

## Information sheet no 116

# Hospital ships

### History:

During the seventeenth century the hospital ship evolved as a vessel equipped to admit sick and wounded sailors. The role of the hospital ship was to provide essential treatment and convey sailors to the hospitals or lodging houses on shore. It is not known when the Royal Navy first used hospital ships, though the first recorded hospital ship was *Goodwill* in 1608. It was not until after the Restoration that the regular practice of setting aside particular ships was adopted, as before this time naval surgeons and mates were among the complement of all large ships.

Throughout the reigns of Charles II and James II, two ships were kept for this specific use and were brought into commission when war broke out with France in 1689. This number rose to four in 1691 and to six in 1696.

In 1703, during Queen Anne's reign, the staff of hospital ships was enhanced by the addition of nurses and laundresses. By 1705 there were five nurses and three laundresses in addition to eight assistants on each hospital ship.

Conditions upon hospital ships were not good; beer was often bad, the oatmeal, flour and biscuits harsh, mouldy and full of weevils, beef and pork over-boiled and over-salted to disguise its state of decay. Suggestions for changes were made by many surgeons, most noticeably James Christie, surgeon of *Jeffreys* who suggested purchase of fresh meat when the ships touched a port and the shipping of livestock. He also suggested that sailors with infectious diseases should be moved to hospital ships straightway instead of being postponed until they were almost dead, as was the usual case. Several lists of medical stores aboard hospital ships have survived. One is shown at the end of this information sheet for the year 1672.

From 1742 until 1828 stationary hospital and convalescent ships were moored in the main naval ports of England which included Chatham, Plymouth, Portsmouth and Sheerness. They were also stationed at Falmouth, Liverpool, Torbay, Cork and Waterford in Ireland, New York, Bombay and Penang.

There are many records of naval hospital ships in the last decade of the eighteenth century. In 1797 HMS *Argonaut* was the base hospital at Chatham where she remained until 1828. During the China War 1839-1842, HMS *Minden* was the hospital ship for the fleet. Hospital muster books for the period 1793-1854 record the names of twenty-nine vessels employed by the navy as hospital ships.

### First and Second World Wars:

Until the First World War, fully equipped hospital ships were kept with the fleet as long as they could. After engagements, wounded sailors were taken aboard for return to port and base hospitals, though regularly those ships that were returning to port kept their wounded in their own sick bays until they recuperated or could be conveyed directly to the base hospital. In peacetime the base hospital would often be a hospital ship.

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World War One changed this situation as the larger number of casualties led to overcrowding and therefore the ships were unsuitable as base hospitals. Instead they became clearing stations, receiving and treating patients and transferring the more serious cases to shore bases. Hospital ships during World War One also stopped accompanying the fleet on patrol or into battle areas, but remained nearby or in deep water ports.

On the outbreak of World War One the Admiralty ordered the conversion of three ocean going liners into naval hospital ships and another six vessels were taken over as war progressed.

The 1907 Hague convention protected hospital ships as the laws meant hospital ships had immunity from attack if they bore prescribed distinguishing marks. They still could be searched by a belligerent but under no circumstances could a hospital ship be sunk. For daylight identification, hospital ships flew a Red Cross Society flag and carried a broad green band around a white hull, interrupted at strategic points by huge Red Cross symbols. Military hospitals differed in that they carried a red band around a white hull in place of the green. At night, all hospital ships had navigation lights and internal lights at full brilliance, while Red Cross markings on the hull were brightly illuminated and lights were rigged to emphasise the coloured band around the hull. In addition, names and details of hospital ships were notified to all belligerents. Germany and Britain were bound by the same code but the start of hostilities in 1914 meant that this code was not followed.

On 1 February 1917 Germany announced unrestricted warfare on all allied shipping and neutral shipping within a declared area. This also included hospital ships. Eleven British hospital ships were sunk during World War I - five of these were sunk after the February 1917 declaration.

During the Second World War, Naval and Military hospital ships were frequently used together and quite a number were also transferred from one service to another. Only five hospital ships were sunk during World War II.

### **Falklands 1982:**

During the Falklands war, the Navy requisitioned the P&O cruise ship *Uganda* to be converted for use as a hospital ship alongside the survey ships HMSs *Hydra*, *Hecla* and *Herald* which acted as ambulances. *Uganda* sailed for the Atlantic from Gibraltar with 136 medical staff, and her call sign was 'Mother Hen'. The first casualties the ship received were from HMS *Sheffield*. During the campaign, the ship's crew treated seven hundred and thirty casualties, one hundred and fifty of whom were Argentine prisoners.

### **Royal Fleet Auxiliary:**

The Royal Navy's current medical capabilities are provided by Royal Fleet Auxiliary's vessels. RFA *Argus* is a Primary Casualty Reception Ship. Equipped with a hospital with two operating theatres and ninety-five beds, she can accept casualties flown straight out to the ship by helicopter.

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### List of Medical Stores for Hospital Ships 1672. Compiled by James Pearse:

2 or 3 dozen bed rugs and pillows	1 dozen lanterns
About 20 pairs of old sheets	2 brass or copper kettles containing 4 or 5 gals
About 2 dozen old sword scabbards (for splints)	2 skillets, each containing 2 quarts
About 20lbs of fine Tow	1 dozen tin saucepans
6 or 8 bushels of charcoal in cask	6 lbs. of Castle soap
10 or 12 yards of baize for struphs (surgical dressings)	2 anchors of brandy
About 1 dozen pails	1 quarter cask of vinegar
As many cans	5 or 6 bushels of oatmeal
2 dozen large wooden platters	About a hundredweight of French barley
8 or 10 dozen wooden dishes and spoons	2 or 300 lbs. of rice
About 3 dozen wooden bowls	2 bushels of fine flour
6 or 8 dozen bottles	3 cwt. of sugar, about 6d at pound
Twice as many corks	As many currents
1lb of whited brown thread	2 chests of candles
About 3 dozen needles of several sorts	½ lb. of cinnamon
8 to 10,000 pins	3 lbs. mace
2 or 3 pieces of broad tape	2lbs nutmeg
5 or 6 pieces of narrow tape	4 oz saffron
2 bed pans	1 dozen quires thin cashew (tissue) paper
2 large chafing dishes	6 wide candlesticks