Assessing Razzle Dazzle
At 1100 on 11 November 1918, the guns fell silent all across the Western Front as the two sides agreed to an armistice. However, it would be several months before the truce became final and all patrolling U-boats received surrender orders: for U.S. Navy Sailors, the war wasn’t over yet.

By February of 1919, the Navy began to return to a peacetime routine, while its transports continued to bring the troops home. Freed from the constant grind of convoy duty and patrols, the Navy could finally take stock of its performance in its first war against submarines.

In 1913, the U.S. Navy approved a recommendation from its aviation section stating that international pilot training standards were not stringent enough to produce qualified carrier pilots. The Navy soon created its own training program to certify naval aviators.
During the rapid post-war demobilization of 1919, the United States Navy was not able to conduct further tests to conclusively determine the effectiveness of Razzle Dazzle camouflage in protecting American ships from the German U-boat threat.

The only hard evidence of Razzle Dazzle’s success came from the maritime insurance industry, which offered reduced premiums to merchants whose ships wore approved camouflage systems. However, the confidence of insurers in camouflage left out the bigger picture.

The variety of other anti-submarine measures used by the U.S. Navy — including convoys, airships, and destroyers — made it impossible to quantify camouflage’s contribution to the Navy’s overall success in neutralizing the U-boat threat. What remains, however, is the good opinion Razzle-Dazzle earned from naval and maritime authorities during its trial by fire in 1918.
In the end, less than one percent of merchant ships wearing Razzle Dazzle camouflage were torpedoed during the war, none while under U.S. naval escort. The U.S. Navy lost only one warship to a U-boat during its involvement in the war — a testament to its ability to adapt to its tactics and technology in the face of new challenges.

While the exact credit due to Razzle Dazzle camouflage may never be known, it is clear that the U.S. Navy’s entry into World War I turned the tide decisively: shipping losses to U-boats declined from a high of more than 875,000 tons in April 1917 to just over 100,000 tons by November 1918, a decrease of almost 90 percent.

This ratchet was used to alert Sailors of poison gas in the event of a chemical weapon attack. In France, Sailors kept their gas masks close at hand, ready to don them at the first alarm.

USS New York led the American battle fleet in European waters during World War I, helping the British keep the German fleet trapped in port.
The work of America’s Razzle Dazzle pioneers was not forgotten after 1918. At the beginning of World War II, many navies’ ships still wore distortion camouflage inspired by Razzle Dazzle during the previous war, to protect against both submarines and surface combatants.

After World War II, distortion camouflage gave way to low visibility systems, as optics improved. During the Cold War, electronic countermeasures — systems that confused or evaded enemy sensor technology — increasingly took over the role that visual camouflage previously filled, but did not entirely replace it.

In the 21st century, advanced sensors and guided weapons permit attacks from beyond visual range, but today’s warships still wear visual camouflage — indeed, one can hardly imagine an American warship today without its signature “Haze Gray” scheme.

A century of amazing technological developments has only proven again and again that the ideas of Thayer, Brush, and Wilkinson still have a place in military thought, and will remain applicable into the foreseeable future.