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THE REVENUE CUTTER SERVICE AND THE GREAT SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE--SEMPER

PARATUS

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At five o'clock on the morning April 18, 1906, the streets of the city of San Francisco had just begun to stir with activity. Twelve minutes after the hour, 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 hundreds of thousands of people homeless, killed over 450 and injured thousands more. This earthquake ranks as 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 is filled with tales of courage and sacrifice, yet there is one group of heroes that have never received mention. These are the men of the Revenue Cutter Service who played a vital role during the hours and days that followed.

The Revenue Cutter Service's first 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 created tremendous growth in San Francisco and consequently increased the need for customs enforcement. When the United States acquired Alaska in 1867 the Service also



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needed a West Coast base for its Bering Sea Patrols. San Francisco was the most advantageous location for the cutter's annual journeys into Alaskan waters to enforce revenue laws and to protect the general interests of the United States.

On the morning of the quake, the cutters *Hartley* and *Golden Gate*, lay in San Francisco Harbor. The large cutters *Thetis*, and *Bear* were laid up in Booles Shipyard in Oakland being readied for the upcoming cruising season. Neither of the latter two vessels would be able to help with the relief efforts but their skeleton crews were available. Including these crews, the Revenue Cutter force comprised only about seventy-five men.

Several officers of the Revenue Cutter Service lived ashore at the California Hotel. Chief Engineer Horatio Nelson Wood, the assistant to the Engineer in Chief in San Francisco, lay in his room on the 7th floor and awoke to find his bed moving. He then 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 theater 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 disoriented and injured citizens. The less fortunate, those trapped in the collapsed buildings, cried out for help.

Chief Engineer 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 while passing pier #25 at the foot of Greenwich Street, he heard the cry of "fire" from the wharf. At



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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 now 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 to save the pier. Putting men on the roof to watch for sparks, he tried to hire other able-bodied men with no success. Wood and the men kept this pier safe until 4:20 that afternoon when the tugs *Relief* and *Markam* arrived to hose down the wharf. Later that afternoon and into the night he also put out 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 *Chicago* helped Wood to fight the fires near the American Sugar Refinery.

Also staying at the California Hotel was Second Assistant Engineer California C. McMillan of the revenue cutter *Bear*. Leaving the hotel immediately after the quake, he proceeded to the waterfront. With the *Bear* laid up in the yard for repairs, McMillan hurried toward the ferry terminal to get orders, but found his way blocked by fire. He then proceeded to the cutter *Golden Gate* but found only First Lieutenant Frederick C. Dodge who had no instructions for



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him. Taking a boat across the harbor to Oakland, he reported to both the *Thetis* and the *Bear* for orders. To provide relief assistance, McMillan formed a landing party consisting of 2 men from the *Thetis*, 9 from the *Bear*, and 2 from the *McCulloch*. Armed with cutlasses and revolvers they proceeded to the custom house, known as the Appraiser's Building.

Since the quake had broken the city's gas and the water mains, the fires raged out of control with no water to fight them. As McMillan and his men arrived at the Appraiser's Building the nearby buildings had begun to burn and the flames threatened the government property.

McMillan stationed his men in the southeast corner of the building. He instructed them to keep the windowsills and casings cool with water and to help the firemen with the hoses and to maintain crowd control. Until about 11:00 pm, the men from the *Bear* along with customs employees, soldiers, and Marines used buckets and mops to keep the sills from catching fire.

Although the intense heat caused the wooden window frames and eaves to smoke and blister, McMillan and his detail saved the building while all those around it burned to the ground.

With the Appraiser's Building safe, McMillan took his squad to the Fairmont Hotel, one of the initial command centers for the authorities. Here they helped Brigadier General Frederick Funston's men 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 to form firebreaks.

Having bedded his men in a barn in the next block at 1200, McMillan had to wake them at 2:00 am to retrieve a disabled fire engine in Chinatown. Six men accompanied McMillan to move

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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 timers, several of who 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.

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 being threatened by nearby flames. After hauling the engine to the institute, McMillan placed his men 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. In order to get the volunteers needed to save the institute’s valuables, McMillan had to threaten the passing men with his pistol. This gesture brought forth “volunteers” who saved the valuables of the institute.

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. Their relief efforts were complicated by the large number of drunk citizens and McMillan and his men made arrests when necessary. Boatswain William Hallberg arrested an intoxicated deputy sheriff who had discharged his weapon and advised people to loot. When McMillan



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arrived, he took the deputy's badge and revolver. Guards 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. Despite these difficult times the Revenue sailors maintained a high level of professionalism and McMillan praised his men accordingly. He claimed that 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."

Another Revenue Cutter officer, First Lieutenant George C. Carmine, the Purchasing Officer in San Francisco, had 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. With this task accomplished, Carmine, traveled 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 refugee's 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.

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Carmine worked on the hose line until 4 am, succeeding in containing the fire at Van Ness and Sutter Streets.

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 being driven from the building by the approaching fire, 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 carry him away. Despite this incident, Glover continued his good will efforts. He worked until the 21st running a water pipe to the square at Lombard and Laguna streets for the convenience of those who sought refuge there.

Shortly after the earthquake, First Lieutenant Frederick G. Dodge, commanding the Revenue Cutter *Golden Gate*, got his steamer underway. Proceeding to Boole's Shipyard in Oakland, he embarked a detachment of men from the cutters *Bear* and *Thetis*. Steaming back across the bay he landed these men at Pier #7 at the foot of Pacific Street and sent them to help guard the Appraiser's Building. 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 Howard



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Street. She served there as one of only four government vessels assigned to fight fires along the waterfront. The others were the *Leslie*, a fire boat for the Mare Island Navy Yard, the Mare Island Yard tug *Active*, and the Army tug *Slocum*.

Proceeding to Pier #10, Dodge made fast to the south side and ran the cutter's fire hose out to begin extinguishing flames. The *Golden Gate* remained here 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* hastened to the north side of these docks.

Here Dodge found the whole area in chaos. The fire had moved so fast that about 200 people had become walled in on three sides by burning buildings. With escape impossible, everyone on the pier began to panic. The crew ran a hose out and began spraying water on the dock by

6:45. 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. Dock hands formed a special squad to keep their clothes wet. Dodge's cutter was so close to the flames that the heat blistered the paint.

While fighting these blazes Dodge witnessed human nature at its worst. The people near the waterfront had become so frenzied that they had broken into liquor stores, and some even consumed alcohol that filled the gutters. Many of the refugees were "helplessly drunk" and had prepared themselves for death. Because drunks interfered with the firefighting efforts,

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Dodge had to “use almost extreme measures to subdue them.” Dodge and his men carried on board the cutter those too drunk to be moved. About sixty persons escaped from the flames in this way. With the flames checked, about 100 of the roving homeless went on board for the night.

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. From 11:45 until 12:30 they fought the flames on this side of the dock. After securing the pumps, they stood by until 8:00, 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 to be worth \$3,000,000.

Dodge sent all the refugees ashore on the morning of the 19th. He then proceeded with the *Golden Gate* to Meigs Wharf and then to Black Point, just a couple of miles east of San Francisco. 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.

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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 Meigs Wharf to fuel the boilers of the city's fire engines. The firemen requested that the cutter be moved 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 $\frac{3}{4}$ 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. Eventually the flames became so intense that Dodge recalled his men to the cutter and took on board refugees that had no 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.

The *Golden Gate* steamed to Sausalito to deposit the refugees and during the journey back across the harbor to San Francisco, 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 and transported them to the cruiser USS *Marblehead* and placed them in the brig.



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The *Golden Gate* then headed back to the North Beach area and found that the fire had consumed the western part of this district. As the fire swept eastward, Dodge moved the cutter to the west side of 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.

The next day 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. On the 22nd the crew landed the securities and valuables of the Crocker Woolworth National Bank at Pier #9 at the foot of Broadway Street. The cutter then transferred under the control of the Navy until 1 May. Dodge and his men under naval orders continued distributing food and performing patrols along the waterfront at night.

During the conflagration, the little harbor cutter *Hartley* continued her usual customs boardings in the harbor. On the 20th, however, she steamed to Fisherman's Wharf and from here it appeared that the wooden Barge Office might be consumed by flames. This building served as the administrative offices for the cutters that performed the customs boardings in the harbor. The crew of five landed and secured the records of the *Hartley*, *Golden Gate* and other customs



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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 pm 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.

The day after the quake, Captain Oscar C. Hamlet, commanding the steam cutter *Thetis*, temporarily took command of the Revenue Cutter forces in San Francisco. Upon taking charge, he found a lack of small boats to carry people and supplies to various places in the metropolitan area. 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, Hamlet impressed the tug *Wizard* and placed 2nd Assistant Engineer McMillan in charge. On the 30th he relinquished "special command" of the cutter forces in San Francisco.

News of the disaster spread rapidly along the West Coast. At 10:00 am on the 18th, it reached



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Captain John C. Cantwell, commanding the cutter *McCulloch* in San Diego. By telegram he requested permission from Washington to leave for San Francisco but never received a reply. On his own initiative he weighed anchor and proceeded with all speed northward. *McCulloch* stood over the San Francisco bar at 5:00 am on the 20th. Cantwell sent an officer on shore to report to General Funston's office and an officer representing the general, told him that he and the 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. Rioting and the huge the influx of the refugees streaming from San Francisco had overwhelmed the local lawmen.

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 compelled persons that might carry a contagious disease to be examined by a doctor. 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 land at a moment's notice. The *McCulloch* remained at Sausalito until 23 May.

The earthquake had displaced about 250,000 people and the devastation covered nearly 500

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blocks of the city. 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. 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.”

The Revenue Cutter Service received special thanks from the President of the United States for their “prompt, gallant, and effective work.” The work of the Revenue Service was crucial to the saving of hundreds of lives and millions of dollars of property. The efforts of the men and cutters to save the docks allowed relief efforts to proceed with less difficulty. The rebuilding of the city and the continued aid to the citizens depended on these facilities. In this crisis the Revenue Cutter Service certainly lived up to its motto—*Semper Paratus*—Always Ready.