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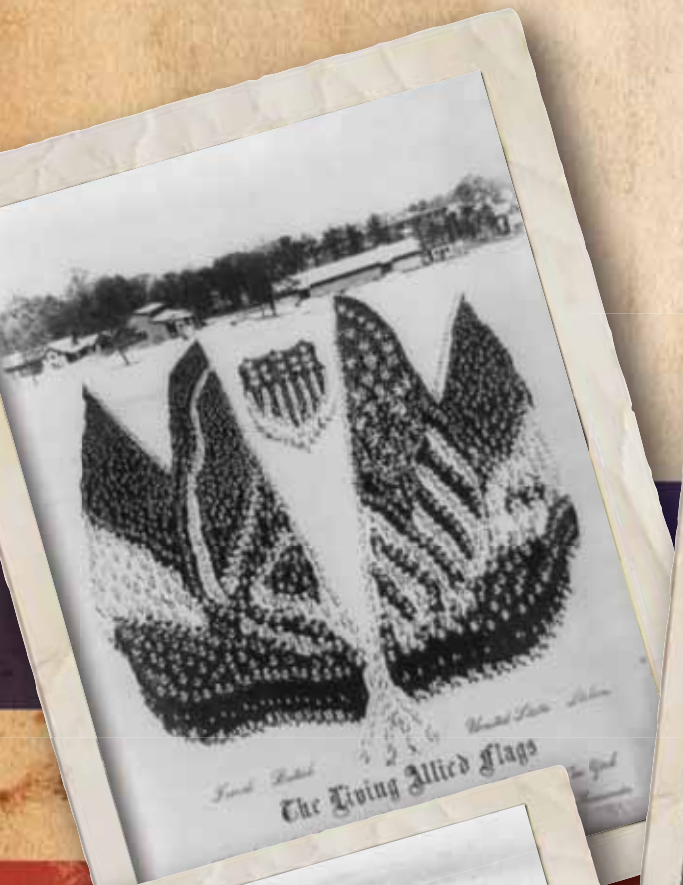
# PATRIOTIC POSES

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“Living Photographs” from MOLE & THOMAS

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by Karen Schmitt



The *DTJ Almanac*, NDTA's signature publication, represents membership demographics, Chapter achievements, and profiles of military associates and corporate patrons—our collective energy, so to speak. As I was preparing for this issue, a friend sent a photo by email that caught me by surprise. "You won't believe this . . . probably another urban myth!" The photo was an image of the Statue of Liberty composed entirely of WWI soldiers stationed at Camp Dodge, Des Moines, Iowa.

After some research, I learned that an original photo was located at the Library of Congress, part of a portfolio presented to Joseph Daniels, Secretary of the Navy (1862-1948). I made an appointment to view the whole set. The images of soldiers, marines, and "bluejackets"—awaiting assignment to battlefields in Europe, I supposed—were captivating. Standing side by side, proud and brave, they revealed a collective force from times gone by, one ready to safeguard freedoms just as NDTA members and associates do today.

Arthur S. Mole and John D. Thomas made these "living photographs," to use Mole's terminology, to boost the war effort and public morale. No matter what your first impression—curiosity, shock, or doubt—their work definitely captures attention.

**A**rthur Mole (1889-1983) was a British-born commercial photographer based in Zion, Illinois. During and shortly after World War I, he traveled with his partner John Thomas from one military camp to another, posing thousands of soldiers into gigantic patriotic symbols that they photographed from above. Their bird's eye view formations depicted familiar icons such as the Statue of Liberty, the Marine Corps emblem, and the Liberty Bell, its crack prominently configured, hinting at Mole's concern with detail. The pair typically spent a week or more preparing for the portraits, which were taken with an 11-by-14-inch view camera. Their work soon served as a rallying point to support American involvement in the war.

Mole met Thomas at the Zion Tabernacle, a structure that could seat up to 10,000 people. John Thomas was the church choir director and later the "choreographic director" for the patriotic poses. He was a natural fit for the project.

When making the group photos, they first traced the symbolic shape on a ground-glass plate mounted on Mole's camera. Then it was outlined on the field with fabric staked to the ground where the group would assemble. A sample section within the outline was used to calculate the total number of men needed to fill in the whole space. Next, it was determined

## MILITARY FORMATION PHOTOGRAPHS

**Mole & Thomas**  
Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs Division  
LOT 5357  
Gelatin Silver Print  
c. 1917-1918

**THE HUMAN US SHIELD**  
(on Almanac cover)  
Camp Custer, Battle Creek, MI  
Brig. Gen. Howard L. Lauback,  
Commanding Officer  
30,000 Officers and Men

**THE HUMAN LIBERTY BELL**  
Camp Dix, NJ  
General Hugh L. Scott,  
Commanding Officer  
25,000 Officers and Men

**"SINCERELY YOURS"**  
PORTRAIT OF  
PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON  
Camp Sherman, Chillicothe, OH  
Brig. Gen. Mathew C. Smith,  
Commanding Officer  
21,000 Officers and Men

**HUMAN STATUE OF LIBERTY**  
Camp Dodge, Des Moines, IA  
Col. Wm. Newman,  
Commanding Officer  
Col. Rush S. Wells, Directing  
18,000 Officers and Men

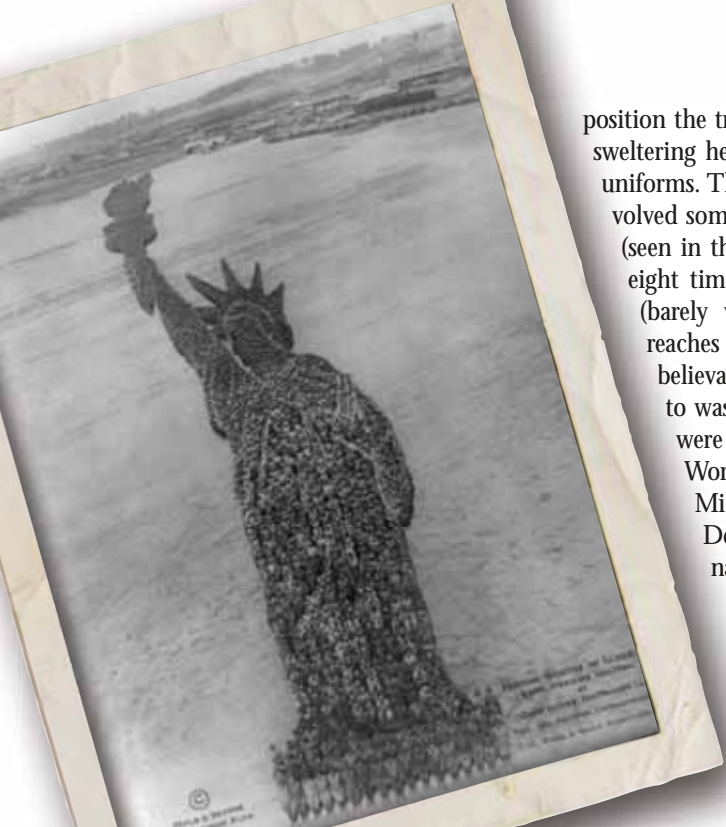
**MACHINE GUN INSIGNIA**  
Machine Gun Training Center  
Camp Hancock, Augusta, GA  
Brig. Gen. Oliver Edwards,  
Commanding Officer  
Lt. Col. E.P. Pierson, Directing  
22,500 Officers and Men  
600 Machine Guns

**NAVY IMAGE**  
US Naval Rifle Range, Camp Logan, IL  
Ensign S.M. Abrams,  
Commanding Officer

**THE LIVING ALLIED FLAGS**  
US Naval Training Station,  
Pelham Bay, NY  
William B. Franklin,  
Commanding Officer

**NOTE:** This list only notes military formations of national emblems, although Mole and Thomas also prepared group images according to other themes (religious icons, for example). Troop numbers, as listed, were provided from Library of Congress records available with the images.





position the troops, who often endured sweltering heat in standard issue wool uniforms. The Lady Liberty photo involved some 2000 men for the body (seen in the foreground) and nearly eight times as many for the torch (barely visible in the far upper reaches of the photo) to convey believable perspective. This photo was taken before the soldiers were shipped out to France for World War I. The Gold Star Military Museum at Camp Dodge, Iowa, has an original print.

Any large group could have been used to compose a patriotic image, but stationing servicemen within the grid underscored the fact that nu-

was challenge enough, but think of what it took to actually send soldiers to battle. According to Hines, “Among the many things the US was wholly unprepared to do [upon entry into World War I] was that of moving a large force overseas. Our Navy stood third among the great naval forces, but our transport fleet stood last.”

Eventually, other photographers were inspired by the “living photograph” technique, like Eugene Omar Goldbeck. But in peacetime, and with “less motivation for military officials to cooperate,” the Mole and Thomas model lost its influence. Likewise, modern history books seem to prefer the documentary style photos of life (and death) in the trenches over the home spun pictorials from Mole and Thomas. Copies do pop up online since so many pictures were originally made. Many Americans had purchased photos as a patriotic statement, and Mole was quick to offer photos for sale to everyone who had posed. But before you judge his actions as “capitalistic,” it should be noted that he did not prosper. Mole and Thomas donated the entire income to the families of the returning soldiers and to this country’s efforts to re-build their lives as a part of the re-entry process—another parallel to NDTA members who give so much in support of the warfighter. *DTJ*

If attempts were made to recreate patriotic portraits today, how would they measure up? Efforts to produce Lady Liberty at Scott Air Force Base, for example, would fall severely short if USTRANSCOM headquarters alone were called into action (currently, 1030 Active Duty and Reserve Components serve at headquarters). In 1917-18, the Mole and Thomas metric required 18,000 people—the greatest concentration positioned farthest from the photographers. So even if the entire military population of Scott Air Force base joined in (7829 Active Duty, Reserve Component, and National Guard as of the ‘05 EIS), the image would lack substantial portions of the Liberty’s raised arm and her hallmark torch that lights our way.

	USTRANSCOM Headquarters	Scott AFB* *2005 Economic Impact Study (EIS)
Active Duty	760	5884
Reserve Component	270	1138
National Guard		807

who would wear dark uniforms and who would wear light colored ones to mimic the black and white photographic tones.

Mole directed the crowd by megaphone from a tower built just for this purpose (as high as 80 feet). He moved the “human pixels” into position by means of voice commands, grossly animated gestures, and a flag for pointing directions. Close ups of photo sections are especially endearing since it’s possible to pick out a nod here, a conversation between friends there. Descendants have been able to spot loved ones standing in the front rows.

Needless to say, it took many hours to

merous troops were on the front lines. The American populace was, for the most part, unaware of how many troops had shipped overseas, which added to the powerful impact.

Brigadier General Frank T. Hines, USA Chief of Transportation Service at the time, reported, “During the first month of war, there was dispatched abroad 1,718 personnel pertaining to the Army . . . . When the armistice was signed the total embarkations amounted to approximately 2,100,000 troops and marines.” Pondering the logistics of assembling a couple thousand men on a base field for a photo shoot

## RESOURCES

- Brigadier General Frank T. Hines “Transporting the American Army – First Official Story of the Marvelous Achievements Is Told in the Simple Words of the Man Who Is Now Getting the Men Home” (The New York Times, June 1, 1919)
- Oliver Jensen “America’s Yesterdays – Images of Our Lost Past Discovered in the Photographic Archives of The Library of Congress” (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1978)
- Louis Kaplan “Dead Troops Salute” (Cabinet Magazine, Issue 24, Winter 2006/2007)
- “American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century” (University of Minnesota Press, 2005)
- “A Patriotic Mole: A Living Photograph” (The New Centennial Review, Vol. 1, No. 1; Michigan State University, Spring 2001)