

The *El Estero* Fire and How the US Coast

by William H. Thiesen, PhD

The terms “Pearl Harbor,” “9-11,” and “Katrina” conjure up disastrous images for most Americans. But, how many have ever heard the name “*El Estero*”? To New Yorkers in particular, this term should strike a chord. It was the greatest man-made disaster in American history that never happened.

engine room. As the heat of the fire grew and smoke billowed into the ship’s passageways, the engine room crew, armed only with hand-held fire extinguishers, gave up the fight and fled the space.

Everyone at the barracks understood that volunteering might result in a fiery death for any one of them. Most of them were

wounding 9,000 more and leveling a large part of the city. It was the largest man-made explosion in history before the atomic bomb blast witnessed at Hiroshima.

The Coast Guard seamen also knew that the potential for catastrophic devastation around New York harbor was far greater than tiny Halifax. An explosion of this magnitude could obliterate nearby ships, the port, portions of local cities and thousands of residents. Two other ammunition ships, flying the red Baker flag for “hot,” were tied up near *El Estero*, and a line of railroad cars on the pier held a shipment of hundreds of tons of munitions, for a total of over 5,000 tons of explosives located close enough to be caught up in a potential blast. Add to this the nearby fuel storage tank farms at Bayonne and Staten Island—massive destruction appeared likely for the nation’s largest population center, including swaths of Jersey City, Bayonne, Staten Island and New York City.

Soon after the smoke began pouring out of *El Estero*, officer-in-charge Lt.j.g. Francis McCausland arrived on scene. He sent out the call to the Coast Guard barracks and signaled two tugs to move the other munitions ships away from *El Estero*. He also helped organize initial firefighting efforts with over a dozen Coast Guardsmen already working on the pier. Meanwhile, army soldiers responsible for the railroad shipment set to work moving the ammunition boxcars off the pier. By 5:35PM, two ladder trucks and three pumpers from the Jersey City Fire Department arrived, as did two thirty-foot Coast Guard fireboats, which all began pouring water into the smoking vessel. Shortly thereafter, members of the Coast Guard Auxiliary mobilized and lieutenant commanders John Stanley and Arthur Pfister arrived by fast boat from the Coast Guard Captain-of-the-Port office, located near the Battery, and took command of operations. Pfister, a retired battalion fire chief in New York City and officer-in-charge of Coast Guard fireboats, assumed overall responsibility for

(left) Although no photographs exist to document the El Estero fire, the smoke from the fire must have resembled this picture of the black cloud that resulted from the Halifax explosion in 1917.



ALL PHOTOS FOR THIS ARTICLE COURTESY OF THE US COAST GUARD

A member of an Explosives Loading Detail monitors the loading of high explosives and the work of carpenters as they construct the bombs' wooden framework in the ship's hold.

It was spring of 1943, a time when the outcome of World War II was still in doubt and port facilities around New York harbor and northern New Jersey stowed convoy vessels to capacity with thousands of troops and millions of tons of war material destined for Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific. At 5:30PM on 24 April, the call went out to Jersey City’s Coast Guard barracks, “Ammo ship on fire! They want volunteers!” The burning vessel was SS *El Estero*, an antiquated 325-foot Panamanian freighter pressed into service with the urgency of the war effort and it was moored at Caven Point pier in Bayonne, New Jersey. Members of the Coast Guard’s Explosives Loading Detail had just overseen the last load to top off *El Estero*’s holds with 1,365 tons of ordnance, including huge “block-buster” bombs, depth charges, incendiary bombs, and anti-aircraft and small-arms ammunition. The fire had started minutes earlier when a boiler flashback ignited fuel oil floating on bilge water under the

aware that in 1917 the French ammunition ship *Mont Blanc*, loaded with 5,000 tons of TNT, blew up in Halifax harbor in Nova Scotia, instantly killing 1,500 residents,



Guard Helped Save New York Harbor

firefighting activities, while Stanley devoted his attention to activities within *El Estero*. It was Stanley's first day on the job!

The timing of the call to the Coast Guard barracks couldn't have been worse. April 24th was the day before Easter, and members of the Explosives Loading

volume of water on board, but the oil fire continued to gain ground. Flames could be seen escaping through *El Estero's* skylights, hatches and scoop-like ventilators while the heat cooked deck plates, blistered paint and scorched the soles of the seamen's once-shiny shoes. The fire's intensity spread

black consistency. On Lt. Commander Stanley's recommendation, the Coast Guard Commander of the Third District and New York's Captain of the Port, Rear Admiral Stanley Parker, ordered *El Estero* scuttled. But it was too late for that. The sea cocks and overboard discharge valves

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Detail had been anticipating liberty for quite some time. They had already donned their dress blues and pea coats and many had just finished shining their shoes. But when the call came down for volunteers, sixty Coast Guardsmen stepped forward, eager to fight the fire. The men scrambled for the barracks door and two awaiting trucks. Witnesses described the scene in almost comical terms, with twenty dressed-up servicemen climbing into a pick-up truck designed for no more than ten, while the other forty clutched any open space available on a larger military truck. With men hanging from cabs and riding fenders, while red lights flashed and horns blared, the trucks sped down the eight-mile stretch of road to the waterfront, passing longshoremen and dock workers marching in the opposite direction to escape the fire. The trucks screeched to a halt at the pier and the men hustled to the burning ship to join their shipmates already fighting the fire.

By 6:30PM, New York City fireboat *John J. Harvey* and the City's new mammoth firefighting boat *Fire Fighter* arrived on scene and ran dozens of high-pressure hoses into the ship for the Coast Guardsmen to douse the burning vessel. The fireboats pumped a tremendous

the conflagration from the bilges to all flammable surfaces, including the extensive wooden framework and staging encasing the ammunition and securing it in the hold.

Lt. Commander Pfister noticed that the fire's black smoke began to show yellowish-white streaks, indicating that water from the hoses, fireboats and local fire trucks had begun to reach the fire's source. The danger of catastrophic explosion was far from over, however, and in fact had only just begun as the smoke returned to its oily

necessary to flood the ship were located in the engine room underneath the blaze and remained inaccessible.

El Estero's bombs, explosives and ammunition grew hotter by the minute. Oil fires have to be fought with chemicals, but the fire's smoke and flames were far too intense for the firefighters to get anywhere near the source of the conflagration. All the seamen could hope to do was cool the ammunition with water, flood the ship's holds as fast as possible and try to extinguish the fire later with chemicals if water failed to

work. Lt.j.g. McCausland had led firefighting efforts inside the ship and suffered injuries, burns and smoke inhalation after rescuing a man in the hold. He had to be evacuated to the local hospital where he remained for the next three weeks. As one Coast Guard seaman remarked, "It was one hot fire!"

El Estero's deck cargo proved as dangerous as that stowed in the holds. Anti-aircraft ammunition for the ship's deck guns was located perilously close to the blistering decks. Coast Guard fire fighters broke open



*(left) During the early stages of the firefighting, two of these water jet propelled 30-foot fireboats arrived at the *El Estero*, and began pouring water into the ammo ship along with local fire trucks and pier-side fire hoses.*

the ammunition lockers and slid the hot ammo ready boxes down a greased plank to the pier below. In addition, numerous drums of high-octane fuel sat stacked on the ship's deck. Nothing could be done with the fuel barrels because *El Estero* had to be towed away from the waterfront to prevent the pier, stored ammunition and local fuel storage tanks from going up in smoke. Lt. Commander Stanley and tugboat skipper Ole Ericksen quickly examined harbor charts and selected an anchorage for the ship in the Upper Harbor.

ignited the water's surface near the blazing freighter; but the fire fighters had averted the threat of igniting a massive fuel explosion on *El Estero's* top side. As the tugboats towed the burning vessel into the harbor, *El Estero* belched black clouds that could be seen for miles and an orange glow above the boiler room illuminated the smoke. The authorities in New Jersey and New York warned residents by radio and through local air raid wardens to prepare for an explosion and braced for a detonation.

The next morning, thousands of New Yorkers participated in the annual Easter Day Parade, many never realizing how close they had come to a major disaster. A few months after the fire, the navy raised *El Estero*, still full of ammunition, and towed it out to sea for target practice. The *El Estero* fire had taught military and civilian authorities the perils of loading live ammunition near a major metropolitan area. Not long after the disaster had been averted, the navy began construction of a weapons depot on a section of rural



El Estero resting harmlessly on the bottom of New York harbor near Robbins Reef, the red "Baker" flag still flying from her mast.

Once Coast Guard officials made the decision to move *El Estero*, Lt. Commander Stanley asked for twenty volunteers to stay on board with him and Pfister to fight the fire during the transit to the Upper Harbor. Far more men volunteered than the number necessary, and many had to be ordered off. One seaman who was engaged to be married, volunteered to stay on board, but the ranking boatswain's mate yelled, "You're getting married in a few weeks. Now get the hell off!" The chances of survival for those remaining on board the ship seemed slim indeed, and the men that stayed passed their watches, wallets, and personal effects to their departing shipmates.

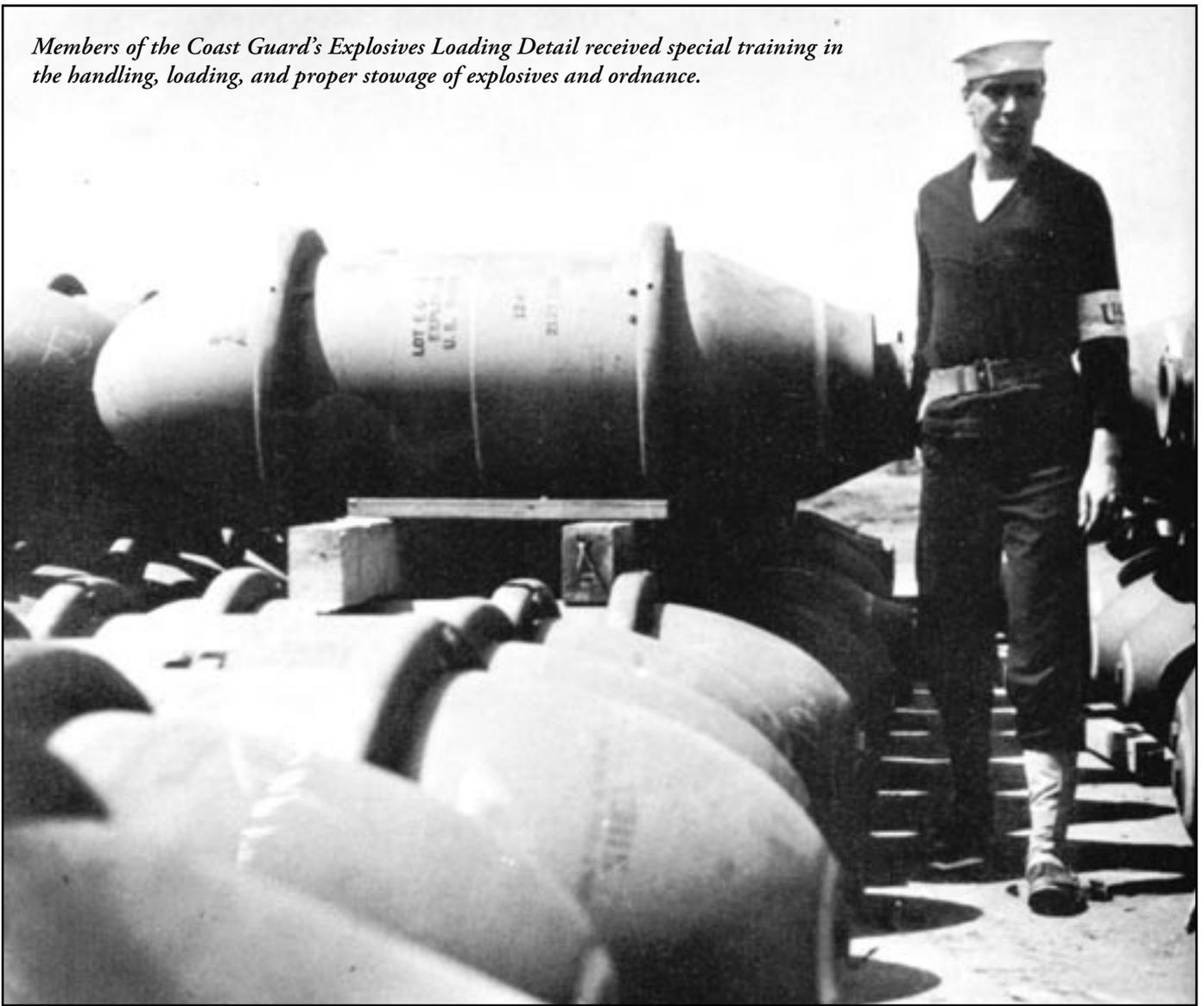
By 7:00PM, the seamen aboard *El Estero* had managed to secure a steel hawser to the ship's bow and the tugboats began pulling it out into New York harbor. Meanwhile, the Coast Guardsmen on board the burning ship pushed the cooking fuel drums off the deck. Fuel leaked from some of the ruptured barrels and

Eventually, the convoy of tugboats, fireboats and *El Estero* reached the target area and the Coast Guard crew successfully anchored the vessel in forty feet of water near the unmanned Robbins Reef Lighthouse. At a little past nine o'clock in the evening *El Estero* finally filled with water and settled to the bottom. The flooded vessel rumbled and belched smoke and steam as it cooled in the cold water of New York harbor. Meanwhile, floating fuel drums exploded on the water's surface and fires continued to burn on the ship's exposed superstructure. By 9:45PM, New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia arrived by police launch to inspect the freighter and reported that it was still burning. As Lt. Commander Pfister later described the fire, "It was touch and go at all times." But by 10:00PM, Rear Admiral Parker broadcast by radio the all-clear announcement and by 11:30PM, the *Fire Fighter* and *John J. Harvey* had finally extinguished the remaining surface fires and returned to their docks.

waterfront property near Sandy Hook, New Jersey. In December, the navy commissioned Naval Weapons Station Earle, named for former naval ordnance bureau chief Rear Admiral Ralph Earle, which soon became a hub for the region's explosives loading operations. The Coast Guard moved the Explosives Loading Detail from Jersey City to Earle when operations began at that facility.

Early in the war, Coast Guard personnel serving in the New York area had come to be known rather derisively as "subway sailors" and "bathtub sailors," because many came from the greater New York area. The men that fought the *El Estero* fire came to be recognized as the heroes they truly were. Some experts later estimated that Manhattan's skyscrapers could have suffered severe damage and as many as one million residents could have been affected had the *El Estero* fire touched off nearby flammables and explosives. For his efforts, Lt. Commander Stanley received

Members of the Coast Guard's Explosives Loading Detail received special training in the handling, loading, and proper stowage of explosives and ordnance.



the Legion of Merit, while Lt. Commander Pfister received the Navy & Marine Corps Medal for his role in fighting the fire. The City of Bayonne threw a parade and huge ceremony recognizing the Coast Guard Ammunition Loading Detail and the City's firefighters, which included speeches, radio broadcasts and the presentation of specially-struck medals to each member of the Detail. In addition, some of the Detail's personnel received a letter of citation from Rear Admiral Parker.

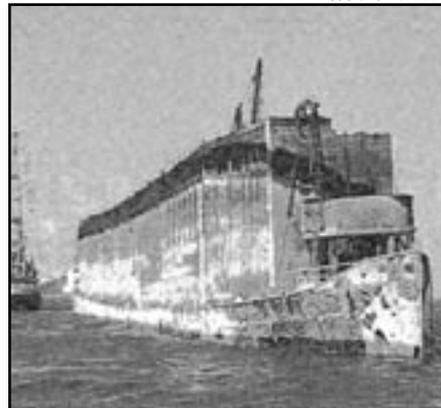
In an unfortunate epilogue to this story, disaster struck a year later at the US Navy's weapons depot at Port Chicago, California, thirty-five miles northeast of San Francisco. The navy had located this munitions facility in an isolated area far away

(right) A US Navy photograph later published in the New York Times shows the El Estero after re-floating. Notice the cofferdam built around the deck to help pump her dry.

from the local population center; however, it failed to implement proper oversight and safety procedures at Port Chicago. In an effort to speed up shipments of munitions to Pacific combat zones, navy personnel ignored Coast Guard safety guidelines and bypassed the assistance of a Coast Guard Explosives Loading Detail for loading operations. In June 1944, a mishap in the

hold of an ammunition ship touched off over 4,600 tons of ammunition, atomizing the ship and another ammo ship, leveling the loading facility, killing over 300 navy personnel and seriously wounding 400 others in the area. While not quite as powerful as the Halifax explosion, it was the worst such disaster in Navy history. ⚓

COURTESY NY TIMES



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US Coast Guard Veteran Seymour Wittek Awarded the Coast Guard Commendation Medal for his Heroic Effort Fighting the *El Estero* Fire

by Dr. William H. Thiesen

The story of the steamship *El Estero* fire is one that has been told in the pages of such popular periodicals as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Reader's Digest*. As time passes, however, fewer and fewer eyewitnesses are still with us who can recount what really happened that day in April 1943. As part of the United States Coast Guard's Explosives Loading Detail, veteran Seymour Wittek responded to the fire; he provided advice and criticism for *Sea History's* article.

Wittek moved to New York City as a child and grew up in the Bronx, participating in Boy Scouts, sports and debate clubs and he even served as a volunteer disc jockey at local community center dances. After high school, he began training to become an electrician. But events in 1941 changed the course of Wittek's life. First, he met his future wife, Anne Cooperman, and became involved in her

Seymour Wittek was a member of the US Coast Guard's Explosives Loading Detail in 1943, stationed at Jersey City, NJ, when the call came for volunteers to fight the El Estero fire, out of control at a Bayonne, NJ, pier.



COURTESY SEYMOUR WITTEK



PHOTO BY SETH JOHNSON

Captain Robert R. O'Brien, Captain of United States Coast Guard Sector New York, looks on as Vice Admiral Robert J. Papp presents NMHS volunteer Seymour Wittek with the Coast Guard Commendation Medal on USS Intrepid on Veterans Day, 2008.

uncle's trade in the fur business. Wittek would prosper in this line of work for the rest of his career. World War II also had a lasting influence on his life as he would serve in the Coast Guard, and both his fiancée and mother would serve in defense-related industries.

In October 1942, Wittek enlisted in the service and began basic training at New York's Manhattan Beach Coast Guard training center. By 1943, he began serving with the Explosives Loading Detail stationed at Jersey City, New Jersey. On that fateful day, when the call came for volunteers to fight the *El Estero* fire, he answered it along with nearly sixty other Coast Guardsmen, despite the obvious danger. After the fire, the grateful citizens of Bayonne, New Jersey, threw a citywide celebration to honor the Coast Guard, its Explosive Loading Detail, and local firefighting personnel. It was only at this point that Mr. Wittek disclosed to his family the specific nature of his service and the danger inherent in it.

Today, at the age of eighty-eight, Mr. Wittek can reflect on a satisfying life, including a fifty-year career in the fur business and, together with his late wife Anne, raising a close-knit four-generation

American family. Today, he remains active with his synagogue, his family, and as a volunteer with organizations, such as the National Maritime Historical Society. Mr. Wittek is a regular volunteer at NMHS headquarters, coming in each week to assist the staff; in 200x NMHS honored him with the Volunteer of the Year Award. He has also told the story of the *El Estero* ammo fire and his personal recollections of the event at an NMHS seminar, to an enthusiastic response.**

Mr. Wittek also remains faithful to the memory of those "subway sailors" who helped save New York harbor from near destruction due to the *El Estero* fire. On 11 November 2008, Coast Guard Vice Admiral Robert J. Papp awarded Mr. Wittek the Coast Guard Commendation Medal. Mr. Wittek admits his pride in receiving the recognition not just for himself, but also in the memory of those Explosives Loading Detail personnel who long ago answered the call to fight the *El Estero* fire with little regard for their own safety. After the war, Wittek and the rest of the Explosives Loading Detail personnel went their separate ways, but Seymour Wittek hopes that some day he may meet members of his old unit once again. ⚓