



NAVY
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

WASHINGTON 29 October, 1942

HEADQUARTERS

CONFIDENTIAL

Subject: Fire, SS MAKUA, Honolulu

Reference:

Summary of Information:

The following is the substance of an official report from the DCGO, 14th ND, re Subject fire:

At 2020, 5 October, 1942 fire occurred in the hold of Subject vessel at Pier 8, Honolulu, T.H. and was extinguished at about 2145, after an unreported amount of damage to part of the vessel's cargo. The fire is reported to have been caused by an improperly packed case of nitric acid being stowed below, due to possible negligence and inexperience of cargo workers. Potential danger from this fire lay in the fact that the vessel at the time was loaded with 264.37 tons of explosives, the fire being in the immediate area over the most dangerous part of the explosive cargo.

The DIO, 14th ND is cognizant.

DECLASSIFIED

Authority NN3-26-83-11

By RB NARA. Date 6/16/77

FOR DEFENSE



BUY
UNITED STATES
SAVINGS
BONDS
AND STAMPS

Distribution:

DNI 5392
Operations, C.G.

Evaluation:

Source: Reliable
Information: Reliable

J.P.B. W.K. [Signature]

used to extinguish smoldering mattresses on deck and keep them wet down.

3. Lieut. Comdr. Stockstill's statement is quoted completely.

1. At 2025 on 5 October 1942, the U.S.C.G. gangway sentry on the MAKUA, reported a fire aboard same, to the Junior O.D.'s office. Ensign Leary was notified and he left immediately with three men to investigate same. Shortly thereafter a city fire truck passed enroute to the scene, and at the same time I learned of the fire. I arrived on the MAKUA at about 2035. Before leaving the unit I ordered Mr. Wing to take all men which were dressed to the scene and have all other personnel broken out to stand by in case they were needed.

2. Upon arrival aboard, I went to the bridge and asked the Commanding Officer what cargo was in the No. 2 hold. He stated that he didn't know. The fire truck's, city, crews were directing the water from hoses on starboard deck between the hatch and the bulwark. It was reported that steam had been turned on (in the hold) to try smothering the fire. Smoke, slight amount, was coming from a few places around the hatch which was covered with tarpaulins. They had been wetted down. The deck on the starboard forward side of No. 2 hold appeared the hottest as steam would appear immediately after the hoses were directed to areas further aft. I suggested to the O.D. opening the hatch slightly and directing the hoses into the hold. About this time the ship's mate (I could be mistaken about this man as to being the mate) appeared on the bridge and said "No", to do so would let in more air and increase the intensity of the fire. He stated that there were 1,000 cases of ammunition in the lower section of the hold. I left the bridge after about four minutes and went down on the hatch covering. The city firemen kept the hoses trained on the hatch cover and starboard area. I contacted the fire chief in charge of the city crew who agreed that they should open the hatch slightly and get some water in same and try to see if the main fire was actually on the starboard forward section. The steam was secured, one hatch was opened by removing two boards on the starboard side. After the smoke and steam cleared somewhat the fire's location was partially verified. The hatch was closed and the steam again turned on. About 15 minutes later it was opened again. The steam had been secured. The smoke appeared to be heavier than the first time, indicating increasing intensity. This time the hoses, practically all of them, were trained on the starboard forward section and the volume of smoke seemed to decrease. Then the hatch was opened wider and after clamping down for about four minutes, firemen started removing the cargo. (Shortly, enough was removed to permit crews to train nozzles below the decking but on top of the cargo. This work continued progressively. Also noted was the fire seemed to have spread along the starboard side from forward to the after section of the hold on a line roughly six feet outboard of and parallel to the starboard side of the hatch coaming. The process was continued alternately, of wetting down and removing cargo until it was brought under control at about 2135. At this time firemen had gone through the various sections and established that the fire was confined to the starboard side. Burning mattresses, some one-gallon tins of Lockheed hydraulic brake fluid, and jugs of acid were removed from the immediate vicinity of the fire. One jug was broken. Some of the brake

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fluid tins had handles melted off, also the filling fittings. The heat of the deck immediately over the fire indicated that it burned with intense heat, too hot to be regarded as coming from the smoldering mattresses alone. There were trunks, miscellaneous luggage and cargo in the upper section, starboard side, of No. 2 hold.

"3. The first Coast Guard fireboat arrived at about 2130 and started pumping. The others arrived about ten minutes later. All operated on the mission. Mazzoni notified me of the fire prior to my departure from Pier 11, and said he'd sent the fireboats to the scene.

"4. On the second opening of the hatch, masks were of no value as smoke and steam obscured vision. Firemen did not attempt to use them thereafter.

"5. The fire was extinguished at about 2145, although mattresses thrown out on deck continued to smolder, only slightly, for about six hours afterward. I do not know if the ammunition was damaged by water. Later the following was obtained as to explosive cargo on board at the time of the fire:

- (1) Two (2.0) tons caps and fuses in No. 1 locker on forecabin head, port side.
- (2) No. 1 hold, lower, 77.74 tons ammunition.
- (3) No. 2 hold, lower, forward end, 119.95 tons case ammunition, (75% M shells), and hand grenades.
- (4) No. 5 hold, tween deck, 64.67 tons dynamite.

Total explosives: 264.37 tons.

"6. It should be noted that the fire was in the immediate area over the most dangerous part of the explosive cargo.

"4. I arrived at the scene about one hour after discovery of the fire; I was delayed by an error in transmitting the directive over the phone and by difficulty in transportation during blackout. On my arrival, fire was apparently coming under control. On questioning master as to whether he could move ship, he said "No." I directed that he get ready immediately. Tug was standing by. I also had adjacent hold (No. 1) checked. When fire was completely extinguished, arrangements were made for immediate removal of cargo. Fire watch was kept all night and one fireboat was kept standing by. At 0800 I examined the hold from which the upper third approximately of the cargo had been removed. The burned, charred and damaged cargo had been removed. The remaining cargo had suffered little or no damage and vessel sailed at scheduled time for two Inter-Island ports where the remainder of the cargo was discharged.

"5. All explosives were loaded under supervision of a guard from the Captain of the Port detail, which was maintained until the hatch was closed. In the case of Army loadings, such as this one, there was little or no control over nature of material stowed on top of ammunition.

"6. The cause of the fire has been determined by the U. S. Naval Intelligence Service report to be an improperly packed case of nitric acid which was stowed below as the result of negligence and inexperience of cargo workers in stowing acid in the hold rather than on deck.

7. I agree that the cause of the fire was the improper packing of the case of acid but the rules require the stowage of acid, even when properly packed, on deck. The hazard to the vessel resulted primarily from the act of stowing it below deck. A careful reading of all statements made indicates that the organization for receiving, checking and insuring proper stowage of cargo does not function properly; it appears that management has not set up an organization that might not fail even with more experienced and more literate workers.

8. An almost similar incident occurred on the steamer WAIALEALE on 29 July. Damage was negligible, but might have been serious. Report on this fire is on file here, but was not forwarded to Headquarters; action was taken by the Army. The danger arises from miscellaneous cargo in small shipments. These shipments should be carefully checked on receipt, preferably in a special area. If dangerous articles are included they should be placed in a definite area clearly marked as deck cargo, special cargo, etc. An arrangement like this is now in use at Pier 31-4, but not as far as known on any other pier in this harbor. It is the function of management to provide the facilities to handle this material rather than for the clerk to find a clear space somewhere on the pier "at the base of a post, clear of all other cargo", "For four or five feet in all directions", and hope that it will not get mixed up with other cargo.

9. The handling of cargo in this port has been under the control of an agency of the Military Governor, Cargo and Passenger Control, with complete charge of priorities, allocation of space, assignment of berths in the harbor, subject to approval for safety by the Captain of the Port, and control of the loading and unloading operations. Stevedoring is done chiefly by two large organizations, Castle & Cooke Terminals, Ltd., and McCabe, Hamilton & Renny Co., who continue to function as private companies doing the Army and commercial unloading. A small steamship company, Inter-Island Steam Navigation Company, does its own stevedoring. Contractors, Pacific Naval Air Bases does its own stevedoring and also most of the stevedoring for the Navy in Honolulu. Most of the Navy cargo is handled at Pearl Harbor under contract by McCabe, Hamilton & Renny Company.

10. Former employees of Castle & Cooke and McCabe, Hamilton & Renny have been commissioned in both military services and are serving in various capacities in Cargo and Passenger Control. Practices in regard to compliance with regulations regarding handling and stowage of cargo were lax before the war and have not been made more rigid since then due to the emergency. Continuance of old personnel means that change of old practices will be difficult.

11. I have taken the following action in this matter:

(a) I immediately advised the Commandant, 14th Naval District by memorandum that the fire indicated that conditions involving considerable danger existed. While the investigation was proceeding it appeared that a person of Japanese ancestry might be involved, but whether or not charges could be established in this particular case that the organization of loading was such that persons of Japanese ancestry (in spite of many restrictions) were in a position to commit acts that might lead to serious consequences.

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(b) I conferred with representatives of the Army Transport Service, suggesting changes in their loading arrangements such as not loading small lots of miscellaneous cargo with uncertainty as to exact contents in the same hold as explosives and other dangerous cargo. I also suggested that loading operations be removed to other wharves further from the center of the harbor. No particular success has been achieved in these matters due partly to practical difficulties which can only be overcome with considerable change in the methods of planning and handling shipments and in the use of wharf facilities under the control of one agency by another agency. These changes cannot be completed without considerable preliminary work. The officers, on the whole, are cooperative but naturally resist any increase in their present difficulties.

(c) I have had better success in arranging for the unloading of large cargoes of explosives at safer distances from vital facilities. Information not formerly available has become available to me in time to take action before arrival. I have obtained cooperation of Army and civilian authorities in this endeavor.

(d) I have taken some steps to make enforcement of "NO SMOKING" regulations more effective.

(e) I have issued more definite instructions to Coast Guard units regarding communications in event of fire or other waterfront casualty. I have also issued an order to all masters regarding the method of reporting casualties and calling for assistance.

(f) I have reported to the Commandant, 14th Naval District the uncertain status of responsibility of various individuals in the matter of security. (See Reference (d)). This memorandum was prepared after receipt of investigation by the U. S. Naval Intelligence Service.

(g) I have made no other investigation, primarily because of the uncertain status of authority and responsibility, but also because I believe that all efforts should be made to effect changes to prevent similar occurrences in the future rather than to exact penalties or punishments for past mistakes. An investigation may be called within a reasonable time and the possibility of its being called is undoubtedly more effective in obtaining cooperation than an ineffective investigation that closes the matter without result. The complicated issues involved appear to require more competent legal counsel than is available to this office. It is recommended that no investigation be called until these complicated issues be examined by a competent counsel and further that no steps be taken until definite approval of the proper Naval authority is obtained.

12. Approval of my action is requested.

L. B. OLSON.

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