Starter Reading – AHS-47 Centaur

In the early 1940s Australia had three hospital ships, but none was able to operate in the shallow coastal waters of South-east Asia. The Centaur was a motor passenger ship converted for use as a hospital ship (AHS-47) in January 1943.

The **Geneva Conventions** required some specific changes and obligations in order for the Centaur to obtain the protected status enjoyed by hospital ships. This included the Centaur being painted with all the international markings of a hospital ship. She was given a white hull, with a green band interspersed with three large red crosses on each side of the hull. The superstructure was also painted white with multiple red crosses positioned so that they could be identified from both sea and air. At night the ship's markings were lit using both internal and external lights. A description of the ship and her layout was given to the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** and the ICRC passed on this information to the Japanese military command on 5 February. The press and media also circulated the information widely. All weapons were removed, apart from a system of anti-mine measures permitted for self-defence. The ship was then commissioned as the Australian Hospital Ship (AHS-47) Centaur on 1 March 1943.

At 0945 on 12 May 1943 the Centaur sailed unescorted from Sydney, carrying 332 personnel, as well as stores and equipment of the 2/12th Field Ambulance. It was heading to New Guinea to pick up wounded, including some injured Japanese prisoners-of-war. There were no medical patients yet on board.

Without warning, in the middle of the night of 14 May, the Centaur was sunk by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine, when it was about 50 miles east north-east of Brisbane. The torpedo hit the port-side oil fuel tank, creating a huge explosion and fire. Many on board were killed instantly; others were incinerated by the fire. Many were asleep when the torpedo hit the ship and didn't have time to get off the boat. With water pouring into the huge hole in the ship, the Centaur sank in less than three minutes.

Of the 332 persons on board, only 64 survived. The survivors spent 35 hours on rafts before being rescued. Australian Red Cross representative W. F. Darwin Clark, who had served with **Australian Red Cross** during both World War 1 and 2, was among those killed.

Sister Ellen Savage was the only one of twelve nursing sisters on board to survive. Though injured herself, Sister Savage gave great help to the other survivors and was awarded the George Medal for her brave work.

Postscript: The wreck of the Centaur was finally located in December 2009, and underwater photographs still clearly showed her red cross markings. Continue to read about her discovery and tributes paid to those lost sixty-six years previously.