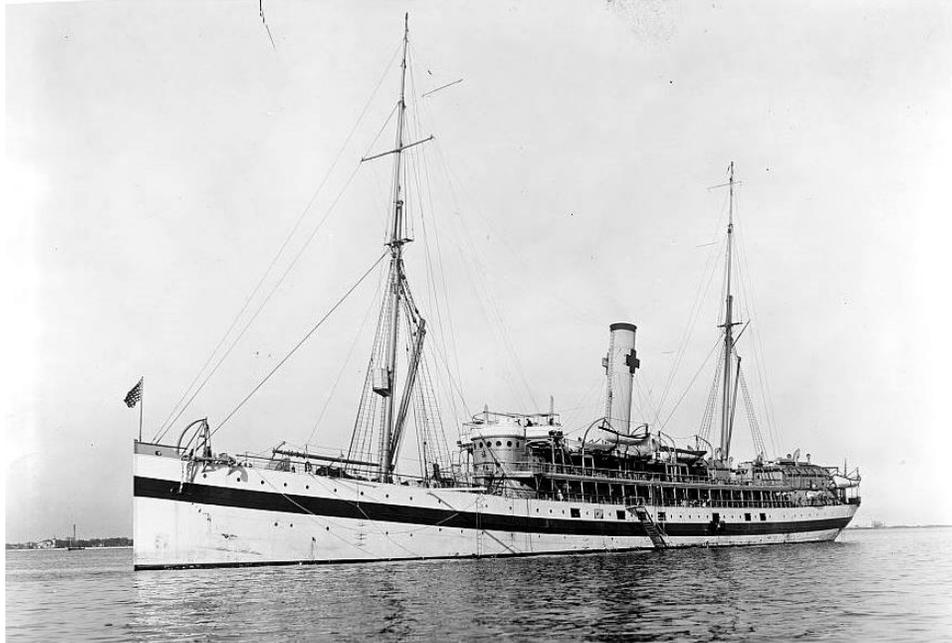


## ***HOSPITAL SHIP SOLACE (AH-2)***



### ***First of Two NNS-Built Passenger Ships Converted to Humanitarian Service***

#### ***~ Background ~***

Over the last 200 years, the US Navy has placed into commission twenty-six hospital ships. The majority were originally constructed for civilian use; mostly as passenger or cargo vessels. The first one was a 60-foot ketch captured during America's first war with the Barbary Pirates and later converted to briefly provide medical treatment to American naval forces in the Mediterranean.

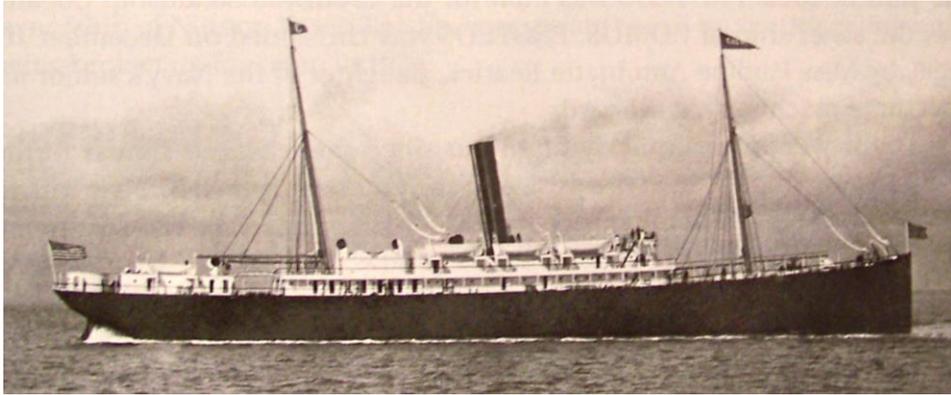
During the Civil War, the Union Navy acquired, converted and utilized four steamships for this purpose. The Confederacy also briefly operated a single hospital ship, a captured Union Navy transport. Seven converted vessels served as American hospital ships during World War I, including the first of two hospital ships named SOLACE.

No less than fifteen vessels provided medical services for the American military during World War II, including the second SOLACE (AH-5). Both of the hospital ships named SOLACE were built at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS).

Currently, the United States has two hospital ships in commission. By far the largest of such specialty ships, they were extensively modified in the 1980s. Originally designed and built as tankers, they are fitted with the most modern of medical equipment available.

## ~ **SS CREOLE** ~

Before becoming a hospital ship, this vessel began life as the coastal passenger and cargo steamship SS CREOLE. NNS received a contract for her construction in August of 1895 from the Cromwell Steamship Company. CREOLE, assigned NNS Hull #16 was just the second passenger vessel built at Newport News.



She was 375 feet long, with a beam of 44 feet. Her displacement was listed as being 6,000 tons. A coal-fired vessel, her triple expansion steam engine produced 3,228 shaft horsepower, propelling her at a top speed of 15 knots.

CREOLE's construction progressed quickly. Her keel was laid on January 8, 1896. She was launched exactly seven months later and delivered on December 5, 1896. For about a year, she made regularly scheduled runs between New York and New Orleans.

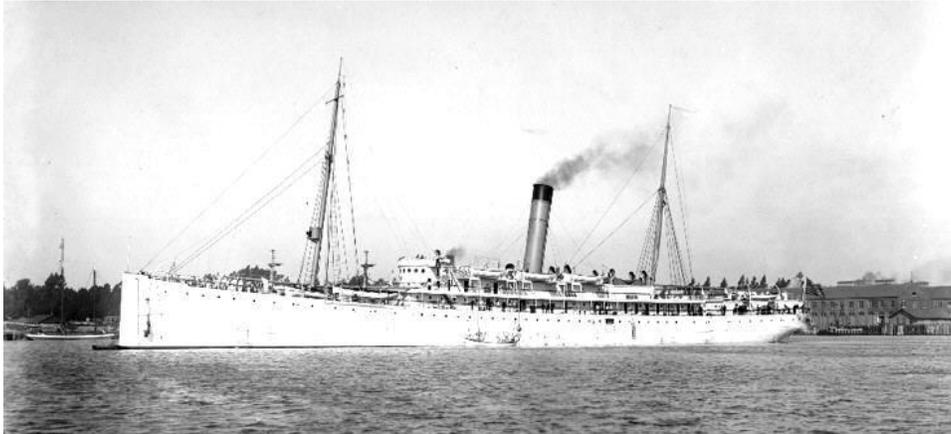
In early 1896, as the US Navy sought to expand its fleet in anticipation of war with Spain, the CREOLE was sold to the government. Taken out of civilian service, she returned to NNS and in just sixteen days was converted to become what was then often referred to as an 'ambulance ship'.

It is believed that her conversion was the first of many accomplished by the Newport News shipyard. Renamed SOLACE, and given the naval designation AH-2, she was commissioned into the Navy on April 14, 1898, just a week before the war started.



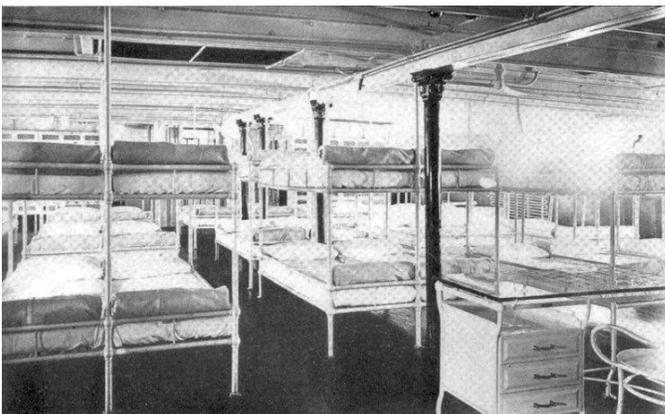
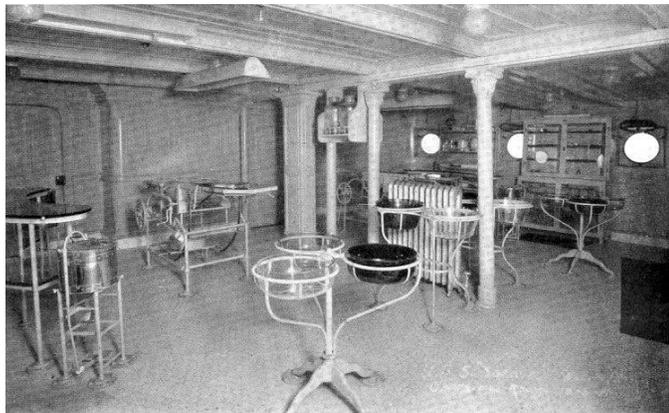
After the war, the Cromwell Steamship Company ordered two more similar vessels to be built by Newport News Shipbuilding. Completed in 1900, they were the SS COMUS and the SS PROTEUS (NNS Hull #28 and #29, respectively).

## ~ 'Ambulance Ship' Details ~



Externally, the first USS SOLACE did not appear much different in 1898 than when she had gone into civilian service as the SS CREOLE two years prior. The biggest change externally was that her hull was painted white, as seen above in a photo taken in 1899.

However, there were many changes made internally to prepare her for humanitarian service. These features included creating a large operating room [right], steam disinfecting apparatus and a steam laundry plant. Plus an ice machine, cold storage rooms and an elevator.



Berths for two hundred patients were provided. A typical hospital ward created during her conversion is depicted on the left. Her hurricane deck was enclosed with canvas to serve as a contagious disease ward. Her fresh water tank capacity was increased to 37,000 gallons and her distilling plant enlarged as well.

Donations of medical supplies and equipment included an X-ray machine and an apparatus for making carbonated beverages were provided by patriotic civilian groups. When placed in service, SOLACE became the first American vessel to fly the Geneva Red Cross flag.

## **~ Spanish-American War Service ~**

Her ship's company was organized in the same manner as the Navy's combat vessels and consisted of twelve naval officers and 110 enlisted men. In addition, her complement included a surgeon, three assistant surgeons and three hospital stewards; one of whom was a skilled embalmer.

Eight trained male nurses were augmented by twenty female nurses whose services were provided to the Navy under contract by an organization called the Graduated Nurses' Protective Association. The image on the right, taken onboard another hospital ship in 1898, is most likely representative of the adventurous nurses who went to war onboard the SOLACE.



SOLACE and her crew saw constant service during the Spanish-American War. Her first mission consisted of visiting the American blockading squadrons off Cuba and Puerto Rico, where 57 sick and wounded men were taken onboard for treatment and transport.

After transferring these patients to a New York hospital, SOLACE sailed back to Cuban waters where she took onboard wounded American Marines and some sick and wounded Spanish prisoners. On July 16, 1898, she disembarked 147 patients at military medical facilities in Hampton Roads, Virginia.

A similar mission took her to Cuban waters and back again to the United States with more sick and wounded from the fighting in Cuba. She carried them to Boston and arrived in early September, shortly after the war officially ended.

But the need for SOLACE's services were even greater than ever after the fighting was over. An epidemic of yellow fever and malaria had broken out amongst American troops in Cuba, and SOLACE took onboard as many sick soldiers and marines as she accomodate; taking them home in late 1898.

In February of 1899, she left the East Coast and made a long voyage to California. Because the Panama Canal did not exist at that time, she went by way of Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. After a brief stop in Hawaii, the well-traveled vessel arrived at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard on May 27, 1899.

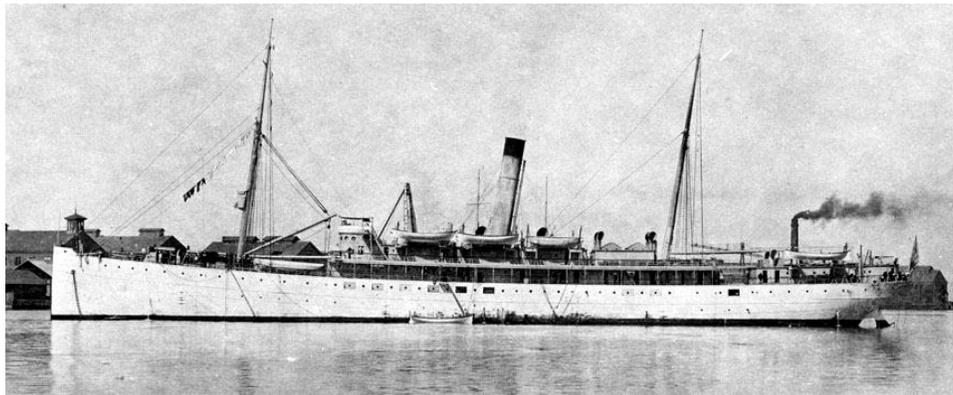
**~ 1899 to 1909 ~**

Dry docked at Mare Island, SOLACE was given a much needed and thorough overhaul. Following two months of rest, the ship went back into service...but not as a hospital ship.

Between July of 1899 and October of 1905, she was classified as a transport and carried mail, passengers and supplies to numerous American military bases in the Pacific.



The following image shows how she appeared in 1903 without any hospital ship markings. In late 1905, she was briefly decommissioned at Mare Island.



Three years later, she resumed her transport ship duties in the Pacific before steaming 'the long way' again back to the East Coast of America. Briefly decommissioned at the Charleston Navy Yard, she was modernized to serve once again as a hospital ship.

Part of that work included a considerable enlargement of her superstructure. This addition, coupled with her relatively narrow beam made her prone to severe rolling in heavy seas. A few years after being placed back in commission in November of 1909, ballast was added to her hold to help stabilize SOLACE under such conditions.

One 'sea story' associated with SOLACE is that the ballast consisted of 200 Civil War cannons embedded in concrete. Consequently, and despite her neutral status, SOLACE was called 'the most heavily gunned vessel in the Navy'.

## ***~ Surgeon Commanders ~***

When the SOLACE was again designated as a hospital ship in 1909, it was the policy of the US Navy for such vessels to be placed under the overall command of Medical Corps surgeons. Merchant Marine officers...called 'masters'...were subordinate to such 'surgeon commanders' and were responsible for the ship's operation and safety.

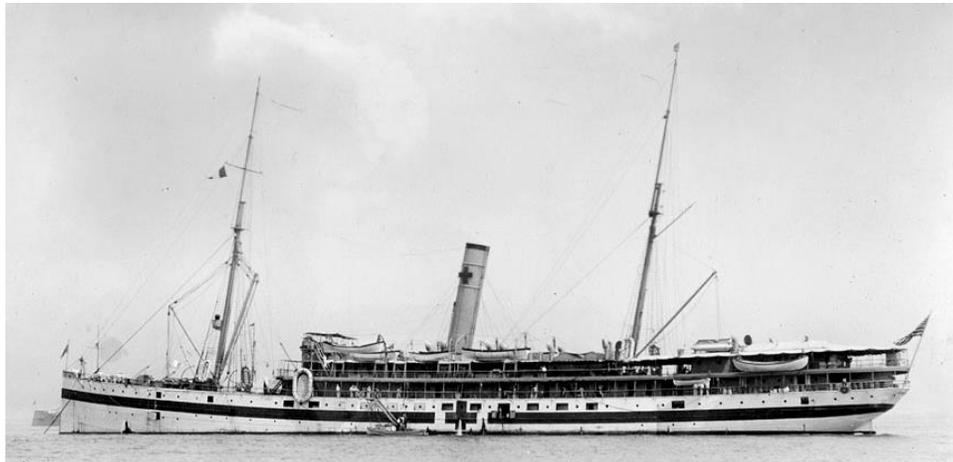
For several years, the crew...aside from the medical staff...were civilians, and often included foreign nationals. At that time, SOLACE was included organizationally as a unit in the Navy's Auxiliary Transport Service. This arrangement continued until 1917.

Between 1909 and America's entry into World War I in 1917, SOLACE served as a hospital ship in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. For various periods of time, she was stationed at naval bases all along the Atlantic seacoast and also at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and in the Panama Canal Zone. This routine was interrupted in 1913 when she made a five week voyage to France.

## ***~ World War I ~***

During World War I, the men who served of masters in SOLACE and other American hospital ships were given commissions in the US Naval Reserve. Surgeon commanders continued to be in overall command.

Civilian crews were replaced by naval officers and sailors. The following photograph shows how she appeared during the war. Brightly colored Red Cross signage was added to her white hull and funnel to discourage U-boat attacks.



During World War I, SOLACE was assigned to the Atlantic Fleet. She made several trips to Europe, bringing home wounded military men. Also, on occasion, she transported the remains of the fallen in flag-draped caskets, where they were received with appropriate honors and dignity, as depicted at the top of the next page.



Shortly after the war ended in November of 1918, SOLACE was berthed at a pier in New York City, serving as a floating hospital. This service was interrupted briefly on January 1, 1919, when she was ordered to get underway.

A naval transport, the USS NORTHERN PACIFIC had gone aground off Fire Island, New York, loaded with wounded veterans returning from France. After the SOLACE arrived on the scene, heavy seas prevented transfer of survivors from the transport until January 3rd.

Using small boats, it took all day and into the night to transfer 504 patients from the grounded ship to the SOLACE, anchored in deeper water nearby. The hospital ship's patient berthing facilities were limited to 200 beds. These were used for the seriously wounded, with the remainder of the rescued personnel being placed on cots scattered throughout the vessel.

SOLACE headed for Hoboken, New Jersey on January 4th and disembarked her overload of patients there the following day. Then she returned to her berth in New York City, where she remained for over two years.

In April of 1921, SOLACE was laid up at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Decommissioned on July 20, 1921, she remained there languishing in the midst of other obsolete ships until sold for scrap to a Baltimore, Maryland firm in 1930.

## **~ History Repeats Itself ~**

In July of 1940, the SS IROQUOIS...another Newport News-built passenger vessel that had been completed in 1927 as NNS Hull #306...was purchased by the US Navy and converted into a hospital ship. Given the naval designation of AH-5, she also was assigned the name SOLACE.

Her patient capacity was more than twice that of her predecessor. The following image depicts her entering Pearl Harbor in October of 1941.



On December 7, 1941, she was the nation's only hospital ship at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked. Undamaged, her crew performed heroically that day, as did many other Americans. She served continuously throughout World War II, steaming some 170,000 miles and caring for over 25,000 patients.

SOLACE (AH-5) returned to Newport News in 1948 to be converted back to civilian use. Renamed ANKARA, she remained in service in Europe until 1977.

A story I created about her that highlights her crew's response to December 7th is entitled *SOLACE for the Suffering*. Issued in 2011, it can be found on the Memories Page of the Apprentice Alumni Association web site; linked below:

[http://www.nnaprentice.com/alumni/letter/SOLACE\\_FOR\\_THE\\_SUFFERING.pdf](http://www.nnaprentice.com/alumni/letter/SOLACE_FOR_THE_SUFFERING.pdf)

*Bill Lee*

February 2018