

History of the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department

1

Section I - Firefighting Fundamentals



History of the Fire Service

History of the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department

San Diego Fire-Rescue Department Fire Chiefs

San Diego Fire-Rescue Department Line of Duty Deaths



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History of the Fire Service

The fire service has a great many traditions. Often these traditions are in conflict with the constant changes required in the fire service to keep up with the task of combating fire in our modern society. Being a firefighter today is much different than being a firefighter in the past. However, just about everything firefighters do to save lives and property is rooted in events from the past. It is imperative that firefighters of today recognize that what they do now will be the process future firefighters will use. The present will eventually become the past.

Fire Fighting Pre -1889

The need for a firefighter was most surely recognized the moment man discovered fire. The earliest recorded document of a firefighter can be traced back to Ancient Egypt during the Biblical times where hand operated pumps were used to extinguish fires. However, it is not known if this type of fire fighting activity was organized or merely a muster of desperate men attempting to save their property.

Through the centuries, organized fire protection or fire brigades slowly began to develop and take shape. In 6 A.D., King Augustus of Rome assembled hundreds of slaves and trained them in the use of bucket brigades, water pumps, poles and hooks to combat fires. The progression of fire fighting techniques was slow and painful due to the lack of technology.

It wasn't until the 1700's during the industrial revolution that improvements really began to take hold. The invention of the steam engine, hose, and fire apparatus all jointly helped take the concept of a fire brigade to a new level.

Benjamin Franklin, [Figure 1-1](#), is often noted as the grandfather of organized fire protection in the United States. In 1736, he formed the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia, an all-volunteer brigade of 30 members, who met eight times a year for training/meetings. Their primary mission was to extinguish flames using buckets and to protect property by removing it in bags during a fire, otherwise known as salvage.

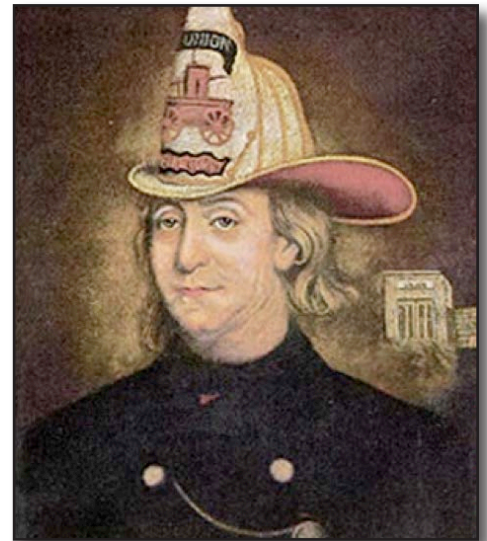


Figure 1-1 Benjamin Franklin



History of the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department

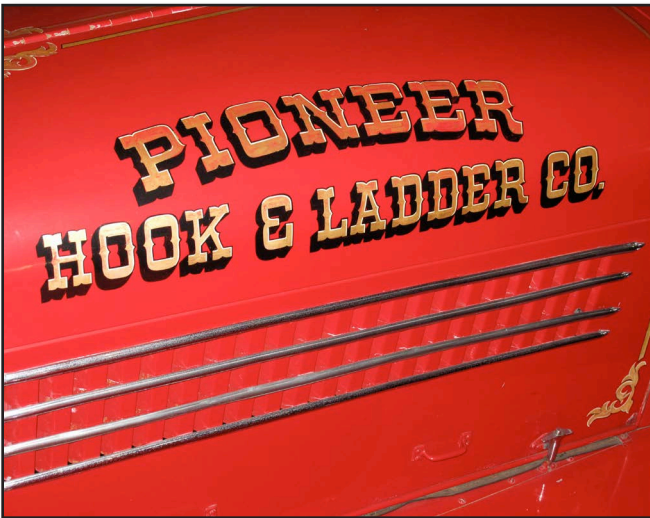


Figure 1-2 Pioneer Hook & Ladder Co.

Fire protection in San Diego first saw light as only volunteer fire companies, several of which were sponsored by local Fire Insurance agencies. On May 17, 1869, the Pioneer Hook & Ladder Company was established with a budget of \$250 and a volunteer staff of 50 people, [Figure 1-2](#). John Valentine Mumford was appointed Fire Chief of this newly organized Fire Department. By 1872, the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company had acquired its first Engine Company, Company 1, for a cost of \$900. Engine Company 1 consisted of a thin, high wheeled, horse drawn wagon with twelve buckets hung over the side for hand-filled bucket brigades.

By 1887, San Diego had two horse drawn steam fire engines, a hose wagon with 3,500 feet of hose, eleven horses and a large fire bell purchased for \$500 (which is currently on display in front of Fire

Station 1). However, up until this point, all fire companies within the city were still volunteer and largely unorganized.

It was only through a series of untimely events that the days of volunteer fire fighting in San Diego would soon come to a close. During the spring, summer and fall of 1888, several disastrous fires occurred in the City of San Diego

- On May 3, a fire burned over half the block bounded by Fifth, Sixth, F and G Streets
- May 26, The San Diego Printing Company was burned
- On June 1, the buildings of Foreman & Stone, on Seventh Street were destroyed by fire
- August 29, a large A-frame building on H Street (Market), between State and Union, was consumed by fire
- On September 5, the new Backesto Block, on the corner of Fifth and H Streets, was destroyed by fire.



In addition to these fires, the City of San Diego saw its population boom from 3,000 in 1880 to 30,000 by 1887. This, coupled with volunteer fire companies which had inadequate and outdated equipment, as well as a lack of training, caused the City to make a change.

The SDFD is Born 1889 to 1900

A new city charter was adopted in the spring of 1889 where a provision was made for the organization of a paid fire department. The control of this department was vested in a board of fire commissioners, appointed by the mayor.

On August 5, 1889, San Diego established a paid, trained and organized fire protection service called the San Diego Fire Department. The newly formed San Diego Fire Department was led by Chief Engineer A.B. Cairnes, [Figure 1-3](#), and consisted of very few staff and minimal resources.

To attract veteran talent from throughout the country, the City Charter was amended to allow payment for the firemen. Extramen (Firemen) received \$10 per month, Foremen received \$12.50 per month and Drivers took home \$75 per month. The top pay of \$100 per month was reserved for Engineers who had the duty of maintaining the fire steamers. As the fire team left its quarters to respond to an alarm, the Engineer would ignite the boiler and then ride on the rear step of the steamer monitoring its condition.

This full time paid department expected firemen to be available 24 hours at a time. The first schedule that was set up required the firemen to work 29 days straight, for 24 hour periods. They were given one hour off for meals per day and one full day off per month. Due to this demanding schedule, the families of these firemen lived in the fire station permanently.

The first ten years of the San Diego Fire Department brought about unique and difficult challenges. Trying to build a professional Fire Department on a shoe string budget was no easy task. Fire Chief A.B. Cairnes however believed strongly in this cause and was determined to progress.

In 1894, seeing a need for larger ladders to rescue occupants out of the increasing number of tall buildings in San Diego, Chief Cairnes (no relation



Figure 1-3 Chief Cairnes

San Diego Fire Department Staff in 1889

1 Chief
2 Engineers
5 Foremen
6 Drivers
28 Extramen aka Firemen

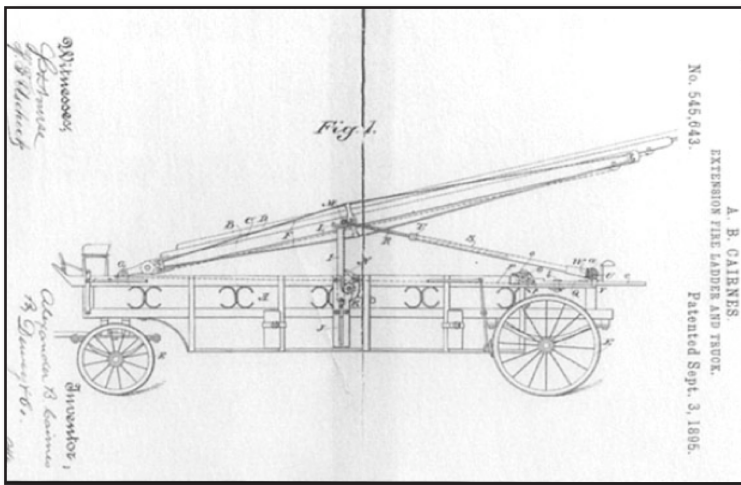
Figure 1-4 Staff in 1889

San Diego Fire Department Resources in 1889

11 Horses
2 Steam Engines
1 Hose Wagon
2 Hose Carts
1 Hook & Ladder
4000 Feet of Hose
1 Fire Bell

All purchased at a cost of \$ 22,576.75

Figure 1-5 Department Resources in 1889



to the Cairns Helmet) invented and patented the first ever aerial ladder which is pictured on the first page of this chapter and, **Figure 1-6**. The sixty foot, two section wooden, horse drawn, aerial ladder was the first of its kind in the United States. Fire departments from all across the country including San Francisco, Chicago and New York purchased this new exciting piece of apparatus from Chief Cairnes. Due to his dedication and love for the fire service, Chief Cairnes used the profits he received from this invention to improve and purchase much needed equipment for his San Diego Fire Department.

Figure 1-6 Chief Cairnes Aerial Ladder

Chief Cairnes remained Fire Chief until 1905, however, his aerial ladder went on to serve the Department for decades

An Uneasy Beginning 1900 to 1910

In 1904, a new era of San Diego fire fighting began with the appearance of the City's first fire hydrants. Firefighters no longer had to draw water from wells and cisterns to extinguish fires.

Leather helmets were also purchased for the Department and a standardized color code was determined. A black helmet with a black shield was issued to Hosemen, Laddermen, Drivers and Engineers. A red helmet with a white shield was given to Foremen (Captains), and a white helmet with a white shield was issued to Chief Officers, **Figure 1-7**. Although these improvements were a step in the right direction, there were still many obstacles to overcome.

1905 - Fire Chief Ray Shute and Eugene Donnelly

In 1905 Ray Shute took the reins from Chief Cairnes as Chief Engineer. Chief Shute had come to the position with experience working for both San Diego and San Francisco Fire Departments.

From the very beginning the Department had struggled with a limited budget, and things had improved very little over the first 15 years. As 1907 rolled around, the Fire Department was riding with short-staffed crews, worn out equipment and using mostly condemned hose. During this same year, the Department made a significant change when it introduced the dormitory system to eliminate the crews' families from living in the fire station which was a constant source of trouble. Coupled with another change of command by a new Chief named Eugene Donnelly, things were turbulent to say the least.



Figure 1-7 SDFD Leather Helmets



1907 - San Diego Fireman's Relief Association

In an attempt to provide some type of benefit to the firefighters and their working-class families, the San Diego Fireman's Relief Association was founded in 1907 with two main goals.

1. To create and maintain a Firemen's Relief Fund for the protection, care and relief of the members of the City Fire Department service who may become disabled by and through such service.
2. To promote fraternal friendship and refined friendship among its members.

Although the establishment of the S.D.F.R.A. was an improvement, by 1909, morale and working conditions in the fire stations were at an all time low.

Enter a young, successful businessman and former member of the Department, Louis Almgren. Chief Almgren would step in to take the helm of a sinking ship and forever change the future of the San Diego Fire Department, [Figure 1-8](#).

A Golden Era of Expansion and Innovation 1910 to 1920

Chief Almgren immediately set to work making changes to the struggling Fire Department. He made a change to the work schedule so that Firemen would now work 12 hour rotating shifts for twenty-eight days in a row with two days off.

Chief Almgren also raised the Department's standards significantly by introducing such sports as boxing and baseball, which promoted physical conditioning. Chief Almgren's theory was that men connected with sports are used to adverse conditions and will have the strength and stamina to continue when the going gets tough.

He also set forth a training and study program in an effort to keep his men alert and to make fire fighting a science. Men were taught the proper use of their equipment in order to reduce damage at fires

1910 - Merit System

Prior to 1910, new Firemen were selected from a pool of men belonging to the Teamsters Union. Chief Almgren introduced the Merit System and established a more equitable means of selecting and promoting personnel. Selection was based upon ability, rather than the number of influential friends the candidate might possess. No longer could the Chief be taken into the back room of a saloon and told whom he was going to promote, an evil with which many an earlier Chief had to contend.



Figure 1-8 Chief Almgren



1910 - American-Hawaiian Company Freighter Fire

It was also in 1910 that San Diego fought its most stubborn fire, the American-Hawaiian Company Freighter Fire. The Freighter S.S. Alaskan was tied up at the Santa Fe wharf and was on fire on June 17th. Longshoremen took the tarp off the Number 4 hatch and raised the cover only to be greeted by a blast of smoke and hot gas. Both the No. 4 and 5 holds were involved when the first fire units arrived. That's when the ship's skipper told them 500 tons of calcium carbide were on board. Water would form lethal acetylene gas. All fire fighting was limited to chemical tanks and hand extinguishers.



Figure 1-9 S.S. Alaskan

After three days, San Diego was running low on bicarbonate of soda and sulfuric acid that was used to slow the fire. The steamship company sent down a carload from Los Angeles. Fire Chief Almgren ordered a shipment of liquid carbonic acid be introduced through holes in the ship plate which finally extinguished the fire.

It took three weeks to put out the freighter fire; the first fire in history to be extinguished using carbon dioxide gas, [Figure 1-9](#).

1913 - Standard Oil Company Fire

A few years later, shortly before noon on Sunday October 5, 1913, a large fire erupted at the Standard Oil Company tank yard on the waterfront. A spark from a passing locomotive was blamed for starting a fire in a 250,000 gallon tank of distillate oil. As the oil burned it threw sparks skyward which rained down on several other tanks nearby. A tank holding 1.5 million gallons of black oil ignited, erupting into a towering ball of flame.

Firefighters were left to do nothing more than spray water on the other tanks to keep them cool. Firefighters were relieved at their hoses and allowed to get something to eat, quickly returning to take their positions again. Spectators gathered as the firefighters tried to keep the black oil from exploding, but the heat eventually caused a third tank, holding 250,000 gallons of gasoline, to explode with such force that it was heard in La Mesa. Steam driven, the burning oil soared into the air and rained down on adjoining lumber yards. Firemen dragged what hose lines they could spare from the Standard Oil yard and re-grouped in the lumber yards.



Figure 1-10 Great Standard Oil Fire

The Fire Department sent out a General Alarm. Spectators on the end of the Standard Oil dock had to be rescued by boats as the pier



October 17, 1917 saw the end of one era, and the beginning of another in the San Diego Fire Department. The last team of Fire Horses were turned over to the City Yards. A sad day for many, it did, however, mark the start of a new age. The San Diego Fire Department was the first large city department on the west coast to be totally mechanized.

Although the horses were gone as far as the Fire Department was concerned, the horses had different ideas. It seems that the City Yards were using the fire horses for a variety of manual hauling duties, including hauling trash and garbage to the City Dumps. An unfortunate, although humorous, situation occurred on December 23, 1917, when one of the horse teams that was being used to pull a wagon load of

trash to a landfill in Golden Hill encountered a fire engine responding to an incident. With the sounding bells and foot crank mechanical siren blaring from the fire engine, a spark of life jumped into the slow moving horses and



caused them to take up their calling and chase after the responding apparatus. This resulted in several blocks of trash strewn about the streets and yards before the terrified driver could pull in the team, and then backtrack and re-collect his load of trash amid the laughter and jeers of the local citizenry.

Jerome Drilling - SDFD Captain - Retired

caught fire. Firefighters battled the flames from Sunday through Tuesday, when crews were finally released, [Figure 1-10](#).

1917 - Mechanization

By 1917, San Diego had become the first major fire department on the West Coast to be totally mechanized. As a result, the last team of fire horses was turned over to the City Yards where they continued their service hauling trash wagons.

In 1917, the San Diego Fire Department made world-wide publicity by using an “aeroplane” and the crew from Station 4 as the first aerial fire fighting unit, [Figure 1-11](#). Ultimately the aircraft did not prove practical, however, but paved the way for continued progression with new ideas throughout the Department.



[Figure 1-11](#) World's First Aerial Fire Fighting Apparatus



Murder in the San Diego Fire Department

Burt Durham was a thin, meek looking man, whose wife and baby lived in a tent on Fourth Street right behind the Fire Station 3. Durham was a sensitive chap, and must have suffered intensely under the robust humor of his cell mates at 3's. Finally, he had got to the point where he had had it. He turned in his badges and walked off the job in early 1910

On the night of July 31, 1910, the crew at 3's were catching up on much needed sleep due to a 3rd alarm fire the night before in the Sherwin Williams Paint Store downtown. At 12:55 a.m. the alarm sounded for Box 72, Second and Spruce Streets. Captain Pete Sampsell climbed up onto the Hose Wagon seated beside Guy Elliot, the Driver, and the team went clattering out onto Fifth Avenue turning north toward Spruce Street three blocks away. Behind them came the Steamer with Driver Len Wood and Engineer Don Grant.

In a minute or so, they were at Second and Spruce, and no sight of any fire. As Captain Sampsell climbed down to go to the box, a man stepped out of the shadows and called. "Is that you Pete?" As the Captain answered, he heard

"Then you're the S.O.B. I want." Raising a revolver, he fired three shots. He missed Captain Sampsell, but got Elliot through the right arm. Another of the shots, as they would soon learn, had far more tragic results. The team turned and started running north on Second Avenue. "Get away Len" Sampsell shouted. He had recognized the gunman; it was Burt Durham. Captain Sampsell started running east on Spruce Street to warn 5's and the Flying Squadron out of 1's who he knew would be answering the alarm. Sampsell got to 5th and Spruce where he met Chief Almgren and told him what had happened, when Durham suddenly appeared from the shadows. Another shot was fired and struck Captain Sampsell in the abdomen. The hosemen dropped off and loaded him into the hose bed and rushed him up to old Saint Josephs Hospital on University Avenue.

At Fifth and Spruce, Chief Almgren, unarmed, faced Durham who was still brandishing the revolver. Then Durham muttered something like "kill myself, tell my wife," and vanished into the shadows. They decided to return to the box at Second and Spruce, thinking he



Figure 1-12 Fire Boat Bill Kettner

In 1919, San Diego Fire Department made history once again by building the first gasoline powered fire boat in the world. This boat, named the "Bill Kettner" was built by the Firemen assigned to Station 6, which is now the Fire House Museum, [Figure 1-12](#). The fire boat had the ability to pump ten powerful hose streams and had two deck guns.

This decade also brought about several firsts for minorities in the San Diego Fire Department. In July of 1918, Alfredo Salazar became the first Mexican-American Fireman hired by the Department. One year later, history was made again by Timothy Augustus Williams, who became the first Black Fireman for the SDFD.



might have returned there. When they arrived, sure enough there was a body huddled in the street. The body however wasn't Durham, it was Don Grant, shot through the heart.

Police, Deputy Sheriffs, and Firemen, spread all over town looking for Durham. It seemed that his new place of residence was unknown since abandoning the tent behind 3's. Later that night, crews at 1's noticed a man running west on D Street (Broadway). A few minutes later, they saw a light come on in a darkened room in the Merchants Hotel, and then go out again. About that time, Police Chief Keno Wilson and Detective Captain Joe Myers drove up, and the two Firemen told them of what they saw.

The two Officers went to the hotel and awoke the night clerk. He said the room at the end of the hall was occupied by a man named Durham, his wife and child. Wilson and Myers went to the room and knocked on the door. There was no answer, so they kicked it in and entered the room. On the bed were Mrs. Durham and her child, beaten to death with a piece of steel wrapped in cloth.

The manhunt now extended to Tijuana, Del Mar and La Mesa. At 7:00 a.m. the following morning, Len Wood was relieved for breakfast and went downtown to eat. As he got off the streetcar at Fifth and D, he saw Durham down toward Fourth Avenue walking towards the Plaza. The Conductor of the Street Car had also recognized the fugitive and motioned to a Policeman, who with Woods, started after him. Durham paused, bought a paper from a newsboy and quickly scanned page one; it was all about him and what he had done. Durham, clutching the paper in one hand, stepped into the Plaza and fired his last shot into his brain, dying instantly.

For years, Captain Sampsell's helmet was kept in a little museum at 5's, until one night when it was used for decoration for the Fireman's Ball. Unfortunately, this would be the same night that the Civic Auditorium burned to the ground, thus also went the Helmet.

A plaque hangs in Fire Station 3 in honor of Captain Pete Sampsell and Engineer Don Grant.

Jerome Drilling - SDFD Captain - Retired

Another milestone for the Firefighters of the San Diego Fire Department occurred in August of 1919. San Diego Firefighters Local 145 was established as the official union for representation.

Line of Duty Deaths

Unfortunately during this ten year period of milestones and progression, the San Diego Fire Department also incurred its first line of duty deaths. In 1910, Captain Pete Sampsell and Engineer Don Grant from Engine 5, stationed at 5th Avenue and Palm (building still standing), after responding to a fire alarm, were murdered by a former disgruntled firefighter named Burt Durham.



A few years later in 1918, Probationary Firefighter Ray Gundlach was killed by a structure collapse while battling a fire at the Steele Packing Company downtown. Firefighter Gundlach had only been on the job for twenty days. A memorial plaque hangs in the apparatus bay of Fire Station 4 in his honor.

Continued Fires, Progress, and a Legend Retires 1920 to 1950

1921 saw the installation of the two platoon system for San Diego Firefighters. This was an asset to fire safety and it doubled the fire fighting force.

In November 1925 a 3 Alarm fire broke out at the San Diego Civic Auditorium in Balboa Park. At the time of the fire it just so happened that the Annual Fireman's Ball was being held there and 500 feet of new 2 ½ inch hose that was being used for decoration was destroyed along with the structure. The Relief Association was required to purchase the new replacement hose for the Department as the 2½ inch hose that burned was on loan.



Figure 1-13 Brunswig Drug Company Fire

1925 - Brunswig Drug Company Fire

The fire in the Brunswig Drug Company at 5th & J Streets was believed to have started in the alcohol storage area in the basement. Five firefighters were injured and several suffered severe lung irritation battling the fire. The third-alarm fire took three hours to contain and losses were estimated at \$100,000, [Figure 1-13](#).

1929 - Depression

The Fire Department acquired a new central fire alarm station in June of 1929, and generally speaking, good conditions prevailed into 1930. There were 206 Fire Department members and 32 pieces

of fire equipment, assigned to 20 stations.

In 1931, San Diego and the Department played host to the annual convention of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the Pacific Coast Association of Fire Chiefs, and the International Firefighters Association.

By 1933, the Department, as did the city itself, felt the full effects of the depression. Three fire stations were closed (Stations 3, 10, and 12). Equipment was curtailed, new personnel was reduced, many members were retired, and the remaining members were placed on a part time basis. Although the tough economic times prevailed, good editorials and the threat of higher insurance rates helped get the Department back to normal by 1935.

1935 - Chief Almgren Retires

The San Diego Fire Department had been turned around and led by a well respected and progressive leader. It had gone from an aimless or-



ganization with little resources and support to a refined Department with long-term goals. In 1935 Chief Louis Almgren was forced to retire due to ill health after 26 years of meritorious service. Chief Almgren will be remembered for putting the San Diego Fire Department on a path of high professionalism and performance, a path traveled by those who have followed him.

His successor, Chief John Parrish, would surely have big shoes to fill during his twelve-year tenure, [Figure 1-14](#).

1936 Whitney Department Store Fire

The Whitney Department Store Fire of October 21, 1936, was “just the kind of fire where everyone could have a ringside seat.” Three miles of hose in 35 lines were used to fight the blaze that engulfed an entire city block on 5th and 6th Avenues between Broadway and E St. It was the biggest fire to date for the San Diego Fire Department, [Figure 1-15](#).

In March of 1937, the merit system introduced by Almgren years earlier was formally adopted by ordinance. Additionally, new requirements were established for individuals wanting to join the San Diego Fire Department. New fire recruits had to meet the following requirements:

- Citizen of San Diego
- Not less than 5’7” tall
- Not less than 150 lbs stripped
- Pass physical exam

It was also in 1937 that Chief Parrish originated the Fire Company Run Cards. Several fire stations such as 15’s and 28’s still have the wooden box/drawer mounted to the wall on the apparatus bay floor where these were stored, [Figure 1-16](#).

1942 - Wildland Interface

During WWII, San Diego saw a major boom in population and building construction. Homes were being built on canyon rims throughout the City and were fast becoming a fire problem. In July of 1942, nine buildings on the rim of Mission Valley were badly damaged or destroyed by fire. Again, in September of 1944, forty buildings along the rim of the 30th Street canyon were damaged by a wildland fire.

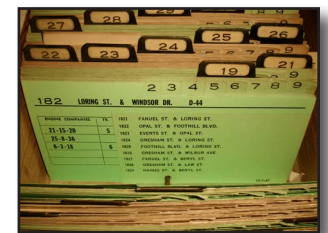
In July of 1943 Fire Station 14 was established as the new Training Facility for newly hired firefighters.



[Figure 1-14](#) Fire Chief John Parrish



[Figure 1-15](#) Whitney Department Store Fire



[Figure 1-16](#)
Fire Run Cards



Figure 1-17
Fire Chief George Courser

1947 - Fire Chief George Courser

After 12 years as Fire Chief, John Parrish turned over the Department to George Courser on April 18, 1947, [Figure 1-17](#). Although he was taking over a department which had recently lost a score of its veterans through a mass retirement because of a pension change, Chief Courser assumed the responsibilities of office with 33 years experience and many progressive ideas.

It was this same month that Chief Courser placed a third battalion into service.

- Battalion 1 - Headquartered at Fire Station 1 at Second and E St.
- Battalion 2 - Headquartered at Fire Station 14 at 32nd and Lincoln
- Battalion 3 - Headquartered at Fire Station 15 at Voltaire and Ebers

1948 - Fire Patrol Boat

San Diego received a Police and Fire Patrol Boat in August of 1948 named in honor of former Fire Chief Louis Almgren. The boat was equipped with twin engines, high-pressure pump and nozzles, CO2 Extinguishers, two-way radios, and life saving devices. The *Chief Almgren* was manned 24 hours a day by a crew of two firemen. Besides fire fighting and life saving, their duties included patrolling the bay, yacht basin, sport fishing docks and commercial fishing piers, [Media 1-1](#).



Media 1-1
Patrol Boat Launch

1948 - Goodrich Surplus Store Fire

On the night of September 8, 1948, a third alarm fire in the basement of the Goodrich Surplus Store at 6th and Market Streets injured ten firefighters. The store occupied the ground floor of the Victory Hotel with guests staying on the second and third floors. Upon arrival, the first alarm units found a high concentration of heat and smoke in the store; the fire was progressing to the hotel upstairs.

The firefighters knew they had to concentrate their efforts on rescuing hotel guests before any attempts at a direct attack could be made on the fire. All residents were rescued and evacuated. As Truck Company 1 and Engine Company 6 began going in to the basement, a back draft occurred and the men were blown out into the street. One firefighter's helmet was found across the street. Fire Chief George Courser was injured but refused treatment and remained on the scene. The estimated fire loss was \$200,000.

Again in late 1948, disaster struck when a tank truck overturned at the intersection of Kettner Blvd. and Harbor Dr. The truck was carrying two-thousand gallons of ethyl gasoline and erupted into flames. While attempting to extinguish the fire, twelve firemen were engulfed in the flames and burned, including FF P.D. Thompson and three others who suffered serious burns, [Figure 1-18](#).



Figure 1-18
Firefighter P.D. Thompson



Post-War Growth and Fallen Firefighters 1950 to 1970

During the administration of Fire Chief Courser, San Diego enjoyed great post-war growth and the Department expanded to serve this growth. By 1956, the Department had 26 Engine Companies, 2 Truck Companies, 1 Fire Boat, 1 Patrol Boat, 25 Fire Stations and 416 Firefighters. They worked a 63 hour workweek schedule. Staff positions were also added, including a Training Officer and various Assistant Chiefs to aid in the training and administration of this “major city” fire department.

In 1951, Fire Chief Courser set forth another milestone for the Fire Department. At a time in our history of high racial tension across the country, Chief Courser issued a standing order that integrated the Department. Prior to this, the African American firefighters were only permitted to work at station 19 at 36th and Ocean View Blvd. (Original building still standing) [Media 1-2](#). Chief Courser stated, “you will work side by side each other as one, if there was any man not willing to abide by this order then they should quit.” This change in Department policy would lead to fairer and more competitive promotional process for minorities on the job.

1953 - Arts and Crafts Press Fire

On Easter Sunday in 1953, downtown units responded to a 3 alarm structure fire at the Arts and Crafts Press Company on 3rd and Ash St. Unfortunately, this incident would result in another line of duty death for the Department. Lieutenant Willard H. Tompkins, of Engine 6, died from a heart attack while fighting the structure fire, [Figure 1-19](#). Two other firefighters were also injured.

1955 - Burnett Furniture Company

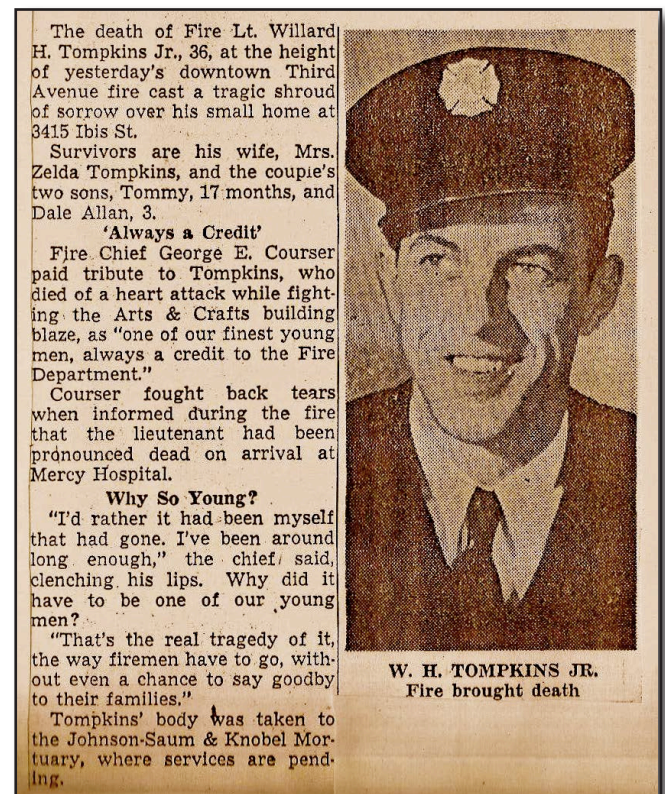
San Diego’s first million dollar fire erupted on January 3, 1955. The third alarm fire at the Burnett Furniture Company at 7th and University was fought by more than 100 San Diego firefighters. Several firefighters were injured and overcome by smoke, including the Assistant Fire Chief. At the height of the fire, Chief George Courser ordered three crews off the southwest corner of the roof. The Chief was the last to leave and the roof partially collapsed just as he jumped off.

1956 - Fourth Alarm Kensington Fire

During the middle of the century, San Diego had seen an enormous boom in population and an



[Media 1-2](#)
“The Men of Station 19”



[Figure 1-19](#) Lt. Willard Tompkins



Figure 1-20 5 Alarm Canyon Fire

expansion of neighborhoods. The many miles of empty canyon land that sprawled throughout the city were beginning to become lined with housing projects and businesses. This new era of expansion brought forth a new type of hazard and challenge for firefighters. Wildland Interface Fire fighting had been born.

A brush and grass fire swept through a canyon in the Kensington Park area in the afternoon of September 14, 1956. Firefighters responded to a call from the 3500 block of War Road and the first engine reported a rapidly moving fire racing up the canyon walls and threatening homes along the canyon. It took 6 hours and 27 minutes to smother the flames. Twenty-five homes were damaged and 19 firefighters were treated for injuries.

1957- San Diego's First 5 Alarm Fire

On September 27, 1957, a five alarm canyon fire swept through the Hillcrest area. At the time, it was the largest fire San Diego had ever seen. 19 fire companies responded to the fire, which resulted in the loss of only two homes. Seven others houses were damaged, [Figure 1-20](#).

1960 - Tragedy Strikes Again

On June 28th 1960, the San Diego Fire Department lost yet another firefighter. Lt. Burton Rogers died of a heart attack while loading equipment after a grass fire.

It was also in this same year when Fire Chief Courser retired after 46 years of meritorious service to the SDFD. His replacement would be Chief Ray Shukraft,

[Figure 1-21](#).



Figure 1-21 Fire Chief Shukraft



Figure 1-22 First Women Hired by SDFD

On February 1966, the Fire Department was struck once again by the loss of one of their own during the line of duty. Engineer Roger Saum died of a heart attack while fighting a fire in Logan Heights.

1969 - Change in Work Schedule

Due to the ever-increasing workload and responses being fielded by San Diego Firefighters, a need for more personnel was warranted. In July of 1969 the implementation of the 56-hour workweek and the three-platoon schedule as we know it today was implemented. This new schedule resulted in an expansion of the Fire Department staff by approximately one-third, thus creating "C" Division.



Women Join the Ranks and Arson Strikes 1970 to 1980

1970 - Laguna Boulder Creek Fire

During September of 1970, the largest fire in San Diego County History at that time, the Laguna Boulder Creek Fire, destroyed 382 homes and 1200 other structures. The Laguna Fire, also known as the Kitchen Creek Fire, was started by downed power lines during a Santa Ana wind event in the Laguna Mountains. Although the fire did not reach San Diego City limits, it devastated the communities of Harbison Canyon and Crest, killing eight people.

1974 - Women Join the S.D.F.D.

In August of 1974, the San Diego Fire Department hired the first five female Firefighters in the Department's history. After a lengthy and controversial six week probationary training period, an assessment by the Training Officers was made. It was determined that these five women had failed to meet the physical requirements of the Academy phase of training. Subsequently all five were fired, [Figure 1-22](#).

In September of 1977, the Department hired another female Firefighter by the name of Lonnie Kitch. Firefighter Kitch was successful during her training and probationary period and went on to serve 31 years for the Department, retiring in 2008 in the rank of Fire Engineer.

1973 - Brothers United

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and the increasing number of African American firefighters on the San Diego Fire Department, Brothers United was formed in 1973. Their primary mission statement is to provide service to the San Diego Community by means of pre-hire classes, student mentoring, community activism, scholarship assistance and charitable contributions. Of the four founding fathers, two, Robert Osby and John Delotch, would later go on to serve as Fire Chief during the 80's and 90's.

1978 - Arsonist Strikes Balboa Park

At 8:13 p.m. on February 22, 1978, the San Diego Fire Department responded to one of the city's most spectacular fires. The Electric Building in Balboa Park burned to the ground in a third-alarm fire, [Figure 1-23](#). The Electric Building housed the Aerospace Museum and contained vintage airplanes, mementos and artifacts. San Diego's contributions to the history of aviation and manned flight dating from the construction of Charles Lindbergh's



Figure 1-23 Aerospace Museum



1978 PSA Disaster



Monday, September 25, 1978, found San Diego in the midst of hot, dry, Santa Ana winds that blew in from the desert at 10 miles per hour, drying out everything in its path.

At 0900 hours it was clear, with temperatures already near 100 degrees and humidity down to 18 percent.

Personnel from Engine Company 14 were participating in their jogging program in the North Park area when they heard a loud noise. Looking up they saw what appeared to be an engine dropping from a 727 jet airliner. What they saw were the remains of a Cessna 172 with two persons aboard that had just collided with PSA. Flight 182.

The 727 was flying 3000 feet above a heavily populated residential area with 136 aboard. The collision damaged the right wing and fire ensued. The Cessna fell straight down, while the 727 started a steep right banking turn on approach to Lindbergh Field.

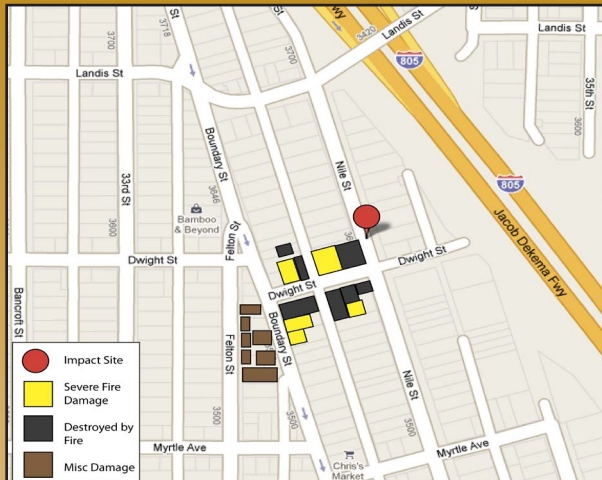
While responding, Engine 14 radioed an approximate location of the crash scene. There was a delay of about three minutes in dispatching a full response because of the lack of a good location. Calls were received from throughout

the city, fixing the crash site as far as ten miles from the actual crash scene.

When Engine 14 arrived at the scene it found an entire two-block area in a residential section totally involved in flames. About 12 houses were involved in fire that had been drenched by aviation fuel. Power lines were burning, a fire hydrant had been sheared off and a six-inch water main was ruptured. Bodies and debris were thrown over several blocks.

It was soon realized that all victims of the airliner had died on impact. Had the plane made a flat, gliding crash instead of crashing at an angle of approximately 60 to 70 degrees, the situation faced by the Fire Department would have been devastating. As it was, all that could be attempted was to keep the fire confined and evacuate homes not destroyed. To the firefighters at the scene it was unbelievable that this huge crash and fire were confined to such a small area.

As it was, the fire crews, working at maximum output under heavy, hot protective clothing with the temperature over 100 degrees, were able to stop the spread of fire before allowing themselves a much needed rest. Many were treated on the spot for heat exhaustion, with



some requiring hospitalization. Helicopters overhead made radio communications impossible and their prop wash drove the stench and smoke down to those on the ground. Onlookers quickly blocked the streets, making it impossible to get fire equipment and ambulances to the scene and making it necessary to lay hose lines by hand in a hard, time consuming job.

The fire was brought under control in an hour. Mop-up, overhaul, and cooling the scene down took more time. Then came the grizzly job of digging out and locating bodies and parts of bodies. These were found in yards, streets, on roofs, in trees, in attics of houses and within the structures themselves.

The collision, the worst in U.S. history at the time, occurred at 0902 hours. The last company left the scene at 1900 hours on the same day of the crash. One hundred and nineteen suppression personnel, 18 staff personnel, an unknown number of off-duty personnel, and 36 pieces of equipment responded.

Mutual-aid companies from throughout Southern California responded to fill our empty sta-

tions. During the height of the fire, 60 percent of the city's fire force was committed. Ten, 2 ½" hose lines totaling 7,450 feet, and five, 1 ½" hand lines totaling 900 feet were used.

Twenty-two residences were damaged and twelve were destroyed. One hundred and fifty died, 135 on the jetliner, 2 on the Cessna and 13 on the ground. Six San Diego Firefighters were injured. Fire Communications, with three dispatchers, handled 1,500 phone calls during the ensuing six hours.

A unique, non-physical injury that occurred after the scene had been cleared soon became apparent in a number of firefighters. The problem was a deep mental anguish caused by exposure to the carnage and having to deal with it.

The San Diego Firefighters responded to the challenge and handled the emergency with a minimum of instruction, great self control and personal sacrifice. They saw a job to be done and did it very well

By Chief G. Easton & Homer Clance



Click here to listen to Captain John R. Allen (retired) from Engine 14 give a first hand account of the incident



“Spirit of St. Louis” by San Diego’s Ryan Aircraft Company, to rocks taken from the surface of the moon were destroyed. A valiant attempt by the first and second alarm companies to rescue artifacts and display cases from the building was in vain as fire broke through the ceiling and drove them outside. The fire was caused by arson. There was little to be done to save the 62 year old structure, which was made of wood and contained no sprinkler system.

March 8, two weeks after the Aerospace Museum fire, an arsonist struck again. Again it was a third alarm fire that destroyed San Diego’s famous Old Globe Theatre. The loss estimate in the destruction of the 43 year old building was \$4 million.

1978 - Another Tragedy and Near Miss

On March 21, 1978, Engineer Charles Kinnel, from Engine Company 5, was killed by a hit and run driver on Texas Street while performing emergency operations at the scene of a traffic accident. Engine 5 carried his coffin, followed by hundreds of his fellow firefighters, to his final resting place at Greenwood Memorial Park.

Shortly thereafter, on April 30, 1978, at a 3 alarm fire in a modern shopping center complex on Clairemont Mesa Blvd., the building’s roof collapsed trapping eight firefighters beneath. Fortunately, they were all pulled to safety by other firefighters, policemen, and bystanders who lifted the collapsed overhang off of them. A little more than 24 hours later, a 2 alarm fire at a Pioneer Chicken restaurant on El Cajon Blvd. resulted in another truss type roof collapse. Luckily, no firefighters became trapped. These incidents highlighted the new dangers that modern building construction have added to the potential hazards for firefighters.

1978 - PSA Disaster

A mid-air collision of a Cessna 172 and a Pacific Southwest Airlines (PSA) Boeing 727 brought both planes crashing into a North Park neighborhood near the streets of Dwight and Nile on September 25, 1978, Figure 1-24. One hundred and forty-four lives were lost including seven people on the ground and the two people in the Cessna. More than twenty residences were damaged or destroyed. At the time, it was the worst air disaster in U. S. history. The fire went to four alarms, committing 60% of the on-duty force of the Department as well as several outside agencies. Doves of off-duty firefighters voluntarily reported back to their assigned stations or to the crash scene to help where they could.



Figure 1-24 PSA Crash



1979 - Paramedic Service Comes to San Diego

Historically, ambulance service to the citizens of San Diego had been provided by the Police Department. There was very little emergency medical training for these officers and even less pre-hospital care given to their patients. It was not uncommon for one of these ambulances to pick up multiple patients from several locations on their way to the hospital. In February of 1979, a new level of pre-hospital care was organized and Paramedic service began for the City of San Diego. This new and improved level of emergency care was provided by the Medevac Corporation. There were only three Paramedic units that were originally placed in the City, Medic-1, Medic-12, and Medic-17, [Figure 1-25](#).

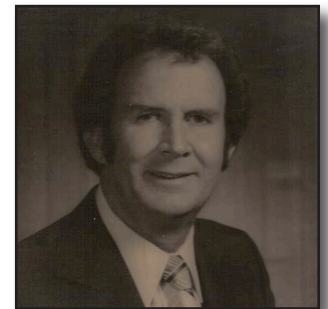


[Figure 1-25 Medevac](#)

1979 - Chief Earl Roberts

Fire Chief Earle Roberts took the reins of the San Diego Fire Department in October of 1979, [Figure 1-26](#). Chief Roberts, who actually started his career as a firefighter here with San Diego in 1957, came from the Phoenix Fire Department with 21 years experience. His first priority was to address several problem areas which included hiring, promotions, morale, and discipline. His arrival marked the first time the Department had monthly open dialogue and job wide discussions to address the Department's issues.

Chief Roberts also started the EMT program and the countywide dispatch concept which connects outside agencies to San Diego via mutual aid and automatic aid. He introduced the "open door" policy; anyone could come and talk to him about anything at any time. He also implemented a wildland fire fighting specialty unit to combat the ever increasing dangers of wildland fires in the interface and changed the Fire Department's staffing policy by upgrading all Engine and Truck Companies from three to four firefighters.



[Figure 1-26 Chief Earle Roberts](#)

1980 to 1990

July 1980 through August 1981, the SDFD trained and graduated all of its personnel as EMT's. This marked the start of a new modern day image as a fire department. No longer would we just respond to fires and rescues, but medical aid responses would soon steer our Department down a new but necessary path.

This new service brought a new challenge for the Department as the number and scope of emergencies greatly increased. With a booming City and the addition of medical aid calls to our response repertoire, our response volume doubled in one year.

1980 also brought about a series of fires on San Diego's waterfront. In January, the tuna seiner *Mariner* sustained over \$500,000 damage and a private yacht, a 72 foot *Sundancer*, was destroyed with a loss of \$435,000. A few months later in April, yet another tuna seiner burned at a loss of \$750,000.



1981 - 6 Alarm Fire in La Jolla

The year 1981 saw San Diego’s first sixth alarm fire in a La Jolla condominium complex under construction, where a tar pot was overturned inside the complex. A delay in the alarm was a result of workers attempting to put out the fire by beating it with their shirts. The loss on this twenty-one engine, seven truck company fire was five million dollars.

MAJOR FIRES OF 1980 & 1981	
Tuna Boat Mariner	\$500,000
72' Private Yacht	\$435,000
Tuna Boat	\$750,000
Elgar Magnetics Corp.	\$2,000,000
Wiping Rags Company	\$500,000
Salvation Army	\$1,000,000
Clairemont Library	\$450,000
Chart House Restaurant	\$350,000
Imperial Tower	\$350,000
Blood Bank	\$1,000,000
O’Sullivan Square	\$2,000,000
First Presbyterian Church	\$2,000,000
La Jolla Condominium	\$5,000,000

In addition to the condominium fire in La Jolla, fires at the Chart House Restaurant, Imperial Tower, Blood Bank and First Presbyterian Church set our fire loss at an all time high. When combined with numerous brush fires, a major tanker truck blaze in June on a South Bay freeway, an explosion fire that killed three in a naval bunker on Point Loma and a sharp increase in residential fires, San Diego totaled a 27 million dollar fire loss for fiscal year 1980, Figure 1-27.

1980 - Metro Arson Strike Team

More alarming than the rise in fire loss was the dramatic increase in arson-related incidents which was quickly becoming an epidemic in all major cities in the country. To fight this insidious crime, San Diego employed a unique team of firefighter investigators and police specialists known as the Metro Arson Strike Team. Since June of 1980, MAST has waged a war on arsonists with dramatic

results reflected by arrests and convictions.

1980 - Improvements and Changes

Major changes to our Department accompanied the early 1980’s. Firefighters’ clothing and equipment underwent several changes during 1980. The Department’s work uniform was upgraded to the OSHA-required Nomex pants and safety shoes, and added to the work uniform was a light blue uniform shirt which replaced the old grey “bus driver” type. A navy blue T-shirt with the lettering San Diego Fire Department emblazoned on the back was also added. Turnout gear was updated as well with better helmets, Nomex hoods, and a breathing apparatus with a positive pressure design. A new policy also accompanied this equipment stating full protective equipment shall be worn on the fire ground. Additionally, radio communication on the airways using “10 code” was replaced by clear text

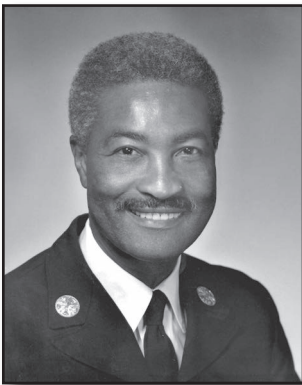


Figure 1-28 Fire Chief John Delotch

1984 - Another Leadership Change

In February of 1984, Chief Roberts retired. Under the direction of Chief Roberts we enjoyed the most significant changes in our overall system of organization and our mission in the fire service in modern times. He was innovative in



his thinking, and was creative in his design, and can truly be congratulated for his enthusiasm and approach to our profession.

To fill the shoes of Chief Roberts, was Roger C. Phillips, who began his career with the Department in 1955 and led the Department for one year until 1985, when he turned over the position to Fire Chief John Delotch, [Figure 1-28](#). Chief Delotch became the first black Fire Chief in the history of the San Diego Fire Department. Under his direction, the Department committed minorities to command positions, including Battalion Chief, Assistant Fire Marshall, and Captain. Among Chief Delotch's many contributions to the Department, it was he who placed a new emphasis on the Incident Command System and introduced the EMT-D certification to firefighters. The EMT-D program was the first in the nation where First Responders had the ability to assess and defibrillate a person in cardiac arrest prior to the arrival of Paramedics.



[Figure 1-29 1985 Normal Heights Fire](#)

1985 - Normal Heights Fire

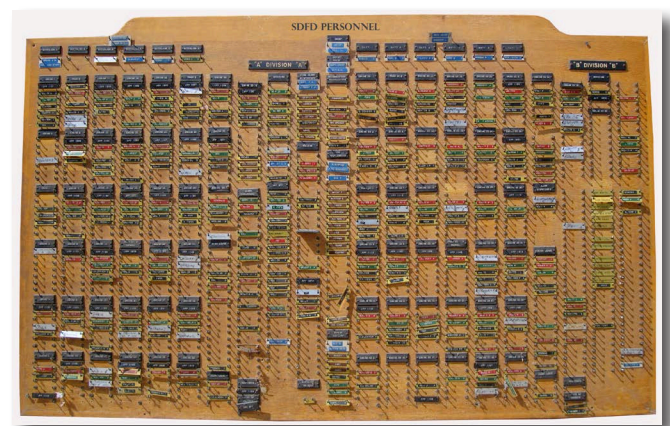
In June of 1985, a fire fueled by heavy brush and strong winds raced up a series of Mission Valley canyons, [Figure 1-29](#). The Normal Heights Fire destroyed 76 houses and damaged 57 others. Heavy brush in the canyons and around the houses on the canyon rim propelled the fire. Firefighters eventually overcame the flames despite problems with low water pressure from fire hydrants. Damage was set at \$9 million. The Normal Heights Fire pushed the City of San Diego to establish several initiatives including a weed and brush abatement program, an educational campaign for canyon rim residents and a plan to improve water pressure in the Mid-City area.

End of the Century 1990 to 2000

The early 1990's brought more change and improvements to the Department. Due to the increased demand for service by the Department, a new communications center had become necessary. In 1990, the Fire Communication Center was moved from the basement of Fire Station 1 to a new state of the art facility located at Kearny Villa Rd. and Aero Drive next to Fire Station 28.

Another service provided at Station 1 had been the administrative duty of daily staffing. The "transfer desk" (staffing desk) was relocated to its current location at the Airport Fire Station, [Figure 1-30](#).

In another move to increase efficiency and reduce duplication of work, the Explosive Device Team was integrated into the Metro Arson Strike Team in 1991.



[Figure 1-30 Staffing Board](#)



1992 - Fire Chief Robert Osby

Robert Osby, who was a long-standing member since joining the SDFD in 1959, took the position of Fire Chief in 1992. Chief Osby was one of the founding fathers of the Brothers United Organization in 1973 and went on to serve and lead the Department for a total of 43 years.

1992 - USAR & Firefighter/Paramedics

In 1992, the San Diego Fire Department was designated as the sponsoring agency for San Diego County’s newly formed Urban Search and Rescue Task Force 8. It was also during this year when San Diego established a First Responder Paramedic-Engine program.

By 1993, the Department had 15 fire engines designated as “Medic-Engines” utilizing a Firefighter/Paramedic. These 15 engine companies were selected based on their run volume and the extended response times by ambulances to their districts. The success of the Firefighter/Paramedic program soon became evident and set the groundwork for the future of the Department.

1992 - Communication Upgrades

To further enhance our communication and dispatch system, Mobile Data Terminals and Automatic Vehicle Location systems were installed in all fire and paramedic units, [Figure 1-31](#). The Department also implemented the 800

MHz radio which interfaced to a Computer Aided Dispatch system. These upgrades allowed the dispatcher to select the closest available emergency response unit to respond to an incident, which allowed for improved response times citywide. Prior to this, units were dispatched to emergencies based upon whether the address of the emergency fell into their pre-designated district.



Figure 1-31 Mobile Data Terminals

1994 - New Training Facility

It was also during this time that the City and Department executed a lease with the U.S. Navy at the Camp Nimitz Naval Training Center in Point Loma. Due to the closure of the facility by the Navy, the Fire Department was able to establish its new training facility on the site. Prior to this, training was administered and conducted at numerous sites including Headquarters, Station 28, and Miramar College.

1997 - Death of Engineer Joseph Estavillo

In August 1997, the San Diego Fire Department lost another firefighter in the line of duty. Engineer Joseph Estavillo, while fighting a brush fire in rural San Diego County, contracted a flesh-eating bacteria through a cut on his arm.



Within three days, Engineer Estavillo was dead at the age of 44. A memorial hangs in his honor at Fire Station 11, where he worked on A division.

1998 - Major Changes for SDFD

By 1998, sweeping change had come to the San Diego Fire Department. Due to restructuring of City Services, the Lifeguard service was moved under the direction of the Fire Chief. Combined with the ever-widening job description of the fire service, the San Diego Fire Department was renamed to San Diego Fire and Life Safety Services. This clumsy new name was not warmly welcomed by members who preferred the SDFD which had stood for over 100 years.

Additionally, a new controversial, yet one of a kind, EMS system had been created, [Figure 1-32](#). This new system was known as the San Diego Medical Services Enterprise. It was a Limited Liability Corporation formed by the Rural Metro Corporation and San Diego Fire and Life Safety Services, [Figure 1-33](#). Named the San Diego Medical Services Enterprise, or SDMSE, it was a Paramedic ambulance system that was staffed by San Diego Fire Paramedics and EMT's as well as Rural Metro Paramedics and EMT's.

Prior to 1997, all ALS ambulances were staffed with two Paramedics. This new system called for one Paramedic and one EMT on each ALS ambulance. In order to meet the County requirement for having two Paramedics at the scene of all emergencies, all Fire Engines in the City were staffed with one Firefighter/Paramedic. This change in staffing requirements led to a massive hiring effort to train Paramedics as Firefighters to fill these roles, beginning with the 52nd Fire Academy.

This decade also saw continued growth and expansion in the City as well as the Department. Fire Stations 41, 42, and 43 were built during the 1990's.

1999 - Cathedral Arms High-Rise Fire

On the morning of Christmas Day, 1999, a deadly high-rise fire broke out on the 10th floor of the 15 story Cathedral Arms apartment building at Park and University, [Figure 1-34](#). This building housed mostly seniors and did not have a fire sprinkler system in place. The fire, which eventually went to 3 alarms, claimed the life of one person, injured three others and was confined to the floor of origin.



Figure 1-32 SDMSE Created in 1997

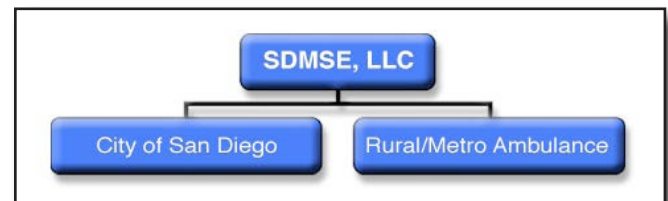


Figure 1-33 SDMSE Organization Structure



Figure 1-34 Cathedral Arms Fire



Smoke pouring out of the tall building was visible as far away as San Ysidro on the clear December morning.

2000 to 2010



Figure 1-35 Chief Jeff Bowman

Despite much anticipation and fear that San Diego and the world as a whole would implode due to the “Y2K” computer glitch, the new millennium rang in as a rainy uneventful Friday night for the San Diego Fire Department.

The most significant event to occur in the early part of this decade was the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. In the ensuing days San Diego’s USAR Task Force 8 was called upon to respond to the World Trade Centers in New York. In the end, 2973 victims died as a result of the attacks including 343 firefighters, police officers and rescue workers.

2002 - Fire Chief Jeff Bowman

In another changing of the guard, Fire Chief Jeff Bowman, came to the San Diego Fire in April 2002 from the Anaheim Fire Department, [Figure 1-35](#). Chief Bowman’s arrival marked a time of new ideas and progression for the Department. Among his many contributions, Chief Bowman pushed for new apparatus, opened dialogue amongst the ranks to address operational issues, and set short, medium and long-term goals for the Department. He was a strong advocate for the firefighters and for increasing funding and resources. He quickly earned the reputation as a “Firefighter’s Chief.”

Another change brought about by Chief Bowman was changing the name back to the SDFD, San Diego Fire-Rescue Department.

2003 - Eco-Terrorism Strikes San Diego

On August 1, 2003, a 206-unit condominium under construction in the University Town Centre area was set fire and destroyed, with a banner left at the scene saying “If you build it, we will burn it”, signed “The E.L.F.s are mad.” ELF, or Earth Liberation Front, is a group dedicated to causing economic damage through terrorist style acts in an attempt to preserve the environment.

The damages totaled \$50 million after flames reached an estimated 200 feet in the air, as over a hundred fire fighters attempted to put out the fire. The destruction was the movement’s most financially damaging action against a target. Exactly three weeks later, 125 SUV’s and Hummers were torched in Los Angeles County, costing a total of \$3.5 million, with “I love pollution” spray-painted at the scene.

Finally, a month later, homes being built in San Diego were targeted again, this time costing an estimated \$450,000 in damages.

Finally, a month later, homes being built in San Diego were targeted again, this time costing an estimated \$450,000 in damages.



Figure 1-36 Cedar Fire 2003



San Diego Fire Department & EMS Patches



SDFD First Patch
1997 - 2002



SDFLSS
2002 - 2007



S.D. Fire-Rescue
2007 to 2018



S.D. Fire-Rescue
2018 to Present



Medevac
1979 - 1984



Hartson
1984 - 1993



American
Medical Services
1993 - 1997



City of San Diego
Paramedic Services
1979 - 1997



SDMSE
1997 - 2002



SDMSE
2002 - 2017



SAN DIEGO COUNTY
MICU
PARAMEDIC
County Paramedic
Present



American Flag
September 11, 2001

2003 - Cedar Fire

Shortly after Chief Bowman's arrival, he was put to the ultimate test. On October 25, 2003, the worst wildland fire in the history of the State of California was started by a lost hunter in an area south of Ramona. The Cedar Fire, as it became known, quickly spread south and westward driven by dry, strong Santa Ana winds. The fire burned 280,278 acres, 2,820 buildings (including 2,232 homes) and killed 15 people including one firefighter before being contained on November 3, [Figure 1-36](#).



The San Diego Fire Department responded with nearly all of its apparatus available to the areas of Scripps Ranch, Miramar, and Tierrasanta in an attempt to halt its westward spread. It also placed a mandatory emergency recall of all off-duty personnel. Due to numerous other fires in the Southern California Region, very little assistance was available from outside agencies.

The Cedar Fire was one of 15 fires throughout Southern California that month, which collectively became known as the “2003 Fire Storm.”

As a result of the 2003 Fires, many changes and improvements were made to the Department, including a reverse 911 phone system to notify residents of evacuations and the purchase of new apparatus and two fire fighting helicopters.

2004 - Mason Hotel Fire



On the morning of December 17, 2004, a fatal fire forced the evacuation of the Mason Hotel in downtown San Diego during the morning rush hour, [Figure 1-37](#). The Mason Hotel is a three-story residential hotel on Fifth and A Streets. Witnesses reported smoke and flames visible from the roof of the aging structure as the first fire units arrived, however the fire was found in the basement and lobby floors by first in engine companies.

First arriving units and Truck 1 raised ladders to rescue occupants from the windows as well as perform search and rescue. A second and third alarm were requested, however, due to another two alarm fire that was just in the mop up stages in Mission Valley, additional units were dispatched to respond from further distances.

In the end, one person was pronounced dead on the scene, another died later at the hospital, and nine others were injured. The fire was brought under control in about an hour.

2005 - Fire Station 45

On the morning of December 7, 2005, a fuel tanker truck overturned at the main entrance to Qualcomm Stadium near the fuel depot, [Figure 1-38](#). The overturned tanker spilled fuel into the parking lot of Qualcomm Stadium which ignited and sent up a spectacular black plume of smoke. Since only the rear of the two trailers overturned and caught fire, the firefighters strategy was to protect the uninvolved tanker from a boiling liquide expanding vapor explosion (BLEVE) and let the fuel burn off.



As a result of this incident, Fire Station 45 was set up in a temporary station on the Stadium premises to provide long overdue fire protection to Mission Valley.

Figure 1-37 Mason Hotel Fire (above 2 images)



2005 - Hurricane Katrina

In late August of 2005, San Diego USAR Task Force 8 was called upon once again to respond. A major hurricane had struck the southeastern Gulf region of Louisiana. New Orleans and its surrounding neighborhoods had suffered the worst. At least 1,836 people lost their lives in the hurricane and subsequent floods.



2006 - Fire Chief Tracy Jarman

In June of 2006, Chief Bowman retired after 4 years of service here in San Diego leaving the Department on a path for the future. To fill his shoes was Assistant Fire Chief Tracy Jarman. Chief Jarman had risen through the ranks of the Department to become the 15th Fire Chief for the San Diego Fire Department, and its first woman Fire Chief.



Figure 1-38 Stadium Tanker Fire

2007 - Witch Creek Fire

Almost four years to the day of the Cedar Fire, in October of 2007, with almost identical dry Santa Ana weather conditions, several fires broke out again in San Diego County. The two most severe were, the Harris Fire in the southern County, and the Witch Fire burning in the San Pasqual Valley area. Once again the City's resources were quickly exhausted as the fire blew through the Rancho Bernardo area. Firefighters without apparatus resorted to placing stripped academy fire apparatus in service and borrowing fire engines that were listed as "For Sale" from a local dealer.

Although many lessons had been learned and improvements made since the Cedar Fire in 2003, it became obvious that when fires of such magnitude are encountered by fire companies, there is very little that can be done to stop them.

Following the fires, the entire Department received training in structure triage and improved tactics to more effectively battle such catastrophic events.

2007 - Downtown Fires

In the Fall of 2007, a series of large fires broke out in the Downtown area. The Goodyear Tire Store Fire on 10th and Broadway, the Jeromes Furniture Warehouse on 16th and Broadway, and a Recycle Center on 14th and J st.

A few months later in June of 2008, the infamous Kansas City BBQ a.k.a. "Top Gun Bar" on Market and Harbor Drive caught fire, [Figure 1-39](#). All four of these fires occurred on A division.



Figure 1-39 Kansas City BBQ Fire



2008 - F-18 Crashes into University City

On December 8, 2008, an F/A-18 based out of Miramar encountered an engine problem over the Pacific. En route back to Miramar, the aircraft lost its second engine as it was flying over Mt. Soledad. The pilot attempted to head the aircraft for a canyon just east of University City High School. The pilot ejected successfully, landing in a tree. Unfortunately the powerless jet crashed into the University City residential area, destroying two houses and damaging a third, [Figure 1-40](#).



[Figure 1-40 F-18 Crash](#)

Truck 35, while returning back to the station, noticed the large column of smoke from the area of Governor Drive and the 805 and responded to the area unsure of what was burning. En route, they received reports from dispatch of a possible downed military aircraft and an Alert 5 response was dispatched.

Upon Truck 35's arrival, they found two homes destroyed with several adjacent exposures threatened. Truck 35 began search and rescue operations and evacuations in adjacent structures while they awaited the arrival of the first in engine four minutes later. Fortunately the aircraft was not carrying any ordnance and the fire was extinguished within an hour.

Sadly, four family members were killed inside one of the two homes destroyed by the aircraft.

2009 - Fire Chief Javier Mainar

October 2009 saw another changing of the Fire Chief as Chief Jarman retired after 25 years of service. To take her place was Chief Javier Mainar, [Figure 1-41](#). Chief Mainar was hired in 1980 and spent a large portion of his career as a Captain in the MAST unit.



[Figure 1-41 Chief Javier Mainar](#)

2000 to 2010 Overview

Throughout this decade we experienced many positive changes. In the last ten years, almost the entire fleet of fire engines, fire trucks and brush apparatus have been replaced. The Department saw the expansion and construction of four new fire stations, station 44, 45, 46, and 47. The Department also upgraded its fire communications system once again by purchasing new laptop computers, referred to as Mobile Data Computers, to replace the aging MDT's.

As technology improved during this decade, so did its implementation into the Department. The old transfer desk staffing system was replaced by a computer program called TeleStaff, a Palm Pilot program replaced the old bubble form of documentation for EMS incidents, and e-mail accounts and electronic documents were set up for all members to communicate rather than the traditional



hard copy forms. Gone are the days of the yellow labor card and day books, as these are all done electronically now.

Summary

The conclusion of this decade has brought us into tumultuous times. With the economic meltdown of September 2008 and subsequent drastic budget cuts to all City Departments, we face an uncertain future. Thus is the story of the Fire Service. As we face the closure of fire companies and possible layoffs, we must remember our past and mission statement. Strong leadership, dedicated members and a common bond, have brought us out of many tough situations both economically and operationally.

We must know, understand, and learn from our history in order to successfully set forth a path into the future.



San Diego Fire-Rescue Department Fire Chiefs



Chief A.B. Cairnes
1889 - 1905



Chief Ray Shute
1905 - 1907



Chief E. Donnelly
1907 - 1909



Chief Louis Almgren
1909 - 1935



Chief John Parrish
1935 - 1947



Chief George Courser
1947 - 1960



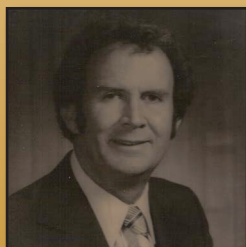
Chief Ray Shukraft
1960 - 1968



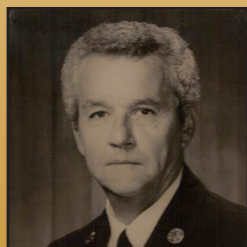
Chief Leonard Bell
1968 - 1975



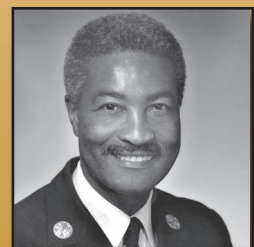
Chief Dee J. Rogers
1975 - 1979



Chief Earle G. Roberts
1979 - 1984



Chief Roger Phillips
1984 - 1985



Chief John Delotch
1985 - 1992



San Diego Fire-Rescue Department Fire Chiefs



Chief Robert Osby
1992 - 2002



Chief Jeff Bowman
2002 - 2006



Chief Tracy Jarman
2006 - 2009



Chief Javier Mainar
2009 - 2015



Chief Brian Fennessy
2015 - 2018



Chief Colin Stowell
2018 - Present



San Diego Fire-Rescue Department Line of Duty Deaths

1910	Captain Pete Sampsell	Murder
1910	Engineer Don Grant	Murder
1918	Probationary Firefighter Ray Gundlach	Structure Fire Collapse
1953	Lieutenant Willard H. Tompkins	Heart Attack at Structure Fire
1960	Lieutenant Burton Rogers	Heart Attack at Grass Fire
1966	Engineer Roger Saum	Heart Attack at Structure Fire
1978	Engineer Charles Kinnel	Struck by Vehicle
1997	Engineer Joseph Estavillo	Flesh-Eating Bacteria from Vegetation Fire

Bagpipe Tradition at Funerals

The tradition of bagpipes being played at fire department and police department funerals in the United States goes back over one hundred and fifty years. When the Irish and Scottish immigrated to this country, they brought many of their traditions with them. One of these was the bagpipes, often played at Celtic weddings, funerals and dances.

It wasn't until the great potato famine and massive Irish immigration to the East Coast of the United States, that the tradition of the pipes really took hold in the fire department. In the 1880's, Irish immigrants faced massive discrimination. Factories and shops had signs reading 'NINA' – No Irish Need Apply. The only jobs they could get were the ones no one else wanted – jobs that were dirty, dangerous, or both – firefighters and police officers. It was not an uncommon event to have several firefighters killed at a working fire. The Irish firefighters' funerals were typical of all Irish funerals... the pipes were played. It was somehow okay for a hardened firefighter to cry at the sound of pipes, when his dignity would not let him weep for a fallen comrade.

If you have been to a funeral where bagpipes play, you know the haunting and mournful sound of the pipes. Before too long, families and friends of non-Irish firefighters began asking for the piper to play for these fallen heroes. The pipes add a special air and dignity to the solemn occasion.

Associated with cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, pipe bands representing both fire and police often have more than 60 uniformed playing members. They are also traditionally known as Emerald Societies after Ireland, the Emerald Isle. Many bands wear traditional Scottish dress, while others wear the simpler Irish uniform. All members wear the kilt and tunic, whether it is a Scottish clan tartan or Irish single color kilt.

Today, the tradition is universal and not just for the Irish and Scottish. The pipes have come.



[Media 1-3](#) Click Here to Listen to
[Media 1-4](#) Amazing Grace



Media & Link Index



“Smoke and Fire Showing” by Chad Allison



“The Men of Station 19”



PSA 182 Crash Interview with Captain John Allen



Vintage SDFD Pictures

The following silent films were provided to the San Diego Fire Department by the granddaughter of Fire Chief George Courser. These rolls of 8mm film were found in a box hidden away in storage and contain miscellaneous Fire Department footage from as far back as the 1940's.



Ship Fire at Broadway Pier



Launching of Fire Patrol Boat “Chief Almgren”



2929 Meade Fire



Dedication of Fire Station 15



Fishing Boat Fire on Harbor Drive



Fire Boat “Bill Kettner”



Commonwealth and Juniper Street Fire



808 W. Cedar Fire



47th and Chamoune Fire



Harley Davidson Fire



Dedication of Station 17



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NOTE: If you have any additional information or content that you feel would be appropriate to contribute to this Chapter or would like to report any errors or misrepresentations, please contact the SDFD Training Division or email the Drill Manual Revision Staff at

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