



*Celebrating the heritage, achievements and relevance of
military medicine*

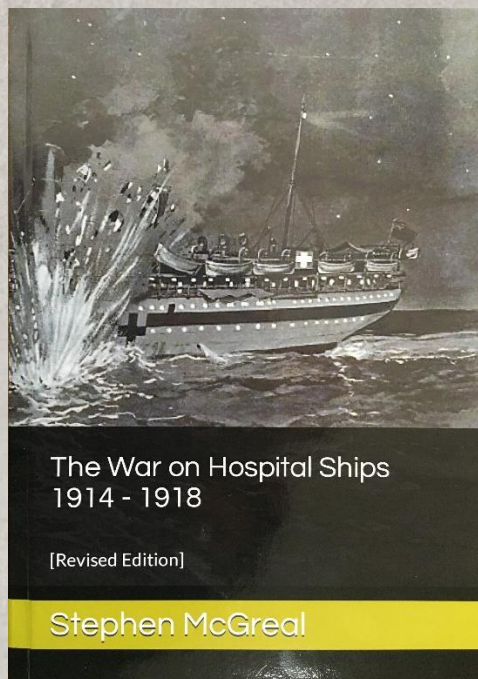
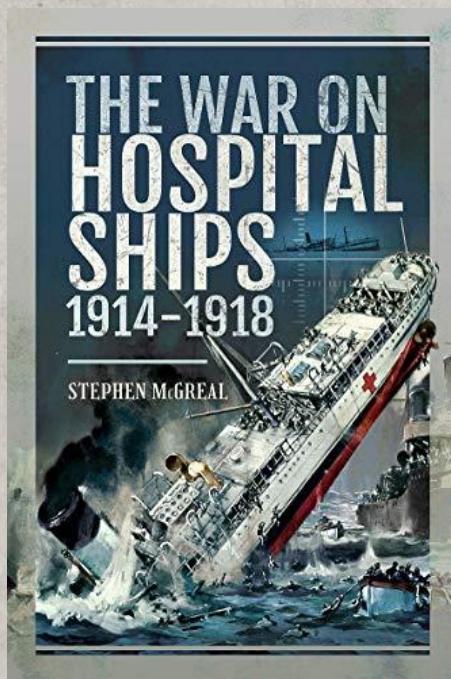
Friends of Millbank Book Reviews

Stephen McGreal

The War on Hospital Ships 1914-1918

Revised edition (independently published, 2021)

ISBN-13: 979-8451246320 (first published 2008)



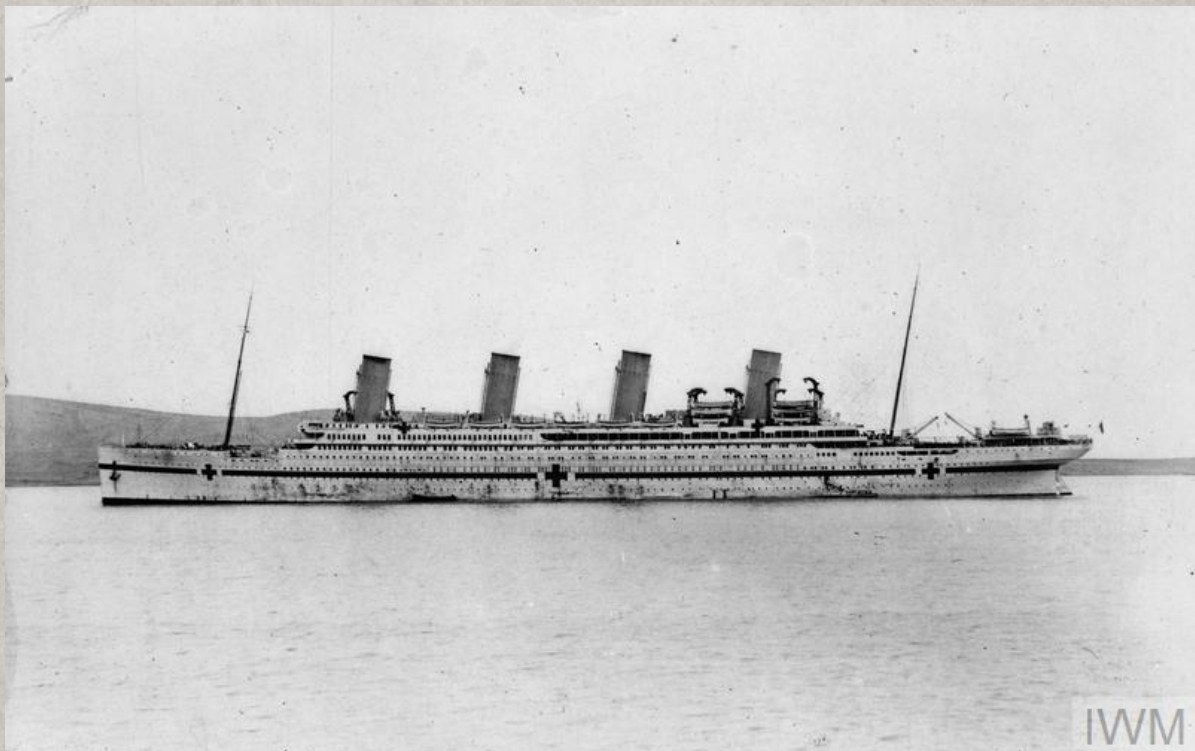
Review by Dr Frances Houghton

At breakfast time on Tuesday 21 November 1916, the British hospital ship HMHS *Britannic* hit a German naval mine near the Greek island of Kea. Although the ship was not carrying wounded at the time of its sinking, there were 1,065 seamen, medical and nursing staff on board. One of these was Lance Corporal E Cyril Gregory, RAMC, who sustained injuries to his leg while abandoning ship. From his hospital bed in Malta, Gregory described this ordeal to his mother: *'I with a great many more, jumped into the water for the purpose of swimming to some wreckage. No sooner had we done this than the suction of the propellers took me underneath and then I went beneath the waves.'* Gregory was comparatively lucky that day. Thirty of the ship's company were later posted as dead or missing.





As the new edition of Stephen McGreal's fascinating book, *The War on Hospital Ships 1914-1918*, relates, the sinking of *Britannic* – sister ship to the equally ill-fated *Titanic* – was far from the worst hospital ship loss of the First World War. Under the Hague and Geneva Conventions, hospital ships were entitled to protection from enemy attack. In accordance with the articles of war, hospital vessels were painted white and were well-illuminated, adorned with large red crosses and a horizontal band of green around the hull. Despite (and sometimes because of) this enhanced visibility at sea, McGreal narrates in heartrending detail how hospital ships became enemy targets from the outset of the First World War.



HMHS *Britannic*, © IWM Q 73422 (See also <http://hmhsbritannic.weebly.com/>)

Despite the legal immunity granted to hospital ships, there was a consistent increase in attacks on these vessels. In February 1917, Germany announced a new policy of unrestricted submarine warfare in which any Allied hospital ships in defined zones would be considered belligerents and so subject to attack. This heightened the crisis facing medical humanitarian care afloat.

Increasingly viewed as a source of 'fair game' throughout the war, hospital ships also became pawns in the violent propaganda battles between Britain and Germany. As McGreal shows, the wartime British press frequently reported on German acts of aggression against hospital ships, showing a particular penchant for sensationalising distressing tales and images of drowned female nurses. This fuelled further ferocious atrocity propaganda in Britain which proclaimed that there were no limits to German barbarity and led to calls for reprisal raids on enemy hospital ships. Such was the emotional power of hospital ship





propaganda that belligerents on both sides frequently asserted that sinkings had been carried out by mistake or in good faith. Damaged or destroyed hospital ships were often accused of unlawfully transporting military troops or generally acting in a suspicious manner that warranted attack. A language of claims and counter-claims of culpability entered the febrile climate of wartime propaganda and international diplomacy.

Despite the national press's best endeavours to suggest otherwise, the British also behaved reprehensibly. McGreal does not shy away from highlighting deplorable British actions against enemy hospital ships. The lawfulness of Britain's controversial capture and detention of the German hospital ship *Ophelia* in October 1914, for instance, remains a hotly disputed issue and McGreal strikes a fair balance in acknowledging that contraventions of the laws of war were carried out by both sides.

First published in 2008, this revised edition of McGreal's forensic examination contains new materials which shed additional light on the role of nursing staff and lines of communication in the hospital ship war of 1914-18. McGreal's book pays tribute to the men and women of the RAMC, QARNNS, QAIMNS, VAD, and other branches of British and Commonwealth medical and nursing services in the armed forces, who found themselves performing duties of care in the alien and hostile environment of the First World War at sea. One of the book's most touching features is its incorporation of a Roll of Honour which memorialises those who lost their lives in British hospital ships.

As a historian of the modern Royal Navy, one of the things which has often struck me when examining photographs of the death of ships is how starkly mechanical and impersonal it all looks through the camera lens. It can be difficult to comprehend that inside that squat bulk slipping down into the dark waves were real people, surely experiencing a horrifying gamut of feelings as they burned, boiled or drowned. It is almost impossible to imagine what it must have been like for incapacitated patients stuck in bed unable to save themselves, or for medical and nursing staff trying desperately to evacuate cases whilst knowing that they were sacrificing their own chances of escape. McGreal's insightful and poignant writing, accompanied by plenty of photographs and survivor accounts, captures this human dimension of the hospital ship war.

Reading the excellent reviews of other books about wartime military medicine written by fellow 'Friends' of Millbank, I am struck by how many highlight historical atrocities meted out to Service doctors and nurses who should have been protected by the laws of war.¹ McGreal's book is a welcome addition to this literary firmament, reminding us that historical humanitarian crimes also stalked wartime medicine in the maritime world.

Well-researched, beautifully written, and richly detailed, McGreal's book is an engaging and recommended read.

¹ Chairman's Note: Readers may also wish to read Rev John A Fleming's account 'The Last Voyage of His Majesty's Hospital Ship BRITANNIC', originally published in 1917. New edition by Wordsmith Publications, 2006





Chairman's Notes



Oscar Parkes: HS Somali loading casualties for Malta, off Cape Helles, May 1915 ©IWM Art 4006

Dr Frances Houghton is now a Lecturer at the Open University, having previously worked as a historian and Simon Research Fellow at the University of Manchester. I am very grateful to her for this Review.

Frances specialises in the history of Britain's armed forces and the Second World War, with a particular interest in medical care in the Royal Navy. Her research interests focus on histories of warfare and medicine, memory and commemoration, gender, race and ethnicity, and captivity. Frances's publications include *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (2019), which won the Society for Army Historical Research's Templer First Book Prize and was shortlisted for the Royal Historical Society's Whitfield Prize in 2020.

She is a keen Friend of Millbank and has delivered a talk to us in May 2019 about 'Shipwreck, Sharks and Seasickness: Memories of the Royal Naval Medical Service in the Second World War'. Subscribing members can listen to a recording on our website <https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/talks-members/>



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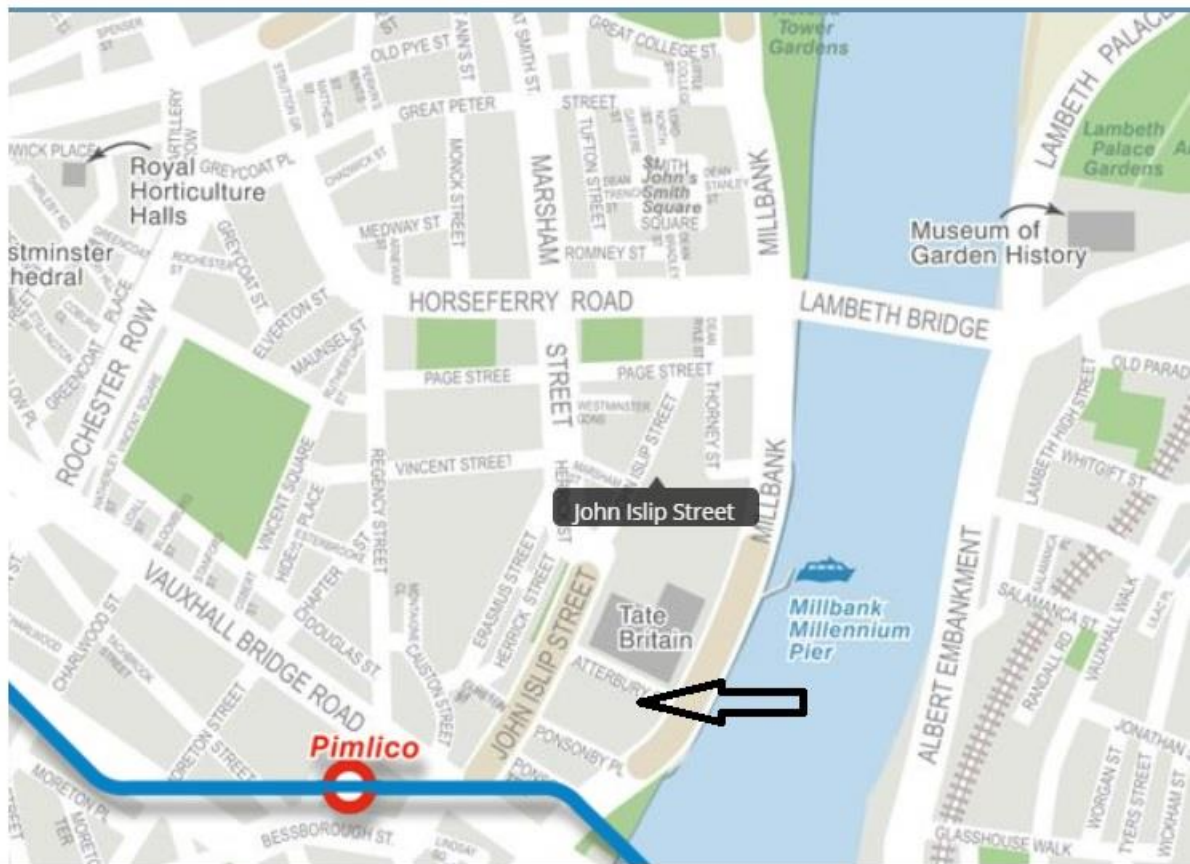


Our military medical history talks at Millbank (Chelsea College of Arts, formerly the Royal Army Medical College)

We hold monthly talks, open to all, at Millbank, also streamed on Zoom, on the last Friday of the month apart from December, with none in August. We meet for light refreshments from 1730hrs. The talk commences at 1830hrs. See programme and registration link on our homepage www.friendsofmillbank.org New members and guests always welcome.

The College entrance is via Atterbury Street, opposite Tate Britain (as arrowed below).

LondonTown.com - John Islip Street Location Map



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