

FIRE ABOARD S.S. "EDMUND B. ALEXANDER"

BALTIMORE YARD ON OCTOBER 23, 1942.

Summary

The S. S. "Edmund B. Alexander" was damaged by fire starting shortly after midnight, October 23, 1942, while undergoing conversion as an Army transport and cargo carrier at the Key Highway Yard. Cause of the fire is believed to have been heat from an electric welding operation on the boat deck igniting combustible woodwork or paint in a stateroom on "A" deck below. This room was known to have been open, but other nearby staterooms had been locked by Army officials in charge, who were in possession of the keys. The fire had apparently gained much headway before discovery, and when subsequently breaking out of staterooms, the built-up heat spread fire rapidly through various passageways on "A" deck. Fire-fighting equipment and number of firemen (fire watch) assigned to the ship were adequate. The fire was extinguished in approximately two hours by combined efforts of the Yard fire department and employees, Baltimore City Fire Department and Coast Guard. The damage is estimated by the Yard to be \$125,000 maximum.

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Background: The "Edmund B. Alexander", formerly the S.S. "America" is a passenger vessel. **BALTIMORE YARD ON OCTOBER 23, 1942.** It was used for troop transport and cargo service for the U.S. Army. It has been in the yard since June 8, 1942; and, excluding fire damage, considerable conversion work was yet to be done. Construction of vessel is usual to the wider steel passenger ships, with numerous combustible interior wood and painted composition board walls and ceilings, providing ready fuel for a fire. At time of fire, the ship was tied up at the North side of pier 54. The ship was "dead" in the yard, i.e., no boilers or machinery were in operation, but there was a small crew on duty. A small force of Army men were assigned to the ship on a 24-hour basis for inspection and victual services and those men used a few of the staterooms as offices, etc. Lt. Smith of the U. S. Army was in charge of the ship. A good sized force of workmen were employed on the ship practically 24 hours a day.

Inspection Equipment: Fire-fighting equipment on board was adequate. It included seven 2 1/2" hose lines (1950' hose) and five 3/4" hose lines (1950' hose) connected to salt water hose outlets on the pier, which were supplied by two (1000 and 1500 g.p.m.) salt water pumps. Ship's fire lines were also in service supplied by two 2 1/2" hose connections from salt water line on pier. Portable equipment consisted of 15 - 2 1/2 gallon water pumps, 1 - 5 gallon water pump, and 2 - 1 gallon vaporizing-liquid-type extinguishers placed on board by the Yard, in addition to ship's portable extinguishers. The ship's own thermostatic fire alarm system was out in service.

Protection Personnel: The fire occurred after midnight. The force of firemen (fire watch) assigned to the ship on the 4 p.m. - 12 a.m. and 12 a.m. - 4 p.m. shifts consisted of 13 men on each shift. One of those,

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William Welch, (employed since 1/26/42), was assigned as leader on the ship, The fireman-inspector BALTIMORE YARD ON OCTOBER 23, 1942. including this ship, was Joseph Judd (employed since 7/3/42). The department was in charge of Captain Francis Palford, who was in the fire station when first notification of fire was received. The Baltimore City (police) force on this ship consisted of 18-24 men on each shift. The guards patrolled all portions of ship without.

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Details

Description: The "Edmund B. Alexander", formerly the S.S. "Amerika" is a passenger vessel of about 22,000 tons, being converted for troop transport and cargo service for the U.S. Army. It has been in the yard since June 8, 1942; and, excluding fire damage, considerable conversion work was yet to be done. Construction of vessel is usual to the older steel passenger ships, with numerous combustible interior wood and pressed composition board walls and ceilings, providing ready fuel for a fire. At time of fire, the ship was tied up at the North side of pier #8. The ship was "dead" in the yard; i.e., no boilers or machinery were in operation, but there was a small crew on duty. A small force of Army men were assigned to the ship on a 24-hour basis for inspection and similar services and these men used a few of the staterooms as offices, etc. Lt. Smith of the U. S. Army was in charge of the ship. A good sized force of workmen were employed on the ship practically 24 hours a day.

Protection Equipment: Fire-fighting equipment on board was adequate. It included seven 2 1/2" hose lines (1950' hose) and five 3/4" hose lines (1950' hose) connected to salt water hose outlets on the pier, which were supplied by two (1000 and 1500 g.p.m.) salt water pumps. Ship's fire lines were also in service supplied by two 2 1/2" hose connections from salt water line or pier. Portable equipment consisted of 15 - 2 1/2 gallon water pumps, 1 - 5 gallon water pump, and 2 - 1 gallon vaporizing-liquid-type extinguishers placed on board by the Yard, in addition to Ship's portable extinguishers. The ship's own thermostatic fire alarm system was not in service.

Protection Personnel: The fire occurred after midnight. The force of firemen (fire watch) assigned to the ship on the 4 p.m. - 12 a.m. and 12 a.m. - 8 a.m. shifts consisted of 13 men on each shift. One of these,

William Welsh, (employed since 1/26/42), was assigned as leader on the ship, The fireman-inspector in charge of South end of Yard, including this ship, was Joseph Judd (employed since 7/3/41). The department was in charge of Captain Francis Pulsford, who was in the fire station when first notification of fire was received. The guard (police) force on this ship consisted of 12-14 men on each shift. The guards patrolled all portions of ship without time-recording devices, but coverage appears to have been complete. Both fire and guard forces change shifts approximately at midnight and both work an overlapping time period so that the men can check in at headquarters, receive instructions, and assignments, and relieve the previous shift on location without lapse of protection.

Weather Data: A light breeze was blowing from southwest, striking ship on the port side toward the bow. Weather was clear.

Events Preceding the Fire: At time of fire all hot work was being done on "E" deck below, with exception of two welders on the boat deck where fire was presumed to have been started. Two welders, Noel Wittenberg, and Alfred Peckrul, were given the job of welding some partitions in place at adjacent locations on the port side of boat deck at 6:30 P.M. A fireman (fire watch) was promptly assigned to them and various confirmed statements indicate that their work was stopped until 8 P.M. by the fire watch in order that electric wiring on ceilings of staterooms #14 and 16 on "A" deck, directly underneath location where hot work was to be done, could be removed and protected. The wood and combustible composition board ceilings in these staterooms #14 and 16 had been removed on October 18, 1942, but the wooden stringer pieces, or nailing strips, bolted to the steel channels were not removed. The welders worked until 11:30 P.M., when they went to lunch. Staterooms were not locked prior to midnight and James Moran, fireman leader on this ship during the 4 P.M. - 12 A.M. shift, is said to have inspected staterooms #14 and #16 at 11:50 P.M. when he found everything "O.K.". Welders Wittenberg and Peckrul returned to the job at midnight or shortly thereafter, when fireman Sam Perlman (employed since 10-2-42), replaced the firemen on the previous shift. The welders state that they were accompanied at all times by the fire watch on both the 4 P.M. - 12 A.M. and 12 A.M. - 8 A.M. shifts. A statement was made by fire watchmen Perlman after the fire that he did not know what was in staterooms #14 and #16. This indicated lack of understanding of his job, or failure in judgment of this new man in not following through to obtain access to this room as it is cardinal rule of long standing in this and other Bethlehem yards that fire watch must check and protect the welding hazard not only where welders are working, but also on opposite sides of bulkheads and decks where hot work may ignite combustible materials.

Discovery and Notification of Fire: All statements seem to lead to the conclusion that the actual start of the fire occurred after the welders returned to work at 12 midnight. Reported time of discovery was 12:55 A.M. There was therefore a possible period of 55 minutes in which the fire could have been burning undetected. It apparently was detected by several sources at approximately the same time. Smoke was first seen on the boat deck issuing from ventilators leading from passageway on "A" deck, and air space

around engine room compartment. It was seen at about the same time by Wittenberg and Fickrul, fireman Perlman, Diesel generator operator and repairmen Richardson and Reuwer, who were then on boat deck. These men spread the alarm by shouting "Fire!", and proceeded with hose streams to fighting the fire, which appeared to be about 15 feet below boat deck, when looking down through smoke in ventilators. Immediately to the Bethlehem Yard, arriving at 1:05 A.M.

From statements of the guard force, a guard detected the fire in port side passage on "A" deck while on patrol at 12:57 A. M. He immediately transmitted the alarm by his whistle (which each guard carries), which was heard at the gate house at South side of pier #8. The gate house guard notified the yard fire department by telephone, the call being received at 1:02 A. M.

Harvey McQuay (employed 10/21/42.) was the fireman assigned to patrol "A" and "B" decks of this ship on the 12A. M. - 8 A. M. shift. He said he was checking stateroom doors and found them locked, but otherwise could not see anything wrong. He was on "B" deck when the fire was detected, and reported that when he reached the scene of the fire on "A" deck, it was traveling fast.

On receipt of the alarm at the yard fire station, Captain Pulsford proceeded to Pier 8 with the Williams Welsh, fireman-leader for the entire ship, was on "E" deck. He reported that when the lights began to dim he went to "D" deck, where he heard a yell, "There is a fire on "A" deck, port Side". Upon arrival on "A" deck, he noted that the fire seemed to be coming from the vicinity of staterooms #14 and #16, then burst out suddenly and spread rapidly. Protection Hunter, and others, all of whom responded immediately.

To prevent electrical fires the ship's lights were extinguished, after which flashlight Joseph Judd, fireman-inspector in this part of yard, was on another ship when the fire was detected and proceeded to the "Alexander", where it was reported to him that there was a fire on the "Alexander".

City Fire Department placed in service in addition to some ship's hose lines. City Fire Department sent out An Army inspector named Steurner, on board, called the Yard phone operator, at 1:00 A. M. and asked her to call the City Fire Department. As he failed to identify himself, she did not do so, a normal procedure to prevent City Fire Department from responding to fake or unnecessary alarms. She did, however, call the Plant Fire Department. Her attempts to call back to identify Mr. Steurner were unsuccessful as he had left the phone.

At 1:28 A. M., Capt. Pulsford of the Yard Fire Department, ranking fire officer in charge, having investigated and determined the magnitude of the fire, and established fire-fighting procedure for his men, then instructed the #3 Gateman, Guard Wess, to call Baltimore City Fire Department. A call was received by the latter at 1:29 A. M., but due to misunderstanding of reported location the Fire Boat "Deluge" and #12 City Fire Company were dispatched to Pier 8, Port Covington. Lt. Smith of the Army called the Yard phone operator at 1:30 A. M. to determine whether City Fire Department had been called. At that moment fire apparatus were broken open and ceiling sheathing partly removed to see that fire had not communicated to these areas. An attempt was made to reach the rest of the

sirens were audible to both Lt. Smith and the phone operator who assumed and agreed that the City Apparatus was on the way to the Yard. At 1:42 A.M. when apparatus had not arrived, Lt. Smity pulled the City fire alarm box on Key Highway near Webster Street, outside of the Yard. The apparatus in the meantime learned of their error and came back immediately to the Bethlehem Yard, arriving at 1:45 A.M.

Cause of Fire: All oral or written statements submitted agree that the fire evidently started from welding operation on boat deck. It is believed that through the deck plates, igniting the wood stringers (nailing stripe), in staterooms #14 and #16 on port side "A" deck, or possibly ignited the red lead paint with which the steel sork was apparently coated. The fire apparently had a good start when it finally broke out fo the staterooms and spread rapidly along the passageway.

Fire Fighting: The men on boat deck and guards on "A" deck immediately made use of 2 1/2" fire lines that were on board, and of ship's fire lines. The density of smoke made it difficult to determine the seat of the fire, and it is likely that the first streams were not used to maximum effect. On receipt of the alarm at the yard fire station, Captain Pulsford prodeeded to Pier 8 with the service truck. After reviewing the situation the service truck was dispatched to the firestation for all available gas masks, and word was given that Chief Weiskittel be notified. The operator had difficulty in notifying the Chief who arrived on the scene about 2:00 A.M. Others promptly notified included J.M. Willis, General Sup't. Crosby, MC. Hodgkinson, Sup't. of Plant Protection Hunter, and others, all of whom responded immediately. To prevent electrical fires the ship's lights were extinguished, after which flashlights 9hand0 were used.

At least four of the seven 2 1/2" hose lines on the ship were placed in service in addition to some ship's hose lines. City Fire Department sent out three alarms and their apparatus took suction from city street hydrants only, with the exception of one fire boat, which took suction from bay and laid lines along the pier. Another fire boat stood by. One Coast-Guard boat also responded but apparently fundtioned only by playing streams from their boat onto the outside of ship. The 500-gallon trailer pump from Key Highway and the one from the Lower Yard were brought to the pier, but were not used at the fire. An attempt was made to lower them in the ship to pump out water, but this was not successful. The City Fire Department flood-lighting equipment proved most valuable as ship's lights were all extinguished.

The fire, starting in or around staterooms #14 and #16 on port side of "A" deck, broke out into the passageway and traveled toward bow and stern as far as the ship's main stairways, where it was held incheck. It also traveled through two cross passageways to the starboard passageway on "A" deck, where it was again held in check. Locked doors to many stqterooms on "A" deck were broken open and ceiling sheathing partly removed to see that fire had not communicated to these areas. An attempt was made to reach the seat of the

fire by cutting through floor of boat deck above; but after removing wood covering of deck the water from hose streams kept the steel plates so wet that a cutting torch could not be used. A similar attempt to cut through the boat deck into a port side passage of "A" deck was made, and the cut was about one-half completed when fire-fighters found they were then able to approach the desired areas directly from "A" deck.

During the early stages of the fire, Army Lt. Smith was said to have given instruction to flood one or more ship's holds, to act as ballast and prevent listing. Water was being put in # 2 hold, but was stopped by Sup't. Crosby when he arrived. The water from fire lines flowed toward starboard side, and gradually cause a list said to have been from a 4 to 9 degrees. This was not considered dangerous, however, as the ship was known to list easily, and on a previous occasion had listed as much as 10 degrees. Water flowed down into "B", "C" and "D" decks, and into engine and boiler room spaces, with the greatest depth of water in passageways. Portable pumps were assembled from the yard, put on board and in operation before the fire was put out.

The fire was extinguished about 3 A.M.

Clean - up: A laborers' clean - up gang of about 150 men were immediately to work and by 7 A.M. all debris had been removed, water was pumped out, and the ship generally cleaned up, leaving little to indicate that a fire had occurred except where actual fire damage was visible.

Damage: The principal damage noted was as follows:

Boat Deck - floor plates over port side staterooms and passage buckled and warped in an area of about 1500 square feet. Some wood and cement flooring above floor plates removed or burned.

"A" Deck - Several staterooms on port side entirely burned out. Some floor plates in this area may be warped. Several passageways burned on surface. These had largely wood or composition board walls and ceilings, stateroom dorrs broken. Electric wiring in burned areas badly damaged. Some water damage in staterooms. Steel supports in "A" deck, supporting floor of boat deck, did not appear badly damaged.

"B" Deck - Water and some smoke damage only.

"C" Deck and "D" Decks- Some water damage, mainly on starboard side.

Engine and Boiler Rooms - Equipment wet down, but apparently no damage except cost of cleaning up.