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U.S. Army Hospital Ship “Relief”

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The Hospital Ship “Relief” served the U.S. Army and Navy in four wars on two oceans: the Spanish–American War (1898–1899), the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1904), the Boxer Uprising (China, 1900), and as a stationary hospital ship in World War I. From 1898 to 1902, she was United States Army Hospital Ship (USAHS) “Relief”; in 1902, she was transferred to the Navy and became USS “Relief” (Fig. 1).

The “Relief” was one of the most modern hospital ships of its time. Originally launched in 1896 as a coastal passenger steamer, the ship was purchased by the Army and refit as a floating hospital—not merely a large ambulance or evacuation vessel—when war broke out with Spain in 1898 (Fig. 2). Passenger cabins were torn out and replaced with two large medical wards on each deck, with a total of 300 beds. Another 200 beds could be accommodated on the upper deck under awnings. There were isolation wards for contagious diseases, two padded rooms for the insane, and a fully equipped operating room. A generator created current for electric lighting and ventilation. An ice machine produced up to 2,000 pounds of

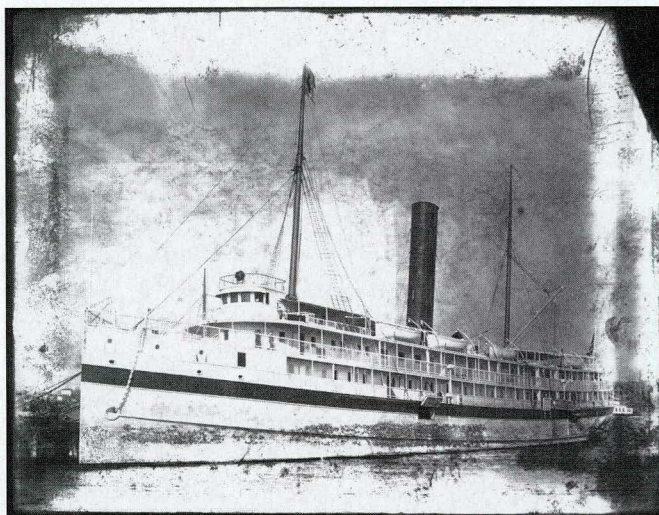


FIGURE 1. USAHS “Relief” in New York Harbor, July 2, 1898, shortly before embarking for Cuba. The former passenger liner “John Englis” was extensively refit to turn her into the most up-to-date hospital ship afloat.

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FIGURE 2. Doctor William M. Gray of the Army Medical Museum makes an X-ray of a patient aboard USAHS “Relief” in July 1898. Note the X-ray tube above patient’s chest. The ship’s electrical power is used to run a motor, which in turn spins the large plates in the static apparatus, located directly behind the mast, to create the high voltage interrupted electrical current needed to produce X-rays.

ice per day for use on the ship as well as for land forces it was supporting; there were medical supplies aboard for an army of 35,000. The ship also had a laundry and bathrooms for officers, crew, and patients, where according to one report, “Turkish, Russian, and tub baths can be taken.”¹ When a wounded or sick man was brought aboard, he was stripped, bathed, and put into a clean bed. His clothing was laundered and fumigated—there would be no repetition of the infections rampant throughout Civil War camps and hospitals. General Electric donated an X-ray machine. It was later asserted that this one item was largely responsible for the very low death rate among wounded men in the Spanish–American War, as it did away with blind probing for bullets, a major source of infection.² The ship’s personnel in 1898 included 6 female nurses; on the Pacific voyages, as many as 20 nurses were aboard.

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