

FIRE DIVISION HISTORY

By Irving R. Schmidt, Sp.2c

With our late President Roosevelt's promulgation of Executive Order 9074, February 25, 1942, which turned the security of the nation's ports over to the U.S. Coast Guard, the CG Captain of the Port, Los Angeles Fire Division was conceived. The security of this nation's ports and their vulnerability to enemy attack and sabotage at that time is well remembered. The rapid induction of young, trained municipal firemen into the armed forces furthered this vulnerability of U.S. ports. To build a Coast Guard Fire Division that would augment depleted municipal fire departments both in personnel and fire fighting equipment was the job that confronted the COTF, Los Angeles. Speed was essential in the Los Angeles Harbor area. Newly constructed shipyards and mountainous piles of war material on docks and in warehouses required immediate additional fire protection.

To build this division the Coast Guard commissioned Philip C. Pifer, Chief of the Bakersfield, Calif., fire department, and James Pinchard, Engineer of the Long Beach fire department. Starting from scratch, these men formed fire fighting units and requisitioned converted fireboats and trailer pumper units. Lieut. Pinchard was transferred for duty on the east coast in May of 1944. The personnel nucleus of the division was formed by patriotic experienced fire fighters like E. C. Gates, Chief Specialist; Miles Brown, Chief Specialist; L. E. Kaplan, Sp.1c; C. Walker, Sp.1c; D. Smith, Sp.1c and many others. Our first fire fighting unit was organized in July, 1942, and consisted of five men and a trailer pumper unit. These men worked 12 hours on standby duty and 12 hours off duty and lived with only the open docks and sky for a shelter. Other units and personnel were rapidly added so that by January, 1943, the Division was sufficiently well organized to play an important part in saving the docks during the million dollar Fish Harbor Fire.

As activities in the harbor increased so did our Fire Division. Fire Stations were built and located in strategic harbor locations. More fireboats converted from former fishing boats and tugs were added, and many Coast Guardsmen were taught the complex art of fire fighting. Our training detail, under the direction of Chief E. L. Howe, who has since returned to his civilian position as Assistant-Chief of the Bakersfield fire department, taught the men fire fighting drills; the proper extinguishing agent for each class of fire; safety rules; hydraulics; pump operation; use of the Navy All-Purpose Nozzle, etc. Needless to say, many a serviceman was surprised at the extensive knowledge a fireman must possess.

On June 21st, 1943, it was a well-trained, efficient CG Fire Division that played an important part in extinguishing the Vegetable Oil Products Company Inc. fire. While working on a U.S. Army \$4,000,000.00 contract, the "Flake Plant" became involved in fire. The CG Fire Division was the first fire fighting unit on the scene. The plant was saved, and with a minor delay, completed the government contract. Another climax of our outfit was reached on June 7, 1944, CG Operations received information that a tanker was afire three miles to sea from our harbor entrance. Aware of a warning radioed while enroute to the fire, that the tanker was momentarily expected to blow up, twelve members of the Fire Division, boarded the Tanker SS FRONT ROYAL, found the crew had given up the ship for lost, took charge and ordered the flooding of the ammunition filled magazine compartments, whose bulkheads were already hot from the fire burning on the other side, and then extinguished the raging fire in the vessel's Engine Room. Our Commanding Officer, Lieut. Comdr. P.C. Pifer; Chief Specialist E.C. Gates; Chief Specialist Miles Brown; Specialist 2nd Class H.W. Bever; Specialist 1st Class W.A. Hadley; Specialist 3rd Class T.A. Hannah; Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class J.E. Sinclair and Boatswain's Mate 1st Class G.S. McCarthy, received commendations from the Coast Guard Commandant for their activities in extinguishing this fire and saving the ROYAL FRONT from certain total loss.

The day following the ROYAL FRONT tanker fire was also eventful. A fire involving the oil soaked creosote wharf at the Navy Depersing Station in San Pedro was reported to Operations. On arrival, it was found that the flames, aided by a strong breeze, had completely involved this important war time activity. Coast Guard and municipal fire fighting units rapidly brought the fire under control and it was possible for the Navy to resume degaussing ships with but slight delay.