

HOSPITAL SHIPS IN JAPAN.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—In view of the recent international conference dealing with hospital ships in time of war, it is of interest to read what Japan had done in this respect before the present war with Russia. In Japan the hospital ships do not come under the Army Medical Department, but under the Red Cross Society. This society, which is in every sense of the word a national undertaking, having nearly one million members, recognized after the war with China the necessity of having hospital ships ready in order to transport the sick and wounded during any future war. The insular situation of Japan renders such ships a prime necessity, as should be the case for the British Isles. Thus the parallel is instructive as well as interesting. The Japanese Red Cross Society decided that it was useless to depend upon transports, improvised into hospital ships on the outbreak of the war, because at this time all available vessels are needed for the service of the active forces. Even should the vessels be available, the lack of adequate sanitary arrangements in vessels not especially constructed for the purpose was held to be too great a danger to be risked. Therefore hospital ships of special design had to be built. But there was the serious question of the expense, both of construction and of the lying idle of such ships during long periods of peace. To obviate to as great an extent as possible these drawbacks the Red Cross Society discovered a means which is most practical, and which has been shown by the present war to have worked exceedingly well. It represents the best possible compromise obtainable, and reflects great credit upon the Japanese brains which evolved it. An arrangement was made along the following lines with the Nippon Yusen Kaisha, the Government subsidized steamship company:—

1. The society shall build and equip at its expense two ships for the transport of the sick and wounded.

2. The plan of construction shall be determined by a technical committee composed of the directors of the medical services of the army and of the navy, a naval architect belonging to the Imperial navy, an engineer of the Nippon Yusen Kaisha, and members of the administrative committee of the society.

3. The actual construction of the vessels, in accordance with the plan fixed by the technical committee, shall be confided to the Nippon Yusen Kaisha.

4. The ships so constructed shall be sold by the society to the Nippon Yusen Kaisha at the cost of construction in partial payments of equal amounts without interest extending over 20 years, on the condition that whenever the society shall have need of them for relief service the Nippon Yusen Kaisha shall place one or both of them at its disposal without delay.

5. The Nippon Yusen Kaisha shall have the liberty of transforming and repainting the ships while it is using them; but the moment they are called for by the society they are to be restored to their original form and colour. For this transformation the company shall be allowed a delay of 30 days in ordinary times, but only seven days in time of war.

6. During the time the ships are being used by the society in relief service, manœuvres, &c., it shall pay to the company an indemnity of so much per ton, to be fixed according to the rate of indemnity paid by the Government to the company for requisitioning its ships.

7. The cost of food, &c., for the relief staff shall be

paid by the society, while the ordinary running expenses, including the cost of coal, shall be paid by the company during the time the ships are being used by the society.

8. During the 20 years the company shall take upon itself all the responsibilities regarding damage or loss of the ships, subjecting them to repairs or replacing them with new ones built in exactly the same form.

9. At the end of the 20 years the society undertakes to build three ships with the accumulated sum of the partial payments from the company and the compound interest paid upon them by the bank of deposit.

The arrangement was entered into in August, 1887, and by the end of 1898 two hospital steamers, costing £51,000 each, were completed on the Clyde. These two boats, the Hakuni Maru and the Kasai Maru, have done yeoman work in the Boer rising and in the present war. Their gross tonnage is 2,774, their horse-power is 878, and the maximum speed $11\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Each contains 208 beds, besides full equipment of physicians, surgeons, and medical and surgical rooms and stores. The nurses and doctors are supplied by the Red Cross Society. In the Boer outbreak these two Japanese ships did much good service to the allied forces, and in seven trips each carried 8,050 patients. During the present war the ships have been used continuously, though it has been found necessary to supplement them by seven improvised vessels. But it was possible to spare the time necessary to transform these latter owing to the immediate readiness of the two special hospital ships at the beginning of the war.

Could not Great Britain take a lesson from Japan in this respect? While it may not be possible for the British Red Cross Society, which does not compare with the Japanese Society, to undertake the work, the War Office might well enter into an arrangement with one of the great British steamship lines somewhat upon the model of the Japanese arrangement. The cost would be very small, and the advantages so great that the idea is at least worth consideration.

Yours, &c.,

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