

# **Heroic Acts Highlighted in Earthquake Exhibit**

**By Nancy Dinger**

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The venerable Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum has joined this year's centennial recognition of the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire.

The museum's exhibit is a revelation of unique and little known heroic acts performed by the U.S. Navy to save lives and property. The display of photos, stories and models all tell of the U.S. Navy's valiant response to the devastation.

Such wonderful and valuable exhibits are why museums are created. The museum is housed in the old Vallejo City Hall on Marin Street. The magnificent stone edifice was constructed in 1927 with art deco architectural decor of the period.

When the current city hall was built and opened in 1978, the old city hall did not remain empty long. The City of Vallejo, being proud of its heritage, saw the wisdom of creating a museum to preserve that heritage and history. The museum opened its doors to the public in 1979. A major remodeling and renovation took place in 1984.

The museum's curator and directors created five galleries. Some artifacts are on permanent display, while others are created for a short duration. This is the case, with the exhibit of the U.S. Navy's heroic deeds during the earthquake, in the museum's Community Room, through the end of this month. So, if you want to view little known images of the terrible event from the Navy's vantage, at sea, then time is running out.

The museum's hand-out explains that On April 15th, 1906, the U.S. Torpedo Boat Destroyer Perry, under command of Lieutenant Frederick Freeman, arrived at the Mare Island Navy Yard for minor repairs. Three days later, Lt. Freeman and his crew would be involved in the fight of their lives, battling the fires raging in San Francisco after the Great Earthquake of April 18th, 1906. The commandant, at that time, of Mare Island, Admiral McCalla, ordered all available personnel and vessels to San Francisco. The U.S. Tug Sotoyoma was the first to leave at eight in the morning.

Freeman followed two hours later, commanding a small flotilla, which included the U.S.S. Preble with medical personnel from Mare Island aboard. The U.S. Tugs Leslie and Active were part of the group and would combat the raging fires which threatened the docks and piers of the Embarcadero, San Francisco's waterfront.

Not content to make their stand on the shore, Freeman's crew repeatedly ranged into

the heart of the inferno, fighting fires as far away as Rincon, Telegraph and Russian Hills. Their efforts saved countless lives and property throughout the city, as well as allowing thousands of survivors escape the flames. By saving the docks, people could board boats and make their escape. At the same time, tons of supplies and hundreds of rescuers would arrive safely.

Admiral Goodrich, of the U.S. Pacific Squadron arrived in a timely manner to give much needed relief to the exhausted Mare Island crews. The admiral dispatched naval patrols to maintain order along the waterfront. The saving of San Francisco's waterfront not only made rescue and relief possible, but greatly speeded the recovery efforts, as countless shiploads of supplies arrived to rebuild the City from the ashes.

Many of the refugees would find temporary homes throughout Solano County. Residents of Vallejo, Fairfield, Suisun and Vacaville opened their homes to complete strangers. One of the exhibits more intriguing artifacts is a Naval report by Freeman that was found in the National Archives in San Bruno. According to Gladys Hansen, who made this report public, she noted that there was some mystery as to why this document was classified by the Navy.

Careful reading, however, clearly shows that General Funston usurped local civilian authority, and essentially ran the fire suppression activities like a military campaign. With civilian authority in such disarray, as outlined in this report, the better-organized military filled the vacuum.

Freeman's report tells of how following orders he had temporarily commanded the destroyer Preble and headed for San Francisco under full boiler power, while convoying all available surgeons and nurses from Mare Island. The Preble, Active and Leslie arrived around 10:30 in the morning.

After contacting Lt. Commander Lopez who was in command of the tug Sotomoyo, Freeman was told to await Lopez's return from Goat Island (now Yerba Buena). While waiting, Freeman sent the hospital party ashore to learn where their services would be needed. He also sent a messenger to the Fire Department officials to find out where the tugs Leslie and Active should fight the fire. The word came back that they were needed at Pier Street, foot of Howard Street.

P.A. Surgeon Smith took command of the hospital party and rendered aid to the injured before sending the patients to Goat Island. Two other tugs arrived, the Slocum and Revenue Cutter Golden Gate. The four boats poured copious amounts of water along the docks, saving them.

Freeman went into great detail about the effort put forth to put out the raging fires. But,

he also complained about the constant trouble his men were experiencing owing to the large number of drunken people along the waterfront. Evidently the crowds rushed saloon after saloon and looted the liquor. The few policemen in evidence, evidently were powerless to do anything. Freeman complained bitterly about how his unarmed men rescuing women and children in the neighborhood of Rincon Hill. If they could have had the assistance of the civilian men, they could have saved more. Able-bodied men refused to work with the fire department, stating that they would not work for less and forty cents and hour.

To stop the fires in their path and to save some of the city, dynamite was used to blow up buildings. Freeman received two wagon loads of dynamite sent over from Goat Island. The idea was to dynamite a line of houses near telegraph hill to try to stop the fire's advancement. Everything possible was done to check the advance of the flames, but without success. Freeman's crew retreated to the waterfront and made a stand on Broadway one block below Montgomery. With the addition of more manpower, military and civilian, they were successful.

This report makes for exciting reading and the accompanying photos on display around the museum's walls are a testament to the pluck and heroism of everyone involved in the fire fight and rescue of the victims.

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