

Ground Zero, 1946

A Jacksonville experiment



As Jacksonville looks forward to hosting the thirty-ninth Super Bowl in 2005, cruise ships docked on the St. John's River are part of the plan to accommodate hotel overflows. But this won't be the first time ships have been anchored downtown to handle large crowds.

Few people today remember the *Ernest Hinds*. This ship has sunk below the depths of local history, yet it once fulfilled a vital—and uncommon—role: The *Hinds* ranked as America's largest and busiest treatment center for sexually transmitted disease (then called venereal disease, or VD). It achieved this distinction after dropping its gangplank on Jacksonville's Northbank on July 1, 1946. The *Hinds* docked in the vicinity of today's CSX Building, during a time when ugly wharves and warehouses ruled the downtown waterfront.

The hospital ship drew patients in droves. From across Florida, they arrived and departed in buses and station wagons furnished by the State Board of Health. Indeed, medical officials expected a yearly case load of 12,000 patients, who would usually live onboard for nine days during treatment. The state government operated the vessel, which replaced several STD treatment centers. One overcrowded facility had operated at the Duval County Hospital, situated where the Shands Jacksonville hospital now stands on West 8th Street. Other treatment centers had been located near Ocala and in Pensacola and Wakulla. A disaster at the Ocala facility prompted the State to request and receive control of the *Hinds* to battle sexually transmitted diseases. As explained in the 1946 Annual Report for the Florida Board of Health, "In April, 1946, a major fire destroyed half of the hospital at Ocala, necessitating a curtailment in admissions to that center. After this catastrophe, negotiations were started to acquire a new rapid treatment center, which finally culminated in the acquisition of the *Ernest Hinds* Hospital Ship..."



Dr. G. Guy Schramm and nurse Bennes Brand, US Public Health Service, perform a spinal puncture

It was hoped that the *Ernest Hinds* would provide treatment for advanced syphilis. This disease could result in some pretty ugly consequences, including blindness, heart disease, and mental illness. According to the *Florida Times-Union* on June 3, 1946, the effects on a victim's mind could even lead to commitment to the "State Hospital for the Insane" (now the Florida State Hospital), located in the panhandle town of Chattahoochee. Up to this point, Florida's STD program had been mostly limited to finding and treating the early cases of syphilis. However, more than 600 advanced cases of the disease were reported to the state's medical officers in 1945, almost double the number of the previous year. Due to a lack of space, though, few of these sufferers could be assisted at the STD treatment centers.



Crowded sleeping quarters aboard the hospital ship

Along with laboratories, the *Hinds* boasted complete facilities for examinations, operations, and x-rays. It was also equipped with lounges and dining areas. According to the *Florida Times-Union* on May 15, 1946, the *Hinds* was part of a national experiment to determine the use of surplus hospital ships from the military.

Why Jacksonville? Our city played host to the *Hinds* for good reason: During the 1940s, Florida sometimes led the nation in STD rates. The national average for syphilis hovered around 45 cases per 1,000 men examined. In Florida, however, the statistic held at about 157 per 1,000 adult males. Alarmed, the state government tried to remedy the situation. Among other things, it initiated intensive educational programs, established live-in treatment centers, enlarged and improved its laboratories, and distributed drugs to medical people who attended to indigent patients. The state also passed more stringent premarital

and prenatal laws in 1945, requiring candidates for marriage licenses to have their blood tested, for instance. The Sunshine State suffered high STD rates due to several identified factors:

1. The military stationed legions of men here, taking advantage of the weather.
2. Particularly after WWII, both tourists and homeless people came south, seeking warmth during the winter.
3. Relatively large numbers of poverty-stricken people resided in Florida, including migrant workers. (The rates among the lower income groups tended to be higher, according to *Millstones and Milestones*, a 1964 State Board of Health publication.)

(To put these rates into perspective, while Florida's STD rates are still disproportionately high, modern incidence is significantly lower. Rates for 2002 showed an incidence of infectious syphilis at less than ten per 100,000 population in Duval County and the state at large.)


Treatment aboard the *Hinds* was designed for speed, not for comfort; one shot every two hours was the standard fare for the ship's STD patients. This dismal regiment of injections was probably disheartening for the patients, but treatment on the ship required only nine days, as opposed to the seventy-two weeks that used to be needed for STD treatment.

The chief medical officer was Dr. Daniel C. Leavitt, according to the *Times-Union* of July 22, 1946. Two physicians and fifteen nurses assisted him, and a grand total of about 100 individuals served as hospital ship's personnel. On August 20, 1946, the *Times-Union* reported that, during July, more patients had been treated aboard the *Hinds* than had been handled in any one month at all four of the STD treatment centers replaced by the ship. The vessel's medical personnel reported having treated 990 patients onboard in July alone.

The *Hinds* provided a capacity for 500 beds, yet its doctors had to turn down cases. According to the State Board of Health's Annual Report of 1946, "This facility... had its limitations, and it was necessary to restrict admissions on many occasions because of inadequate space."

After serving in Jacksonville for only seven months, the treatment center on the *Hinds* had to shut down in February 1947. A budget crunch proved the culprit. In its 1947 Annual Report, the Board of Health explained that the problem had been "the lack of funds to maintain the Rapid Treatment Center for the remainder of the fiscal year 1947." The Board also noted, "The lack of funds not only affected the in-care treatment of venereal disease patients but also drastically curtailed the purchase of drugs for out-patient treatment... We were fortunate during the year in that there were no exceptional outbreaks of communicable diseases..."

The Board decided not to use the hospital ship again. According to the 1947 Annual Report, "Due to the administrative impossibilities on the *Ernest Hinds*, it was deemed necessary to find a land base facility." The Naval Air Station at Melbourne looked like a good candidate. It had opened in 1942 during World War II, but closed after the conflict's conclusion. As indicated in the Annual Report, "The Naval Air Station Hospital at Melbourne was finally secured for the Rapid Treatment Center and the program began operating again in July (1947)." Consequently, the treatment facility functioned in "better quarters," becoming the "chief bulwark in the venereal disease control program in Florida."

Whatever happened to the *Ernest Hinds*? The vessel was transferred to the Maritime Administration in April 1947 and laid up at Brunswick, Georgia. A year later, it moved to the National Defense Reserve Fleet at James River, Virginia. The ship's final days came in May 1957, when it was scrapped for its parts. 

[Editors note: Thanks to jacksonvillestory.com for this in-depth information and for photos of the *Hinds*' history.]



A young woman onboard is x-rayed for tuberculosis (Duval County led the state in TB deaths in 1946)