



REMEMBERING OUR FALLEN FIRE FIGHTERS

by Scott Mellott, Retired

In the December 2007 issue of this publication, I printed two pictures on page 11 that depicted the Houston Fire Department's participation in the aftermath of two massive explosion in Texas City, Texas. It was then I decided that at a later date I would give you a history lesson of one of the worst industrial disasters in American history, - so here goes.

I grew up in the Texas City - Galveston area. I heard adults talk about the tragedy that took place on April 16, 1947. Through the years, I heard many stories about the disaster and grew up knowing that this day was not a good day for the citizens of Texas City.

It all started on April 11th, the day that the French Liberty ship S. S. Grandcamp docked at Texas City's loading docks. The ship had traveled from Belgium and Cuba and was on the way to Venezuela with a shipment of ammunition, then would sail back to Europe. The ship was to be loaded with ammonia nitrite, which during World War II was used to make explosives and turned into fertilizer after the war. The fertilizer, manufactured in Nebraska and Iowa, was shipped to Texas City by rail, then loaded on a ship enroute to the farmers in war torn Europe.

This product was packaged in unmarked 100 pound paper bags placed on pallets and hoisted into the air and down into the ship's hold. During the war years, the docks had been operated by the military for loading equipment and supplies for the troops. During that time, safety regulations were strictly enforced. After the military left, safety rules were not always adhered to. Loosely enforced safety rules probably contributed to the original fire. A discarded cigarette in the hold of the ship was concluded to be the likely cause of the disaster.

Due to weather delays, the remainder of the fertilizer was to be loaded on the morning of the 16th. The Grandcamp had been previously loaded with 2300 tons in two different compartments of the ship. Berthed in the next slip from the Grandcamp was the S.S. High Flyer, which had previously been loaded with 1000 tons of the fertilizer with 2000 tons of sulfur being the remainder of the ship's cargo. (And by the way, ammonia nitrite mixed with sulfur and water make it much more volatile).

On the morning of the 16th, the stevedores were ordered to



Photos courtesy of the University of Houston

start their day, for reasons unknown at 8 a.m. instead of the usual 7 a.m. start time. Since Monsanto Chemical Company, only 300 feet away from the dock, changed shifts at 8 a.m., the hour delay saved many of the Monsanto worker's lives, probably my Aunt Louise was one of them. She had enough time to get home from her night shift at Monsanto, into bed and was awakened by the first blast.

At 8:00 a.m., the first group of stevedores boarded the ship to begin loading the remainder of the fertilizer. After the hatch was opened, the workers descended into the hold and immediately noticed an odor of smoke. After a brief investigation, the smoldering fire was located. Water was summoned and two containers were dumped on the fire to no avail. Fire hoses were requested and the Captain of the ship denied the order because of damage to the rest of the cargo. The hatch was secured and the Captain ordered steam piped into the hold.

Around 8:30 a.m. the Texas City Fire Department was called, the hatch of #4 hold had blown off due to the pressure of the steam and the fire began to belch a very colorful large deadly column of smoke. This attracted hundreds of onlookers who gathered a few hundred feet away from the head of the Grandcamp - in less than an hour they went from spectators to victims.

Close to 9:00 a.m. flames shot out of the open hatch and 12 minutes later the S. S. Grandcamp violently exploded producing a large mushroom cloud reaching several thousand feet in the air. Many Galveston residents just 10 miles away thought that an atomic bomb had exploded. Super heated metal fragments, some weighing several tons, rained down over the town and Texas City's industrial area, leveling buildings and houses and setting pipelines and chemical storage tanks ablaze.

This first blast literally disintegrated the bodies of the Texas City Fire Department, surrounding area industrial Fire Fighters and the crew of the ship that were still on board. To make matters even worse, the S. S. High Flyer had sustained severe damage by the first blast and tore from it's mooring. It was unable to be moved out of harms way by tugs or under her own power. Within a short time the abandon ship order was given and she caught fire and exploded 15 hours later and destroyed a nearby ship, the Wilson B. Keene, and damaged even much more of the surrounding port area.

Damage to the town of Texas City, population 16,000 was severe. Every home and business in the town suffered some type of damage. Some homes were totally destroyed leaving many homeless. The loss of life totaled nearly 600 with 2000 plus injuries. This death toll included 27 members of the Texas City Volunteer Fire Department. I am ending this article (history lesson) with the name and rank of the brave Fire Fighters that gave their lives protecting the citizen of Texas City, Texas in one of histories worst industrial disaster.



continued on page 14

Baumgartner, Henry J. - Fire Chief
Braddy, Joseph Milton - Assistant Chief
Davis, Zolan - Fire Fighter
Durio, Roy Louis - Fire Fighter
Emsoff, Archie Boyce - Fire Fighter
Findeisen, Henry John - Fire Fighter
Fereday, Virgil D. - Fire Fighter
Henricksen, Edward Henry - Fire Fighter
Johnson, William Carl - Captain

Hughes, William Fred - Fire Fighter
Cain, Lloyd George - Fire Fighter
Jolly, Frank P. - Fire Fighter
Kaiser, William Louis - Fire Fighter
Meadows, Jacob Otto - Fire Fighter
Nunez, Sebastain B. - Captain
O'Sullivan, William C. - Fire Fighter
Pentycuff, Marcel - Fire Fighter
Pentycuff, William D. - Lieutenant

Menge, Harvey Alonzo - Fire Fighter
Reddicks, Jimmy - Fire Fighter
Smith, Robert Dee - Fire Fighter
Stafford, Joel Clifton - Fire Fighter
Stafford, Marshall B. - Lieutenant
Neely, Maurice R. - Fire Fighter
Westmoreland, Marion D. - Fire Fighter
Wood, Clarence J. - Fire Fighter
Vestal, Clarence Rome - Fire Fighter

Remembering To Never Forget

OTTO W. MUELLER

*Served HFD 1956 to 1982
Died March 26, 2008*

ARLON FLOYD DRAKE

*Served HFD 1953 to 1973
Died March 9, 2008*

RICHARD HENRY DECKER

*Served HFD 1961 to 1984
Died March 6, 2008*

“WHITEY” LESTER O’NEAL MARTIN

*Served HFD 1949 to 1988
Died March 2, 2008*

ERIC DEWAYNE BRADY

*Served HFD 1959 to 1986
Died February 15, 2008*

BRICEY EUGENE CHILDRESS

*Served HFD 1959 to 1986
Died February 9, 2008*

DAVID LEE NORRIS

*Served HFD 1975 to 2003
Died February 1, 2008*

TED W. SANFORD

*Served HFD 1946 to 1974
Died January 26, 2008*

Total from January 1, 2008 to present - 8 Deaths

Total for the Year 2007 - 43 Deaths

For current information on deceased Fire Fighters, please go to my web site www.houstonfirememorial.org
and click on “Recent Deaths” or email Scott at scottmel@juno.com

LINE-OF-DUTY DEATH ANNIVERSARIES FOR THE MONTH OF APRIL

April 4, 2004

KEVIN WAYNE KULOW

Probationary Fire Fighter - Station 50

April 14, 1949

ROBERT “BOBBY” WIER MILBURN

Chauffeur - Station 7

April 26, 1908

BARNEY C. MOFFATT

Fire Fighter - Station 7

April 27, 1899

EMIL “ED” THOMAS

Fire Fighter - Station 5

Remembering



Never To Forget

The Faces of Local 341

1932 to 2008

Houston Professional Fire Fighter's Association



Captain Frank "Barney" Barletta - 1950's

Photo provided by the family of W. O. Hunter



**Chief "Birdie" Thompson - Chauffeur not identified
1960's**

Photo provided by the family of "Birdie" Thompson



HFD Station 2, 1954 (names of Fire Fighters unknown)

*If you have any pictures, old or new, that you would like to share with us,
please contact Scott Mellott at 713 729 6536 or scottmel@juno.com.*

The Faces of Local 341

1932 to 2008

Houston Professional Fire Fighter's Association



*2nd from left - Chief Brian McLeroy, Sr.,
Chief Dennis Holder, Captain Joe Jones and other
Fire Fighter (name unknown)*



Deputy Chief Ewell Lawson - Station 1, 1980

Photo provided by the family of "Birdie" Thompson



*Station 2/C Shift - April 16th 1982
(L to R) Dave Barrier, Doug Howze,
Ray Ponce, Craig Kannady*

Photo provided by David Barrier



*Station 15/A Shift, April 2006
(L - R) Rene Neira, Scott Mellott, "Eddie" Rodriguez*

Photo provided by Station 15

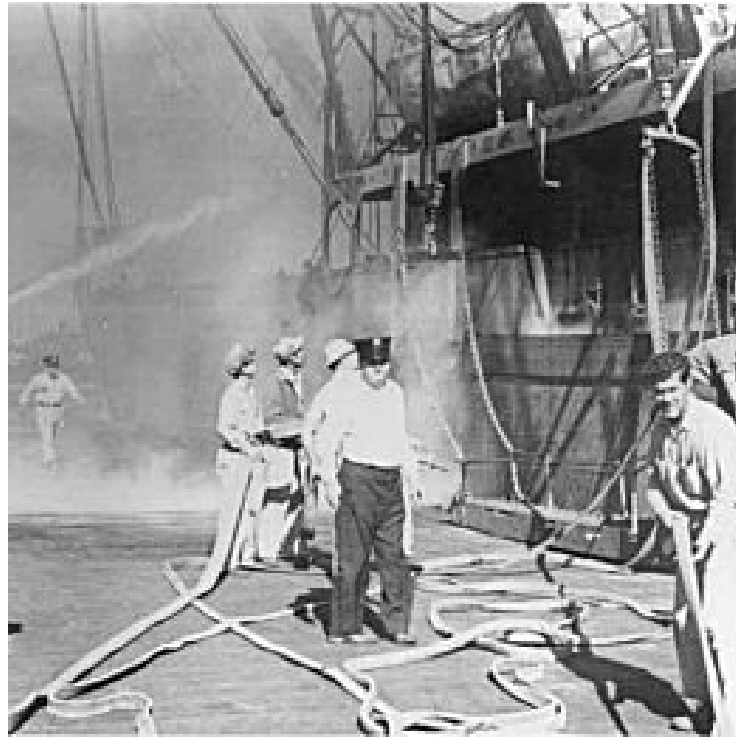
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TEXAS CITY DISASTER - 1947



SS Grandcamp shortly before she exploded

Photo provided by Texas City Fire Fighter's Local 1259



View of Texas City Fire Fighters

Photo provided by Texas City Fire Fighter's Local 1259



View of 20 Rail Road cars burning

Photo provided by Houston Fire Fighter J. D. Robinson



View of the town of Texas City

Photo provided by Houston Fire Fighter J. D. Robinson

TEXAS CITY DISASTER - 1947



Texas City Disaster - Grain elevator smoke



Texas City Disaster - wide view of the smoke and flames



Texas City Disaster - Houston Fire Department



Texas City Disaster - Houston Fire Department