



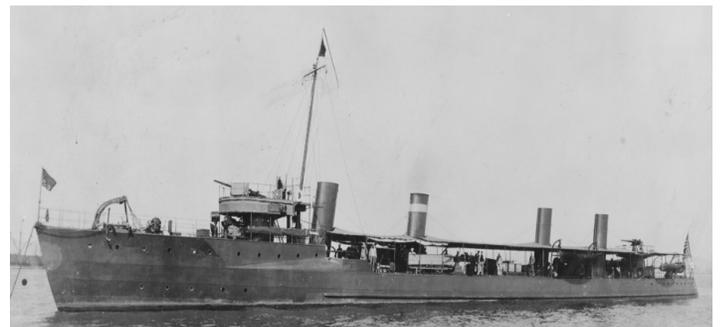
A panoramic photograph of San Francisco after the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906. (National Archives and Records Administration, RG 111-AGF-1-A-D)

THE U.S. NAVY'S RESPONSE TO THE 1906 SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE

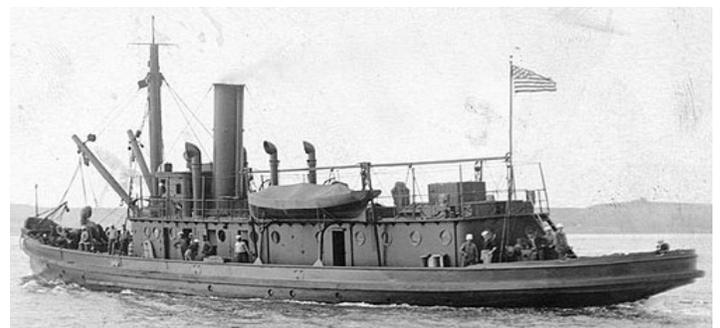
On April 18, 1906 a deep rumble awoke thousands of residents in a sleeping city. The fault lines near that city shifted for over one minute. The San Francisco earthquake and its aftershocks caused subsequent fires to erupt throughout the California metropolis. The west coast urban sprawl of 400,000 saw 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

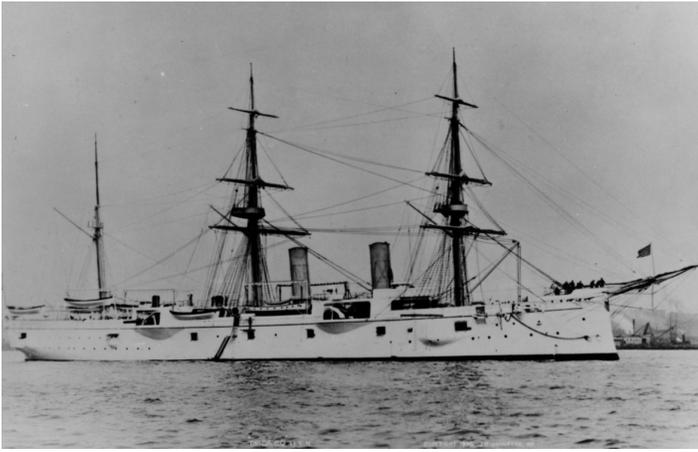
Mare Island peninsula and San Francisco became a small obstacle but the ships did everything in their power to reach the city as fast as possible.



USS *Preble* (DD-12) at sea, port side view. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 63145)



USS *Fortune* off of San Diego, California. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 92205)



USS *Chicago* (CA-14), the flagship of the Pacific Squadron. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 55138)



Bowman H. McCalla, Commandant of the Mare Island Navy Yard. (Naval History and Heritage Command)



USS *Leslie* off of Mare Island in 1903. One of the main work-horses of the US Navy and its response to the disaster. (Department of the Navy)



USS *Active* off of Mare Island in July of 1898. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 57711).

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)

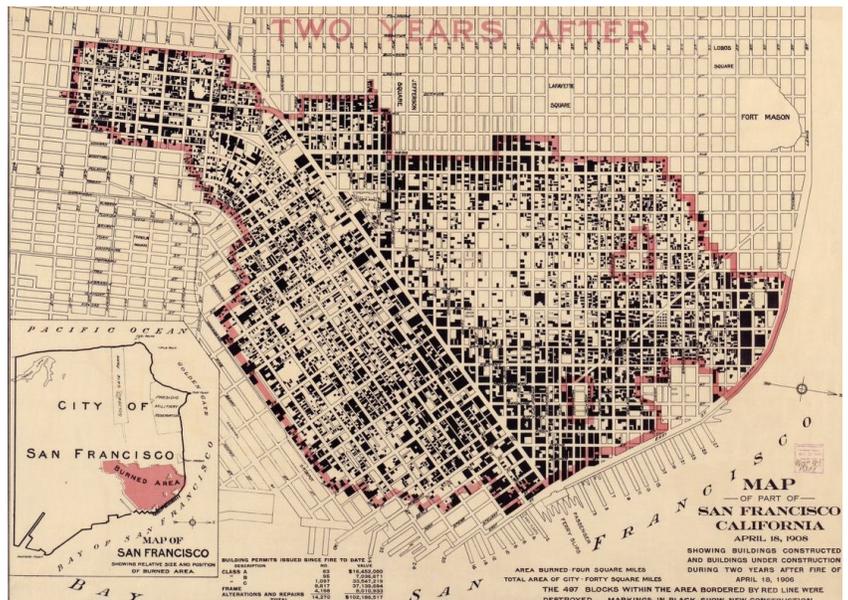


The destruction along the waterfront from the San Francisco fire. Stitched together from an image taken from the Ferry Building Tower and a secondary image, most likely taken from the same location in the National Archives collection, this shows the piers on the right and some of the devastation the Navy could not control within the neighborhood on the left.

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.



Navy Sailors, like the man in the center, guarding refugee lines and maintaining order after the San Francisco Earthquake. (Official U.S. Navy Photograph)



Devastation and subsequent rebuilding, noted by the darkened shapes, of the city of San Francisco in the two years after the fire. (Library of Congress)

Bibliography

Correspondence from Dr. D. Ragan, Health Officer to C. F. Goodrich, Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Squadron, San Francisco, California, May 6, 1906.

Correspondence from George C. Pardee, Governor of California to Admiral C. F. Goodrich, Commanding Pacific Squadron, C/O Mare Island Naval Station, June 18, 1906.

Freeman, Frederick N. "Report on His Unit's Activities during the Earthquake and Fire in San Francisco, April 18-24, 1906." Submitted April 30, 1906. Record Group 181: Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments, 1784-2000, National Archives at San Francisco, p. 1-11. NAID # 296766.

Livingston, Rebecca. "When an American City is Destroyed: The U.S. Military as First Responders to the San Francisco Earthquake a Century Ago." *Prologue Magazine*, Spring 2006, Vol. 38, No. 1.

Pond, Commander John E. "The Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906." *Proceedings*, Naval History Institute, Issue 78 (September 1952): p. 982-993.

Report by Commander Charles J. Badger, Commanding Flagship Chicago and Commander of the Sixth Marine District of San Francisco, California to Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Squadron, United States Navy, May 31, 1906. Written from U.S.F.S. Chicago in Portland, Oregon. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 45, Box 464.

Report by Commander F. H. Sherman, Commanding U.S.S. Princeton to Commander Charles J. Badger, Commanding 6th District of San Francisco, California, United States Navy, May 10, 1906.

Report by D. W. Coffman, Commanding U.S.S. Boston to Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Squadron, United States Navy, May 10, 1906.

Snyder, Thomas L., MC, USNR (Ret.). "The Military Medical Response to the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire." *Military Medicine* Volume 181, Issue 11-12 (November-December 2016): p. 1399-1400.

The Amador Ledger (Jackson, California), May 25, 1906. p. 1

The Daily Progress (Pomona, California), April 18, 1906. p. 1.

The Sacramento Star (Sacramento, California), April 18, 1906. p. 1.

United States Army and Navy Journal and Gazette of the Regular and Volunteer Forces Volume 43, Number 34 (Saturday, April 21, 1906): p. 937-963.

"Unsung Heroes of 1906 San Francisco Earthquake." *All Hands*, Magazine of the United States Navy, April 1981.

"Warships Are Not Injured," *Oakland Tribune* (Oakland, California), April 20, 1906. p. 3.