



Hospital Ships Are Hopes Afloat



by George S. Nammack

Many readers have seen and some may have been aboard these roomy, usually white-hulled, ocean-going vessels with either a large red cross or red crescent painted on each side. The red markings signify that they are to enjoy Geneva Convention protection, having been built to serve primarily as medical facilities or hospitals for wounded personnel in wartime. Most are operated by the military of various nations because, though "neutral" and unarmed, they are supposed to be used in or near war zones. Though firing on a bona fide hospital ship generally constitutes a war crime, a Japanese submarine sank the Australian hospital ship *Centaur* on May 14, 1943 off the coast of Queensland, generating a memorable wave of international revulsion.

Hospital Development

We would like to open with some background on the busy blessings that we know as hospitals, a word derived from the Latin (*hospitium*) where guests (*hospes*) were received. According to available records, places for the assembly of the ailing with facilities for their care were created when man established his first communities. Pre-Christian people identified some of their deities with healing powers as early as 4,000 B.C. Early temples were dedicated to Saturn, Asclepius and Hygieia and were used as medical schools for practitioners and resting places for patients under observation or treatment.

Greece, Egypt, Babylonia and India maintained the world's original hospitals, with India probably having the world's first hospital system. By the 4th century A.D., Christian church members in the Roman Empire had set up hospitals for cripples, lepers, the blind and the sickly poor. The Hotel Dieu in Lyons, France was founded A.D. 542, and the Arabian kingdom's hospitals functioned throughout Spain, North Africa and western Asia. About 1155, the Augustine nuns became the first solely nursing order. In A.D. 1123, St. Bartholomew's hospital was established in London and The Hospital of Jesus of Nazareth, founded by Cortés in Mexico City in 1524, became the oldest institution with continuous service in the Americas.

In 1793, France initiated the unheard of unshackling of mental patients; three years later, England started vaccinating hospital patients against smallpox. In the United States, the Quaker-founded Philadelphia Almshouse began in 1732 to treat the insane and ultimately became Philadelphia General Hospital. Pennsylvania Hospital, established 1751, was the first one in the United States constructed solely for sick and injured persons. Later came New York Hospital, Massachusetts General in 1811, and New Haven Hospital in 1826.

In 1854, during the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale, a courageous volunteer nurse with the British army, created the first effective coordination of scientific medicine and humani-



"USS Red Rover" tied up astern of "USS General Sterling Price," on the Western Rivers during the Civil War.

tarian care of patients in hospitals. Her theories were applied all over the world. In the United States, her May 12 birthday has been celebrated as National Hospital Day since 1924. Since 1863, the Red Cross has coordinated hospitals' service programs for disasters and emergencies like fire, flood, famine or military occupancy.

Early Hospital Ships

An early (pre-Geneva Conventions) hospital ship was the *USS Red Rover* in the 1860's. This famous vessel aided the wounded soldiers of both sides during the American Civil War. The only Confederate States hospital ship mentioned in literature was *Star of the West*, renamed *CSS Saint Philip*. Other pre-Geneva Convention hospital ships included *USS Intrepid*, *USS Ben Morgan*, *USS Home*, *USS Illinois*, *USS Pawnee* and *USS Relief II*. Post-Geneva Convention hospital ships, all bearing telling names, were *USS Relief*, *USS Solace*, *USS Comfort*, *USS Hope*, *USS*



"USNS Comfort" ported in Baltimore. This ship assisted in the 9/11 recovery operation in NYC.

Mercy, *USS Bountiful*, *USS Samaritan*, *USS Refuge*, *USS Haven*, *USS Benevolence*, *USS Tranquility*, *USS Consolation*, *USS Repose*, *USS Sanctuary*, *USS Rescue*, *USNS Mercy* and *USNS Comfort*.

During both World War I and World War II, some passenger liners were partially converted to hospital ships. *RMS Aquitania* and *HMHS Britannic* were two such ships that undertook this noble mission. During World War II, the German *SS Deutschland* became a hospital ship, but in the teeming waters and riotous minds of that war's

closing days, it was insufficiently red-marked as a hospital ship and was sunk by British air attack with a substantial loss of lives.

The last British Royal Yacht, *HMV Britannia*, was built in such a way as to be easily convertible to a hospital ship, but it never served in that capacity. *USNS Mercy* and *USNS Comfort* are hospital ships currently operated by the United States Navy. They are the largest naval ambulances extant. Both are converted oil tankers.

United States Army hospital ships:

USAHS Acadia, *Aleda E. Lutz*, *Algonquin*, *Blanche F. Sigman*, *Charles A. Stafford*, *Chateau Thierry*, *Comfort*, *Dogwood*, *Emily H.M. Weder*, *Ernest Hinds*, *Ernestine Koranda*, *Francis Y. Slanger*, *Hope*, *Jarrett M. Huddleston*, *John L. Clem*, *John J. Meany*, *Larkspur*, *Louis A. Milne*, *Mactan*, *Maetsuckyer*, *Marigold*, *Mercy*, *Relief*, *Republic*, *Seminole*, *Shamrock*, *St. Mihiel*, *St. Olaf*, *Tasman*, *Thistle*, *Wisteria*.

Today's United States Navy hospital ships

There are currently two, which are maintained by the Military Sealift Command and are part of the Naval Fleet Auxiliary Force (NFAF). *USNS Comfort* (T-AH 20) participated in Operation Desert Storm and Desert Shield. It is the former oil tanker *SS Rose City*, the keel of which was laid in 1975 and launched as a tanker in 1976. Commissioned as a hospital ship on December 1, 1987, it has a length of 894 feet, and a beam of 106 feet. This single-prop vessel draws 33 feet, has a speed of 17.5 knots, a helicopter platform and no armaments. Her homeport is Baltimore, MD and her substantial crew includes 956 Naval medical staff, and 258 Naval support staff.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, *USNS Comfort* was deployed to New York City and served as a floating base for rescue workers. In mid-2002, she visited both the North Sea and the Baltic Sea for exercises. In late 2002, *Comfort* was deployed to the Arabian Sea to support Operation Enduring Freedom.

Receiving, Supply, and Guard Ships

A receiving ship is any vessel that serves as a point of induction into the service for new recruits. These vessels were not constructed for this specific purpose, rather they were appointed. This usually occurred at the end of a vessel's combat career when it was deemed best for the vessel to remain in port, at anchor. Modifying ships serving in this manner included removal of all weapons and building housing units on the main deck.

When released from receiving duties, most of these once proud vessels were decommissioned or transferred to a state's Naval Militia. When active, the receiving ships' actual medical duties were based upon space available, proximity of local naval hospitals, and the availability of medical staff. Receiving ships acted as hospital ships occasionally and in different roles. Refits, if done at all, were done locally.

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