

Always ready—the Revenue Cutter Service and the great San Francisco earthquake

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Le tremblement de terre de 1906 à San Francisco se situe parmi les plus grandes catastrophes naturelles de l'histoire des Etats-Unis. Un des organismes gouvernementaux qui ont répondu au désastre était le Service de pataches des Etats-Unis. Ce document met à l'examen les efforts de ce petit groupe d'officiers et d'hommes qui ont immédiatement répondu à l'appel et ont fourni l'aide à toute la région de la Baie. Travaillant sans répit pendant des jours, ils ont joué un rôle de contraindre et d'éteindre les incendies qui ont menacé tout San Francisco, en particulier le long des quais. Ils ont également sauvé bien des vies, protégé l'immobilier de San Francisco et des villes voisines, renforcé l'ordre civil, et ont porté secours par la suite.

At five o'clock on the morning of 18 April 1906, the streets of the city of San Francisco had just begun to stir with activity. Twelve minutes after the hour and just before sunrise, a severe earthquake, lasting more than a minute, jolted the city. The pavement undulated, buildings shook and crumbled to the ground, and the shocks severed gas mains that spawned raging fires throughout the downtown district. The destruction of the city and outlying areas left about 225,000 people homeless. The death figure runs as high as 3,000 with many thousands more injured.¹

This earthquake remains the most tragic event in the history of California and as one of the greatest natural disasters in the history of the United States. The literature of this event is plentiful, and includes many tales of courage and sacrifice. In the aftermath of the quake, San Francisco's police and fire departments immediately mobilized and performed magnificently. Thousands of Army troops from nearby bases also quickly rushed to the city. The Navy sent numerous warships there to help with rescue efforts. Many citizens also ignored the loss of their homes and businesses to lend a hand to those less fortunate. Among the many published accounts, however, one group of heroes has rarely received mention: the men of the Revenue Cutter Service who played a vital role.

The Revenue Cutter Service's presence on the West Coast began in 1849, when the cutter *C.W. Lawrence* arrived to perform customs duties in San Francisco. The discovery of gold in the territory stimulated tremendous growth in San Francisco and

¹ The casualty figures for the earthquake vary widely, and historians are continually revising them upward. Gladys Hansen, and Condon, Emmet, *Denial of Disaster* (San Francisco: Cameron and Co., 1989), 160.

increased the need for customs enforcement. When the United States acquired Alaska in 1867, the Service also needed a West Coast port to use as a base for its Bering Sea patrols. San Francisco served as the staging area for the cutters' annual journeys into Alaskan waters to enforce revenue laws and to protect the general interests of the United States.



Fig 1: Golden Gate—The Golden Gate, a 110-foot tug, built in 1896, served an important role in the firefighting efforts along the waterfront after the earthquake. She remained in service until 1947. (Coast Guard Historian's Office)

On the morning of the quake, the cutters *Hartley* and *Golden Gate* lay in San Francisco Harbor prepared to perform the usual customs duties. The large cutters *Thetis*, and *Bear* were laid up in Booles Shipyard in Oakland, under repairs for the upcoming Alaska cruising season. Neither of the latter two vessels would be available to help with the relief efforts but their skeleton crews were nearby.² The Revenue Cutter force in the Bay Area on this day comprised, in total, only about seventy-five men.

With no barracks or base, several officers of the Revenue Cutter Service lived ashore at the California Hotel. When the earthquake began, Chief Engineer Horatio Nelson Wood, the assistant to the engineer in chief in San Francisco, lay in his room on the seventh floor. He awoke to find his bed moving and recalled hearing the distinct and “continual roar” of buildings and chimneys crashing to the ground. Struggling to his feet, he peered out his open window and observed the water tank atop the adjoining theatre slopping its water “like a bucket on a freight truck.” When the quake ceased, he dressed and hurried into the street to observe the damage. Wood found the streets filled with

² Berry to secretary of the Treasury, 9 May 1906, Entry 178, Correspondence Concerning the San Francisco Fire, Records of the United States Coast Guard, Record Group 26, National Archives, hereafter all references to this group of papers will be cited as NA, RG 26, Entry 178.

disoriented and injured citizens. The less fortunate, those trapped in the collapsed buildings, were already crying for help.³

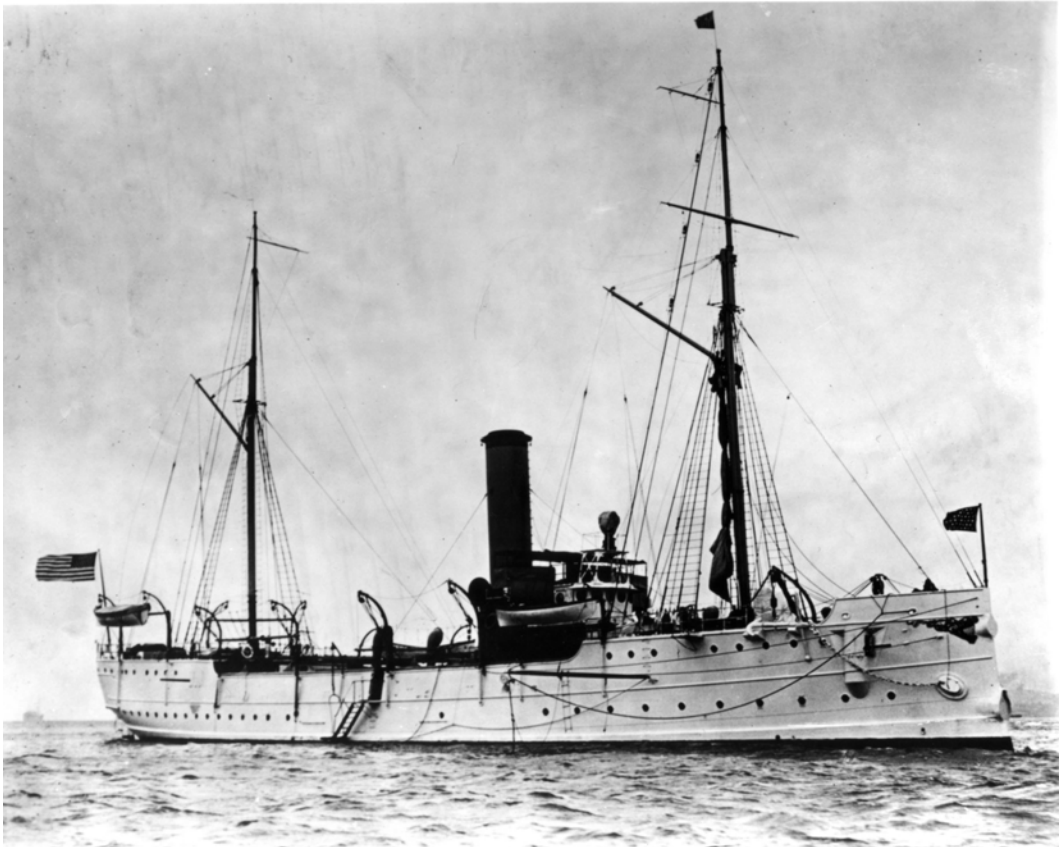


Fig 2: McCulloch—The McCulloch was the largest cutter in service. The 219-foot vessel was commissioned in 1897. She served as part of Admiral Dewey's squadron during the battle of Manila Bay. (Coast Guard Historian's Office)

Wood, who for health reasons had lived ashore for eight months, spent two days digging people from the rubble and assisting the distressed citizens. On the 20th, after an exhausting two days of relief work, Wood, while passing Pier 25 at the foot of Greenwich Street, heard the cry of “fire” from the wharf. At the same time, someone two blocks away reported a fire on the roof of Pier 27 at the foot of Lombard Street. Wood showed the watchman the first fire and hurried to Pier 27. Grabbing a ladder and a couple of buckets, Wood, with the help of the pier watchman and a couple of other men, led the efforts to put the fire out. Now charged with the safety of the pier, Wood watched as the fire spread to the north side of Telegraph Hill. Soon the lumber yards and the Sea Wall Wharf began to burn fiercely and threatened the Lombard Street Wharf. The intense heat on the exposed side started fires on the wharf's planking. Wood managed to convince a few straggling refugees and a “discouraged wharfinger” to remain in order to save the

³ H.N. Wood to O.C. Hamlet, 9 May 1906, *ibid.*

pier. Putting men on the roof to watch for sparks, he tried to hire other able bodied men with no success. Wood and the few he had convinced to remain behind kept this pier safe until 4:20 that afternoon when the tugs *Relief* and the state fire tug *Governor Markham* arrived to hose down the wharf. Later that afternoon and into the night Wood also fought fires at the bonded warehouses at Sansome and Lombard streets, at the American Can Company factory, nearby stables, wood and coal yards, and the Italian Swiss Colony Building. At 7:30, Marines from the cruiser USS *Chicago* helped Wood to fight the fires near the American Sugar Refinery.⁴

Also staying at the California Hotel was Second Assistant Engineer California C. McMillan of the revenue cutter *Bear*. Leaving the hotel immediately, he only delayed long enough to assure his mother and brother that he was alive and he proceeded to the waterfront. With the *Bear* laid up in the yard across the harbor for repairs, McMillan hurried toward the ferry terminal to get orders, but found his way blocked by fire. He was able to locate the cutter *Golden Gate* but found only First Lieutenant Frederick C. Dodge who had no instructions for him. Taking a boat across the harbour to Oakland, he reported to both the *Thetis* and the *Bear* for orders. Unable to find a senior officer, McMillan gathered the men he could find. His "landing party" consisted of two men from the *Thetis*, nine from the *Bear*, and two from the *McCulloch*. Armed with cutlasses and revolvers they travelled back across the harbour to the customhouse, known as the Appraiser's Building, "for such duty as might be necessary."⁵

Fires made their trip difficult. McMillan and his crew passed through the smoke-filled streets to the Appraiser's Building, the headquarters of the Treasury Department. As they progressed, they found fires spawned by ruptured gas lines. These fires would eventually destroy much of the city. But the quake also severed the water mains, which created a symbiotic catastrophe. Once the fires began, there was no water to fight them.

As McMillan and his men arrived at the Appraiser's Building, the nearby structures had begun to burn and the flames now threatened the government property. McMillan stationed his men in the southeast corner of the building. He instructed them to keep the window sills and casings cool with water and to help the firemen with the hoses and to maintain crowd control. Until about 11:00 pm, McMillan and his men, along with customs employees, soldiers, and Marines, used buckets and mops to keep the sills from catching fire. Fortunately, the building had an artisan well and a 5,000 gallon tank of water on the roof for flushing the toilets. Although the intense heat caused the wooden window frames and eaves to smoke and blister, McMillan and his detail helped to save the building while those around it burned to the ground.⁶

⁴ H.N. Wood to Hamlet, 9 May 1906, *Ibid.*; N.S. Farley to Collector of Customs, 12 May 1906, *ibid.*

⁵ C.C. McMillan to Hamlet, 1 May 1906, *ibid.*

⁶ Outside the building, sailors of the Navy tugs *Leslie* and *Active* tended hoses, which helped to quench the fires. *ibid.*; Cornelius Toohey to N. S. Farley, 30 April 1906, *ibid.*; Carmine to secretary of the Treasury, 7 May 1906, *ibid.*; N.S. Farley to F.S. Stratton 25 April 1906, *ibid.*; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 May 1906.



Fig 3: San Francisco on Fire—Large portions of the city survived the earthquake only to be destroyed by fires. The Revenue Cutter Service helped the citizens escape the flames, carry their possessions to safety and aided the San Francisco firefighting efforts. (National Archives)

With the Appraiser's Building safe, McMillan took his squad to the Fairmont Hotel, one of the initial command centres for the authorities. Here they reported to the Army's commander of the Department of California, Brigadier General Frederick Funston. Funston took charge of the city after the earthquake and ordered troops in from the surrounding military installations to help with the firefighting efforts. McMillan and his squad helped the army personnel to stow several tons of dynamite brought over to the city from the Presidio. The army and city leaders later used these explosives to destroy buildings in a desperate, but largely unsuccessful, attempt to form firebreaks.⁷

At midnight, McMillan bunked his men in a barn a block from the hotel. McMillan had to wake them at 2:00 am to retrieve a disabled fire engine in Chinatown. Six men accompanied McMillan to move the engine and hose. Before they could get the engine to its destination, a deputy sheriff asked if McMillan and his men could help transfer prisoners from the damaged county jail to Fort Mason. Arriving at the jail, a group of militia joined McMillan and his men to escort twenty-eight murderers and "life

⁷ McMillan to Hamlet, 1 May 1906, NA, RG 26, Entry 178.

timers, several of who [sic] were under the sentence of hanging. . . .” With drawn revolvers and instructions to shoot anyone who attempted to escape, they escorted the unchained men to another facility.⁸

At 9:00 the next morning the assistant fire chief asked McMillan and his men to help move hose and a fire engine to the Mark Hopkins Institute, then under threat by nearby flames. After hauling the engine to the institute, McMillan placed his force in a line across California and Mason Streets. McMillan and his men tried to impress every able-bodied man to help with the hose and to remove the paintings and artifacts from the building. Few of the passersby, however, showed any willingness to help save these treasures until McMillan threatened passing men with his pistol. This gesture brought forth “volunteers” who saved the valuables of the institute.⁹



Fig 4: San Francisco Waterfront—This photo is taken from the Union Ferry Building looking towards Telegraph Hill. (National Archives)

Over the next two days McMillan and his men kept law and order on the streets, fought fires, helped the old and infirm, and issued food from grocery stores to about 1400 destitute people. The large number of drunken citizens complicated their relief efforts and McMillan and his men made arrests when necessary. Boatswain William Hallberg

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.; Richard Linthicum and Hubert Russell, *San Francisco Earthquake Horror*, (np, 1906), 108-109.

arrested an intoxicated deputy sheriff who had discharged his weapon and advised people to loot. When McMillan arrived, he took the deputy's badge and revolver. Revenue Cutter Service men stood watch at several saloons to keep the citizens from breaking into the stores of alcohol. To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, they found it necessary to destroy approximately 100 barrels of liquor. The Revenue sailors maintained a high level of professionalism and McMillan praised his men: they "worked cheerfully throughout the whole time, never attempting drink or loot, being ready for any and all emergencies and being at all times a credit to the service."¹⁰

Another Revenue Cutter officer, First Lieutenant George C. Carmine, the purchasing officer in San Francisco, helped his family escape from their hotel after the tremors. After placing them on one of the cutters steaming to Oakland, he hurried to the Appraiser's Building. Here he removed the Service's public and private cash, ledgers, unsettled accounts, vouchers and bills. Carmine then travelled back to the hotel to pack his family's belongings and secure them. That afternoon he helped the exhausted refugees save their baggage and belongings from the flames. He witnessed people streaming from the devastated areas trying to stay ahead of the fires. The citizens pressed vehicles of all descriptions into service. Automobiles, trucks, wagons, baby carriages, lounges with castors, pony carts, and toy wagons, all served to carry the refugees' valuables. Throughout the second day, he helped people to move their belongings into the streets and loaded their possessions into wagons. By the afternoon of the 19th, the fire had reached Van Ness Avenue. The exhausted firemen trying to save the western and northern sections of the city sought volunteers to relieve them. Carmine worked on the hose line until 4 am, succeeding in containing the fire at Van Ness and Sutter Streets at the northwest portion of the fire's reach.¹¹

Second Assistant Engineer Jesse W. Glover of the *Bear* hurried from his home on Buchanan Street after the quake. He helped remove persons from the Waldeck Sanitarium and assisted other women and children when possible. While working his way to the ferry in order to report to the *Bear*, he saved the valuable books, ledgers, tracings, contracts, and instruments from the Main Street Iron Works. After the approaching fire drove Glover from the building, he spotted a man, under the influence of alcohol, staggering through the smoke. Glover ran to drag him away from the flames. As Glover got the man to safety, however, he got on his feet again and began beating Glover with a barrel hoop. It took several persons nearby to separate the two and carry the drunk away. Despite this incident, Glover continued his efforts. He worked until the 21st running a water pipe to the square at Lombard and Laguna streets for the survivors who sought refuge there.¹²

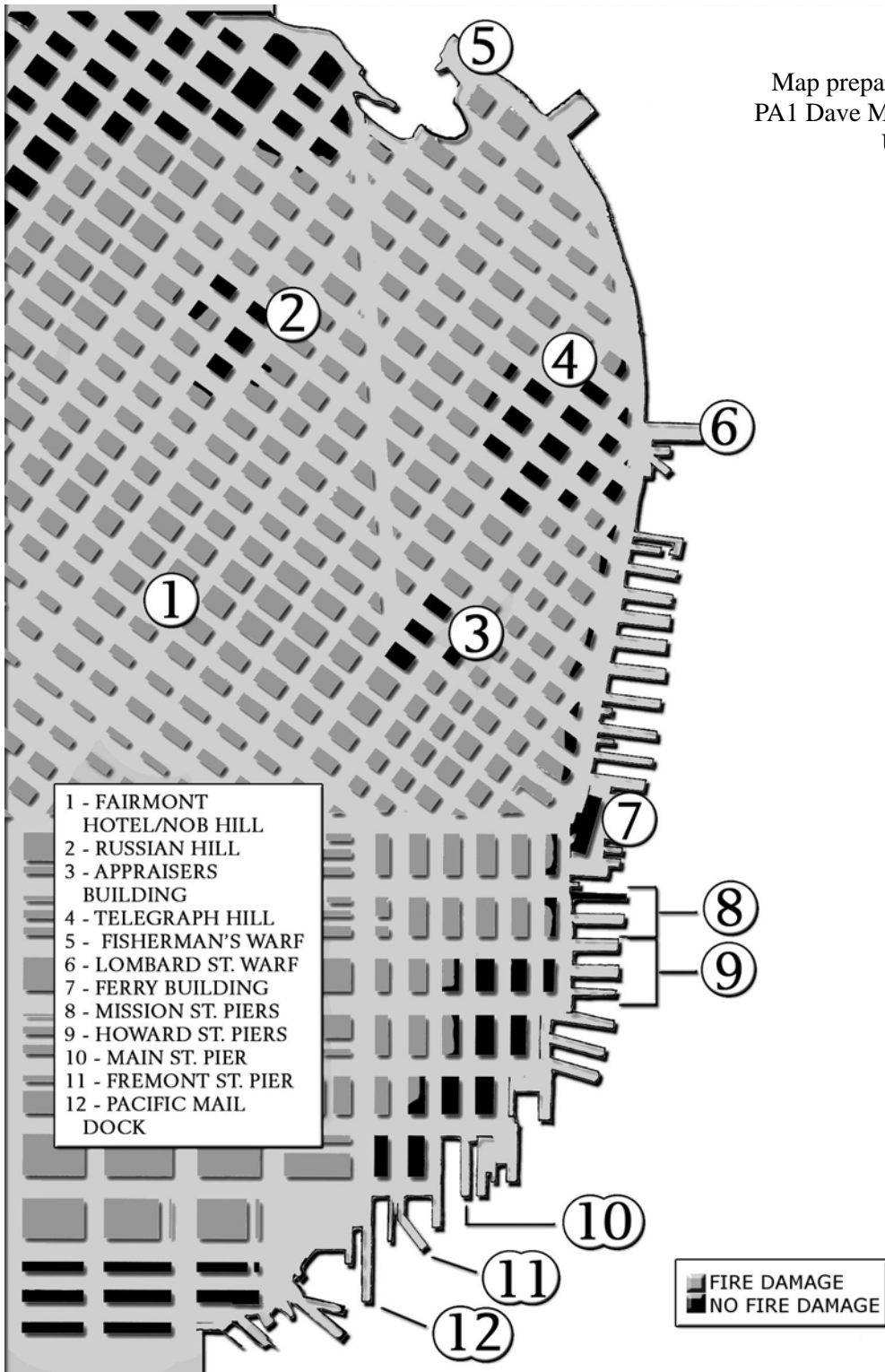
During the first few days, the fire fighting along the waterfront was among the most important accomplished during the conflagration. The battle to save the waterfront facilities began immediately and became one of the focal points in the firefighting efforts.

¹⁰ McMillan to Hamlet, 1 May 1906, NA, RG 26, Entry 178.

¹¹ Carmine to Hamlet, 7 May 1906, *ibid.*; H.N. Wood to Hamlet, 9 May 1906, *ibid.*; F.M. Dunwoody to secretary of the Treasury, 15 May 1906, *ibid.*

¹² J.W. Glover to O.C. Hamlet, 1 May 1906, *ibid.*

Map prepared by
PA1 Dave Mosley,
USCG



The San Francisco Fire Department used nearly thirty fire engine companies over several days to fight the blazes along the three miles of docks. Rear Admiral Caspar F. Goodrich, the commander of the Navy's Pacific Squadron, ordered several cruisers and other ships to San Francisco after the disaster. Some of these warships arrived on the 19th, and sent parties ashore to help with the fire fighting and to keep order. Shortly after the quake shook the city, the destroyer *Preble* with all the available surgeons and nurses, the tug *Active*, and the fireboat *Leslie* steamed there from the Mare Island Navy Yard and met the tug *Sotoyoma* in the bay. The revenue cutters in the harbour joined them.¹³



Fig 5: Damaged Wharf—The San Francisco waterfront was saved by the efforts of the Revenue Cutter Service, the US Navy and a few other craft. The preservation of the waterfront facilities aided the city's rebuilding and the landing of food and supplies for the destitute survivors. Pictured is one of the wharfs that did not survive. (National Archives)

Shortly after the earthquake, First Lieutenant Frederick G. Dodge, commanding the Revenue Cutter *Golden Gate*, got his steamer underway. Dodge offered the cutter's services to the local and state authorities. They consigned the *Golden Gate* to duty at the south side of Pier 10 at the foot of Folsom Street. The *Golden Gate* served there as one of only a few vessels assigned to fight fires along the waterfront. The others were the Navy's *Leslie* and *Active*, and the Army tug *Slocum*. The Navy tug *Sotoyoma* also later arrived to assist. Other vessels such as the state's fire tug *Governor Markham* and the commercial tug *Pilot* also "assisted materially."¹⁴

Proceeding to Pier 10 at the foot of Folsom Street, Dodge made fast to the south side and ran the cutter's fire hose out to begin extinguishing flames. The

¹³ NA, "Navy Saved the Water Front" *The Argonaut*, 25 August 1906; Admiral Goodrich to Retire," *The New York Times*, 3 January 1909; Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts, *The San Francisco Earthquake* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 187, 201.

¹⁴ Log of *Golden Gate*, 18 April 1906, NA, RG 26; Dodge to secretary of the Treasury, 1 May 1906, NA, RG 26, Entry 178; Frederick N. Freeman to commander in chief, Pacific Squadron, 30 April 1906, Subject File OO, Operations of Large Groups of Vessels, NA, RG 45.

Golden Gate remained there until 6:15 that evening when Dodge received an urgent request to hurry south to the Pacific Mail Docks in order to save “life and property.” Within minutes, the *Golden Gate*, the *Active*, *Leslie*, and *Slocum* hastened to the north side of these docks. Here Dodge found the whole area in chaos. The fire had moved so fast that the burning buildings trapped about 200 people. With escape impossible, everyone on the pier began to panic. The crew ran a hose out and began spraying water on the dock. Dodge at first believed that he had arrived too late, but his men carried the hose so close to the fire that the heat blistered their hands and faces. His men aggressively fought the “seething mass of burning houses and lumber” by covering themselves with wet blankets. Dockhands formed a special squad to keep his men’s clothes wet. Dodge’s cutter was so close to the flames that the heat blistered the paint. By 10:30 that night the four vessels and crews managed to check the flames.¹⁵

Dodge witnessed human nature at its worst. The people near the waterfront became so frenzied that they had broken into liquor stores, and some even consumed the alcohol that filled the gutters. Many of the refugees were “helplessly drunk” and had prepared themselves for death. Because drunks interfered with the fire fighting, Dodge had to “use almost extreme measures to subdue them.” Many were too drunk to move and Dodge and his men had to carry them on board the cutter. About sixty persons escaped from the flames in this way. With the flames checked, about 100 of the homeless remained on board for the night.¹⁶

Immediately after putting out the fire at Pier 10, Dodge sent his men into the offices of the Pacific Mail Company in order to secure their important papers on board the cutter. He then moved the *Golden Gate* around to the south side of the dock to check the flames creeping up this side. The *Slocum* and the San Francisco fire department were there and the *Leslie* and *Active* nearby. From 11:45 until 12:30, they fought the flames on that side of the dock. After securing the pumps, they stood by until 8:00 on the morning of the 19th. Many considered the Pacific Mail Docks the most important waterfront facilities in San Francisco. Had they burned the fire might have destroyed the remaining line of wharves. The state superintendent of wharves valued the Pacific Mail wharves, buildings, and cargoes at \$3,000,000.¹⁷

Dodge sent all the refugees ashore on the morning of the 19th. He then proceeded with the *Golden Gate* to Fisherman’s Wharf and then to Black Point at Fort Mason, just a little east of the wharf. Here state authorities instructed Dodge to embark refugees and transport them to various points in the bay. This continued for most of the day. At 2:00 that afternoon Dodge and his men stowed on board a number of trunks and cases containing \$23,000,000 of negotiable notes and securities from the Crocker Woolworth National Bank. An armed guard protected these valuables day and night for several days.¹⁸

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Fisherman’s Wharf was also called Meiggs Wharf. Dodge to Hamlet, 1 May 1906, NA, RG



Fig 6: San Francisco Damage—The raging fire gutted most of the city and left thousands homeless. (National Archives)

On the 20th, as fires still raged out of control in many parts of the city, the *Golden Gate* transported firemen to Black Point. The men loaded five tons of coal and then delivered it to Fisherman's Wharf to fuel the boilers of the city's fire engines. The firemen requested that they move the cutter near the foot of Mason Street. Here Dodge and his crew worked to connect the ship's pump to a disabled fire engine. Complicating this effort was the different sizes of couplings used by the federal and municipal governments. Finally finding the proper combination of fittings, the *Golden Gate*'s pumps provided water at ninety pounds of pressure to the fire engine three-quarters of a mile distant. This operation worked well until the fire shifted, driving the flames parallel to the waterfront. Panic erupted and people began crossing over the hose and the vehicles of retreating citizens threatened to cut the line. Dodge stationed his men at the street intersections with orders to shoot anyone attempting to drive over the hose. The fire gradually moved towards the wharf where the *Golden Gate* lay. Eventually the flames became so intense that they threatened the tanks there holding gas and oil. Dodge, therefore, recalled his men to the cutter and took on board refugees that had no

26, Entry 178; Carmine to Hamlet, 7 May 1906, *ibid.*

route of escape. The *Golden Gate* remained at the foot of Mason Street to assist any other refugees until flames forced the cutter to move.¹⁹

Later that day, the *Golden Gate* steamed to Sausalito to put the refugees ashore. During the journey back across the harbour to San Francisco, the crew spotted the brig *Lurline* flying a distress signal. The cutter stood alongside and put a boarding party on the brig. On board they found that part of the crew had threatened mutiny. Dodge arrested two mutineers, transported them to the cruiser *Marblehead*, and placed them in the brig.²⁰

The *Golden Gate* then headed back to the North Beach area and found that the fire had consumed part of this district. As the fire swept eastward, Dodge moved the cutter to the Lombard Street wharf to attack it. He ran a hose out and connected it with a city water line at 4:45 pm. For a couple of hours his crew fought the flames and saved the piers between Lombard Street and the ferries. Once these piers were secure, his men spotted smoke billowing from under the eaves of the Sea Wall U.S. Bonded Warehouse. The cuttermen climbed on the roof, cut part of it away and dragged a hose into the opening, saving the building.²¹

On the 21st, the *Golden Gate* carried refugees to various points in the bay. The crew also worked to distribute food to the destitute and delivered the records of the Pacific Mail. The following day the crew landed the securities and valuables of the Crocker Woolworth National Bank at Pier 9 at the foot of Broadway Street.²²

During the initial days after the quake, the revenue cutters and the Navy worked together on the waterfront to fight the fires and supply water pressure to fire department's hoses. In a scene reminiscent of the tragedies after the World Trade Center towers collapsed, tens of thousands of the city's residents streamed towards the waterfront for transportation to safety. Without the navy and Revenue Cutter Service there to fight the blazes, the fires would have consumed the waterfront facilities and the ferry terminal. Without these outlets to evacuate the populace, many of the panic stricken people would not have escaped across the bay to Oakland, Alameda, Sausalito, and Berkley.²³

One of the more energetic naval officers was Lieutenant Frederick N. Freeman of the torpedo boat destroyer *Perry* who oversaw much of the Navy's effort on the waterfront. Naval crews and Marines fought fires, assisted the populace, and protected private property from looters. These men, like the cuttermen, worked for days with virtually no sleep and little to eat in order to save the waterfront portions of the city.²⁴

¹⁹ Dodge to Hamlet, *ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ NA, "Navy Saved the Water Front," *The Argonaut*, 25 August 1906.

²⁴ Freeman to commander in chief, Pacific Squadron, 30 April 1906, Subject File OO, NA, RG 45.



Fig 7: Hartley—The *Hartley*, a 64-foot cutter was commissioned in 1875 and served San Francisco as the boarding vessel for the port. (Coast Guard Historian's Office)

During the disaster the little harbour cutter *Hartley* continued her usual customs boardings in the bay. On the 20th, however, she steamed to Fisherman's Wharf and from there it appeared that flames might consume the wooden Barge Office. This building served as the administrative offices for the revenue cutters that performed the customs boardings in the harbour. The crew of five landed and secured the records of the *Hartley*, the *Golden Gate* and other customs records and placed them on the small sixty-five ton cutter. She then took on board a few refugees and landed the records and passengers at the Howard Street Wharf. At 7:10 p.m. the *Hartley* steamed back towards the Barge Office and tied up to Fisherman's Wharf. The crew and a few fishermen formed a bucket brigade and worked until nearly 3:00 am to save the Barge Office and two nearby warehouses. This would be the *Hartley's* only efforts of assistance. During the remaining days of the emergency, she continued her duties as the customs boarding vessel for the port of San Francisco.²⁵

The day after the quake struck, Captain Oscar Hamlet temporarily took command of the Revenue Cutter forces in San Francisco. His cutter, the *Thetis*, was laid up in the shipyard and was not available for service. He immediately found there was a lack of small boats to carry people and supplies to various places in the metropolitan area. Thousands of people were seeking to escape the city and awaited transportation across the bay. Many of the small fishing boats and other craft did evacuate these people, but at huge profits, approaching forty times the normal rate of a passage across the bay. Hamlet used the *Bear's* steam launch to carry blankets and tents from Fort Baker to Fort Mason. On the 19th, he borrowed a large naphtha steam launch from the W.A. Boole Shipbuilding Company to assist. For the first two days, volunteers from the merchant ships at the Boole shipbuilding yard manned this launch. Afterwards men from the *Bear* manned it. They ferried people and supplies from the western area of the city and from the Presido to Oakland. On the 21st the launch carried arms and ammunition to Sausalito. On the 23rd

²⁵ Log of *Hartley*, 20, 21 April 1906, NA, RG 26.

Hamlet impressed the tug *Wizard* and placed California McMillan in charge. On the 30th, he relinquished “special command” of the cutter forces in San Francisco.²⁶



Fig 8: John Cantwell—Had served many years on the Bering Sea Patrol. In 1906, he had more time in the Arctic than any other officer. (Coast Guard Historian’s Office)

News of the disaster spread rapidly along the West Coast. At 10:00 am on the 18th, word reached Captain John C. Cantwell commanding the cutter *McCulloch* in San Diego. By telegram, he requested permission from Washington to leave for San Francisco. When a reply did not come quickly, on his own initiative he weighed anchor and proceeded with all speed northward. At 5:00 am on the 20th *McCulloch* stood over the San Francisco bar. Cantwell sent an officer on shore to report to General Funston’s office. An officer representing the general indicated that Cantwell and his men could do nothing in San Francisco to help. He suggested that Cantwell take his cutter to Sausalito to assist the small local police force. Here the huge influx of the refugees streaming from San Francisco had overwhelmed the local lawmen.²⁷

Cantwell shifted anchor to Sausalito and at 9:30 offered his services to the local officials. He organized a landing party of thirty men to patrol the city during the night. His men searched every boat that came across the bay and confiscated the incoming liquor supplies. They likewise had a doctor examine persons that might carry contagious diseases. In the afternoon, the local officials put the town under martial law with Cantwell in complete control. The landing party and two officers patrolled the waterfront, guarded stores, and assisted the relief committee distributing food and clothing to the destitute refugees. Cantwell found that his men had little problem maintaining order. Once the local police force organized and appointed special deputies, Cantwell withdrew his men to the cutter and held them in readiness to

²⁶ Assistant secretary of the Treasury to F.S. Stratton, 28 April 1906 (telegram), NA, RG 26, Entry 178; Hamlet to general in command of Army Forces, 23 April 1906, *ibid.*; log of *Bear*, 19, 28 April 1906, NA, RG 26. The Boole Shipyard produced bills for the services of the *Wizard* and the launch for a total of \$2,000, a sum considered “exorbitant.” Brandenburg & Brandenburg to secretary of the Treasury, 9 January 1907, NA, RG 26, Entry 178; Hamlet to secretary of the Treasury, 7 May 1906, *ibid.*; McMillan to Hamlet, 4 May 1906, *ibid.*; Thomas and Witts, *The San Francisco Earthquake*, 200.

²⁷ Log of *McCulloch*, 18, 20, 24 April-passim, 23 May 1906, NA, RG 26; Cantwell to secretary of the Treasury, 19, 22 April 1906, NA, RG 26, Entry 178; Jacques Thomas to secretary of the Treasury, 1 June 1906, *ibid.*

land at a moment's notice. The *McCulloch* remained at Sausalito until 23 May.²⁸

Captain Hamlet, however, was critical of Cantwell's actions. He wrote the secretary of the Treasury that he should have remained along the wharf in San Francisco and used his crews help fight the fires. Hamlet claimed that when Cantwell observed there was no disturbance in Sausalito, that he should have brought the *McCulloch* back to San Francisco. Cantwell later had to defend his actions to Washington. He wrote that on 20 April, when he arrived off the wharf at San Francisco, there was no fire and that the draft of the *McCulloch* would not let him approach any nearer than 100 feet of the wharf. Regarding the charge of no disorder in Sausalito, Cantwell wrote that his was true but the presence of his crews on shore prevented local disorder. The chairman of Sausalito's Board of Town Trustees supported Cantwell. He claimed that "complete order was maintained" and that the Treasury Department should "be proud of such a ship and such a crew."²⁹

The earthquake left nearly 500 blocks of the city destroyed and about a quarter of a million people destitute. After the fires had burned out, the officers and men of the Revenue Cutter Service aided the Army in the relief effort and helped to establish and maintain law and order throughout the Bay Area. On the 23rd, Captain Hamlet placed the cutters *Golden Gate* and *McCulloch* under the control of the Navy to perform relief work until 1 May.³⁰



Fig 9: Oscar Hamlet—Captain Oscar Hamlet was the forth most senior office in the Service in 1906. He joined the Revenue Cutter Service in 1867. (Coast Guard Historian's Office)

²⁸ William Bronsen, *The Earth Shook the Sky Burned* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986), 83, 104; Cantwell to secretary of the Treasury, 17 May 1906, NA, RG 26, Entry 178; John G. Berry to O.C. Hamlet, 9 May 1906, *ibid.*; Hamlet to Berry, 26 April 1906, *ibid.*; Dodge to Hamlet, 1 May 1906, *ibid.*; *The Call* (San Francisco), 13 July 1906.

²⁹ Hamlet had the *McCulloch* come to San Francisco on the 23rd but sent her back to Sausalito the next day. Hamlet to secretary of the Treasury, 7 May 1906, NA, RG 26, Entry 178; Cantwell to secretary of the Treasury, 3 June 1906, *ibid.*; Jacques Thomas to secretary of the Treasury, 1 June 1906, *ibid.*

³⁰ Hamlet's temporary transfer of the vessels to the Navy had the secretary of the Treasury at a boil. He directed the assistant secretary to telegraph Hamlet to find out by what authority he had done this, since only the president can direct the Revenue Cutter Service to operate with the Navy. Reynolds to Hamlet (telegram), 28 April 1906, *ibid.*; J.B. Reynolds to Dodge



Fig 10: San Francisco, near the waterfront — Relief efforts began shortly after the fires were under control. Horse drawn carts are already unloading supplies even though some of the buildings are still smoldering. (National Archives)

Dodge and his men under naval orders continued distributing food and performing patrols along the waterfront at night. For at least a month they distributed food, meal tickets, and passes. They settled disputes, made sanitary inspections of the refugee camps, assisted persons looking for friends and relatives, and helped to maintain the 150 relief stations in the city. In addition, the *Golden Gate's* galley prepared hundreds of meals for the destitute. The cutters also brought food and fresh water into the city and patrolled the docks. Lieutenant Dodge paid an extreme compliment to the men under his command, writing that they showed great courage and had “worked day and night without complain of hunger or weariness, and obeyed orders . . . with cheerfulness and alacrity.”³¹

(telegram), 3 May 1906, *ibid.*; Dodge to Hamlet, *ibid.*; assistant secretary of the Treasury to Dodge, 3 May 1906 (telegram), *ibid.*; Dodge to secretary of the Treasury, 4 May 1906 (telegram), *ibid.*; Hamlet to Flag Captain *Chicago*, 23 April 1906, *ibid.*

³¹ San Francisco was never under martial law. The Army, under Funston, cooperated with the civilian authorities and tried to comply with their needs. Bronson, *The Earth Shook the Sky Burned*, 104-06; McMillan to Hamlet, 1 May 1906, NA, RG 26, Entry 178.



Fig 11: Refugee Camp—The homeless lived in refugee camps like this until housing could be built to shelter them. (National Archives)

The actions of the thousands of soldiers, sailors, policemen and firemen are familiar stories while the work of the Revenue Cutter Service has largely gone unnoticed. The Revenue Cutter Service received special thanks from President Theodore Roosevelt for their “prompt, gallant, and effective work.” The efforts to save the docks were extremely important. San Francisco flourished on its shipping and the loss of these facilities would have crippled the city. The preservation of the dock facilities allowed the city and its inhabitants to receive supplies and facilitated the rebuilding of the city. Overall, the work of the Revenue Service was integral to saving countless lives, the evacuation of hundreds of others, and preserving millions of dollars of property. The service’s accomplishments demonstrate that even a small cadre of men can make a large contribution in a crisis. The Revenue Cutter Service certainly lived up to its then unofficial Latin motto—*Semper Paratus* or Always Ready.³²

³² Theodore Roosevelt to H.A. Taylor, 31 May 1906, *ibid.* The Latin phrase *Semper Paratus* is the modern Coast Guard’s official motto but it was in use by the Revenue Cutter Service for many years prior to the creation of the Coast Guard in 1915.