

Royal Canadian Navy Medical Service During WWI

(Excerpt from the book *History of the Canadian Forces--the Medical Services* by Sir Andrew Macphail)

The personnel of the Royal Canadian Naval Medical Service during the war (World War 1) consisted of three staff surgeons, eight surgeon lieutenants, and four surgeon probationers. In addition, 24 temporary surgeons and 142 surgeon probationers were serving in England and English waters. These surgeon probationers were first or second year medical students who took a short course in the naval hospital and were sent to sea as medical officers in destroyers or other ships too small to warrant carrying a qualified surgeon.

Surgeon J.A. Rousseau was in command, and all but two of the personnel were Canadians. The naval hospital at Halifax has a staff of three surgeons, two nurses and ten attendants, with accommodation for 50 patients. At Sydney a surgeon lieutenant, a probationer and a sick berth petty officer were stationed for the treatment of officers and men of the patrol area based on that port.

Hospital Ships and Enemy Action

In the work of evacuating the sick and wounded to Canada, the Service employed 5 hospital ships, which made an aggregate of 42 voyages. The names of the vessels, and number of voyages made, and number of patients carried were as follows:

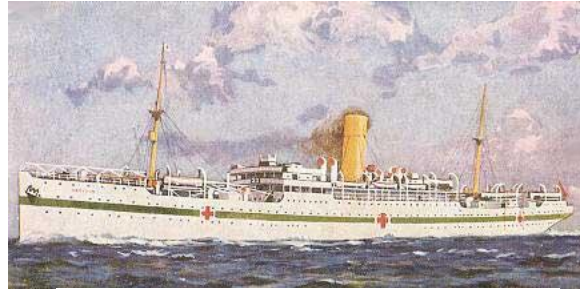
Araquaya	20 Voyages	15,324 patients
Essequibo	9 Voyages	5,106 patients
Llandoverly Castle	5 Voyages	3,223 patients
Letitia	5 Voyages	2,635 patients
Neuralia	3 Voyages	1,950 patients
Totals	42 Voyages	28,238 patients

In addition 5 voyages were made by as many transports carrying 2, 369 convalescent patients.

When sixteen hospital ships had been destroyed by submarines and mines, the melancholy conclusion was forced upon the Admiralty that the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention were no longer a protection from this enemy. Up to this time hospital ships were painted white with a green band from stem to stern and a red cross amidships. By night a row of red and green lights burned around the whole circuit of the ship. In the new circumstances that had arisen all distinctive marks were removed and the hospital ships sailed as ordinary transports. The

equipment was unchanged, but they were designated as ambulance transports; they were armed to repel attack, were supplied with naval escort, and sailed under the Red Ensign. One achievement of the German Navy was to banish the Red Cross from the seas; the White and the Red Ensign remained.

When war broke out there was not in the British Navy a hospital ship. There has been one, but she was wrecked on June 19, 1914. This was the *Maine*, originally fitted out by a group of American women for service in the South African War and subsequently acquired by the Admiralty.



HMHS Letitia

But within four days three ocean steamers, originally designed with such an emergency in view, were converted into hospital "carriers", with medical and nursing staff's complete and full equipment of stores, cots, and bedding. In three weeks six additional ships were in commission, fitted with swinging cots to accommodate 220 patients and space for 300 emergency cases. It was January 3, 1919, before an American hospital ship became available for the American Army, when 245 of the worst cases were embarked at Plymouth.

The cot in the navy corresponds with the stretcher in the army, and from the time the man is placed in his cot after wounded he never leaves it until he is put to bed in hospital. The new standard pattern cot was made of canvas stretched and laced over a wooden frame. At each end was a lanyard and eye so that the cot might be slung. It was a complete bed with mattress, pillow and two blankets, and the canvas sides were ample enough to overlap as additional covering for the occupant. The naval ambulance and ambulance train were the same as those employed in the army except for fittings to receive cots instead of stretchers.

For the disinfection of hospital ships a clever device was employed. The *Aquitania* was fitted with a mechanism for generating hypochlorite from the electrolysis of sea water, using the ship's electric current. The saving in carbolic acid in one voyage alone was sufficient to justify the installation, and the process was so thorough that no cases of secondary infection occurred.

The *Llandoverly Castle*, assigned to the Canadian service was sunk by submarine June 27, 1918. Of the entire ship's company of 258 only 24 survived; and of these only six, one officer and five other ranks, were from the 97 in the medical personnel. Amongst the lost was the whole complement of nursing sisters, 14 in number. The attack was made with utter savagery; even the escaping life-boats were pursued and sunk.

The submarine was No. 86; the commander was First-Lieutenant Helmut Patzig, the first and second officers of the watch were Dithmar and Boldt. Patzig was a native of Dantzig. When war criminals were being sought, he had disappeared; but as his country had then been separated from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles he was no longer amenable to German jurisdiction even if he could be found. The Germans "of their own initiative" arrested Dithmar and Boldt and put them on trial with other war criminals at Leipzig. The Court found that "the act of the Patzig is homicide"; Dithmar and Boldt were held to be accessories, and they were sentenced to four years' imprisonment. The judgement of the Court sets forth all the facts, and the record confirms in every detail the account given by the survivors.

On February 4, 1915, notice was given in the Imperial Gazette, signed by V. Pohl, chief of the German naval staff, that "waters around Great Britain and Ireland are declared in the war zone," as from February 18, 1915. On the same day instructions were given to commanders that "hospital ships are to be spared; they may only be attacked when they are obviously used for the transport of troops from England to France."

The German claim to justification for a departure from this provision is best recorded by Admiral Scheer, "On October 17, 1914, a half flotilla engaged in laying mines in the Downs was attacked and destroyed by the English cruiser Undaunted. The English saved as many of the survivors as possible. After we received the first wireless message that action had been begun, no further news of the torpedo boats was forthcoming, and as we had been lost, we sent out the hospital ship Ophelia to pick up any survivors. However, the English captured her and made her prize, charging us with having sent her for scouting purposes, although she was obviously fitted up as a hospital ship and bore all the requisite markings."

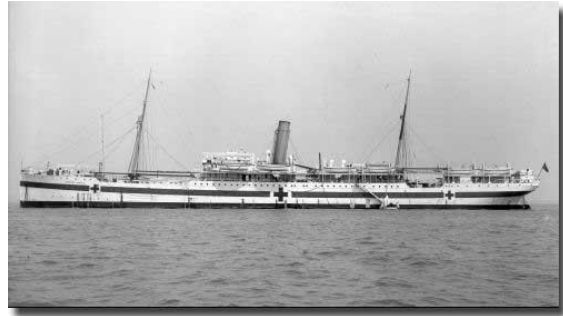


Patient's Aboard HMHS Letitia

The trail before the Prize Court left no doubt that the Ophelia has been used as a signalling ship, but this is the reason given by Admiral Scheer why, "we also considered ourselves released from our obligations and with far more justification took action against hospital ships which, under cover of the Red Cross flag, were patently used for the transport of troops.

Such horrid reasoning from the baseless charge excited even more horror in the mind of the world than the horrible outrage itself. The circumstances as related by the survivors from the Llandoverly Castle were incredible to those who were

not even yet aware of the desperation into which the German military mind had sunk. The lifeboats filled with survivors 116 miles from land were rammed and fired on by the German commander. This sacrifice of women profoundly moved the heart of the world. The Imperial Chancellor was right when, on June 30, 1916, he informed the Commander of the Fleet, which he was against a form of warfare, "which would place the fate of the German Empire in the hands of a U-Boat commander." The thing he feared had come to pass, and the fate of the German Empire from that day was fixed.



HMHS Llandoverly Castle

By similar reasoning it was an easy step to warfare against hospitals on land, and two such attacks were made in due course. Etaples was a congested military area from the beginning of the war. It was a military centre long before the war, and the Germans were not likely to be ignorant of its importance. It was the Portus of the Romans. Here it was that Julius Caesar assembled his troops for the invasion of England, concealing his flotilla in the estuary of the Canche. In mediaeval times it was the main depot of trade across the channel, and has always been the beloved of artists. Etaples was now the center of much Canadian hospital activity. No. 1 General Hospital was installed May 17, 1915; No. 2 followed; then No. 7: No.5 Stationary completed the complement, but there were also many English hospitals in the area.

On May 19, 1918, the enemy raided these hospitals from the air, and again in May 21, 30 and 31. At the moment there were in one hospital alone upwards of a thousand patients, and to make the situation more dreadful, three hundred were suffering from fractured femurs, and incapable of movement. Incendiary bombs were dropped; the buildings burst into flames; and by their light the enemy aeroplanes were able to descend close enough to employ machine guns upon those engaged in rescuing the patients. The first raid lasted two hours. In the four raids the casualties were 15 patients killed and 67 wounded; personnel, 54 killed and 94 wounded. Of the killed three were nursing sisters, and of the wounded seven. No.5 Stationary Hospital suffered most casualties. Four other ranks, and nine patients were killed; three officers, 16 other ranks, and 37 patients were wounded.

Doullens, where No. 3 Canadian Stationary Hospital was installed, suffered in like manner on the night of May 30. In the retreat of March, Doullens became the natural clearing centre for a front of fifty miles, and from March 21 to July 10, -- 93,000 casualties passed through that station. In the case of Etaples there might possible be for the enemy the excuse that other arms of the service were

concentrated in that area: the reinforcement camp, which at times contained 10,000 troops, adjoined the hospital.

But at Doullens the old fort, which housed the hospital, lay well apart from the town, and was surrounded by fields. It has from the beginning been used for hospital purposes alone, and there was no railway or military material in the vicinity. The raid began a few minutes after midnight with a flare and bomb. The hospital was struck. An operation was in process at the time. The two surgeons, three nursing sisters, four patients and 16 orderlies were killed: a sister and 13 other ranks were wounded.