

German Pirates and Hawaiian Patriots: The Sinking of the *SS Aztec* and the United States Entry into the First World War

On April 1, 1917, a German U-boat fired one torpedo at the *SS Aztec* off the coast of Ushant, France. The *Aztec* was the eighth of ten American merchant ships that Germany sank between February 3 and April 4 as part of its unrestricted submarine war campaign. It was also the deadliest. Twenty-eight men were killed, including eleven American citizens, five of whom were Native Hawaiians.¹ Merchant vessels on the Atlantic, Germany warned, were not to cross the submarine blockade under any circumstances. Preventing cargo ships, especially those of the United States, from reaching Western Europe was believed to be the surest way that Germany could starve the British and French armies into submission. News of the *Aztec* sinking reached President Woodrow Wilson on April 2, the same day he requested Congress to end the United States' neutral status and officially declare war on Germany. Although Wilson had already concluded that war was the proper recourse, the *Aztec* sinking factored into the Congressional decision-making that legitimized his war resolution on April 6.

While newsworthy, the details and victims of the *Aztec* story faded into the background with word of war. The sinking of the *Aztec* and other merchant vessels became fleeting footnotes to growing patriotic fervor and general anti-German sentiment. In the Hawaiian Islands, however, the *Aztec* sinking received widespread attention and was discussed as a direct precedent for Wilson's war declaration. The "kaua ma Europa" (war in Europe) was now a tangible reality that had come to Hawai'i and its people. Local newspaper coverage of the incident made it clear that the lives lost were, first and foremost, Hawaiian. This distinguished the *Aztec* sinking from that of other merchant ships. Across the Islands, there was an outpouring of sorrow and anger over the fallen "Keiki Hawaii" (Hawaiian children), or "Keiki Owi o ka Aina" (Native Children of the Land).² According to *Ke Aloha Aina* (The Love of the Land), a prominent Hawaiian-language newspaper, Germany's actions constituted nothing short of "mau

hana luku” (slaughter) and these young men were the first Hawaiian victims of “na ka poe Prussian ame ko lakou powa ia ana” (the Prussians and their piracy).³

The depiction of Germans as ruthless pirates opposed to democracy and the freedom of the seas was a ubiquitous and potent trope in Allied propaganda and media throughout the First World War. In Hawai‘i, the debate over how to address German “piracy” against merchant vessels culminated with the sinking of the *Aztec*. Like the “Hun” epithet, the German pirate, or “powa” in Hawaiian, was a helpful caricature that former President Theodore Roosevelt and his Preparedness Movement helped popularize after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. Roosevelt’s coalition of politicians and activists petitioned the Woodrow Wilson administration to expand the United States’ naval and military capabilities for self-defense. According to Roosevelt and his many supporters, preparedness was crucial because Germany had demonstrated that it was no longer a rational state operating within international law. “This represents not merely piracy, but piracy on a vaster scale of murder than the old-time pirates ever practiced. ... It seems inconceivable that we can refrain from taking action in this matter, for we owe it not only to humanity but to our own national self-respect.”⁴ After the *Aztec* disaster, Hawai‘i officials echoed these claims.



Figure 1: Political cartoon by William Allen Rogers, depicting the threat of German piracy. “Enlist in the U.S. Navy--your country needs you!” *New York Herald*, April 18, 1917. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010717764/>. Public Domain.

With political and public support, a large memorial service was organized on the grounds of the Capitol in Honolulu on April 22, 1917, to honor the fallen Hawaiian heroes. Over two thousand people attended the event, including the families of the deceased, territorial politicians, and military personnel. This was the only recorded public memorial event organized for any of the ten torpedoed merchant ships that precipitated America's entry into the war.⁵ The sinking of the *Vigilancia* and the *Healdton*, which led to the deaths of six and seven Americans, respectively, received moderate press coverage but spurred no public demonstrations. This can be attributed to several factors. First, most of the victims on those ships did not hail from a single place like Hawai'i. Second, since Hawai'i was a recently annexed part of the United States, territorial politicians had a strong incentive to generate patriotic displays of loyalty, particularly amongst Native Hawaiians who had actively opposed American annexation in 1898. Lastly, Hawai'i's residents, especially its Native Hawaiian population, which numbered only around 24,000, represented a tight-knit community with a unique regional identity and culture. And though the memorial embodied a genuine desire to help this community mourn, it was also a prime example of political theater and propaganda. For many of the event's organizers, the literal blood of these men mattered most, not their actions. That is what made them heroes. It needed to be stressed to the Native Hawaiian community that Germany had "murdered" some of their own. Hence, the primary ambitions of the memorial service were twofold: to rally support for the war effort amongst Hawai'i's general population and, more specifically, to target Native Hawaiian men for potential recruitment into the United States military.

This article first humanizes the five Hawaiian victims and one survivor of the *Aztec* tragedy with biographical sketches highlighting the vital role that Hawai'i and Hawaiians had played in securing needed supply chains across the Atlantic Ocean during the First World War. Second, this paper explores how the *Aztec* memorial service's portrayal of Germany as a criminal pirate state underscored Hawai'i's strategic importance to the United States Navy. The political implications of the *Aztec* memorial service also reveal how Hawaiian nationalism had not disappeared in the first two decades after American annexation and was still influential in Hawaiian society and life. The conservative organizers of the *Aztec* memorial understood that Hawaiian nationalism and history could be called upon to galvanize Native Hawaiians into action.

After the United States entered the First World War, nearly ten thousand Hawai'i residents, including hundreds of Native Hawaiians, served in civilian and military roles. The war was an unprecedented opportunity to solidify an increasingly popular narrative for Hawai'i that framed its entire history as a preamble to becoming the Pacific frontier of the United States. The *Aztec* memorial service articulated this new teleological and colonial narrative for an emerging generation of Native Hawaiians who were expected to dispel any lingering doubt that they were not "real" Americans. Underpinning the memorial service, then, was a deliberate Americanization process that animated the war

effort in Hawai‘i. However, it did not downplay Native Hawaiian heritage and history, as one might expect, given the Islands’ colonial status. On the contrary, it championed Hawaiian pride as fundamental to being a good American citizen and soldier, with German “pirates” serving as the perfect foil.

John “Tota” Davis, Charles Nakalo, Charles Kanai, Ekela Kaohi, Julian Macomber, and Hiel Rice were the six Native Hawaiian sailors who boarded the *SS Aztec* with forty-one others in New York City on March 18, 1917, to deliver food and supplies valued at over \$500,000 to Le Havre, France.⁶ They knew the voyage was a gamble. U-boats had already sunk seven American ships since Germany had announced, for the second time, a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1. A German torpedo had even killed fifteen people, including six Americans, aboard the *Vigilancia* two days before the *Aztec*’s departure. The shipping industry offered hundreds of reliable jobs to Native Hawaiians but put them on the front lines of Germany’s war on commerce. Still, there were many reasons to assume the odds favored them. Not only did most American ships bound for France reach their destination uneventfully, but wages and working conditions had also improved in recent months.

All six men had started their careers in the merchant marine after 1908, which means they had witnessed progressive transformations in labor rights by the time they had joined the *Aztec* crew. Before President Wilson signed the Seaman’s Act on March 4, 1915, American merchant mariners were expected to work long, arduous hours and tolerate abusive treatment from ship captains and owners. Safety requirements were not regulated, and key crew members were not required to have logged any prerequisite years of experience. Though technically illegal, punitive measures for desertion or disobedience still included physical beatings and forced imprisonment. With input and support from the International Seaman’s Union and its president, Andrew Furuseth, the Seaman’s Act remedied these problems and ushered in meaningful welfare reforms for American merchant mariners.⁷ The Seaman’s Act also went into effect as the popular image of sailors was shifting due to their involvement in the First World War. Long treated as boorish vagabonds, sailors were now upstanding citizens and heroic defenders of free trade. While the six Hawaiian sailors were employed in different positions on the *Aztec*, they all reaped the benefits of these recent developments. Like many merchant sailors at this time, Macomber and Nakalo spoke of the value they found in their work and newfound recognition.

Julian Macomber, known commonly as “Makama,” was born and raised in Wai‘ōhinu in the Ka‘u district on the Big Island of Hawai‘i in August 1889 to Charles Macomber, a carpenter, and Kaukani Kamali, a homemaker.⁸ He was the eleventh of nineteen children, of which eleven lived past infancy. He was raised in a rural, Hawaiian-speaking home but learned English at a young age in primary school and from his bilingual parents. His grandfather, Luther Macomber, was a carpenter from Massachusetts but immigrated to Hawai‘i in 1849 and became a naturalized citizen of

the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1851. He learned the Hawaiian language and married Mary Kahula Kuhaupio, an alleged descendant of Kamehameha the Great's legendary advisor Kekūhaupi'o.⁹ Unlike his father and grandfather, Julian Macomber did not embrace the family trade and, by eighteen, had moved to Honolulu to pursue his career in shipping.

Between 1910 and 1917, Macomber worked on ships moving between Honolulu, New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, and South America.¹⁰ As the war on the Atlantic escalated, he told his family in a letter that he wanted to join a ship bound for Europe. Primarily, Macomber was a fireman, a dirty and demanding position in the ship's fire room that required feeding coal into a furnace to produce the steam needed to power the ship.¹¹ Because firemen worked alongside the ship's volatile boiler, they were the crew members most vulnerable to a torpedo attack. When Macomber's father warned he might die if he sailed on the Atlantic, he replied, "I can die but once, and I must die some time. I don't intend to be scared out by a German submarine or anything else. I'm a Hawaiian and an American sailor." Macomber had pride in his dual Hawaiian and American identity, reflecting how deeply Hawai'i had seemingly assimilated into the United States. Echoing the loftier yet fashionable talking points of big business and politics, he told his father, "The seas [are] free and there's money to be made."¹² He was twenty-eight years old when he boarded the *Aztec*.

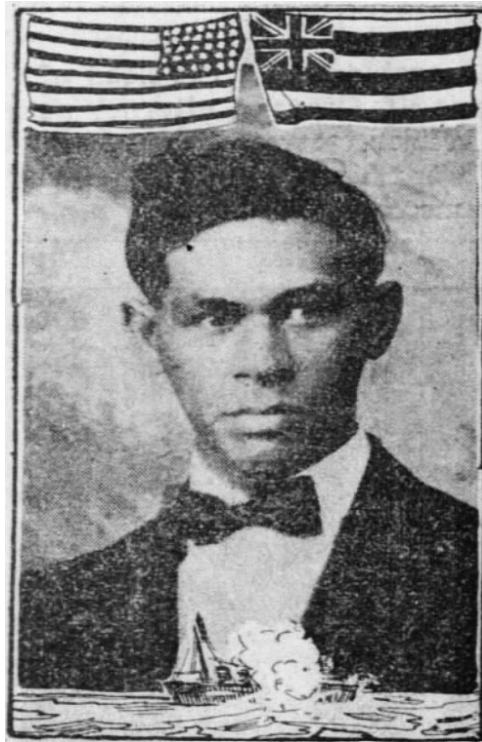


Figure 2: Julian "Makama" Macomber, circa 1917. *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, April 4, 1917. Lehi, UT, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc. Public Domain.

Charles “Chas” Nakalo shared these sentiments. As a messman on the *Aztec*, his duties mainly involved serving food and washing dishes. Born in Waiākea on the Big Island on 23 January 1895, Nakalo grew up in Hilo Bay and witnessed countless fishing boats and cargo ships pass through it.¹³ He was about six feet tall and had a visible tattoo on his right arm. He supported his mother financially and regularly traveled to Waiākea to visit her and other relatives. However, he mainly lived in Brooklyn, New York, after becoming a merchant mariner.¹⁴ He worked and sailed primarily out of the Port of New York’s Erie Basin area and lived in a new building on 39th Street in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, which was booming in middle-class housing. Living just a few blocks from the port, he became part of a diverse network of sailors from around the world, including many from Hawai‘i. According to one sailor who knew him, Germany would have “to kill him outright if they wanted to keep him down.”¹⁵

Ekela Kaohi was born on 12 September 1892 in the North Kohala district on the Big Island of Hawai‘i.¹⁶ He was raised in a Hawaiian-speaking home and exposed to the contentious politics surrounding Hawai‘i’s sovereignty. His father, Joseph B. Kaohi, was an active attorney in civic life. Joseph joined 21,000 other Native Hawaiians in 1897 and signed the Kū‘ē (opposition) Petitions to protest the American annexation of Hawai‘i.¹⁷ Fearful of Native Hawaiians losing effective representation in the new Hawaiian Territorial Legislature, Joseph joined other former anti-annexation activists and became a member of the nationalist Home Rule Party in 1900. He was elected senator representing the Big Island’s First District until 1904. Around the time of his father’s death in 1907, Ekela Kaohi moved to Honolulu and lived with his half-sister, Eunice Kahuila Dower.¹⁸ He worked as a butcher and driver for a local meat market downtown on Fort Street until joining the merchant marine around 1914 at the beginning of the First World War.¹⁹ He worked mainly as a fireman on ships moving across the Pacific between Honolulu, San Francisco, Seattle, and Sydney, Australia. For unknown reasons, he sailed to London in 1915 and resided there for over one year.²⁰ He was twenty-five years old when he accepted to be a wiper on the *Aztec*, an entry-level position responsible for keeping the ship’s engine room and machinery clean and orderly.²¹

Unlike the other Hawaiian crew on the *Aztec*, Hiel Rice did not grow up in the countryside. Born in July 1890 in Honolulu on the island of Oahu to William Rice and Julia Kawahinekaulana Spooner, Rice was raised with seven brothers and sisters in a bilingual home on King Street in Mō‘ili‘ili, an urban neighborhood with a growing Japanese population.²² His father worked as a clerk and a salesman and had also signed the Kū‘ē (opposition) Petitions to protest the American annexation of Hawai‘i. After primary school, Rice worked as a bellhop at the Alexander Young Hotel before joining the merchant marine around 1915.²³ Outside his native Honolulu, he frequented the ports of Baltimore, New York City, and Liverpool, England, working mainly as a fireman. Coincidentally, he worked on the SS *Rockingham* in 1916, a ship Germany

torpedoed one month after the *Aztec*, killing Hawaiian sailor William Wond.²⁴ On the *Aztec*, Rice was assigned as a messman alongside Nakalo.



Figure 3: Hiel Rice, 1916. "United States, Passport Applications, 1795-1925." Photograph. *FamilySearch* <https://www.familysearch.org>. Citing NARA microfilm publications M1490 and M1372. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration. Public Domain.

Today, John “Tota” Davis and Charles Kanai remain the most enigmatic of the group. Unfortunately, none of their surviving family members were verified to attend the memorial service, and ship records reveal little about them besides their crew position and confirmed “Hawaiian nationality.”²⁵ What is known is Davis was a wiper, an entry-level position that suggests he was probably a young man with limited experience in the field. Records do not list him as having any home address or family.²⁶ Kanai, however, was a fireman and worked with Macomber, shoveling coal and monitoring the ship’s furnace. Kanai was ostensibly from rural Kōloa on the island of Kauai, a district best known as the home of Hawai‘i’s first large-scale commercial sugarcane plantation.²⁷ Like many other Hawaiians, Kanai presumably shirked the prospect of agricultural labor and was drawn to a life on the seas. Regardless of their positions, Kanai, Davis, Rice, Kaohi, Nakalo, and Macomber were working-class civilians with only marginal opportunities for upward mobility and career advancement.

While they did not represent conventional wartime heroes, they briefly worked alongside active servicemen. The *Aztec* voyage was unique in one considerable respect. To ensure the ship's "protection," thirteen sailors considered among the best gunners in the Navy joined the crew.

Built for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company in 1894 in Newcastle, England, the 3,727-ton *Aztec* was still a relatively new vessel, measuring a reliable 349.2 feet long and 26.6 feet deep. For the first half of its tenure, the *Aztec* moved mail and cargo across the Pacific and the Atlantic, frequently docking in Honolulu, San Francisco, Shanghai, and Rio de Janeiro. Once purchased by the Oriental Navigation Company, the ship regularly traveled between New York City and the ports of Western Europe. Like other major shipping companies, Oriental Navigation had a reputation for publicly underscoring the United States' official policy of neutrality and commitment to the freedom of the seas. The company was even at the center of a recent media spectacle when it sent the *SS Orleans* as one of the first two American ships to defy German "piracy" and cross the blockade, arriving in Bordeaux on February 26.

A crowd of 30,000 locals waving American and French flags greeted the *Orleans* crew before the mayor escorted them to City Hall to enjoy a large banquet organized by the Chamber of Commerce. The crew then received box and first balcony seats to various theatrical performances, where they were provided complimentary champagne and cake. The event was great publicity for Oriental Navigation, and its owner responded to the fanfare with a 50,000 francs donation to the Bordeaux government.²⁸ French, English, and American newspapers lionized the captain and crew as heroes for championing free trade and resisting German aggression. The crew aboard the *Aztec* were undoubtedly aware of the growing admiration for merchant mariners. They had reason to believe they, too, might receive a similar reception, albeit far less glamorous. Indeed, the *Aztec* was the first ship armed under President Woodrow Wilson's short-lived order to "defend" merchant ships by assigning them skilled Navy gunners that could "deter" German advances. It was the only testimony to Wilson's fleeting experiment to promote the United States' official position in the First World War as an "armed neutrality."²⁹

The day the *Orleans* arrived in Bordeaux, Wilson requested Congress grant him the authority to arm merchant ships. He received overwhelming support in the House of Representatives, where the specter of German piracy loomed over the proceedings and was invoked repeatedly by sympathetic Congressmen. Denying that such a measure constituted an act of war against Germany, Halvor Steenerson of Minnesota expressed the opinion of many when he called arming ships a necessary "peace measure" against the ongoing "threat of murder and piracy."³⁰ Yet when the armed-ship bill arrived on the Senate floor, Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin organized a filibuster with eleven others to prevent a vote. With only three days left before the Congress expired, La Follette stalled the proceedings much to the fury of his colleagues, President Wilson,

and the American public. La Follette considered the bill unconstitutional and predicated on an exaggerated German threat. He suggested the bill would render American sailors as pawns in the British Navy, which he blamed as much as German U-boats for creating the current predicament. “The American public is being woefully deceived,” La Follette remarked, “Shall we, to maintain the technical right of travel and the pursuit of commercial profits, hurl this country into the bottomless pit of the European horror?”³¹

When it became clear that La Follette’s filibuster would work, seventy-five of ninety-six members signed a manifesto declaring that a small and stubborn coalition had obstructed the will of the overwhelming Senate majority. Wilson fumed how “a little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, have rendered the great government of the United States helpless and contemptible.”³² Four days later, the Senate held a special session to adopt its first cloture rule, requiring a two-thirds majority to end a filibuster and force a vote.³³ Never again, Wilson thought, can a few recalcitrants sabotage the legislative process at such a volatile moment in history. Most Americans agreed as calls for La Follette’s resignation swept the nation.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, he and his coalition were denounced for surrendering to German lawlessness and barbarism on the high seas. Enough effigies of La Follette were hanged or burned on college campuses and other public spaces that one reporter joked it was “likely to cause a shortage in straw.”³⁵

With public and Congressional support, Wilson decided to arm merchant ships through an executive order, forcing him to challenge a legal problem first raised by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge at the Senate debate. Lodge brought attention to an 1819 law that allowed any merchant ship to arm and defend itself against pirates. However, it prohibited ships from using those arms against vessels of “a nation that which we are at amity.”³⁶ Lodge figured since the United States was not officially at war with Germany, the provision not only prevented merchant ships from using force against hostile submarines, but also ironically gave Germany the precedent to treat armed American merchant vessels as pirates. “If we arm these vessels,” Lodge cautioned, “or if they arm themselves ... and are made prisoners, under our own statutes they can be deemed pirates and treated in that way”³⁷ The ambiguity of “amity” and “piracy” was at the debate’s forefront. Do U-boats represent literal “piracy,” or was this merely a rhetorical invective? Former Attorney General Geroge Wickersham told a reporter, “If precedent is wanting, let the President treat the submarines and those who operate them like the pirates they are. In the olden days every merchant ship mounted a gun or two to give the pirates what was coming to them. Why not treat the pirates of today in the same way?”³⁸ Acting Attorney General Thomas Gregory agreed and validated the legality of Wilson’s executive order, paving the way for the *Aztec* to become the first armed American merchant ship in the First World War.³⁹ However, as the *Aztec* was nearing the end of its two-week voyage on April 1, Wilson had already abandoned the “armed neutrality” policy, unbeknownst to everyone on board.

According to Charles Nakalo, the conditions were ominously rough as the *Aztec* approached the French coast. They were only nine miles from the island of Ushant, but strong winds, high seas, and gusts of rain and hail battered the ship as it pushed forward with all its lights cautiously turned off. At 9:30 pm, Lieutenant William Fuller Gresham, the officer in charge of the gun crew, told the chief engineer, “I consider this the most dangerous night we have had, and if we get by tonight, I feel we will be pretty safe.” Immediately after speaking these words, “there was a flash like a sheet of lightning.”⁴⁰ As the ship listed rapidly to starboard and water flooded the deck and cabins, Captain O’Brien ordered everyone to abandon ship.

With rough seas and no working lights, crewmembers struggled to dispatch lifeboats safely. “Seven of the crew got excited,” Nakalo recalled, “and try [sic] to launch the boat No. 2, which were on the weather side [and] they were all smashed between the lifeboat and the ship side ...”⁴¹ One of these men was fellow Hawaiian sailor Ekela Kaohi. Nakalo crammed with eighteen others, including O’Brien, Gresham, and the Navy gunners, into boat No. 1. The four other Hawaiians, Davis, Kanai, Macomber, and Rice, crowded with the remaining crew into boat No. 3. After only fifteen minutes, both lifeboats had lost sight of one another, and the *Aztec* was entirely underwater. The two powerful five-inch guns mounted forward and aft went with it—never discharged. Though it is unclear when it happened, boat No. 3 capsized. All twenty-one men drowned. A French patrol boat picked up Nakalo and the others in boat No. 3 over four hours later. “I didn’t have any shoes or hat on,” Nakalo lamented, though relieved, “I was frozen and could hardly speak.”⁴²

U-boat Lieutenant Commander Leo Hillebrand had already established himself as a seasoned underwater ace when he ordered the surprise attack on the *Aztec*. In the previous two years, the 32-year-old had participated in the Battle of Jutland, the only major naval battle of the First World War, and had sunk twenty ships on the Atlantic, costing seventy-seven lives and a tonnage of 38,913.⁴³ He was an integral player in Germany’s unrestricted submarine warfare campaign and the recipient of the Iron Cross 1st class, the Friedrich August Cross, and the Royal House Order of Hohenzollern for his exceptional service to the German war effort.⁴⁴ Epitomizing the German pirate stereotype, he followed his commands after his superiors had warned American sailors and those of other neutral nations that the success and pageantry surrounding the *Orleans* voyage should not induce other ships, like the *Aztec*, to try their luck.⁴⁵ The U-46 under Hillebrand’s command was so stealthy when it approached and fired upon the *Aztec* that some American naval officers assumed for years that it must have been the victim of a German mine, not a torpedo.



Figure 4: Propaganda Poster by William Allen Rogers, depicting the horrors of German piracy. “Only the Navy Can Stop This.” New York: U.S. Navy Publicity Bureau, 1917. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Lithograph. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001700444/>. Public Domain.

In their deliberations for declaring war, Wilson and Congress refrained from using the words “pirate” and “piracy” to describe Germany. They also refrained from naming or discussing specific individuals who had died on the *Aztec* or other torpedoed merchant vessels. Germany’s attacks on merchant ships were the *casus belli*, but the victims themselves had to remain an afterthought. Though this might seem callous, it was part of a larger foreign policy strategy. Wilson was adamant that he never appeared emotional or imprudent in his decision-making. He figured correctly that declaring war over the deaths of a few American merchant mariners on contested waters would not be seen by the world powers or even most Americans as a reasonable recourse. In expressing his dissatisfaction with armed neutrality, he repeated Senator Lodge’s earlier concern, mentioning how Germany had “conveyed that the armed guards which we have placed on our merchant ships will be treated as beyond the pale of law and subject to be dealt with as pirates would be.”⁴⁶ In step with his characteristic and oft-criticized idealism, Wilson appealed mainly to higher, yet vaguer, principles of freedom and democracy. He wanted Germany and the world to know that sovereignty and free trade concerns motivated the United States’ entrance into the war. This required him to make an important, albeit tenuous, distinction between the German government and its people.

Wilson and Congress understood it was blatantly hypocritical to fault Germany for its submarine blockade while ignoring that its existence was a desperate response to the original Allied blockade. The latter was acceptable to Wilson, but the former was anathema to “the humane practices of civilized nations” and represented “warfare against mankind.” To take the moral high ground, Wilson blamed the German government and its military, not its people or culture: “We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship.”⁴⁷ His war, Wilson insisted, was against the “little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools.”⁴⁸ Framing the war as the result of a clash between democracy and autocracy minimized room for publicly discussing the individual victims of sunken merchant ships. Hence, on the national stage, the *Aztec* victims faded into the background. In Hawai‘i, however, territorial politicians and the press had other motivations and expectations. In Davis, Kaohi, Kanai, Macomber, and Rice they found not nameless victims or apolitical working-class sailors, but rather patriotic martyrs who gave their lives protecting American freedoms from encroaching German pirates. It was no surprise, then, that they brought news of their deaths directly to Her Majesty Lili‘uokalani, the last reigning monarch of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

The day after Wilson addressed Congress, several politicians visited Queen Lili‘uokalani’s home at Washington Place, where allegedly she made her last political act. Fragile and primarily confined to a wheelchair at the age of seventy-eight, she permitted for the first time the raising of the Star-Spangled Banner over her home to salute the Hawaiians aboard the *Aztec*. Since the overthrow of her monarchy in 1893 and her stint under house arrest in 1895, Lili‘uokalani refused to fly the American flag or visit the new Territorial capitol. Yet, according to one reporter, Lili‘uokalani gave an emphatic “yes” when her private secretary, Colonel Curtis Iaukea, informed her of the Hawaiian sailors’ deaths and asked if she would like to raise the American flag over her home. Because of the respect and loyalty that attendees of this intimate flag-raising ceremony paid to Lili‘uokalani, the reporter noted, “one could imagine as if she were still their reigning sovereign.”⁴⁹

Many interpreted Lili‘uokalani’s decision to raise the American flag as an indication that she had finally reconciled with the overthrow and annexation of Hawai‘i. The *Honolulu-Star Bulletin* reported on its front page how the “queen allowed the flag to be flown in honor of the government which years ago was responsible for her loss of a monarchy.”⁵⁰ “The news that Hawaiians had been killed in the progress of the German submarine campaign,” another reporter declared, “was the deciding factor in persuading her to take this step.”⁵¹ Other news outlets framed the former Queen as a stubborn relic who had finally come to her senses: “Once a bitter opponent of constitutional rule ... She who sought to be a despotic ruler, before her death contributed her share toward winning the war for world democracy.”⁵² “So there has been added to the list,” another

writer proclaimed, “of those in official opposition to Germany our only American Queen.”⁵³

It is likely, however, that the politicians and press vested in war with Germany politicized this gesture to underscore the appearance of Hawai‘i and Hawaiians as unanimous in their support. Given the Queen’s approval, even the most skeptical congressmen on the mainland could not deny that Hawaiians had come to see themselves as proud Americans eager to rise to the occasion of war. But her actions might have represented nothing more than a commemorative toast to those who had died on the *Aztec*. There is no substantial evidence that it symbolized for her a new appreciation for the United States or herself as an American citizen. The *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*’s treatment of the event raises questions about Lili‘uokalani’s mental health and capacity to make informed decisions at that time.

*Queen Liliuokalani’s growing feebleness has lessened her interest in the present and outside world. Visitors who have talked with her recently say she seemed not to understand fully the magnitude of events now shaping in Europe, but that her eyes kindled at mention of her garden. Accordingly, President Chillingworth of the senate was asked yesterday if the flag had been flown by the Queen’s order. “Yes,” he said, “by her order, but not of her initiative. The suggestion was Colonel Iaukea’s, but the Queen quite understood the significance of the act and the reasons for it, and the order was hers.”*⁵⁴

Either way, it was certain that Lili‘uokalani’s actions carried considerable weight in 1917 and meant a great deal to individuals like Charles Nakalo, a survivor of the *Aztec* tragedy. In his letter to the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, he signed off with a postscript to Lili‘uokalani: “Thanking our Queen for her kindly remembrance to us boys off the ill-fated S.S. *Aztec*.”⁵⁵

After the United States Consulate in Brest, France, released the victims’ names to the press, local reporters in Hawai‘i visited the home of at least one of their families for a statement. A reporter for the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* questionably interrupted a family gathering at the Macomber residence in the Makiki neighborhood of Honolulu, where “ukulele and guitar were twanging merrily” to inform Julian’s father, Charles Macomber, that Julian had been killed at sea.⁵⁶ He was stoic and ambivalent upon receiving the news: “I am glad. I am glad to get this news. Not glad that my boy is dead, but glad to know that he died as he did.” Echoing Julian’s earlier response after being warned that sailing on the Atlantic was deadly, he affirmed, “My boy died as an American sailor, a Hawaiian sailor, would want to die—and I am glad.” Reportedly, “Not a word was said to spread the information the father had received, but there was something in the air that brought the gaiety to a sudden hush. The musicians eased their instruments and the company broke up and departed.” Julian’s mother, Kaukani

Macomber, was ill and intentionally not yet told what had happened. Allegedly, though, “she knew that something was wrong, for she talked agitatedly with her guests until she was soothed by a few words in Hawaiian by her husband.”⁵⁷ The quiet honor and pride that Charles Macomber expressed for Julian and his dual American and Hawaiian identity proved perfect fodder for generating support for the war effort.

Newspaper coverage in Hawai‘i claimed the moral high ground while still condemning the attack as an unambiguous “murder.”⁵⁸ Framing it as if it were Hawai‘i’s own *Lusitania*, the torpedoed ocean liner that killed 128 Americans in 1915, was a surefire way to trigger public outcry against Germany. Operating under the assumption that no other options existed besides war, an article in the conservative *Hawaiian Gazette* incited Native Hawaiians to enlist. Under the headline “Blood Calls to Blood,” the article argued that race-based nationalism should galvanize Native Hawaiians to fight for the legacy of their brothers lost on the *Aztec*:

*... to the Hawaiian race thus falls the honor of sharing in the first episode of the greatest war this nation, of which they are a part, has ever ventured. These boys, whom doubtless thousands of us knew, will not have died uselessly. Their deaths will help steel the arm of this nation and heighten the resolve that there will be no laying aside of the sword until the German pirates have been hunted off the seas ...*⁵⁹

The Hawai‘i Territorial Legislature underscored racialized calls to action. When closing a meeting of the House of Representatives, Representative George Kawaha announced the victims’ names and that “a formal entry be made on the records of this house that such adjournment is taken out of respect to [their] memory ... whose deaths may cause us to ‘Remember the *Aztec*’ as much as 20 years ago Americans ‘Remembered the *Maine*.’”⁶⁰ Kawaha’s remark was striking for two reasons. First, he acknowledged that the *Aztec* tragedy should be used as unabashed war propaganda. By 1917, the “Remember the *Maine*” mantra, a shortened version of “Remember the *Maine*, to Hell with Spain,” had come to represent the most egregious example of yellow journalism and American imperialism. Unlike the *Aztec*, the origins of the explosion that sank the USS *Maine* and killed 268 Americans in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898, were unknown. But this did not prevent hawkish politicians and yellow journalists from blaming the explosion on a clandestine Spanish mine. The incident was controversial but played a role in generating American support for the Spanish-American War. Kawaha and his fellow legislators wanted the *Aztec* tragedy to spur similar pro-war enthusiasm throughout Hawai‘i. Second, the remark speaks volumes about Hawai‘i’s complex and unusual place in American history. Indeed, “Remember the *Aztec*” made for a convenient rallying cry. However, by likening the *Aztec* sinking to the *Maine*, which contributed to an extraordinary American land grab in the Pacific Ocean and

Caribbean, Kawaha obscured the painful origins and ramifications of the American annexation of Hawai'i.

After the United States defeated Spain in August 1898, it acquired many of its overseas territories, including Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Hawai'i became entangled in this stroke of imperialism and quickly lost its sovereignty to the rapidly-expanding United States. When considering this, it was ironic that Kawaha framed the killing of Hawaiian men, who were raised in homes that had shown allegiance to the monarchy, under a rallying cry that contributed to Hawaiians unwillingly losing their independence. Several of Kawaha's colleagues in the legislature were originally royalists who had protested American annexation. Yet, by 1917, the political landscape had shifted, with the war providing an unprecedented opportunity to further assimilate Hawaiians into American military culture. The victims of the *Aztec*, Kawaha and the legislature understood, need not have died on the battlefield to contribute to the war effort. Because they were of Hawaiian blood, they were convenient ambassadors for recruitment and the draft.

Of course, the United States military had embraced Hawai'i's strategic location in the middle of the Pacific Ocean for decades—it was prime geo-political real estate. And although Native Hawaiians had fought in American wars in the past, this was the first time they would participate as American citizens. Using the victims of the *Aztec* as conscription tools for the American military confirmed their status as honorary soldiers and bona fide heroes. They were made emblematic of a growing climate in Hawai'i where it was reasonable and often desirable to identify as both “Hawaiian” and “American.” The Territorial Legislature deliberately appropriated the legacy of these young men to knit Washington D.C. and Honolulu closer together.

Judge Clarence Ashford, a controversial figure who had once served as Attorney General of the Kingdom of Hawai'i and later played a pivotal role in overthrowing the monarchy, politicized their deaths even further by petitioning the Territorial Legislature for a memorial service:

... the blood of these five Hawaiians constitutes the first contribution of aboriginal Hawaiian blood to the cause of civilization in the colossal battle now being waged upon land and sea in Europe. I would respectfully suggest that it would be a graceful, appropriate and patriotic course for the two houses of our legislature to pursue, should they within a very few days hence, hold a joint memorial service in honor of those Hawaiian victims of Prussian fury. Such a course would, I feel assured, have a wide effect in kindling and maintaining the patriotic fervor of Hawaii and Hawaiians at this critical juncture.⁶¹

With widespread support, a memorial service was organized on the grounds of the Capitol in Honolulu on April 22, 1917. A popular newspaper printed invitations

issued by House Speaker Henry Holstein denouncing the German threat: “In memory of the Sons of Hawaii who perished as victims of the ruthless submarine warfare waged by the German Empire against the world.”⁶² Hawai‘i was marching toward war and, as Ashford stated plainly, the goal of a memorial service was not to commemorate the lives the victims had lived and the relationships they had had with their families and loved ones, but rather to kindle and maintain “the patriotic fervor of Hawaii and Hawaiians.”⁶³ Though no one in the Territorial Legislature opposed holding the service, the proceedings were entirely a Republican affair.⁶⁴ All the speakers at the *Aztec* memorial service were Republicans who favored President Wilson’s decision to declare war. The optics made this clear.

Held on an overcast Sunday morning after days of unusually excessive rain and heat, the memorial service attracted several thousand attendees, with Boy Scouts serving as ushers. The gray skies and light breeze, according to one Hawaiian-language newspaper, was an auspicious sign of “ke aloha no keia mau hana maikai no ka hoomanao ana i na mea aloha i hala (love for the good deeds performed in memory of the loved ones who passed away).”⁶⁵ The Legislature allocated two hundred dollars to erect a large platform in front of the steps of ‘Iolani Palace, the capitol building and former seat of the Hawaiian monarchy, and decorate it with a large Star-Spangled Banner and flag of Hawai‘i situated side-by-side. Seated on the platform were Hawai‘i Governor Lucius Pinkham, Honolulu Mayor John Lane, and a cadre of military leaders, including General Fredrick Strong of the United States Army, General Samuel Johnson of the United States National Guard, and Captain George Clark of the United States Navy. According to the *Honolulu-Star Bulletin*, which supported Wilson’s war declaration and echoed its chief talking point, the military leaders’ presence emphasized that “the Hawaiians died in the service of their country—in upholding American right of legitimate commerce at sea.”⁶⁶

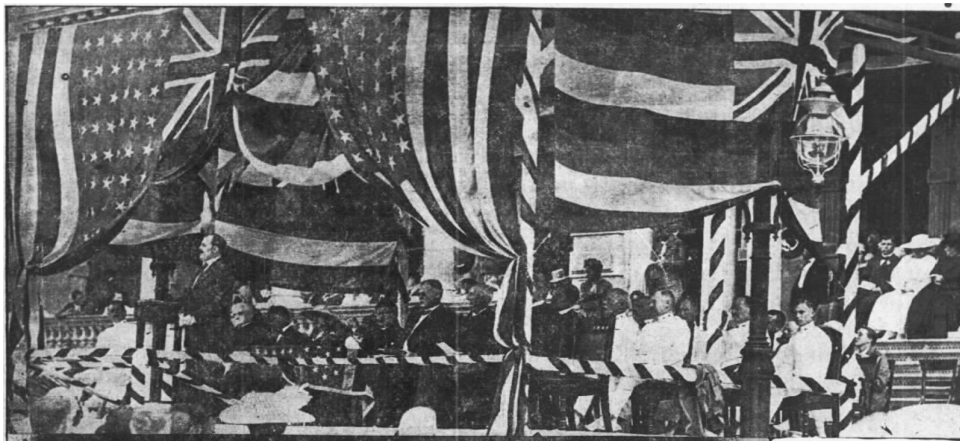


Figure 5: Politicians and the family of the deceased gathered on the steps of ‘Iolani Palace at the *Aztec* memorial service. *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 23, 1917. Photograph. University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, Honolulu, HI. Public Domain.

The Territorial Republicans responsible for organizing the event were seated beside them, specifically Senate President Charles Chillingworth, House Speaker Henry Holstein, Senator Stephen Desha, and Representative Lorrin Andrews. Beside them were the grieving families of Kaohi, Macomber, and Rice. This included Kaohi's mother, brother, four nieces, and four nephews; Macomber's parents and three siblings; and Rice's parents and four siblings. For reasons unknown, no one from Davis or Kanai's family attended the service. Behind, on the palace's balconies, sat consular representatives of Great Britain, Spain, France, China, and Japan. It was a stately affair. The presence of sailors and soldiers, all instructed to attend in formal white uniforms, gave the appearance of a military funeral.⁶⁷ Absent from the memorial service was Queen Lili'uokalani. According to a communication sent to the Territorial Senate, she was invited to the proceedings but could not attend because of "her present and enfeebled condition."⁶⁸

The service was equal parts political rally and religious observance. The memorial resembled a weekly Protestant liturgy. Proceedings began with the Hawaiian Band playing the national anthem and Senate President Chillingworth offering opening remarks. The Normal School choir sang "Hail Columbia" before an invocation by Reverend Lincoln Kaumeheiwa, pastor of the renowned Ka'ahumanu Church in Wailuku, Maui.⁶⁹ Making the trip to Honolulu was part of Kaumeheiwa's duty as chaplain of the House of Representatives. Reverend Akaiko Akana, the chaplain of the Senate, then read scripture and led opening prayers.⁷⁰ The Hawaiian Band returned to perform the classic hymns "Old Hundred" and "Saul" before giving the stage to Representative Lorrin Andrews, one of the service's two designated orators.

Andrews' passionate speech on the meaning of the American flag and the reverence it deserved hinged on the assumption that it symbolized the culmination of Western Civilization's greatest achievements. "What shall be said of the Flag we venerate," he asked the audience, "the Flag for whose sake the young men whose death we commemorate today gave their lives?" Of course, besides Macomber's earlier remark to his father that he did not "intend to be scared out by a German submarine" because he was a proud Hawaiian and an American sailor, there is little evidence to support this claim. Patriotism might have factored into the Hawaiian sailors' decision to accept their position on the *Aztec*, but we cannot be sure. That the victims of the *Aztec* had willingly sacrificed themselves to protect the American way of life was a mostly specious claim. Convenience and compensation surely were primary motivations. "Our Flag represents all that is best and wisest in human government," Andrews exclaimed, "It represents the fruition of the seed that was planted ages ago when the monotones of the Mediterranean chanted first the cradle songs, and later the requiems of republics long since dead, but whose immortal principles still survive." In a zealous push to encourage Hawaiians to support or join the war effort, Andrews made two more misleading claims: first, that

even before annexation, Hawaiians were always Americans at heart; and third, that Germany was exceptionally violent and posed a unique threat to the United States:

This is not the first time that the young men of Hawaii have shown their willingness to give their lives for their country. In the dark hours of the Civil War when it looked as if national life would be blotted out and our Flag disappear from the nations of the world, the young men of Hawaii heard the call of liberty and traveled to the mainland, there to shed their blood for the sacred principles of liberty and equality of all mankind, regardless of race. When the nation was threatened in the Spanish war, the young men of Hawaii were among the first to volunteer, and in the jungles of the Philippines, fought with savages to carry out our ideas of civilization and progress. Whenever the Flag has called—wherever it has pointed—the young men of Hawaii have been ready to follow. They have not hesitated. They have not asked reasons and their devotion to their country has been as sincere as those whose ancestors fought at Bunker Hill, and, now, a new war threatens our country and, lo, the young men of Hawaii have been among the first to lay down their lives.

While it is true that over one hundred Hawaiians fought in the Civil War, serving in the armies and navies of both the Union and Confederacy, the motivations of individual participants were far more diverse than Andrews suggested. The Hawaiian Kingdom was officially neutral. Some enlisted because they had cultural or economic ties to New England, while others wanted to play a role in ending slavery. Others were simply opportunistic. Already laboring in the United States when the war broke out, they figured service was a means of upward mobility. Moreover, during the Spanish-American War and subsequent Philippine-American War, expansionists embracing the Darwinian logic of New Imperialism considered Hawaiians, like Filipinos, “savages” in need of civilizing. They, too, were America’s “little brown brothers.” Remember, the United States annexed both Hawai‘i and the Philippines in 1898. To significant effect, Andrews romanticized Hawaiians’ place in American history and projected a common American national identity onto their nuanced past. Andrews concluded with a broad vilification of Germany and a call to arms.

These five men were not trained fighters. They were simple folk—lighthearted boys, personally known to many of you who honor their memory today. They were our people. They belonged to us. ... And they met an enemy as crafty and ruthless as any since the days when barbarians waged warfare for massacre and plunder. ... This was no act of warfare. It was a deliberate and downright murder. ... These Hawaiian boys are the first from these Islands to give up their lives for

these principles. It may be that many of us here, before this war is over, may follow in their footsteps. It may be that this ruthless and brutal tyranny will desolate the homes and shrines of our people; but here today in commemoration of their death, let us resolve that they shall not have died in vain and that the people of these Islands shall shrink from no sacrifice, shall hesitate at no danger which shall interfere with our devotion to our Flag, our country, our principles and our God.⁷¹

When Andrews took his seat, the Normal School choir sang “Hawaii Pono’i,” a regional anthem that King David Kalakaua had originally written as the Hawaiian Kingdom’s national anthem. The song divided the English language portion of the service from the Hawaiian language portion. According to nearly all press coverage, the highlight of the service was Hawaiian Senator Stephen Desha’s rousing Hawaiian-language address.

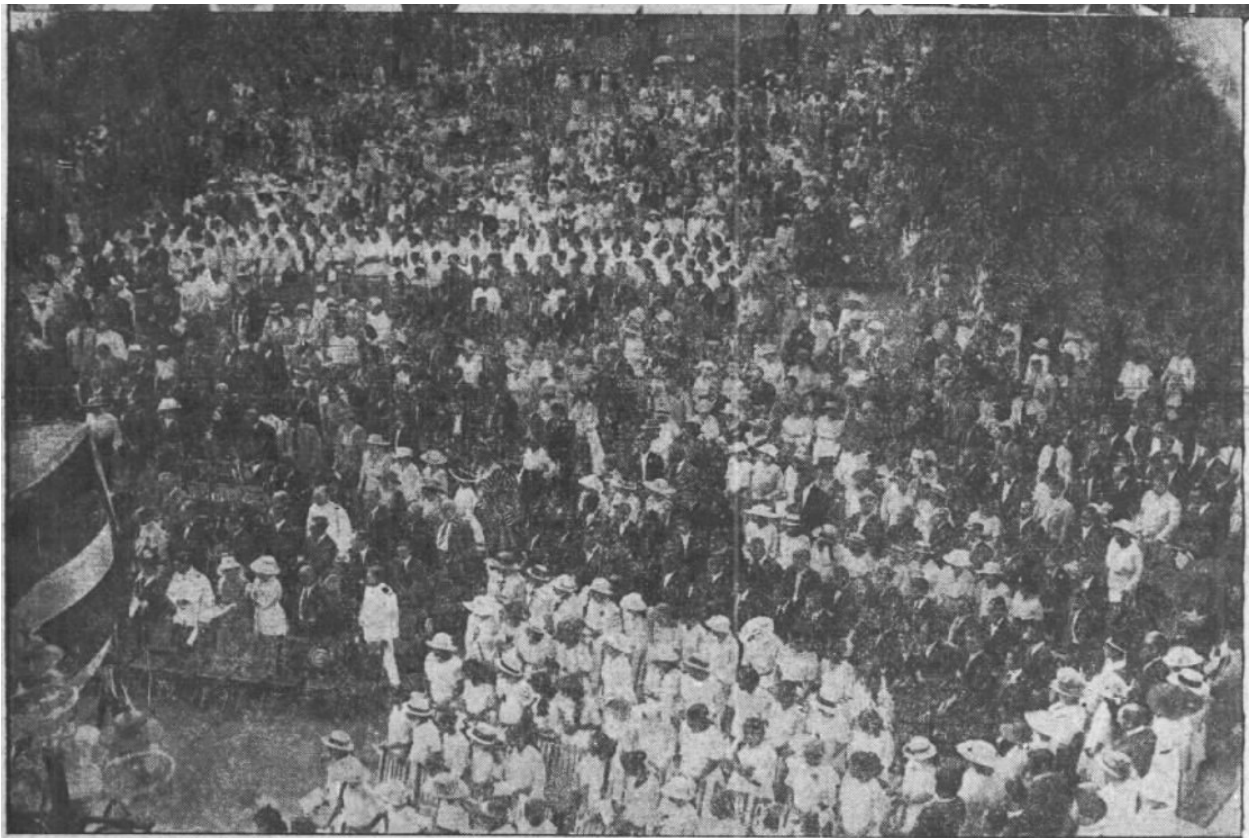


Figure 6: Attendees of the Aztec memorial service. *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 23, 1917. Photograph. University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, Honolulu, HI. Public Domain.

With a reputation as “Hawaii’s silver-tongued orator,” Desha gave a fiery speech that praised the deceased and delved into Biblical scripture and Hawaiian history.

Something of a renaissance man, Desha had served as a pastor, author, supervisor of the County of Hawai‘i, and editor of the Hawaiian-language newspaper *Ka Hoku o Hawaii* before his election to the Senate in 1913. He was also a talented musician and expert on Hawaiian history and mythology. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* called his speech that day “splendidly eloquent” and claimed that “as he dwelt with sympathy on the loss of the families of these young men many Hawaiians were moved to open emotion.”⁷² Despite such praise, English-language newspapers like the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* did not contain a transcription of what was said since their assigned reporters did not understand Hawaiian. Instead, they merely described the sentiment of the speech in a few sentences. Desha’s decision to speak only Hawaiian rather than English demonstrated that the service was an event for Hawaiians above all else, signaling them out in a diverse crowd comprised of individuals of European, Japanese, and Chinese descent. The significance of this act must not be overlooked.

By speaking Hawaiian at what was believed to represent a turning point in Hawaiian and American history, Desha demonstrated how the language still mattered in political discourse. By the turn of the twentieth century, it was no longer the official means of communication in government affairs. The Board of Education had prohibited it as a language of instruction in public and private schools. In a widespread effort to Americanize Hawaiian children, teachers discouraged students from speaking their Native language on school grounds or at home. Despite such efforts, the language remained the vernacular for many Hawaiians and a source of pride and inspiration, particularly for Desha, who in the past had been celebrated and criticized for lecturing his colleagues and constituents in Hawaiian. Desha realized English would not resonate with the target audience as his native tongue could.

As the bedrock of their identity and culture, the Hawaiian language connected Hawaiians to their history as an independent kingdom and was living proof of their endurance as a people. Hawaiian-language media endured even as the islands became increasingly integrated into the United States. Though Desha’s address was not at all a rebuke of Hawai‘i status as an American possession, it did demonstrate profoundly how Hawaiians asserted their own identity as they prepared for the first time to participate in a war as American citizens. A nearly complete transcription of his speech appears only in the Hawaiian-language newspaper *Ka Puuhonua o na Hawaii* (The Observer of Hawaii) and not the far more popular *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* or *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*. This illustrates how many Hawaiian-language newspapers operated according to their own perspectives and did not simply parrot what could be found in the ubiquitous English-language press, nearly all of which endorsed or catered to the Republican platform. Moreover, it underscored Desha’s success at reaching a predominantly Hawaiian audience in a distinctly Hawaiian manner.

“He la hoomanao keia,” Desha announced, “no na Keiki Oiwi o ka Aina, e hoomanao ana hoi i na mua i aloha i hala aku iloko o ka opu hohonu o ka moana ma o

ka hoopahuia ana e na enemi ma ka Moana Atelanika (This is a day of commemoration for our Native Children of the Land, we remember passionately and with aloha how they passed into the deepest depths of the ocean due to the actions of our enemy on the Atlantic).⁷³ To help appease his audience's grief, Desha cited three anecdotes from the Bible about fathers losing their sons as a part of divine providence. Besides serving as a general take on mourning, it was also a nod to Charles Macomber, Julian's father, who had told a reporter he was "glad" his son died as a proud American and Hawaiian sailor. Speaking as if he was giving a sermon, Desha first referenced the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors as a parable for the *Aztec* tragedy:

*Aia hoi, o kekahi elemakula ohohina e noho ana ma kona home, e kali ana no kana mea aloha; ua hala ae kekahi mau manawa, aia hoi, ike aku la oia i kana poe keiki e hoi mai ana; a ia lakou i hiki mai ai i ka home o ka makua e noho aku ana me ke aloha keiki; eia nae, ua waiho ia mai la imua ona ke kapa i kiheahea i ke koko; "aole anei kela o ke kapa o kau keiki o Iosepa, ua haehaeia e na ilio hihui hae. Ae, ola no, o ke kapa no kena o kuu keiki, alaila, hapai ae la oia i kona mau lima ... ("Behold, this gray-haired old man [Jacob] sitting in his home, waiting for his most beloved son; some time passed, and behold, he saw his other children returning; they arrived at the house of their father who was living with the love for his child; however, the children placed a robe stained in blood before him; "Is it not the robe of your son Joseph—torn apart by wild untamed beasts." Yes, it was so ... indeed it was the robe of his favorite child; and so, he raised his hands in sorrow ...).*⁷⁴

Joseph served as a stand-in for the five victims and Jacob for the grieving parents and the greater Hawaiian community. Although the "na ilio hihui hae" (wild untamed beasts) might have conjured images of an aggressive pirate Germany, those familiar with the story understood that Joseph was not dead but had been enslaved and sold by his jealous brothers to a party leaving for Egypt, where eventually Joseph befriends the Pharaoh and becomes second-in-command. He later reconciles with his brothers and saves them and their bereaved father from famine. The story suggests that God had planned these events to save the tribes of Israel. The message was that Davis, Kaohi, Kanai, Macomber, and Rice died for a greater purpose. They, too, might have put into motion acts that would ultimately save their people. But, Desha noted, no one can know God's will.

He elaborated with references to the stories of Job and King David, two other biblical patriarchs who had grieved over the untimely deaths of their sons. "I ka manawa o kana mau keiki i lawe ia aku ai mai iala aku" (When Job's children were taken away from him), Desha proclaimed, he said: "E hoomaikai ia o Iehova, Nana no i haawi mai a Nana no i lawe aku" (Praise be to Jehovah, for He does giveth, and He does taketh

away). Desha called on the audience to lean on their faith and put their trust in God's hands. Like King David hearing news of Absalom's death, Hawaiian fathers cried out in vain for "kuu keiki" (my son). But, Desha insisted, we must continue "e noho ana ola iluna o ka hanohano a me ka ikaika" (living a life of dignity and strength" to honor those who had given their lives. "E haaheo kakou" (We are proud), Desha insisted, "i ko kakou mau Keiki Oihi Hawaii i haawi i ko lakou mau ola maluna o ka hana ... oia make ana he makemake hanohano (of our Native Children of Hawaii who gave their lives in service ... to die in such a manner is a desirable honor).

By framing the young men as heroes who had upheld military standards of excellence and were now in the hands of "ke Akua" (God), Desha glorified their deaths to shore up patriotic fervor. "Ua haawi aku ko kakou mau Keiki Oihi Hawaii i ko lakou mau ola no hai, oiai e lawe ana lakou i na mea i e ola ai ko Enelani poe, aka, ua poino nae a waiho aku la iloko o ka opu o ka moana" (Our Native Children gave up their lives as a sacrifice, indeed they brought items to aid the people of England, but, alas, tragedy struck, and now they are inside the stomach of the ocean). Nevertheless, Desha proclaimed, their legacy would withstand the test of time and come to represent a critical moment in American and Hawaiian history: "e like me ka loihi o ke kau ana o keia Hae Hoku, ka Hae o ka wiwo ole a me ke Kuokoa, pela no e mau ai ke o ia ana o keia mau Oihi Hawali o kakou, a no ka mea, o ka moku mua loa keia i poino ma hope koke iho no o ke kukala ana o ka Presidena Wilson i ke kaua me Geremanie" (as long as this star-spangled banner shall be hoisted, the flag of the brave and the free, so shall these Native Hawaiians of ours continue to live, because this was the very first ship destroyed just after President Wilson declared war on Germany)." Hence, never forget that they were "Ka mua iloko o ka hana" (The first in the service); "Ka mua iloko o ka hookauoha" (The first in the order); and the "Ka mua iloko o ka Lahui Hawaii" (The first of the Hawaiian Nation).

To marshal Hawaiians for the military, Desha concluded his address by quoting Kamehameha the Great before the Battle of Kepaniwai, one of the most brutal and influential moments in Hawaiian history. In his quest to consolidate control over the island of Maui, Kamehameha faced strong opposition from the ali'i nui (supreme chief) Kalanikūpule. To inspire his regiment of approximately 1,200 warriors, Kamehameha reportedly told his anxious soldiers, "E o'u mau pokii, e hele imua a inu i ka waiawaawa, aohe hope e hoi ai" (My brothers, go forward and drink from these bitter waters. There is no turning back). With his emphasis on "imua" (to move forward) despite adversity, Kamehameha rallied his men to win the battle, paving the way for Hawai'i's transformation from a collection of chiefdoms to a unified state with a central monarchy. Therefore, the phrase became synonymous with Hawaiian nationalism and collective resilience. As Desha exclaimed, "E a'o mai ana ia oukou e na opio o Kamehameha i keia la a me na opio e ae o na Oihi Hawaii, e hele imua aole e hoi i hope" (He is teaching you, the youth of Kamehameha today, and other young Native Sons, go

forward, there is no turning back). Hawaiians in attendance would have been familiar with the famous battle cry since it had already become a local proverb. Unlike his co-speaker Lorrin Andrews, Desha prioritized the Hawaiian experience over the American. It was the most explicit display during the service of coupling Hawaiian nationalism to the war effort. Hawaiians needed to draw inspiration from their greatest historical figure, who ruled the islands long before the United States had a stronghold in the Pacific. With those final words, Desha gave the stage to the children of Normal School and the congregation to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” before Reverend Henry Hodges Parker offered a closing prayer.

It is impossible to measure if the *Aztec* memorial service had any direct or lasting impact on enlistment and recruitment. What is known is that nearly ten thousand Hawai‘i residents, including hundreds of Hawaiians, did “go forward” (imua) to serve in civilian and military roles during the First World War. Charles Nakalo, the sole Hawaiian survivor of the *Aztec*, was one of them. After returning to his port in New York City, he enrolled in the Navy and worked at the Brooklyn Naval Yard as a 2nd class Boatswain’s mate.⁷⁵ Although he was never discharged for active duty, he joined many other Hawaiians in doing their part to expand the American merchant fleet and improve labor conditions for American seamen. The International Seamen’s Union and other labor leaders leveraged the fate of sunken vessels like the *Aztec* to secure a new industry-wide decision-making fifty percent bonus for all crews traveling through the contested submarine zone.⁷⁶

Despite serving as the primary catalyst for the United States’ entry into the First World War, the details surrounding sunken merchant vessels have received surprisingly little attention from scholars. The significant roles that Hawaiians played on these vessels have hitherto received even less attention.⁷⁷ This is surprising considering the impact these events had on the course of the war and the subsequent rise of the United States as a global power, an arc that benefitted from a convenient foil. The image of the ruthless German pirate colored decision-making and popular opinion from Washington D.C. to Honolulu. The *Aztec* memorial service’s framing of Hawaiian patriots against German pirates reflected larger concerns over freedom of the seas. This article spotlights five unassuming Hawaiian men whose deaths shocked their community and reflected the transformative powers underscoring life on the Islands. The First World War provided politicians and the press a platform to further integrate Hawai‘i into the United States’ military and cultural fabric. However, power dynamics in Hawai‘i were far from unidirectional, defying a simplistic narrative of colonizer and colonized. The *Aztec* memorial service and its motives reveal the intricate interplay between Americanization efforts and the continuation of Native Hawaiian identity. The narrative of a Hawaiian struggle against German piracy helped reconcile Hawaiian heritage with the expectations of American citizenship in wartime.

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Notes

¹ The Organic Act of 1900 formally established the Territory of Hawai‘i and its government, marking the culmination of Hawai‘i’s transformation from an independent kingdom to a United States territory. It conferred U.S. citizenship on citizens of the former Republic of Hawai‘i, which included most of the Native Hawaiian population.

² See: “Make Eha Mau Keiki Hawaii i Na Kelemania,” *Ka Nupepa Kuokoa*, 6 April 1917, 1; “Elima Keiki Hawaii i Make,” *Ke Aloha Aina*, 6 April 1917, 1.

³ “Elima Keiki Hawaii i Make,” *Ke Aloha Aina*, 6 April 1917, 1.

⁴ “U.S. Owes it to Self-Respect to Act, Says Roosevelt; ‘Piracy on a Vast Scale,’” *New York Tribune*, 8 May 1915, 1.

⁵ For a detailed study on all ten American merchant ship losses that provoked the United States to enter the First World War, see Rodney Carlisle, *Sovereignty at Sea: U.S. Merchant Ships and American Entry into World War I* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009).

⁶ “Steamer Aztec is Torpedoed at Night Without Warning,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 April 1917, 8.

⁷ For a deeper examination of the Seaman’s Act and its legacy in labor history, see: Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seaman in the World’s First Globalized Industry* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

⁸ "United States Census, 1900," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-6Q17-2VX?cc=1325221&wc=9B73-VZ4%3A1030549601%2C1030549602%2C1030621701> : 5 August 2014), Hawaii Territory > Hawaii > ED 55 Kau (Waiohinu) > image 5 of 18; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

⁹ "Hawaii, Naturalization Records, 1838-1991," database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSMG-1S1Y-B?cc=2842680>: 11 July 2019), > image 1 of 1; Hawaii State Archives, Honolulu.

¹⁰ Ancestry.com. *Massachusetts, U.S., Boston, Crew Lists, 1811-1921* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2019. Original data: Massachusetts, Boston, Crew Lists, 1811-1921. Salt Lake City, UT, USA: FamilySearch, 2016. Crew Lists, 1810-1918. NAI 4672201. Record Group 36: Records of the U.S. Customs Service, 1745-1997. National Archives at Boston. Waltham, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

¹¹ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:2:9XH6-WSW> : accessed 26 July 2022), Household of Julian Macomber, Honolulu, Honolulu, Hawaii, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 24, sheet 8A, family 58, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1982), roll 1753; FHL microfilm 1,375,766.

¹² "First Islanders Killed in War With Germans Part of Aztec's Crew," *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, 3 April 1917, 1.

¹³ "United States World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-G1XM-D24?cc=1968530&wc=9FZR-16D%3A928312401%2C928951301>: 4 October 2019), New York > New York City no 40; N-Z > image 15 of 3099; citing NARA microfilm publication M1509 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

¹⁴ "New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island), 1892-1924", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JJZM-L36> : 2 March 2021), Charles Nakalo, 1917.

¹⁵ "Honolulu Boy Signed Whiskers of Death—Now in National Service, *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, 16 September 1917, 5.

¹⁶ Ancestry.com. *U.S., Consular Registration Certificates, 1907-1918* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2013. Original data: Consular Registration Certificates, compiled 1907–1918. Archives at Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Ekela Kaohi's sister-in-law and niece also signed the petition.

¹⁸ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:2:9XH6-HK2>; accessed 26 July 2022), Household of Eunice K Dower, Honolulu, Honolulu, Hawaii, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 30, sheet 11B, family 107, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1982), roll 1753; FHL microfilm 1,375,766.

¹⁹ Honolulu, Hawaii, City Directory, 1912-1914. Ancestry.com. *U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

²⁰ Ancestry.com. U.S., Consular Registration Certificates, 1907-1918 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2013. Original data: Consular Registration Certificates, compiled 1907–1918. ARC ID: 1244186. General Records of the Department of State, 1763–2002, Record Group 59. National Archives at Washington, D.C.

²¹ The National Archives at Washington, D.C.; *Lists of Merchant Seamen Lost in World War I*; NAI: 2789082; Record Group Title: *Records of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, 1774-1982*; Record Group Number: 41; Schedule: *Schedule A: Officers and Seamen in the American Merchant Marine*. Ancestry.com. *U.S., World War I List of Merchant Seamen Lost, 1914-1919* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

²² "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch*, (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6P3C-D16?cc=1325221&wc=9BW8-MJM%3A1030549601%2C1030865101%2C1031003401> : 5 August 2014), Hawaii Territory > Honolulu > ED 25 Honolulu District > image 10 of 36; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

²³ Honolulu, Hawaii, City Directory, 1908. Ancestry.com. *U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

²⁴ "Local Athlete and Student is Victim of U-Boat," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 5 May 1917, 1.

²⁵ In a letter to the press, Nakalo claims that Davis was from Tahiti. However, official records always classify him as "Hawaiian."

²⁶ I have not been able to locate Davis in any census records. It is possible that John Davis was not his birth name. Though his origins are unclear, because he was received as a Native Hawaiian, I treat him as such.

²⁷ It is possible that Kanai's family name was actually "Pineoppu" or "Pinnopu." Charles Nakalo refers to him as "Chas. Pumoku." Kanai might have been a misspelling of his home island, "Kauai." I refer to him as "Charles Kanai" simply because this is how he was named in the memorial service and press coverage.

²⁸ "U-Boat Just Missed Orleans, Now Back," *New York Times*, 1 April 1917, 7. "Orleans in Port Lionized by French," *New York Times*, 27 February 1917, 3. "Bordeaux Greeted Crew of Orleans," *New York Times*, 28 February 1917, 4.

²⁹ Woodrow Wilson, "Message Regarding Safety of Merchant Ships," February 26, 1917, Miller Center, University of Virginia, accessed November 12, 2025, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/february-26-1917-message-regarding-safety-merchant-ships>.

³⁰ U.S. Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 2nd sess., March 1, 1917, 4673–74 (H.R. 544 / debate on H.R. 21052, Arming of American Merchant Ships), accessed November 12, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/64/crecb/1917/03/01/GPO-CRECB-1917-pt5-v54-5-2.pdf>.

³¹ U.S. Congress, *Appendix to the Congressional Record*, vol. 55, 65th Cong., 1st sess., "War and Neutrality: Extension of Remarks," April 11, 1917, 41, accessed November 12, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1917/04/11>.

³² "German Submarine Blockade: Arming American Merchant Ships and the Events Attending It," *Current History (1914-1940)*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Part 1, April 1917, 51.

³³ "German Submarine Blockade," *Current History* 6, no. 1, pt. 1 (April 1917): 52.

³⁴ "Threaten Recall of Senator Lane," *New York Times*, 6 March 1917, 1-2. "Deluge of Demands to Oust La Follette," *New York Times*, 5 October 1917, 7.

³⁵ "The Community Vocally," *The Daily Missoulian*, 8 October 1917, 4.

³⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 2nd sess., March 2, 1917, 4749 (debate on S. 8322, Armed Merchant Ships), accessed November 12, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/64/crecb/1917/03/02/GPO-CRECB-1917-pt5-v54-6-1.pdf>.

³⁷ U.S. Senate, *Cong. Rec.* (Mar. 2, 1917), 4749..

³⁸ "Wickersham Holds Wilson Has Power," *New York Times*, 5 March 1917, 4.

³⁹ "Gregory Asked for Opinion," *New York Times*, 6 March 1917, 1. "Senate Adopts Closure 76 to 3," *New York Times*, 9 March 1917, 1.

⁴⁰ "Gresham Tells of Aztec's Last Hour," *New Britain Daily Herald*, 30 April 1917, 5.

⁴¹ “Hawaiian Survivor of Aztec Tells His Story in Letter to the Star-Bulletin,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 9 May 1917, 1.

⁴² “Hawaiian Survivor of Aztec,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 9, 1917, 1..

⁴³ By the end of the war, Hillebrand had sunk 52 ships and a tonnage of over 130,000.

⁴⁴ Yves Dufeil, *Kaiserliche Marine U-Boot 1914-1918: Dictionnaire Biographique des Commandants de la Marine Imperiale Allemande [U-Boat Commanders 1914-1918: Biographic Dictionary of the German Imperial Navy]* (France: Histomar Publications, 2009), 31. For more on Hillebrand and other U-boat commanders, see: “Kapitänleutnant Leo Hillebrand - German and Austrian U-Boats of World War One - Kaiserliche Marine - Uboat.net.” Uboat.net., n.d. <https://uboot.net/wwi/men/commanders/127.html>.

⁴⁵ “German Regret American U-Boat Defiance,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 March 1917, 2.

⁴⁶ Woodrow Wilson, “Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany,” April 2, 1917, National Archives, accessed November 12, 2025, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/address-to-congress-declaration-of-war-against-germany>.

⁴⁷ Statements like these proved disingenuous since Wilson and his administration infamously fanned the flames of open discrimination against German Americans and German American businesses and institutions.

⁴⁸ Wilson, “Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany,” April 2, 1917.

⁴⁹ “An American Queen,” *The Outlook*, 30 May 1917, 178.

⁵⁰ “Queen’s Home is Flag-Decorated; First time in History,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 3 April 1917, 1.

⁵¹ “The Queen is Dead,” *The Outlook*, 21 November 1917, 452.

⁵² “Liliuokalani Dead,” *Idaho County Free Press*, 15 November 1917, 3.

⁵³ “An American Queen,” *The Outlook*, 30 May 1917, 178.

⁵⁴ “Stars and Stripes Fly Above Queen At Visit of Solons,” *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, 4 April 1917, 1.

⁵⁵ Charles Nakalo, “Hawaiian Survivor of Aztec Tells His Story in Letter to the Star-Bulletin,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 9 May 1917, 1.

⁵⁶ The Macombers had relocated to Honolulu from the Big Island a few years before.

- ⁵⁷ “First Islanders Killed in War with Germans Part of Aztec’s Crew,” *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, 3 April 1917, 1.
- ⁵⁸ “First Islanders Killed in War with Germans Part of Aztec’s Crew,” *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, 3 April 1917, 1. “Hawaii Honors Sons of Territory Who Died By German Ruthlessness,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 23 April 1917, 6.
- ⁵⁹ “Blood Calls To Blood,” *Hawaiian Gazette*, 6 April 1917, 4.
- ⁶⁰ “Hawaiians Believed Lost with Aztec are Honored,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 3 April 1917, 1.
- ⁶¹ “Hawaiians Believed Lost with Aztec are Honored,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 3 April 1917, 1.
- ⁶² “Public Invited to Memorial for Lost Hawaiians,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 17 April 1917, 2.
- ⁶³ “Public Invited to Memorial for Lost Hawaiians,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 17 April 1917, 2.
- ⁶⁴ In 1917, the Republican Party in Hawai‘i was the majority party by a wide margin, outnumbering Democrats in the Senate and House of Representatives four to one. The Republican establishment represented an unusual coalition between wealthy haole (white) businessmen and Native Hawaiian judges, lawyers, and lawmen. The former had ties to the “Big Five” corporate oligarchy that controlled the sugar industry and dominated Hawai‘i’s economy; as such, they had disproportionate influence over territorial affairs. In contrast, the latter were of more modest backgrounds, despite some having previous ties to the Hawaiian monarchy or the short-lived Hawaiian nationalist Home Rule Party. Prince Jonah Kūhiō, a member of the Kalakaua royal family, controversially became a Republican in 1902 and was elected Delegate to the US House of Representatives. Kūhiō was integral to building a haole-Hawaiian alliance that by 1917 had reached a status quo where, for better or worse, the legitimacy and electability of each depended on the other.
- ⁶⁵ “Halawai Hoomanao,” *Ka Puuhonua o na Hawaii*, 27 April 1917, 2.
- ⁶⁶ “Hawaii Honors Sons of Territory Who Died By German Ruthlessness,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 23 April 1917, 1.
- ⁶⁷ “Wear White Uniforms,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 21 April 1917, 3.
- ⁶⁸ Senate Journal, Ninth Legislature of the Territory of Hawaii, Regular Session, 1917. *Hawaiian Gazette*, 1917. 949-950.

⁶⁹ The Ka‘ahumanu Church was known for its commitment to conducting services in the Hawaiian language.

⁷⁰ One year later Akana became the first Hawaiian pastor of the historic Kawaiaha‘o Church in Downtown Honolulu, where he would serve for fifty-four years.

⁷¹ “Honor U-boat Victims, Crowds at Memorial Service,” *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, 23 April 1917, 7-8.

⁷² “Hawaii Honors Sons of Territory Who Died By German Ruthlessness,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 23 April 1917, 6.

⁷³ “Halawai Hoomanao,” *Ka Puuhonua o na Hawaii*, 27 April 1917, 4.

⁷⁴ “Halawai Hoomanao,” *Ka Puuhonua o na Hawaii*, 27 April 1917, 4.

⁷⁵ Nakalo was never called for active duty. His service took place entirely in New York.

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Reports of the Department of Commerce, 1917: Report of the Secretary of Commerce and Bureaus* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1918), https://www.google.com/books/edition/Reports_of_the_Department_of_Commerce_Re/gKkXAAAAYAAJ?hl=en. Joseph Jordan, “Here is the Man Who Gets the Men to Man the Ships of the U.S.A.,” *Long Beach Press*, 18 December 1917, 10.

⁷⁷ For additional information on Hawai‘i and Hawaiians’ role in the First World War, see historian Anita Manning’s work at: <https://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/hawaii-wwi-centennial-articles.html>. I am deeply grateful to Anita, whose request in 2017 to help translate Desha’s speech for the Hawai‘i World War I Centennial Task Force first inspired my interest in the sinking of the *Aztec*. Without her initiative, this article would not have come to fruition.