

Earthquake, continued from front page

assistant chief in the San Francisco Fire Department invented the portable water system (more below). Now retired, he lives in Bad Wildbad, Germany.

Marina's Close Call

At 5:04 p.m. on Oct. 17, 1989, the earthquake struck, its epicenter near Loma Prieta peak in the Santa Cruz Mountains, its magnitude 7.1 on the Richter Scale.

The quake demolished the underground water system in the Marina, owing to the district's origin: It had been built on fill for the Panama Pacific Exposition of 1915. Gas from ruptured mains soon ignited. Flames engulfed a three-story apartment house at Divisadero and Beach streets, spreading to adjoining houses. Fire engines were nearly helpless.

"The big high-pressure system all broke up because of the liquefaction of the soil. The shock wave rolled the earth up and snapped the lines," says Dennis Kennedy, marine engineer on the fireboat Phoenix at the Fire Department's Station 35. "The Phoenix supplied water to the portable hydrant system that put the fire out." (More below.)

The fire boat arrived near Scott Street at about 6:20 p.m. Marina residents helped by carrying hoses from the boat to the fire scene two blocks away. Using bay water, the Phoenix pumped for 15 hours at 6,400 gallons per minute until the fire was out. It could have pumped indefinitely.

Phoenix, 89 feet long and 19.5 feet wide, was built in Alameda in 1954 and commissioned in 1955. Normally she has seven crewmen. In 1989 she departed for the Marina from her regular berth at Pier 22½ (Embarcadero at Harrison Street) with only pilot Arvid Havneras, engineer Nate Hardy, and Lt. Bob Banchemo aboard. The regular firefighting crew was on another call.

In 1990 The City bought its second fireboat, built in 1951 in Victoria, BC. A \$300,000 donation by an anonymous couple saved her from becoming scrap, and \$50,000 from the Marina Buddhist organization Shinnyoen California paid for repairs and transportation from Vancouver, BC, to San Francisco. In a children's competition to name the boat, a fireman's son, 6, won with "Guardian."

Loma Prieta took 63 lives (U.S. Geological Survey), 42 of them in the collapse of Oakland's Cypress Freeway. Eleven died in San Francisco, three of them when a building housing about 40

people collapsed at 2 Cervantes St. The victims were Scott Dickinson, 3 months old; Paul J. Harris, 48; and Diane Laufer, 40. Only in the Marina did buildings collapse, at least six of them. All told, the quake damaged about 300 Marina buildings – about one in seven – from lightly to beyond repair.

Although this was not the hardest-hit area in number of casualties, the spectacle of flames shooting perhaps 75 feet in the air on an unusually windless day at Divisadero and Beach caught the news media's attention. And collapsed housing served as a backdrop for national telecasts for several days.

Emergency System

The portable water system developed by Blackburn and the San Francisco Fire Department furnishes water above ground to areas lacking underground water systems.

Five-inch hoses serve as water mains. Portable hydrants substitute for fixed hydrants, permitting the five-inch hoses to be extended for substantial distances and allowing three-inch hoses to be attached; the latter are manageable by firemen in battling fires. Pumper trucks may join the hook-up, as they did in 1989, to replace the pressure lost through friction.

In use by about 1985, the system also helped fight several City industrial fires between 1987 and 1990, the East Bay hills fire in 1992, and forest fires near City water facilities in the Sierra Nevada in 1996.

Used with portable chlorinators and pumps, the system can also supply drinking water. After the civil war in Rwanda, when polluted water supplies led to a catastrophic cholera epidemic among refugees in 1994, Blackburn and eight San Francisco firefighters helped check the epidemic by pumping water from Lake Kivu into Goma, Zaire.

The assistance of the public, carrying hoses from the Marina harbor, showed fire officers the value of civilians in emergencies and spurred the formation of the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team.

NERT is a volunteer group of some 11,500 people who live or work in San Francisco whom the Fire Department trains in preparation for disaster and what to do after disaster strikes. An 18-hour course covers first aid, search-and-rescue techniques, and communications. Since 1998, NERT has helped The City register disabled and senior people needing help in emergencies. NERT relays information to 10 City fire stations in respective "emergency

response districts." Frank Lucier, then with the San Francisco Fire Department, is credited with founding NERT, having developed and taught the first course in 1990 at the request of Marina residents. Neither that emergency team nor the San Francisco Office of Emergency Services could be reached immediately at their listed telephone numbers, raising the question of how either would deal with an emergency without anyone to answer the phone.

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