

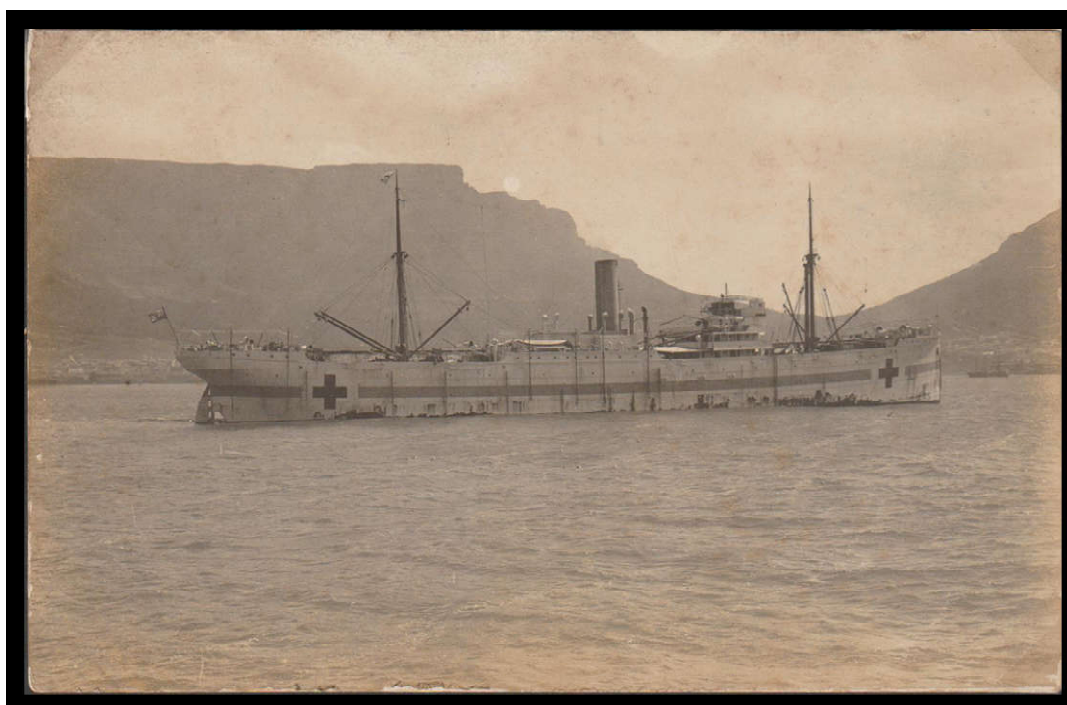
# THE SOUTH AFRICAN NAVY HOSPITAL SHIP

## H.M.H.S. EBANI

Dave Young

Deon Brand - Navy News No. 2 / 2012

Hugh Amoore.



*1914. Real Photo Postcard taken at the time of the commissioning of HMHS Ebani.  
(Hugh Amoore)*

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### HIS MAJESTY'S SHIP "EBANI"

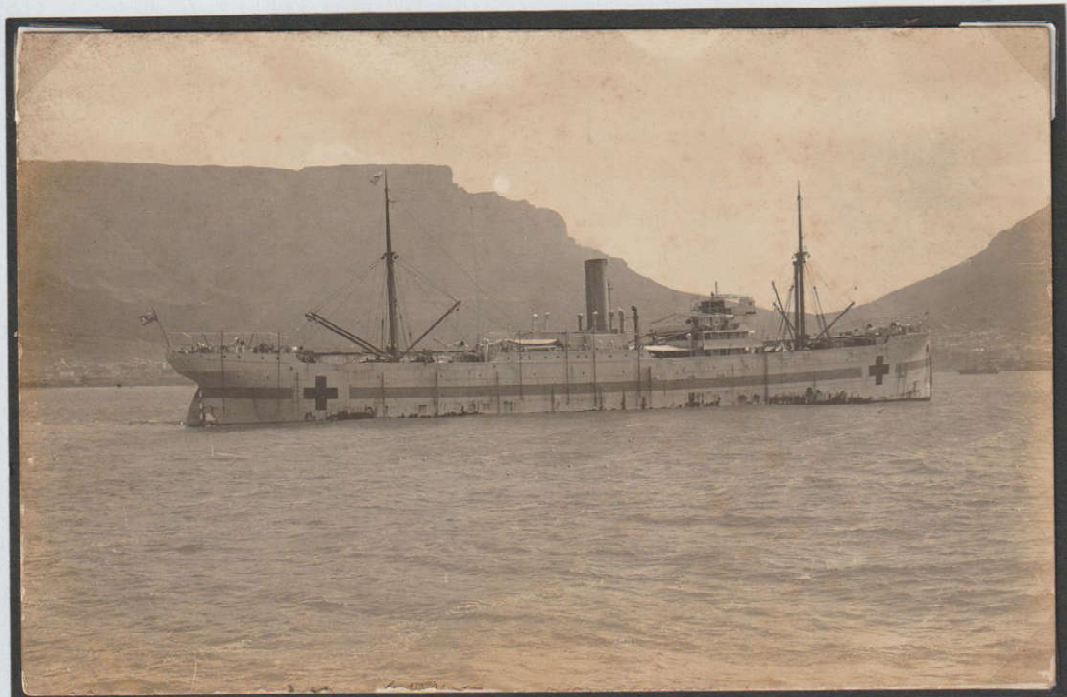
The only practical way to return wounded soldiers from GWSA was by sea to Cape Town. To this end a special fund was established by Lady Jessie Rose-Innes to equip the cargo ship "Ebani" as a hospital ship. A large operating theatre and some smaller theatres, a special ward for contagious diseases, a pharmacy and a number of wards on various decks were prepared. In an emergency the ship could accommodate some 500 patients.

The SS Ebani was registered as a hospital ship and formally inaugurated in this capacity as HMHS Ebani in Cape Town by Her Excellency Viscountess Phyllis Buxton on 1 December 1914. Although HMHS denotes His Majesty's Hospital Ship both the Royal Navy and SA Navy web sites show the Ebani as the "South African Hospital Ship". Lady Buxton was on board the hospital ship on 14 December 1914 to inaugurate the Ebani as the "South African Hospital Ship Ebani". This technically made the HMHS Ebani South Africa's first naval vessel, although she was not a fully fledged man-of-war. The medical staff on board were trained South African nurses from Wynberg Hospital (Cape Town) and male counterparts from the South African Medical Corps.

Some photographs were taken for the inauguration and made into post cards. These cards are relatively scarce and rarely seen. I illustrate two real photographic cards – both postally unused, one of the vessel off Cape Town Harbour – similar to the one depicted in most articles and the other one of the deck wards showing two nurses and two SAMC orderlies.

The ship is also recorded as having transported German POW's from Walvis Bay to Cape Town. The rear of the cards under the 'Correspondence' section also has the German word "Mitteilung" indicating that the cards may have also been used by the German prisoners.

On completion of the military campaign in German South West Africa the Ebani was declassified as a hospital ship from 1 June 1915 and had to remove her Red Cross emblems. She was thus no longer under Geneva Conventions protection. Although still transporting sick soldiers, she also carried limited stores, fresh provisions, a limited number of passengers and small detachments of soldiers returning to South Africa. On her last trip she arrived back in Cape Town on 30 July 1915. Two days prior to this on 28 July 1915, the Admiralty requested that they take over the vessel for the East Africa campaign. Reclassified, again as a hospital ship, the Ebani was transferred to the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. Refitted the vessel reported for duties in Kildini, German East Africa on 19 March 1916. HMHS Ebani did several trips after this date and had regular stops in Cape Town, Durban, Dar Es Salaam, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Alexandria, Kilwa, Tanga and Port Said. The last military voyage was on 27 March 1919. HMHS Ebani travelled over 200 000 nautical miles for the Admiralty and transported more than 50 000 sick and wounded officers and men.







Few postally used items from the Hospital Ship Ebani have been observed. One such item is in the possession of Hugh Amore member of the Royal Philatelic Society of Cape Town. Acknowledgement is given to Hugh Amore and the Post Office Stone (The Official Journal of the Postmark and Postal History Society of Southern Africa incorporating the Colonial Society) for the following:

"The cover was posted from HMHS Ebani which was docked in Cape Town at the date of posting 1 Dec. 1916 and received in Pietermaritzburg 4 December 1916, 6.15pm. A letter appears to be missing from the lower end of the cachet (? E.F); E F is presumably for Expeditionary Force". One can deduce that the missing letter would have been "M" for Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.



Persons interested in the detailed history of HMHS Ebani, should study the attached article contributed by Deon Brand to the Navy News, date unknown. Acknowledgement is given to the author and the Navy News.

Dave Young, Fishhoek Philatelic Society Cape Town.



# The SA Navy Hospital Ship *Ebani* - SA's First True Naval Vessel?

Sent to Navy News by contributor, Deon Brand

It is generally accepted that the South African Navy came into being upon the arrival of the three Royal Navy vessels HMS *Crozeir*, *Foyle* and *Eden*, subsequently named SA Ships *Protea*, *Sonneblom* and *Immortelle* respectively in 1922. Although this is technically true, some ships were utilised by SA Naval Forces prior to this.

The Natal Government authorised a part-time naval unit, the Natal Naval Volunteers (forerunner to SAS *Inkonkoni*), to be established on 30 April 1885 by Mr Harry Escombe, a later Colonial Prime Minister. He was initially appointed as a Cdr, but served as a Capt from February 1897. The unit's primary function was to man the mounted 6-inch batteries on the Bluff and at Back Beach in 1889 to defend the Natal Colony against a possible Russian invasion. In July 1892 the Colonial Government paddle-tug *Forerunner*, which was laid up in reserve in Durban, was donated to the unit as a depot ship. Annual provision was also made by the Government for the upkeep and maintenance of the vessel. She was apparently wrecked in 1905.

A Cape Town harbour tug, the large, very modern and sophisticated *Ludwig Weiner*, built on the Clyde in England nine months earlier, was commandeered eight days after commencement of the war, painted battleship grey, armed and commissioned as an armed patrol vessel as HMS *Afrikander* on 16 August 1914. She originally operated from Cape Town harbour, but soon moved to Simon's Town to protect that harbour from possible attacks. She was disarmed and returned to the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR&H) as *Ludwig Weiner* on 19 March 1915.

In 1914, three weeks after the outbreak of hostilities of World War 1, the SA (Union) Government, decided to invade German South West Africa, as part of the Allied offensive against Germany in that war. A number of Allied (Royal Navy) commandeered British passenger liners and transports, supported by some capital ships, were utilised to transport largely SA troops and equipment from Cape Town to German South West Africa for this offensive. The Union Government also chartered and requisitioned a number of local ships as troop and transport ships as support for the expeditionary force. These vessels were used to ferry about 67 000 men and their horses, ammunition and other supplies from Cape Town to Port Nolloth, Luderitz Bay, Walvis Bay and Swakopmund from October to December 1914, to assist in putting them ashore, and to return them to the Union on cessation of hostilities in July 1915. The tugs also towed some lighters and 24 specially constructed rafts to these harbours and utilised them, together with some RN ships' cutters to land the troops and supplies.

The details of the SA vessels involved in this operation are as follows:

Coaster <i>Agnar</i>	Tug <i>Good Hope</i>
Tug <i>Alert</i>	Coaster <i>Ingerid</i>
Tug <i>Anichab</i>	Coaster <i>Karatara</i>
Tug <i>Annie</i>	Trawler <i>Kingfisher</i>
Whaler <i>Blink</i>	Tug <i>Ludwig Weiner</i> (as HMS <i>Afrikander</i> )
Tug <i>Colonist</i>	Tug <i>Magnet</i>
Whaler <i>Diamant</i>	Coaster <i>Nautilus</i>
Tug <i>Eland</i>	Tug <i>Sir Frederick</i>
Tug <i>Eveline</i>	Tug <i>Sir John</i>
Tug <i>Fronteir</i>	Coaster <i>Southern Cross</i>
Tug <i>Garth</i>	Tug <i>Stork</i>

General cargo ship *SS City of Athens*, also serving as hospital ship, did a few trips before being replaced by the refurbished *SS Ebani*.

General cargo ship *SS Ebani*, conveyed injured and sick troops.

These vessels were only in use for a short period. However, *SS Ebani* was used for about five years. Technically, she can be considered as South Africa's first naval vessel, although not armed.

## The *SS Ebani*'s story is as follows.

The original *SS Ebani* was a modern British cargo ship built by Palmer Shipbuilding and Iron (Co) Ltd Shipyard in Hepburn off Newcastle on the river Tyne in 1912 for the Elder Dempster Co as a general cargo ship. She was launched on 12 June 1912 and completed on 21 October 1912.

She had two steel decks and a shelter deck. She was fitted with limited refrigeration machinery, which facilitated the carrying of certain types of medical supplies. She had 12 single cabins for 12 passengers, each with own ablution facilities. She was specifically built for the West African trade and operated by the British and African Steam Navigation (Co) Ltd, a subsidiary of the Elder Dempster Co.



*SS Ebani* off the Liverpool coast in 1913

She had an overall length of 420 feet, a beam of 54 feet and a draught of 23 feet 6 inches. Her gross tonnage constituted 4 254 tons under-deck and 4 862 tons under full load, and she had a nett tonnage of 2 965 tons. She had a speed of 12 knots and a range of approximately 3 500 nautical miles. She was fitted with 3 single-ended boilers, providing 205 pounds per square inch pressure, driving a steam triple-expansion 3-cylinder engine, giving 566 nominal horsepower. She had only one drive shaft and one propeller. She officially carried 582 tons of coal, but this capacity was later expanded during her United Kingdom refit and she was believed to carry a maximum of 1 300 tons.

She operated on the monthly Liverpool to South West African coast mail run from 1912 to 1914. At the time she was the fastest and largest ship serving Ghana and Liberia. The contract to take over *SS Ebani* was secured on 2 October 1914. She was taken over by the Union Government on 13 October 1914 and refurbished in Cape Town as a hospital ship to support the South African troops taking part in the German South West African campaign.



A special fund was established by Lady Jessie Rose-Innes to equip SS *Ebani* as a hospital ship and to establish various convalescent homes in the major SA centres to care for the sick and wounded from the German South West African campaign. Various donations were made in support of the war effort in South Africa. Of special note was a donation of £30 000 made by the Transvaal Chamber of Mining (excluding the J.B. Robinson group of companies) towards the fund. A large operating theatre and some smaller theatres, a special ward for contagious diseases and a large pharmacy were added on SS *Ebani*. As her decks were not unduly divided, large airy wards were prepared, and 200 hospital beds and approximately a dozen single-tier "swing cots" fitted. In an emergency she could accommodate about 500 patients. Arrangements for separate accommodation for coloured and native troops were made. Although it was planned and budgeted for to spend approximately £3 200, the alterations cost in the vicinity of £5 500.

The SS *Ebani* was registered as a hospital ship and formally inaugurated in this capacity as HMHS *Ebani* in Cape Town by Her Excellency Viscountess Phyllis Buxton on 1 December 1914. Although HMHS denotes Her Majesty's Hospital Ship, both the Royal Navy and SA Navy websites show the *Ebani* as the "South African Hospital Ship *Ebani*." Lady Buxton was on board the hospital ship, *Ebani* in Cape Town harbour, on 14 December 1914 to inaugurate *Ebani* as the "South African Hospital Ship *Ebani*". This technically made the HMHS *Ebani* South Africa's first naval vessel, although she was not a fully-fledged man-of-war.

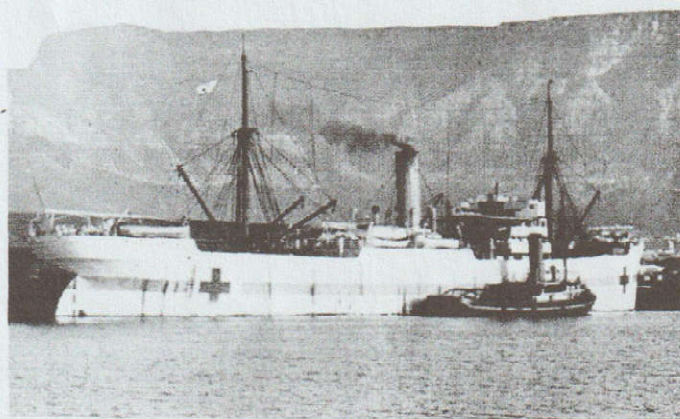


**The Crew:** The original SS *Ebani* crew of the Elder Dempster Co provided the ship's crew and catering facilities, but the hospital part was staffed by military medical staff from the SA Medical Corps and SA Military Nursing Service. All medical costs were initially paid by the "Voluntary Aid Committee", but the Union Government paid the ship's hiring, operating and maintenance costs. From 25 February 1915, however, the committee paid for all costs, except the monthly hiring fee. HMHS *Ebani* was in terms of the Geneva Conventions, classified as a hospital ship sailing under protection from 15 December 1914. HMHS *Ebani* made 14 trips between Cape Town and Walvis Bay, Luderitz Bay, and Swakopmund, and evacuated 3 754 sick and wounded troops. She also had stopovers in Angra Pequena and Port Nolloth in between to staff and supply medical facilities in German South West African.

On completion of the military campaign in German South West Africa, she was declassified as a hospital ship from 1 June 1915 and had to remove her Red Cross emblems. She was thus no longer under Geneva Conventions protection. Although still transporting sick soldiers, she also carried limited stores, fresh supplies, a limited number of passengers and small detachments of soldiers to be returned to SA. On her last trip she arrived back in Cape Town on 30 July 1915.

Two days prior to this, on 28 July 1915, the Admiralty enquired about the ship and expressed the desire to take her over urgently for the East African campaign. She was thus reclassified as a hospital ship again, stored and transferred to the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force under control of the Admiralty, where she served till 1919, after the end of hostilities in 1918. During this period, the hospital part was still staffed by the same South African medical staff, which transferred to the Admiralty and enlisted as part of the Royal Army Medical Corps. HMHS *Ebani* departed from Cape Town on 20 August 1915 for the UK, where some modifications were made, eg, an X-ray facility was installed and more beds were added.

She reported for her duties in Kilindini on 19 March 1916. HMHS *Ebani* did several trips during this period, and had regular stops in Cape Town, Durban, Dar Es Salaam, Zanzibar, Mombasa,



The South African Hospital Ship *Ebani* in service of the Royal Navy off the East African Coast, 1915 - 1919.

Alexandria, Kilwa, Tanga and Port Said. She left Cape Town for her last "military" voyage on 27 March 1919. She travelled over 200 000 nautical miles for the Admiralty and transported more than 50 000 sick and wounded officers and men.

After her last voyage, from end of April 1919, she was refitted again as a general cargo vessel and towards the latter part of 1919, returned to her former owners as the SS *Ebani*. She operated for the British and African Steam Navigation (Co) Ltd, a subsidiary of on the Elder Dempster Co from 1919 to 1933 and thereafter for another subsidiary, the Elder Dempster Lines Ltd. She operated on the monthly North America to South West African coast mail run. In 1939 she was purchased by the Rizzuto Brothers in Italy and renamed the SS *Maristella*. In 1941 she was sold to the Argentinian Government and renamed the SS *Rio Atuel*. She was again returned to the Rizzuto Brothers in Italy in 1946 and renamed the SS *Maristella*. She was broken up for scrap in 1950.

Sources: SANDF Archives, Pretoria, Various files of the SA Union Defence Force (including various newspaper clippings from that time)  
[www.theshipslist.com/shiplines/Elder\\_Dempster.html](http://www.theshipslist.com/shiplines/Elder_Dempster.html), [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk), [books.google.com/prayers\\_on\\_the\\_occasion\\_of\\_the\\_inauguration\\_of\\_the\\_S.S.\\_Ebani\\_as\\_a\\_hospital\\_ship\\_by\\_Her\\_Excellency\\_the\\_Viscountess\\_Buxton\\_Cape\\_Town\\_December\\_1st\\_1914](http://books.google.com/prayers_on_the_occasion_of_the_inauguration_of_the_S.S._Ebani_as_a_hospital_ship_by_Her_Excellency_the_Viscountess_Buxton_Cape_Town_December_1st_1914), [www.photoships.co.uk](http://www.photoships.co.uk), [www.samagie.co.za/weermag/geskiedenis](http://www.samagie.co.za/weermag/geskiedenis), <http://rapidit.co.za/museum/htm> (John H. Marsh Maritime Museum and Research Centre), [http://www.archive.org/stream/medical\\_services](http://www.archive.org/stream/medical_services) (General History of the Medical Services in in SA), [http://www.battleships.cruisers.co.uk/south\\_african\\_navy.htm](http://www.battleships.cruisers.co.uk/south_african_navy.htm), <http://samilitaryhistory.org> (Some notes on the South African Military Nursing Services) Hat, Cdr the Honourable, Serald, The Story of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (South African Division), Juta & Co, Cape Town, 1920.





# **The End**

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