

How The Army Worked To Save San Francisco

Cosmopolitan Magazine, July 1906

By Brigadier General Frederick Funston (U.S.A.)

When first approached by a representative of the *Cosmopolitan* with the request that I prepare a short sketch of the work of the army in maintaining order and in sheltering and feeding the homeless during the first few days of the San Francisco fire, I declined, because of the seeming impropriety of such action, but reconsidered on its being pointed out to me that the public interest in the action of the military authorities in connection with the recent catastrophe was so keen that an authoritative statement from one in a position to be cognizant of all the facts would be most welcome. Few people ever see official reports; but hundreds of thousands read so widely circulated a magazine as the *Cosmopolitan*. This communication, in connection with the fact that the necessary permission has been obtained from the secretary of war, must be my apology.

At the time of the earthquake there were stationed at the military posts on or near San Francisco Bay ten companies of Coast Artillery; the First, Ninth, and Twenty-fourth Batteries of Field Artillery; the entire Twenty-second Regiment of Infantry; Troops I, K, and M, Fourteenth Cavalry; Company B, Hospital Corps--an aggregate of about seventeen hundred men. Of these, two companies of the Twenty-second Infantry and the troops of the Fourteenth Cavalry were temporarily absent on the rifle-range at Point Bonita; but they were soon available for duty, the cavalry being brought to San Francisco.

The headquarters of the Pacific Division and of the Department of California were located in office-buildings in the heart of the city, and the officers on duty thereat lived in the city and not at the army posts near it. Maj.-Gen. A. W. Greely, commanding the Pacific Division, had departed from the city on a visit to his home in Washington only a few days previous to the earthquake, which accounts for the writer, as senior officer, being in command until the return of the division commander.

I was living with my family at 1310 Washington Street, near Jones, one of the most elevated parts of the city, and was awakened by the earthquake shock at 5:16 a.m. on that never-to-be-forgotten eighteenth day of April. The entire street-car system being brought to a standstill by the damage resulting from the shock, I hastened on foot toward the business section of the city for the purpose of ascertaining what damage had been done to the hotels and other large buildings. Arriving at the highest part of California Street, on what is popularly known as "Nob Hill," several columns of smoke were seen rising from the region south of Market Street, with others rising apparently from fires in the banking district. Walking rapidly down California to Sansome, I found that several fires were burning fiercely, and that the city fire-department was helpless, owing to water-mains having been shattered by the earthquake.

I realized then that a great conflagration was inevitable, and that the city police force would not be able to maintain the fire-lines and protect public and private property over the great area affected. It was at once determined to order out all available troops not only for the purpose of guarding federal buildings, but to aid the police- and fire-departments of the city.

Now it was ascertained that the entire telephone system was prostrated and that I must return to first principles in order to get into communication with the commanding officers at the Presidio and Fort Mason, the two army posts most convenient to the city. Several men dashing wildly about in automobiles declined to assist me, for which I indulged in the pious hope that they'd be burned out. So I made my way, running and walking alternately, from Sansome Street to the army stable on Pine, near Hyde, a little more than a mile, where I arrived in so serious a condition that I could scarcely stand. Directing my carriage driver to mount my saddle-horse, I hastily scribbled a note to Col. Charles Morris, Artillery Corps, commanding officer at the Presidio, directing him to report with his entire command to the chief of police at the Hall of Justice on Portsmouth Square, and sent a verbal message of the same import to Capt. M. L. Walker, Corps of Engineers, in command at Fort Mason. The messenger was well mounted and covered the mile to Fort Mason and the three miles to the Presidio at a keen run. Both Colonel Morris and Captain Walker had their commands well in hand and responded with alacrity.

Before leaving Sansome Street I had asked a member of the city police force to inform the chief of police as soon as possible as to the action I contemplated taking.

Leaving the stable, I walked in a leisurely manner to the summit of Nob Hill, only a few blocks distant, whence could be obtained a good view to the south and east across the great city doomed to destruction. The streets were filled with people with anxious faces, all turned toward the dozen or more columns of thick black smoke rising from the densely populated region south of Market Street. The thing that at this time made the greatest impression on me was the strange and unearthly silence. There was no talking, no apparent excitement among the near-by spectators; while from the great city lying at our feet there came not a single sound, no shrieking of whistles, no clanging of bells. The terrific roar of the conflagration, the crash of falling walls, and the dynamite explosions that were to make the next three days hideous, had not yet begun.

It was a beautiful clear morning with no wind, and the sinister column of smoke mounted a thousand feet in the air before they were dissipated. Probably none of the people who watched the imposing spectacle on that occasion would have believed that within thirty-six hours the spot where they stood would be a maelstrom of fire. Walking now to my home, only four blocks distant, I had a cup of coffee and gave a few hasty instructions to my family about packing trunks and leaving the house, so soon to be destroyed. From here it was a walk of fifteen minutes to the Phelan Building, the headquarters of the Department of California, where I found awaiting me several officers of the Pacific Division and the Department of California.

Market Street was full of excited, anxious people watching the progress of the various fires now being merged into one great conflagration. A few moments before seven o'clock there arrived the first detachment of regular troops, the men of the Engineer Corps at Fort Mason. They were greeted with evident good-will by the crowd, and made a fine impression with their full cartridge-belts and fixed bayonets. They had marched from Fort Mason to the Hall of Justice, where they had been reported to the chief of police, and were now being distributed along Market Street, two to each block, with instructions to shoot instantly any person caught looting or committing any serious misdemeanor. Their presence had an instantly reassuring effect on all awe-inspired persons.

It was considered most desirable to bring to the city at once the battalion of the Twenty-second Infantry stationed at Fort McDowell, on Angel Island, in San Francisco Bay. All telegraphic communication being cut off, the large army-tug Slocum was dispatched to that fort with verbal orders to Col. Alfred Reynolds to embark his command at once, land at the foot of Market Street and march to the Phelan Building.

In the meantime, the clerks and messengers who had reported for duty set about saving the records of the department in the offices on the fourth floor. As fast as the records could be brought out they were placed in a wagon for transportation to Fort Mason. About eight o'clock a.m. there came so severe an earthquake shock that I directed that all attempts to save records and papers cease, not deeming them of sufficient importance to risk the lives of a dozen men. Before this time, however, troops from the Presidio began to arrive--cavalry, coast artillery armed and equipped as infantry, and field artillerymen mounted on their battery horses.

Abundant use was found for all the troops at our disposal, for the conflagration with a mile of front was rapidly eating its way into the heart of the city, and the streets were black with tens of thousands of people who were kept at a distance of two blocks from the fire by strong detachments of troops. Before ten o'clock the troops from Forts McDowell and Miley had arrived and there were now on duty about seventeen hundred regulars. They were used in various ways, guarding the people, the Sub-Treasury and the Mint, patrolling the streets to prevent looting, maintaining fire-lines, and taking a hand at the hose wherever there was sufficient water pressure to enable the firemen to accomplish anything.

While not acting under the orders of the officers of the police- and fire-departments, the officers of the troops consulted them and complied with their wishes in every possible way. There was absolutely no friction.

In the meantime, dynamite had been obtained; and then began the series of terrific explosions that was to shake the city for the next few days. The amount of dynamite available in the earlier hours of the day was too small to accomplish much, but a tug was obtained and a number of trips made to the works of the California Powder Company at Pinole, the tug returning each time laden with explosives. I doubt if anyone will ever know the amount of dynamite and guncotton used in blowing up buildings, but it must have been tremendous, as there were times when the explosions were so continuous as to resemble a bombardment.

Most of the work was done under the instructions of Captain Coleman and Lieutenant Briggs, Artillery Corps, U. S. A., who, however, ascertained the wishes of the fire- and police-officials as to the buildings to be destroyed. In this work Lieutenant Pulis of the Artillery Corps was very seriously injured by a premature explosion. While frame and old brick buildings were reduced to piles of rubbish by these explosions, the modern steel and concrete structures remained as impervious to the heaviest charges as they had been to the earthquake.

I had several times during the day been in consultation with Mayor Schmitz and Chief of Police Dinan at the Hall of Justice, which was the headquarters of the city officials until forced out by the approach of the conflagration. At the last one of these conferences it was arranged that during the night the regular troops should patrol the wealthy residence district west of Van Ness Avenue, in order to prevent robbery or disorder by the vast throngs being driven thither by the progress of the fire. For this duty I placed all troops in the city under the command of Col. Charles Morris, Artillery Corps, who established his headquarters in the district to be patrolled.

It is useless to attempt to go into a detailed account of the events of that night of horrors. Four square miles of the city were on fire. The night was as light as day, and the roar of the conflagration, the crash of falling walls, and the continuous explosions made a pandemonium simply indescribable. During the night, the Grant Building, headquarters of the Pacific Division, and the Phelan Building, for so many years headquarters of the Department of California, had gone up in the general holocaust; and the officers on duty in the city assembled and re-established headquarters at Fort Mason, the small and ancient army post on the bay shore, at the north end of Van Ness Avenue.

An account of the events of the succeeding two days would unduly lengthen what is meant to be a brief sketch. Block by block and street by street and hour after hour the firemen, police, and soldiers fought the conflagration, in hope of possible success. Scores of buildings were blown down by dynamite and gun-cotton, and others were set on fire in order to check the conflagration by back-firing. The Pacific Squadron, under command of Admiral Goodrich, arrived from the south and landed several hundred marines and blue-jackets, who rendered excellent service in fighting the fire and patrolling the streets.

During the memorable 18th and 19th every hotel and bank, every large store and nearly every storeroom and wareroom in the city had been destroyed, three hundred thousand people were homeless, and thousands more were left without the means of livelihood.

The rations, tents, and blankets on hand at the army posts adjacent to the city were dealt out to the sufferers with no account of the responsibility involved; and within two days, relief supplies from neighboring states and cities and army supplies from various army posts had begun to arrive and were being distributed under the supervision of Maj. C. A. Devol, depot quartermaster, and Maj. C. R. Krauthoff, depot commissary.

The sick from the city hospitals and many of those injured in the earthquake were sent to the general hospital at the Presidio. The Hearst Relief Corps with a number of well-equipped hospitals, and a complement of physicians and nurses, arrived from Los Angeles and rendered excellent service.

In a few days conditions were as normal as could be expected under the circumstances, and the work of feeding and sheltering the homeless thousands proceeded in a systematic manner.

Through all this terrible disaster, the conduct of the people had been admirable. There was very little panic and no serious disorder. San Francisco had its class of people, no doubt, who would have taken advantage of any opportunity to plunder the banks and rich jewelry and other stores of the city, but the presence of the square-jawed silent men with magazine rifles, fixed bayonets, and with belts full of cartridges restrained them. There was no necessity for the regular troops to shoot anybody and there is no well-authenticated case of a single person having been killed by regular troops.

Two men were shot by the state troops under circumstances with which I am not familiar, and so I am not able to express an opinion, and one prominent citizen was ruthlessly slain by self-constituted vigilantes.

If there is any lesson to be derived from the work of the regular troops in San Francisco, it is that nothing can take the place of training and discipline, and that self-control and patience are as important as courage.