



A research note on the history of ships, places, organisations and events associated with the
Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA)

Hospital Ships and the RFA

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1. Background

During the 20th century the British Admiralty and the British War Office operated over 100 hospital ships and hospital carriers world-wide. Essentially these were passenger ships requisitioned, for the duration, converted and declared for their 'Red Cross' role. They were crewed (navigation and engineering) by merchant navy personnel and staffed by navy or army and civilian medical and nursing personnel. What may surprise many is that during this period the Admiralty deemed it necessary to maintain at least one Hospital Ship in permanent commission and these 'passenger ships' were civilian crewed as Royal Fleet Auxiliaries with a Naval



Fleet Surgeon in charge of the medical assets and role of the vessel.

Under the provisions of international law these ships were protected vessels, declared as Hospital Ships to the International Committee of the Red Cross (Comite International de la Croix-Rouge) (ICRC) in Geneva. This however restricts the ship's use in military situations. For example, she cannot operate forward in a combat zone and personnel treated aboard cannot be pressed back into active combat. Declared ships have to be painted to comply with the International Colour Scheme for Hospital Ships.

Hospital ships. The Hague Conference of July 1899 agreed the Convention for the adaptation to maritime warfare of the principles of The Geneva Convention of 1864. This enabled hospital ships to be recognised and protected Red Cross vessels. Initially termed as HM Hospital Ships (HMHS) since 1905 Britain's permanent hospital ships have operated under the status of RFAs. This also successfully displayed a form of crewing on that is applied with RFAs to this day – that of 'mixed manning'. Crewed by Director of Transports engaged merchant seafarers on standard BoT six-month foreign articles with the driving, that is the safe navigation, maintenance and engineering of the ship, being the responsibility of the Master; the fittings of the hospital spaces and the medical, dental and nursing staffing being the responsibility of the Medical Director-General's Department and afloat came under the charge of a Naval Principal Medical Officer.

Excluding the vital and more obvious wartime role of hospital ships, they have provided worldwide aid and a lasting impression of British good will. Until 1954 these ships, the RFAs MAINE and, for a short time, RFA BERBICE enjoyed the internationally protected status of designated and marked hospital ships. As a modern day successor RFA ARGUS cannot claim this status but nonetheless is a leading example of 'British soft power'. Working as a primary casualty receiving ship her 100-bed equipped hospital and unique facilities surpass what staff on the previous RFA-run hospital ships could never have foreseen.

2. Naval Hospital Ships Timeline

- **1904/1908: unnamed naval hospital ship**

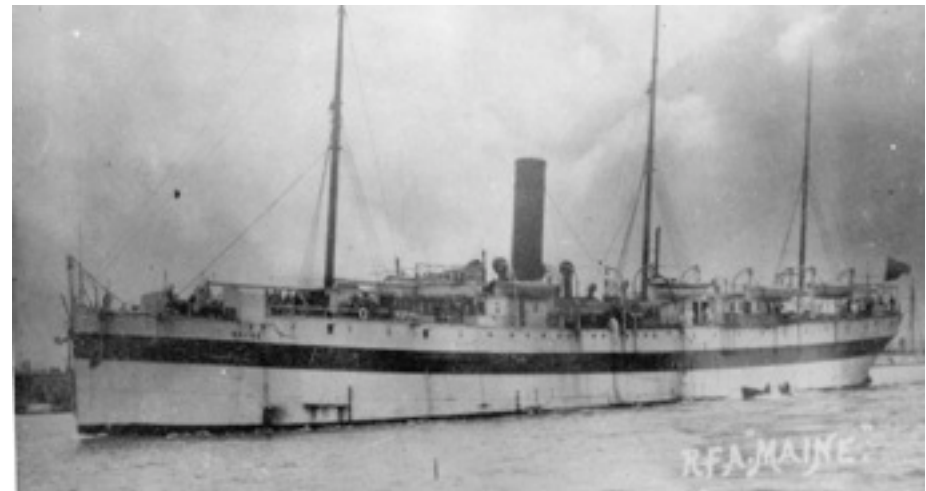
An outline design for a purpose-built Royal Naval hospital ship was prepared by the Controller's Department. This was based on experience working with HMHS MAINE, it was prepared in 1904 and approved by the Medical Consultative Board. A twin-screw steam ship capable of accompanying the fleet and accommodating 270 patients. Crew 125 mercantile officers and ratings plus 77 medical staff. This ship was not ordered.

On re-approaching the subject in 1908 this design was recommended for a second time in a report from the Committee on the Naval Medical Service. Although in both cases it was not clearly stated there is no reason to believe this civilian-crewed ship would not have been operated like **MAINE** (1) – as a Royal Fleet Auxiliary.



- **1905: MAINE (1)**

naval hospital ship, 2,780 grt, length, 315.2ft (oa). Built as the SS SWANSEA by William Gray & Co, West Hartlepool for the Baltimore Storage & Lighterage Co Ltd of London. Single screw, powered by 3cyl triple expansion by Central Marine Engineering Works, West Hartlepool, speed 11 knots. 1888 sold to the Marine Shipping Co, London (Williams, Torrey & Field Ltd, managers) renamed SS MAINE; 1892 owners Atlantic Transport Co Ltd, London; 1899 she was fitted out as a hospital ships for Boer War service; 1900 undertook China service during the Boxer Rebellion; 29.06.1901 formally presented as a gift to the Crown, represented by the Admiralty as HMHS MAINE – the Royal Navy's first permanently fitted out hospital ship to comply with the Geneva Convention. August 1905 re-titled as **RFA MAINE** and served largely in the Mediterranean. 17.06.1914 she grounded in fog off the Isle of Mull; within days salvage attempts were abandoned because of her age and the potential salvage bill and dockyard repair costs. Naval personnel removed personal effects, medical stores and portable equipment. During July the hulk was sold for scrap.



The hospital ship RFA MAINE (1) with her distinctive white hull and prominent green hull band. The painting up of prominent Red Crosses on the hull was not approved until World War One. [author's collection]

- **1913: MEDIATOR** – see under **1914: MAINE (2)**

- **1914: MAINE (2)**

naval hospital ship, 4,688 grt, length 390ft (pp). Completed in 1906 by D & W Henderson, Glasgow as the SS HELIOPOLIS, a cargo ship for the Alliance Steamship Co Ltd, London (Harris & Dixon Ltd, managers); 1908 she was registered under Century Shipping Co Ltd (Harris & Dixon Ltd, managers); 07.03.1913 purchased by the Admiralty, London then to Pembroke Dock for conversion into what was to be a second RFA crewed naval hospital ship to have been named **MEDIATOR**; July 1914, following the loss of **MAINE (1)** she was



renamed **MAINE**. This new ship was considered by some as totally unsuitable for conversion into a hospital ship so it appears fortunate that owing to more important war work, her conversion was not completed. Her unsuitability was finally recognised and in March 1916 she was resold to Harris & Dixon and reverted to name HELIOPOLIS. 1917 sold to Canadian Pacific Railway Co, renamed METHVEN; 1923 renamed BORDEN; 1926 sold to G E Kulukundis, Greece and renamed PERSEUS; 1932 sold to F Bertorello, Italy; 1933 broken up at Genoa.

- **1920: BERBICE**

naval hospital ship, 2,379 grt, 1,225 dwt, length 300.08ft (oa).

Completed 08.07.1909 by Harland & Wolff, Belfast, as a small luxury passenger/cruiser ship BERBICE for the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co, London. Twin screw, powered by 8cyl quadruple steam expansion machinery by the shipbuilders, speed 13 knots. 04.12.1915 she was requisitioned for service as a hospital ship HMHS BERBICE (ICRC number 18) and initially managed by the Royal Mail Steam Packet. 20.08.1920 purchased by the Admiralty for permanent service; converted at HM Dockyard, Portsmouth and then entered service as **RFA BERBICE** on deployment to the Mediterranean station until relieved by **RFA MAINE** (3). BERBICE was the second of two declared ICRC registered permanent naval hospital ships in naval service until she earmarked for disposal under the Geedes Committee's financial cut-backs. September 1922 sold by Board of Trade to Michell Cotts & Co (Sun Shipping), renamed SUNTEMPLE; 1925

sold to the United Baltic Corporation, renamed BALTARA, converted to burn oil fuel; 11.01.1929 wrecked on Weishsee River during bad weather, all passengers and crew saved.



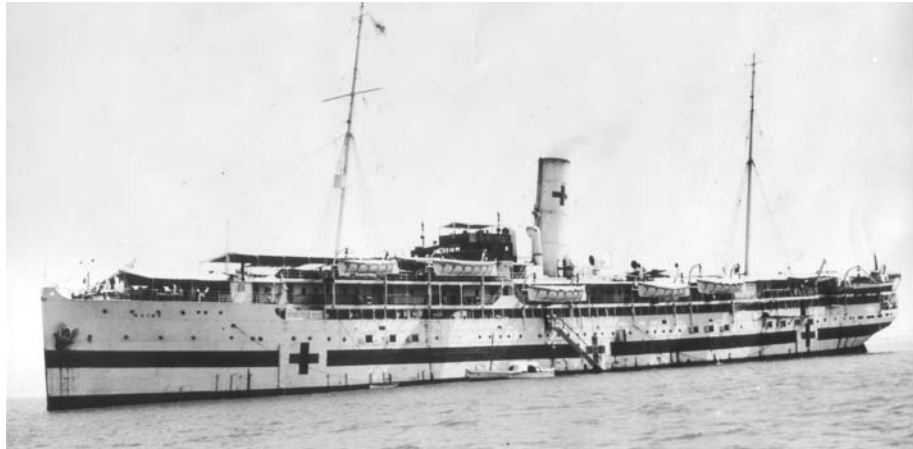
The hospital ship RFA BERBICE. [author's collection]

- **1920: MAINE** (3)

naval hospital ship, 5,981 grt, length 401.3ft (pp). Completed in 1902 by Fairfield Shipbuilding & Engineering Co Ltd, Govan, as the passenger liner SS PANAMA for the Pacific Steam Navigation Co, Liverpool. Twin screw, triple expansion by the ship builder, speed 13 knots. July 1915 chartered by Admiralty Transport Department for service as military hospital ship HMHS PANAMA; May 1917 she had her hospital ship markings suppressed, hull painted grey and fitted with defensive armament – with this conversion she became what was



known as a 'black hospital ship' or Ambulance Transport. This conversion was forced due to Germany's criminal declaration that they would sink hospital ships in the Channel/Biscay Area.



The hospital ship RFA MAINE (ex PANAMA) with prominent green hull band interspaced with Red Crosses. [author's collection]

10.1920 she was purchased by the Crown represented by the Admiralty, London for service as a naval hospital ship (ICRC number 1), cost of purchase and refit £276,453, renamed **MAINE** for service as a Royal Fleet Auxiliary with naval staffed hospital assets; 1922 replaced **RFA BERBICE** as the Mediterranean Fleet hospital ship. 07.1935 participated as a host ship at George V's Silver Jubilee Fleet Review at Spithead an event for which she was de-declared as a hospital ships and had her Red Cross markings temporarily removed;

she later undertook valuable humanitarian work during the Spanish Civil War. Served largely in Mediterranean during World War Two. 22.10.1946 damaged in an illegally laid Albanian minefield; 21.02.1947 paid off for disposal. 08.07.1948 arrived Bo'ness for scrapping by P & W McClellan & Sons.

- **1939: MAGICIAN**

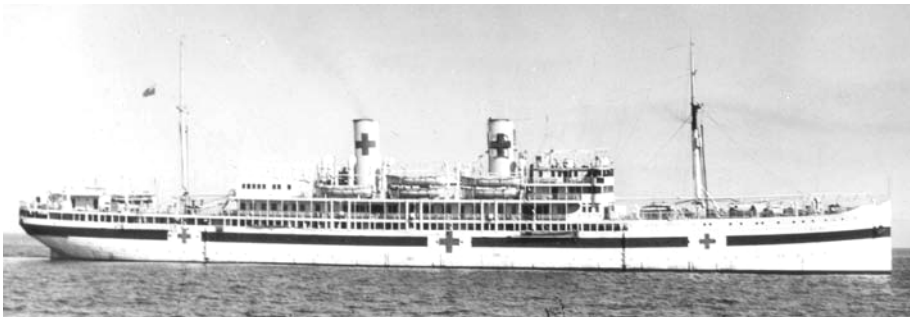
proposed naval hospital ship, 10,000-ton design, construction budget reportedly £700,000; to be operated as a Royal Fleet Auxiliary; under the name **MAGICIAN** she was to operate alongside and to eventually replace **RFA MAINE** (3). In May 1939 six shipbuilders were asked to tender – Barclay Curle, Caledon, Blythswood, Furness, Harland & Wolff (Govan) and Swan Hunter. She was included in the 1939 Naval estimates programme, however, shortly afterwards the invitations to tender were cancelled.

- **1947: MAINE** (4)

naval hospital ship, 7,525 grt, length 427.1ft (pp). Built by Ansaldo San Giorgio, La Spezia, as the passenger liner LEONARDO DA VINCI for Transatlantica Italiana Societe Anonima di Navigazione. Twin screw, six double reduction geared steam turbines by Sansaldo Sampierdarena, speed 13 knots. 05.1925 owing to bankruptcy ownership was taken over by Credito Italiano with new operator Compagnia Italiana Transatlantica. 1926-29 laid up, transferred to Tirrenia Line; 1936 suffered a serious fire and was rebuilt; 17.12.1926 ownership with Lloyd Triestino, employed on



transatlantic route as a troopship. 11.02.1941 captured by HMS HAWKINS at Kismayu during Italo-Somaliland campaign, declared a prize. Ellerman Lines, London appointed as managers of SHIP 289 and she sailed to Mombasa for repairs; 1942 taken over by Ministry of War Transport converted for service as a military hospital ship and renamed **HMHS EMPIRE CLYDE** (ICRC number 54) (City Line, appointed as manager). May 1945 taken over for use as a naval hospital ship under City Line management; 1947 purchased by the Crown represented by the Admiralty; 01.01.1948 placed under RFA crewing and management, 26.01.1948 renamed **MAINE** (4). Served in Far East and was active during Korean War, 05.03.1954 announced that she was to be disposed of; 25.05.1954 sold to Hong Kong shipbreakers for scrapping.



The hospital ship RFA MAINE (4) [author's collection]

- **1951: 10,000-ton naval hospital ship**
proposed naval hospital ship, 10,000 ton design.
04.1951 ordered from Barclay Curle & Co, Clydeholm,

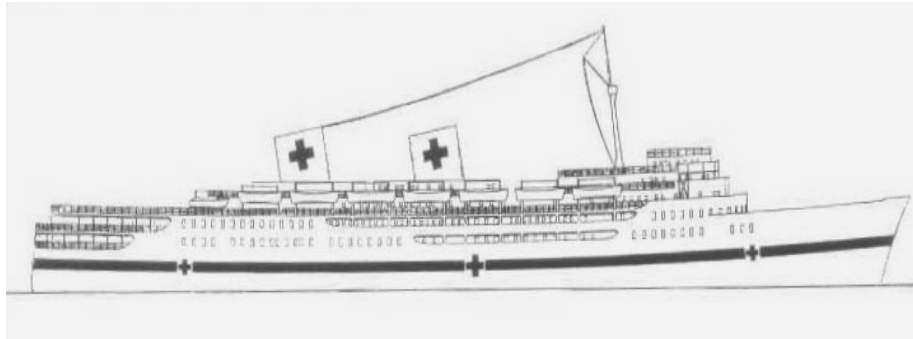
31.01.1952 laid down at No 3 berth as yard number 730. July 1952 the order was cancelled – reasons being austerity, a strict economy and steel shortages. The money and material saved reportedly went into the construction of the Royal Yacht-cum-Hospital Ship BRITANNIA at John Brown's Clydebank yard.

No name was announced for this hospital ship, however, DNC's Statement of Requirements provides a range of information. This hospital ship was intended to be a twin screw fleet hospital ship with a displacement of 10,600 tons, for service in both tropical and arctic conditions; range 6,000 n.miles. Fully loaded speed of 18 knots so that she could trail a fleet train or replenishment group, be capable of accommodating 350 patients in peace and up to 500 in war.

The contractor was to have been responsible for the general design within the Admiralty's specification and it was understood that a starting point would be the previously abandoned 1939 design. The ship was to be built to classification society rules and supervised by the Society's surveyors and Warships Production Superintendent. Underwater hull to be shockproof and fore end, at the waterline, appropriately stiffened for service in arctic waters. Accommodation and wards were to be fully air-conditioned with crew cabins to the latest Ministry of Transport (MoT) standards. Lifeboats, lifesaving appliances and fire fighting protection were to meet the 1948 Convention for Safety of Life at Sea requirements (SOLAS 1948). The Admiralty were to supply two 25ft fast motor boats, a 32 ft general service motor cutter and two 14ft sailing dinghies.



Arrangements were to be made, included jackstay for the 'transfer-at-sea' of patents, light stores and fuel; interestingly 65ft of the after end of the boat deck was to be specially stiffened for use as a helicopter landing deck; bridge controlled stabiliser system was to be fitted and the Admiralty were to supply a Sperry type gyro compass. She was to have a commercial radio outfit complying with the Merchant Shipping Radio Rules plus a Naval pattern VHF and a commercial type radar.



An artist's impression of the 1951 hospital ship, presumably the after funnel being the dummy referred to in an Admiralty statement of requirements. [author's collection]

Her passive defence was to include that all wards were gas tight, air filtration units to be fitted in each watertight sub-division and the means of crash stopping of fans. Degaussing arrangements were to be fitted and a raked stem capable of taking the latest paravane equipment. Interestingly the requirement refers to 'the dummy funnel' and that it should be used for air intakes and exhaust purposes.

Records refer to 'a galley for the RFA', so it is logical that she would have been civilian crewed as a Royal Fleet Auxiliary. It is, therefore, unlikely that she would have carried any name other than **MAINE** (5).

3. Falklands experience (1982)



Hospital ship UGANDA conducting a replenishment-at-sea during Operation Corporate (Falklands 1982) [author's collection]

The 16,907 ton P&O educational cruise liner SS UGANDA became a Ship Taken Up from Trade (STUFT) for Operation Corporate in 1982. She was significantly adapted for service as a hospital ship in accordance with the Second Geneva Convention (1949). Although it was reported that the Navy had little precedence in hospital ship management to assist them with the 'redesign', certainly records in The National Archive show that there was significant previous understanding. UGANDA's



conversion was undertaken by the Gibraltar Dockyard in a matter of days. Converted and stored as a tri-service field hospital – a 200 bed field hospital. Surgical, clinical, medial and naval stores, staff accommodation and messing had to be arranged. This included X-ray machines, laboratories, increased electrical, heating and ventilation systems, increased fresh water supplies, galley, laundry, waste disposal and a mortuary. Her communications arrangements were enhanced and she was fitted with a jackstay strongpoint with the necessary pipe work enabling a replenishment-at-sea facility. Lighting was rigged so that the ship could be completely illuminated at night. In addition to having all her non-white markings painted out she was adorned with large Red Crosses on her hull, lifeboats and funnel. Her external appearance included the fitting of a helicopter platform that was robust enough to support a Sea King. Crewed and managed by P&O and staffed by 135-strong Naval and Army medical team. She was the last ICRC recognised British hospital ship. While clearly not a RFA she carried a small RN/RFA team to handle communications, helicopter control and RAS. Unofficially known as NOSH (for Naval Ocean-going Surgical Hospital) she was ably served by three ICRC approved ambulance ships (the H-class ocean survey ships HM Ships HERALD, HECLA and HYDRA).

4. ARGUS Primary Casualty Receiving Ship (1990)

Unlike previous hospital ships (BERBICE and the MAINES) RFA ARGUS, with her 100-bed medical facility, is a fine example of British soft power. However, she

cannot be classified as a hospital ship under the Geneva Convention. Her operational facilities as an air training ship and self-defence arrangements prevent this.

The government's 1998 Strategic Defence Review called for the upgrading of the hospital facilities on ARGUS and for the procurement of a 200-bed 'primary casualty receiving ship'. Following this a concept phase was started by the MoD and in December 2001 a replacement project – the **Joint Casualty Treatment Ship (JCTS)** – was approved with an invitation-to-tender planned for mid-2005. However, this project did not materialise, it stalled in 2001 and was finally being abandoned in 2005.





At time of writing, early 2017, there was no public plan to replace this extremely versatile ship and the soft power she represents. She remains on the Navy List as an Primary Casualty Receiving Ship/Air Training Ship.

It was reported in May 2005 that Swan Hunter submitted a proposal to convert and complete RFA LYME BAY as a JCTS at a cost of £360m. Babcock Rosyth apparently submitted a rival proposal and MoD reportedly studied the proposals. By 2013 further information ceased to exist on such a project.

Appendix 1: Hospital Ship colour scheme

The colour scheme for 'registered' hospital ships was first prescribed by the The Geneva Convention and Maritime Law (3rd Hague Convention) of 1899 and then by the 10th Hague Convention of 1907.

Hospital ships are painted white overall, a broad green band from stem to stern. During World War One the painting of a number of large Red Crosses round the upper part of the hull; additional Red Crosses are painted on the funnel(s). In 1940, identifying facilities from the air were improved by additional Red Crosses fore and aft painted horizontally on the upper deck.

By night the Red Crosses must be illuminated and a row of green lights must be displayed in place of the green band.

After World War Two amendments to the Geneva Convention modified the markings by suppressing the

Green Band. Hence the reason that UGANDA and the H class vessels did not have a Green Band.

Under the Geneva Convention RFAs BERBICE and MAINE flew the Red Cross flag on their foremasts and as RFA the Admiralty Blue Ensign on their flagstaff.



Red Cross Flag

The Red Cross flag originated in 1864 with the *Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Wounded in Armies in the Field*. This provided that a distinctive and uniform flag shall be adopted for hospitals, ambulances and evacuations and that the flag shall bear a Red Cross on a white field. This design was the Swiss national flag with its colours reversed. This was in recognition of the pioneering work of Swiss citizens in establishing internationally recognised standards for the protection of war wounded.

A convention signed at The Hague in 1899 extended the use of the Red Cross flag to the maritime environment. This required that all hospital ships make themselves known by, eg, hoisting, together with their national flag, the 'white flag with a Red Cross' provide by



the Geneva Convention'. The RFA Hospital Ships MAINE and BERBICE wore this flag. The flag proportion is 1:1 and 2:2.



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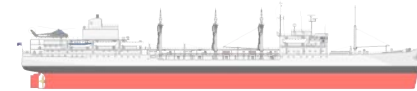
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