Marine in Guam

Washington, Apr. 8—Twenty years ago this month America's first shot in the World War was fired in the far away island of Guam on the very day that President Wilson signed the war resolution. This shot was not heard around the world, but there are official records to corroborate the incident.

The news that America entered the war was promptly flashed by cable to Guam on Apr. 6, 1917. The German warship *Cormoran* was interned there and orders from the Navy Department directed authorities at Guam to demand her surrender.

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Thereupon, the Governor's aide left in a barge to enforce the official order and take possession of the German vessel anchored in the harbor. He was followed closely by another small boat, commanded by Lieutenant W. A. Hall, of the Navy, with a crew of 15 U. S. Marines.

On its daily errand of getting supplies ashore, a German launch from the Cormoran, with a cutter in tow, was heading across the bay, and Lieutenant Hall decided to demand its surrender. He ordered Corporal Michael Chockie, of the Marines, to fire a rifle shot across its bow. The first shot apparently was not understood, but when more shots were fired the enemy craft hove to and surrendered.

Meanwhile the Cormoran had been boarded and her captain informed of the surrender order. The Americans scarcely had time to leave the vessel before it was blown up by its own crew. For the next half hour small boats in the harbor were busily engaged in picking up survivors.

More than six months later, on October 23, the men of Battery C., Sixth Field Artillery, First division, hauled a gun of the soixantequins type up on the firing line near Bathlemont, and sent a shell screaming in the general direction of the German lines. It was America's first hostile shot in France.

But the bullet that Corporal Chockie sent ricocheting across the bow of the German launch at the isolated naval station in the Pacific on April 6, was America's first shot in the World War.