On April 18, 1906 a deep rumble awoke thousands of residents in a sleeping city. The fault lines near that city shifted for over one minute. The San Francisco earthquake and its aftershocks caused subsequent fires to erupt throughout the California metropolis. The west coast urban sprawl of 400,000 saw a section of its population homeless, neighborhoods devastated, civic organization disrupted, and a desperate need for food and fresh water. This became one of the most devastating natural disasters in American history. First responders arrived to answer the call, including members of the United States military.

The United States Navy offered extensive humanitarian aid and emergency response during the catastrophe. Fourteen vessels deployed or provided men to assist the city and its residents. USS Perry (DD-11), a destroyer; USS Preble (DD-12), a destroyer; USS Farragut (TB-11), a torpedo boat; USS Independence, an 1814 vessel refitted and used as a receiving ship; and fireboat tug/submarine tender USS Fortune lay docked at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo. The 25-mile difference between the Mare Island peninsula and San Francisco became a small obstacle but the ships did everything in their power to reach the city as fast as possible.
Protected cruiser USS *Chicago* (CA-14), protected cruiser USS *Boston*, unprotected cruiser USS *Marblehead* (C-11), and gunboat USS *Princeton* (PG-13), situated in San Diego, did not move as quickly to San Francisco's aid because of the problematic communications out of the city. Communication lines by telephone or telegraph no longer existed. Utter chaos ensued and San Francisco could not tell the outside world of its devastation. USS *Marion*, no longer an official US Navy vessel but used by the California Naval Militia, could be called upon if needed. The Revenue Cutter Service offered their vessel, *Golden Gate*, to assist in every way possible.

Lieutenant Frederick N. Freeman, under orders from Commandant Rear Admiral Bowman McCalla, took command of *Preble* and began sailing. Normally attached to *Perry*, which was receiving engine repairs at Mare Island, Freeman brought Sailors with him to offer their services. Some of the other men went aboard USS *Active* to assist the regular crew and also act as coal heavers. Freeman brought along every available surgeon and nurse from the Mare Island Naval Hospital and headed south toward the city. The fireboat USS *Leslie* and fire tugboat USS *Active* arrived shortly thereafter, with another tugboat USS *Sotoyomo* waiting if needed. After communicating with a fire department battalion chief, Freeman sent both of the main fireboats to the waterfront with full crews, full fresh water tanks, and added assistance from the *Perry* Sailors. At the intersection of Pier and Howard Streets in San Francisco, the men began to douse the flames.

The earthquake ruptured numerous gas and water mains throughout the nearly demolished city. The former caused large-scale fires to break out and the latter affected the situation immensely where land-based fire departments usually attached hoses. Those hydrants now acted as curb decorations. If the Navy boats equipped with firefighting supplies had not arrived, the amount of damage that occurred along the waterfront may have left no buildings standing in the vicinity. In order for the Navy to...
also assist the fire engines, to continue working hour after hour, they needed a fresh water supply. The fire engines depleted the entire fresh water supply in the Navy fireboat tanks. This is where *Sotoyomo*, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Robert F. Lopez, made the trip back and forth to Goat Island Torpedo Station (now known as Yerba Buena Island) for over 5000 gallons of fresh water. The ship set aside a separate 200 gallons of fresh water, on the closest side of the Bay Bridge, for all of the citizens “piteously crying out for water.” *Sotoyomo* made more trips when fire engines needed fresh water. *Leslie* and *Active* stretched out their hoses as far as they could reach, pumping Bay water onto the fires.

In other areas of the fractured city, USS *Marion*, under the control of the California Naval Militia, rescued over 2000 people and put them aboard their vessel at the dock on Folsom Street to move them out of wreckage and away to a safe distance. Sailors attached to the submarine USS *Pike* also provided assistance. For example, Chief Electrician Joseph A. Curtin took it upon himself to establish a hospital for the care of the injured inside of a church on Church Street and Duboce Avenue. Lt. Frederick Freeman commented that Curtin “organized this institution, getting doctors and nurses together, impressed automobiles into the service, and supplied the hospital with medicines and food.” The old warhorse, *Independence*, let the nearby city of Vallejo use its hoses and every onboard stretcher. Commandant McCalla wrote a telegram that Union Iron Works, the premier shipbuilding institution on the west coast, remained in fine order, all ships under construction remained unharmed, and the extensive loss of life became overly exaggerated through the reports of the press.

By April 19th, after moving at anywhere from 13 to 17 knots for an entire day, *Chicago* arrived in port. *Boston* did not arrive until two days later and *Princeton* two days after that. The Pacific Squadron flagship *Chicago* took on as many passengers as it could hold and acted as an asylum for the destitute citizens. That same day Lt. Freeman took it upon himself to return to Goat Island and pulled twenty firearms, most likely rifles, rounds of ammunition, and cartridge belts from storage. After witnessing the horrific looting and drunken conduct along the waterfront, as well as the difficulties experienced in the Rincon Hill neighborhood, he knew he needed to do something. Freeman mentioned that he saw men turn down helping the fire companies unless they were paid 40 cents an hour and because of assistance that the residents did not offer, the fire “made a clean sweep of this poor residence in about an hour’s time.”

A panoramic photograph showing the ruins of San Francisco from Russian Hill on the left to Telegraph Hill on the right. Alcatraz Island can be seen in the background. (Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-124174)
On April 20th, Chicago sent a party of 189 men to aid the Army, under orders from Brigadier General Frederick Funston, and patrolled sectors for two days. Continuously, Active made trips to Chicago to ask for relief for their regular crews. The Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Squadron, Rear Admiral Caspar F. Goodrich (pictured below), approved the request and sent men back as relief. Throughout the entire firefight the flames remained impassable and Midshipman John E. Pond stated “we were told afterwards that the heat had been so intense in this area as to cause the cobbles of the streets to pop like pop-corn.”

By April 21st, most of the fires had been put out. It took three whole days of grueling work and little sleep but the Navy accomplished what it came to do. The Officers and Sailors started moving onto other duties. Boston finally arrived after a stopover in Los Angeles. The relief association sent much needed supplies with the vessel, which included “five (5) car-loads of provisions, some bedding, and some clothing.” On the 22nd, Goodrich made an effort to put all of the vessels under his command at key points throughout the waterfront district acting as makeshift headquarters and reinforcement stations. Goodrich ordered the following vessels to take up docking at specified locations: Boston at Pier 8, Marblehead at Pier 26 (relieved on May 6), Princeton at Pier 7 (remained until May 26), and USS John Paul Jones (DD-10) at Pier 17.

From the 22nd to the 24th, almost 330 Navy Sailors patrolled a 3.5-mile stretch of the wharf. This meant that Officers also oversaw that any ferry, steamer, or other ship that touched land acted as a carrier for refugees to any point outside of San Francisco. USS Pensacola, at that time a training ship for new recruits, had over 525 men aboard to offer aid. Commanding officers sent 100 men out on patrol duty and assigned hundreds of others as needed along the Embarcadero, the eastern waterfront main road. Various working parties of Sailors also assisted in loading and unloading milk from a civilian tug-boat near the Army’s Presidio. On April 23rd, Princeton arrived from San Pedro with over sixty tons of provisions taken directly from the Chamber of Commerce Relief Committee of Los Angeles. The crew established “twelve sentry posts to which were assigned three officers and 42 men.” The vessel also relieved Marblehead on the 6th of May and established another seven sentry posts with 43 men. Sailors upheld the safety and security of San Francisco along the waterfront to the best of their ability.

This map of San Francisco displays the piers by number. Above the image is text where each Navy vessel remained docked. The Army utilized this map to show boundaries and numbers for relief areas in blue and indicated locations of kitchens in red. (National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780-1917, RG 94)
During its entire involvement, the United States Navy did everything it could to protect the waterfront section and nearby neighborhoods from the fires. In total, Sailors saved the lumberyards, warehouses (including Folger Coffee, Gibraltar Company, Italian-Swiss Colony, and Haslett Bonded), the Merchants’ Cold Storage, Mutual Electric Light power plant, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company docks, Hotaling and Company, Bank of Italy, the Appraiser’s Building, 150 freight cars of the Southern Pacific placed on the Belt Line Railroad, and the Sailors’ Home. After seventeen days, the support crews and vessels of the Pacific Squadron left their temporary duty stations. They departed the wharves after helping a broken city regain a foothold on normalcy. Resilience existed within the confines of San Francisco. Even though the destruction spanned a few days, stretched over 500 city blocks, and ultimately killed 3,000 people, the residents soldiered on. Over the next few years San Francisco rebuilt itself out of the ashes.
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