

MAIDEN TRIP BY ORANJE AS HOSPITAL SHIP

Sets Record For Indian Ocean

THE only regret of 530 Australian and New Zealand wounded and invalided "diggers" on arriving home recently was that their "luxury" cruise back to Australia had passed too quickly because of the speed of the hospital ship Oranje, which the Netherlands East Indies Government made available, free of cost, for conveying Australian and New Zealand wounded from the Middle East.

This triple-screw 20,017-ton motor-ship—often referred to as the "Pride of Holland"—took only 11 days 18 hours for the journey from the Egyptian embarkation port to Australia, thereby setting a new Indian Ocean record. Oranje is regarded as the fastest motor-ship in the world, having a cruising speed above 23 knots and being capable of between 27 and 28 knots.

The arrival of the Oranje in Melbourne from her first "hospital" trip was an occasion of demonstrations marked by spontaneous gestures of goodwill and friendship unequalled by any other ship's visit to Port Phillip since the outbreak of war. These demonstrations revealed the measure of appreciation of the "diggers," heads of the fighting services, and of the civil community for the N.E.I. Government, for the Dutch doctors, nurses, V.A.Ds., and crew, and for the ship.

The "diggers" spoke in glowing terms of the unfailing kindness, courtesy, and friendliness they had received during the voyage. They said "goodbye" on disembarking with real regret.

Regarded as the flagship of the Royal Netherlands Mail Line, Oranje was launched at Amsterdam by the Queen of Holland on September 6, 1938. She first put to sea on September 4, 1939, making a hurried departure after the outbreak of war. She travelled via the Cape of Good Hope, frequently doing 21 knots, and reached Colombo one day quicker than the normal passenger liner time for a vessel coming through the Mediterranean and Suez Canal. Before being offered to the Commonwealth last February she had lain in the East Indies for 15 months.

Costs of conversion and operation of this palatial and luxuriously appointed liner are being borne entirely by the East Indies. When the personnel of 539, including doctors, 30 nurses, and 30 V.A.Ds., is considered, together with provisioning, running, and wages, the magnanimity of this gift to Australia can be realised. Great blocks of cabins were torn out to provide spacious wards when

the liner was converted in Sydney. Special care was taken, however, to preserve the magnificent decorations and fittings.

Col. J. Gerards, senior Dutch medical officer, said that when the fitting-up was being considered the N.E.I. Government said only the best was to be provided, irrespective of cost. Thus, the operating facilities and X-ray room are equal to any in Australian shore hospitals. "There has not been much we could do to show our deep appreciation of the British Empire in this war," said

could do to show our deep appreciation of the British Empire in this war," said Col. Gerards. "We have been very glad to do this." As the Oranje was designed for tropical service, being air-conditioned, and having a hull fitted with an anti-rolling device, she has even more value as a hospital ship for use in the Middle East.

Dr. Gerards is a bacteriologist. His staff includes three surgeons, including Prof. Reddings, best-known surgeon in the East Indies, an eye specialist, a lung specialist, two physicians, and a psychiatrist.

Deep concern was expressed by the Dutch medical officers at Germany's refusal to recognise the Oranje as a hospital ship. When the ship left Sumatra for Australia to be converted a cable was sent to Germany seeking recognition. It was not forthcoming, so the Oranje sailed without it. On arrival at Aden on its way to pick up wounded another attempt was made to obtain recognition of the vessel as a hospital ship, but there was no German reply.

So the Oranje went up the Red Sea. She passed the South African hospital ship Amra, which was heading from Suez with all lights burning. The captain signalled the Amra captain, saying, in effect, "Put your lights out." The Amra's lights were extinguished, and a few minutes later a German torpedo-carrying aeroplane made an attack on the Amra swooping to promenade deck level before releasing its torpedo, which missed narrowly. An armed merchantman fought off further attacks with anti-aircraft fire.

Dutch officers said the attack was obviously meant for the Oranje, as the aeroplane had come 100 miles down the Red Sea from Libya or Crete. They said it made the reason for refusal of recognition quite plain. Attempts were also made to bomb the Oranje while embarkation of wounded was being completed. They were frustrated by the ship being moved away from the dock during the nights.