

## World War I and The Birth of NIT

Per an agreement with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, The Port of Virginia has created this document to mark and commemorate the role that Norfolk International Terminals (NIT) played as an Army Quartermaster base during World War I. While now used to move cargo throughout Virginia and markets beyond, NIT was once a critical point for movement of goods to troops serving overseas.

## The Buildup: Base Construction and Other Infrastructure Needs

When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, it lacked the infrastructure needed to undertake such a large military effort. The existing supply depots in New York, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Chicago, Jeffersonville (Indiana), Omaha, San Antonio, Seattle, and San Francisco were built to supply a regular army of 100,000 men. These depots had proved inadequate when the National Guard of 150,000 men was called out in June of 1916 to support the punitive expedition into Mexico against Pancho Villa. As the army was being greatly enlarged during wartime, the quartermaster system was further developed, and additional depots placed where needed.

To address the shortage, additional Army Supply Bases (or Quartermaster Terminals) consisting of railroad terminals, storehouses for supplies, and docks for the trans-shipment of materials to vessels were constructed along the seacoasts in Boston, Brooklyn, Newark, Philadelphia, Norfolk, Charleston, and New Orleans. The Army Supply Base construction techniques were divided into two classes. The first class were those where the chosen base locations were already developed in a city and where the reinforced-concrete storehouse type of several stories was employed. The second and preferred class were constructed in cities where the real estate was not so valuable, where the storehouses were one story only, thus avoiding the additional labor of raising the material to the upper floors for storage and bringing it down again for shipment. The first class afforded a more permanent character of building while the second class permitted quicker construction. The first class included Boston, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and New Orleans and the second class, Newark, Norfolk, and Charleston. Where the storehouses are of only one story, the pier sheds are one story also, except that at Norfolk a second floor was added over part of one shed to facilitate the handling of troops. The amount of dredging done in connection with the Army Supply Bases was notable, with over 15,000,000 yards of material removed along the eastern seaboard, mostly by hydraulic dredges, with five hydraulic dredges at Norfolk, where 4,000,000 yards of material were moved. Refrigeration plants for the storage of perishable subsistence were operated only at the port terminals at Norfolk and Charleston. These plants consisted of a 6-ton refrigerating-machine equipment and were equipped to store 240 quarters of chilled beef and one carload of other perishables (Butler 1919). Army records show that shipments during the month of November 1918 alone totaled 1,030,000 tons from all the seven supply bases (USA 1919).

Both the Army and the Navy built bases in the Norfolk area to meet the needs of the forces at the front (Calhoun 2014). The Navy built a large naval air station on the site of the Jamestown Exposition held 10 years earlier in 1907 and approximately 34,000 troops were housed at this location by 1918. The Army also constructed a facility in Norfolk, which became part of a series of supply bases in ports along the East Coast. The Army used these facilities primarily to support the American Expeditionary Force, the main United States Army unit in France. By constructing the facility near the naval facility, the Army reduced the distance they had to go to pick up their naval escorts for their travels across the Atlantic Ocean (Calhoun 2014).

## Norfolk Quartermaster Terminal

Construction began on the Norfolk Quartermaster Terminal in September 1917. Prior to the Army purchasing the property, the City of Norfolk had already begun construction of a municipal pier. When the Army acquired the property, they authorized construction of a creosoted-timber bulkhead running parallel to, and approximately 810 feet in from, the established bulkhead the city had started. The Army hired Alsop and Pierce of Newport News for the bulkhead work and H. P. Converse and Company of Boston for the pier construction. In April 1918, the Army adopted plans for the pier and construction was set to begin. However, at the same time, Army officials made changes to the layout of the overall facility, which invalidated the plans for the pier (Butler 1919). All construction stopped on the pier and the contracts were terminated.

A month later, construction resumed, and plans were made for not one but two piers at the site. Dock construction varied across the Army Supply Bases with the local marine conditions. The Army discovered that it was necessary to guard against the action of marine borer worms at Charleston, New Orleans, and Norfolk. The piers at Charleston and New Orleans were constructed of creosoted piles, but at Norfolk a more elaborate construction method was adopted. The necessity of disposing of a large quantity of dredged material there dictated the use of a filled dock. To retain the fill, reinforced-concrete sheet piling was employed. These tongued and grooved piles were 18 inches by 24 inches, were 50 to 65 feet in length, and weighed from 9 to 12 tons each. They were tied back to a system of wooden-anchor piles with rods every 30 feet clear across the dock. The outer portion of the dock floor was constructed of concrete carried on the anchor piles and the inner portion was of plank laid directly on the fill. In all, over 7,400 concrete piles were constructed for the two piers. When completed, Pier 1 measured approximately 300 feet wide and approximately 1,328 feet long with approximately 35-foot ship channels. This new facility was used to ship war supplies across the Atlantic Ocean to aid in the war effort in Europe (Butler 1919).

By mid-1918, both piers were completed along with several warehouses, a small headquarters building, and a hospital. This construction is clearly evident on a 1922 quad map (Figures 1 and 2). This map is an update to the 1918 quad map and still labels the property as an army base, although the property had been considered surplus by this time.

## The War Ends

The Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, ending the fighting in Europe. The Army no longer required such a large number of bases and the Norfolk Army Supply Base became surplus property. The Army began the process of going through the available supplies at the base and determining what could be sold or disposed. The sale of unserviceable property and waste materials covered every conceivable class of article used by or with an army.

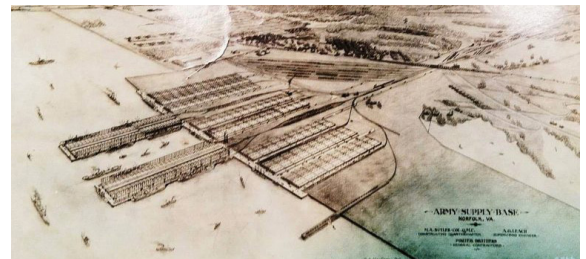


Figure 1. View of the Army Supply Base.

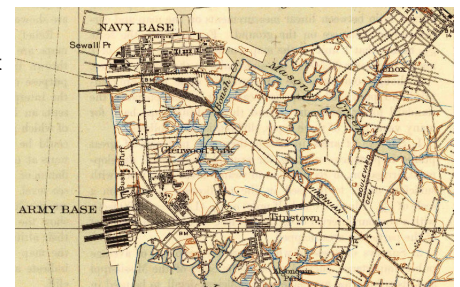


Figure 2. Detail of 1922 Newport News quad map showing the Army Supply Base.



For instance, at the Norfolk Army Supply Base and at Newport News, several million bags of obsolete blue uniforms used by National Guard companies on duty at the port of embarkation during the period of hostilities were sold on sealed proposals. The bag sale at Norfolk and Newport News yielded a return to the government of approximately \$189,596.50. In the 1919 annual report the Army listed the emergency rations consisting of 1,159,800 pounds of wheat, meat, and chocolate types. These supplies were declared surplus and sold (Butler 1919). From July 1, 1919 to June 30, 1920, the Army listed 98 government vessels and 181 commercial vessels with 706,612.96 tons of incoming freight and 294,449.10 tons of outgoing freight at the Norfolk Army Supply Base terminals (USA 1920).

On June 30, 1920, hospital unit train cars number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10 which were obtained by purchase in January of 1919, were still assigned to the Norfolk Army Supply Base to transport the sick and wounded further inland. These cars, of steel underframe construction with anti-telescoping devices, were outfitted with Glennan adjustable bunks, large kitchens, and refrigerators, and are used in conjunction with standard sleepers, providing messing facilities for 250 patients (USA 1920, Figure 3).

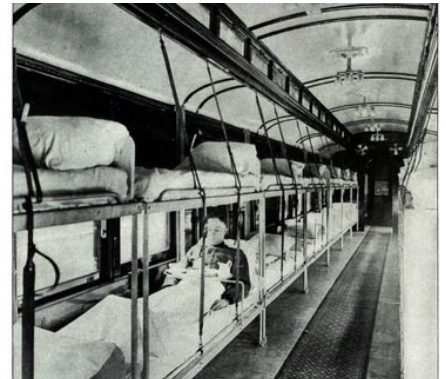


Figure 3. Interior of hospital train car.

The Army's decision to classify the Norfolk Army Supply Base as surplus allowed the City of Norfolk to follow neighboring Portsmouth and enter the shipping business by purchasing the facility. The City began planning to purchase the surplus property from the Army at the end of 1918 for \$6,572.00; however, the agreement would not be finalized until 1919. Army records indicate that 60 soldiers stood trial for court martial from July 1919 to March 1920 at the Norfolk Army Supply Base indicating the base was still in use for some military activities during that timeframe (USA 1920).

### The Spoils of War

The U.S.S. Naiwa arrived in Hampton Roads in May 1919 loaded with 7,130 tons of artillery pieces received from the Germans as part of the cease-fire agreement (Figures 4 and 5). Knowing the value of these pieces, various politicians wanted a portion for their districts as spoils of war (Calhoun 2014). While the military worked out the details, it had the ship unload the artillery at the Army Supply Base in Norfolk (USA 1919).

### Czecho-Slovak Connection

A major event that occurred at the base involved the Czechoslovak Legion. This unit, consisting of Czech and Slovak nationalists, fought with the Russian Army during World War I. When the Russians surrendered in 1918, a civil war ensued between Communist (Red) and Czarist (White) factions. The Legion had hoped to establish a homeland in the Bohemia region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; unfortunately for the Czech and Slovak patriots, this did not occur. This forced the Czechoslovak Legion to fight its way across Siberia in their attempt to evacuate the country. They eventually made it to Vladivostok where on April 12, 1920, 699 Czech-Slovakian prisoners of war boarded the U.S.S. Mount Vernon with the intention of returning to western Europe. However, the ship broke down off the coast of Virginia and docked in Norfolk on June 13, 1920. The Army allowed the Legion to stay at the Norfolk Army Supply Base until the repairs were completed. On June 23, 1920, the Legion transferred to the transport Antigone, which left Norfolk, and arrived at Brunsbuttel Koon, Germany, on July 11, 1920. In the course of the voyage, nine prisoners escaped in San Francisco, California, and one disappeared in mid-ocean (USA 1920).

In the spring of 1919, the repatriation movement of invalids and those too old to stand the rigors of the Siberian climate was started by the Czecho-Slovak Government. The Czecho-Slovak Government paid all expenses connected with this movement, which was arranged by a special committee appointed by the President of the United States and the Czecho-Slovak Legation in Washington. The number of invalids repatriated on hired Japanese ships was about 7,000. Roughly 3,000 invalids were repatriated on United States Shipping Board ships, across the Pacific to San Francisco, thence across the United States by rail. They were then embarked on United States transports at Norfolk for home. Thus approximately 10,000 invalids were brought home and the movement of the Czecho-Slovak invalids ended in October 1919 (USA 1920).

### The City of Norfolk

After these events, the City of Norfolk finalized its agreement and purchased the property. The City maintained the property throughout first half of the 20th century and in 1968, designated the property as the Norfolk International Terminals. The Norfolk Port Authority was renamed the Virginia Port Authority and has been operating at the site since 1968. The VPA continues to use the property and its piers today.

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