The United States Naval Railway Battery in WWI

During the First World War, the Allies were losing an artillery duel against heavy German guns that could fire at a range of 24 miles. Upon its entry into the war in 1917, the US was asked to provide a gun that could match or surpass these guns. The US Navy was assigned the task, and they chose the largest and longest-ranged available naval gun to fill the gap—the 14"/50 caliber Mk 4 gun. The gun had a maximum range of 25 miles.

Five guns were manufactured at the US Naval Gun Factory, Washington Navy Yard, with the engines and cars manufactured by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Philadelphia, PA. Each battery consisted of a locomotive, gun car, ammunition cars, supporting equipment cars, and accommodation cars for the crew, who were all US Navy Sailors. Each was under the command of a United States Navy lieutenant, and under overall command of Rear Admiral Charles Peshall Plunkett. After crossing the Atlantic, these trains were assembled in St. Nazaire, France in August, 1918. From initial design to the first firing in France, only 230 days had passed.

The guns bombarded sites deep behind enemy lines in northern France with great efficiency. Sailors fired their giant 14-inch 50-caliber guns at German railway yards and freight centers after—not before—Allied infantry attacks had begun. This meant they were hitting the positions when they were most crowded with reserves and ammunition cars being rushed up to support front-line troops. A direct hit from the 1400-pound shells could devastate a railroad line, destroying the rails, smashing the ties to pieces and blowing a crater in the roadbed.

The Sailors of the U.S. Naval Railway Batteries, along with their fellow Sailors at sea, added to the Allied march to victory over Germany in the terrible conflict that was known as "the Great War."

They fired a total of 782 shells on 25 separate active days on the Western Front at ranges between 16 and 22 miles. The last shot was fired by Battery 4 at 10:57:30 a.m. on 11 November 1918, timed to land just before the scheduled Armistice at 11 a.m.

The guns served to support General Pershing's army offensive in the Meuse-Argonne sector of the Western Front in France. They operated as single-gun batteries designated Battery 1 through Battery 5. Combined, the battery units were manned by some 25 officers and 500 enlisted men. Battery 2, commanded by Lieutenant (JG) E. D. Duckett, US Navy, was the first US Navy railroad gun to fire in action on the Western Front. On 6 September 1918 they fired from the forest of Compiegne at the important German railway center of Tergnier in support of an Allied attack.