Canadian Military Hospitals at Sea 1914-1919

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AS there was an ocean between Canada and the fighting during WWI, the movement of casualties needing lengthy treatment required special arrangements. Many of the casualties returning home, especially in 1915 and 1916, came back to Canada on relatively empty troop ships (ex-passenger ships) and were accompanied by a small medical team. The more serious casualties came home on either hospital ships or am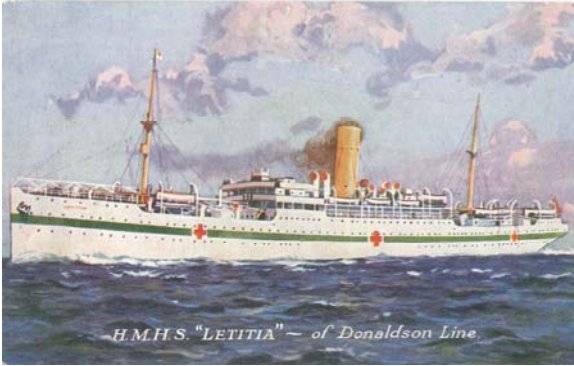bulance transports, most of which were equipped as floating convalescent hospitals. Hospital ships and ambulance transports generally were identically equipped. The former were commissioned naval auxiliaries painted white with green stripe and large red crosses and protected by the Geneva Convention (Figure 1). The latter were normal naval auxiliaries painted troop ship colours that sailed in convoy and were not protected by the Geneva Convention. Like most military units each ship had an 'Orderly Room' where mail could be

Figure 1. Colour postcard of *HMHS LETITIA* with the correct colour scheme for a commissioned hospital ship under the Geneva Convention.

posted and, if lucky, picked up upon arrival at port. Military service personnel overseas could post mail unpaid. For much of the war, the Canada Post Office added postage upon arrival in Canada so postage due would not be applied. Canada had six hospital ships and ambulance transports during WWI. Of this number, two were lost while in service. A return trip from Liverpool to Canada and back took one month.

HMCHS PRINCE GEORGE

The *HMCHS PRINCE GEORGE* was Canada's only naval hospital ship. *SS PRINCE GEORGE*, a Grand Trunk Pacific Railway coastal steamer, was requisitioned as a hospital ship on 8 August 1914, four days after war was declared. The crew stayed on as Merchant Marines and the hospital was staffed with Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) personnel. On 11 August *PRINCE GEORGE* was commissioned and the painting of the ship began. Enemy powers were notified of her existence and location as required by the Geneva Convention for hospital ships.

Figure 1. Postcard from RCN Acting Sister Elizabeth Pierce to her sister upon *HMCHS PRINCE GEORGE*'s return to Vancouver from Prince Rupert.

PRINCE GEORGE stayed close to the *HMCS RAINBOW*, an obsolete cruiser, until more modern and larger Allied cruisers arrived at Esquimalt, BC. With the German Asiatic Fleet's departure from the Pacific Ocean, action with German warships appeared unlikely. *HMCHS PRINCE GEORGE* was decommissioned on 2 September 1914 and returned to her passenger route on 4 October. Although in service only for a short time she had several firsts:

- First hospital ship commissioned in WWI
- First female members of the RCN (six nurses on board)
- First female officers in the RCN
- First women in the RCN to serve at sea.
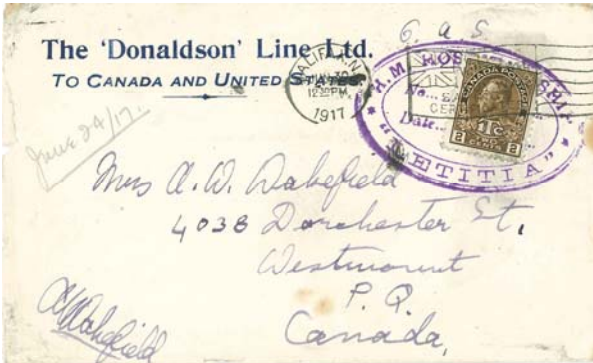
HMHS LETITIA

Figure 2. *HMHS LETITIA* cover self-censored by CAMC Capt. AW Wakefield, medical officer, posted unpaid upon Voyage 4 arrival at Halifax. The postage was applied by the Post Office.

The *HMHS LETITIA* was commissioned as a hospital ship by the British Admiralty on 19 November 1914. She was made available to the Naval Staff, Ottawa, in March 1917. *LETITIA* had a Merchant Marine crew and Canadian Army Medical Corp (CAMC) officers, enlisted men and nurses staffing the hospital. Staffing was the same as all subsequent hospital ships and ambulance transports. *LETITIA* sailed the round trip from Liverpool to Halifax four times (see Figure 3 from 4th voyage). On the fifth trip, she ran aground on Portuguese Cove, near Halifax, in dense fog. Although fully loaded with patients, many in stretchers, the only fatality was a member of the crew who drowned. The wreck of *LETITIA* is today a popular diving site located only a few minutes drive from downtown Halifax.

HMHS ARAGUAYA

The *HMHS ARAGUAYA* was commissioned as a hospital ship by the British Admiralty on 2 May 1917. She made one trip to Canada, in June 1917, with a Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) unit on board. Returning to England she sighted a German submarine north of Ireland. Upon arrival at Liverpool in September 1917, she was transferred to Canadian operational control and the CAMC staff previously on *LETITIA* took over the hospital. *ARAGUAYA* made nine voyages as a Canadian hospital ship before her commission was revoked on the recommendation of the British Admiralty.

Figure 3. Unusual cover to a commercial addressee using YMCA stationery, possibly from YMCA representative Albert Pequenat. Posted two days after Voyage 9 arrival. A ship sitting in Halifax harbour was considered to be an overseas location.
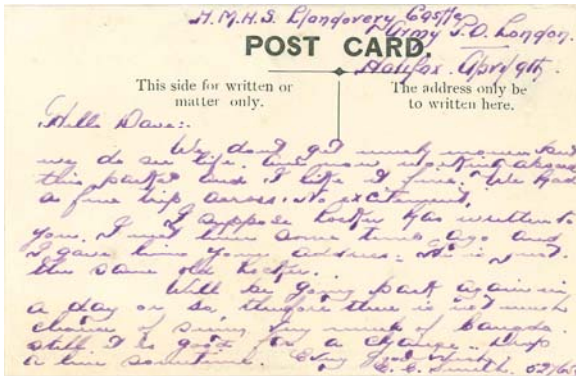
HMHS LLANDOVERY CASTLE

Figure 4. Postcard of LLANDOVERY CASTLE with text written by CAMC orderly Private Ernest C. Smith upon second arrival at Halifax. Pte Smith was lost with the ship.

The *HMHS LLANDOVERY CASTLE* was commissioned as a hospital ship by the British Admiralty on 26 July 1916. She was made available to the Naval Staff, Ottawa, in April 1918 to replace *LETITIA*. The *LLANDOVERY CASTLE* made five voyages to Halifax before disaster struck. On 27 June 1918 northwest of Ireland, she was torpedoed by a German submarine and sank in 10 minutes. For a period of time the submarine shelled the lifeboats. Subsequently only one lifeboat with survivors was found. A total of 89 CAMC medical personnel, including 14 nursing sisters, died in the sinking.

HMAT ARAGUAYA

The *HMHS LLANDOVERY CASTLE* was the 13th allied hospital ship lost due to enemy activity. As a result, most Allied hospital ships had their commissions revoked and were painted troop ship grey. They travelled in a convoy whenever possible. Their titles were changed to His Majesty's Ambulance Transport (HMAT). After the change to ambulance

transports only one ship was lost to enemy activity. *HMAT ARAGUAYA* made 11 voyages as an ambulance transport. Due to damage from the Halifax Explosion on 6 December 1917 and the volume of returning troops from February, 1919, the ambulance transports landed their patients at Portland, Maine.

Figure 6. Postcard of *HMAT ARAGUAYA* with a dazzle paint style. The reference to Hospital Ship is in error.

Figure 6a. Paysheet processed on *HMAT ARAGUAYA's* last voyage.
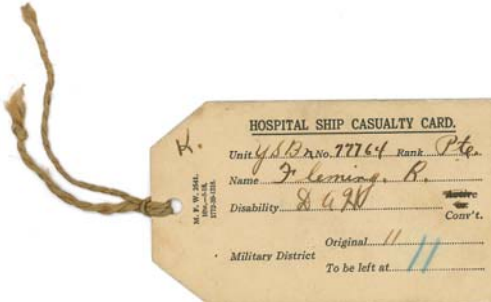
HMAT NEURALIA

Figure 7. Disembarkation card from *NEURALIA* and hospital train boarding identification card for patient Private Fleming, age 18, after being in military service for two years. Military district 11 is British Columbia (Esquimalt military hospital).

HMAT NEURALIA had originally been a commissioned as a British hospital ship on 12 June 1915. However, she was made an ambulance transport when transferred to Canadian control in September, 1918. She replaced *LLANDOVERY CASTLE*. The *NEURALIA* made only two trips to Portland, Maine before being transferred back to the British Admiralty.

HMAT ESSEQUIBO

The *HMAT ESSEQUIBO* was originally commissioned as a British hospital ship on 2 September 1915. In March 1917, with a RAMC unit on board, *HMHS ESSEQUIBO* was the first hospital ship to cross the Atlantic to Canada. On the return voyage *ESSEQUIBO* was stopped at sea north of Ireland for 75 minutes by a German submarine after two warning shots were fired. *ESSEQUIBO* was made an ambulance transport in December 1918 when transferred to Canadian control to replace *NEURALIA*. With *NEURALIA* and

ESSEQUIBO docked side by side, the CAMC hospital staff carried their equipment from one to the other. Even the postcards of *NEURALIA* were taken. *ESSEQUIBO* made five trips to Portland, Maine, before she was transferred back to the British Admiralty.

Figure 8. Cover from CAMC orderly Private Edward Clarke posted on the second day of disembarking patients at Portland, Maine after the third voyage.

Summary

During WWI, Canada made use of six hospital ships and ambulance transports, one with Naval medical staff and five with Army medical staff. Of the six ships, two were lost – one due to navigation error by the pilot and one to enemy action. Due to advance screening of patients for ability to travel before boarding the ships, only one patient died on board (on *HMAT ESSEQUIBO's* last sailing). The patient was buried at sea. Upon landing in North America, the patients were transported by Canadian hospital train to hospitals within the military district where the patient had enlisted.

References:

[1] National Archives, Kew, England: File WO95/4142 (Araguaya, Essequibo, Letitia, Llandovery Castle, Neuralia).

[2] Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Canada: File RG9, Series III-D-3, Volume 5055, Reel T-10949, File 955 (Araguaya); File RG9, Series III-D-3, Volume 5056, Reel T-10950, File 956 (Neuralia); File RG9, Series III-D-3, Volume 5056, Reel T-10949, File 955 (Essequibo).

[3] Andrew MacPhail, *History of the Canadian Forces* – The Medical Services, FA Acland, Ottawa, 1925, pp. 239-243.

[4] John H Plumridge, *Hospital Ships and Ambulance Trains*, Seeley, Service & Co., 1975, pp.166-169.

[5] Jon Johnson and Barbara Bavinton, *SS Prince George* goes to War*, British Columbia HISTORY*, Vol. 44, No.2, 2011, pp.6-16, http://www.bchistory.ca/publications/journal/toc/44.2_toc.pdf