



Onlookers watch as the city of Yokohama is engulfed in flames. The extent of the damage destroyed thousands of homes and left many struggling to find their loved ones and a safe place for refuge.

## THE UNITED STATES NAVY'S RESPONSE TO THE 1923 KANTO EARTHQUAKE IN JAPAN

The United States Navy aided the people of Japan during one of the most devastating natural disasters in human history. On September 1, 1923, the Kanto plain on the main island of Honshu shuddered from the impact of a catastrophic earthquake. The severity of the earthquake remained intense, severely damaging the cities of Tokyo, Yokohama, and even shifted buildings over 35 miles away. This meant that, even though the disaster occurred on a Saturday at midday, the earthquake affected nearly every Japanese civilian. Houses and buildings toppled and, much like the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, fire erupted throughout most of the cities and continued

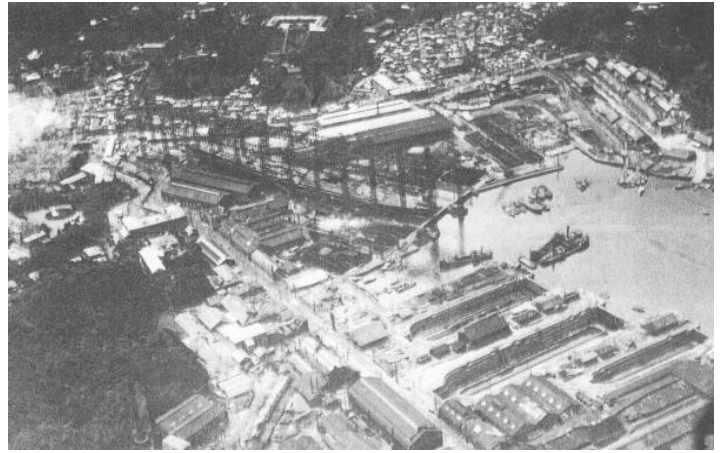
to spread from 60 mile per hour gale-force winds.

In Yokosuka, the Japanese Naval Barracks, Naval Hospital, and Engineering College burned to the ground, inhibiting the Imperial Japanese naval response. Also, the famed Naval Shipyard, known for producing immense Japanese vessels, decided to hide most of its damages from the public and outside vessels intent on assisting the city. Officials believed that foreign nations could take advantage of these so-called secrets and this disaster made them vulnerable in terms of national defense. In any case, the large Headquarters and other buildings, the Lib-

rary, Gunnery School, Torpedo School, Wireless Transmitting Station, Meteorological Weather Station, and oil tanks near the waterfront suffered severe damage. Tons of oil began drifting into the ocean and the Imperial Japanese Navy lost two submarines, one aircraft carrier (*Amagi*), and suffered damage to the battleship *Mikasa* and numerous aircraft. However, the combined Japanese fleet still consisted of over 150 vessels and offered relief and aid to the port stations of Kure, Sasebo, and Yokosuka.

The earthquake caused similar damage 20 miles north of Yokosuka. The United States Naval Hospital in Yokohama, established in 1872, and under the direct oversight of Dr. Ulyss Webb, remained a foothold of the United States Navy in the Far East. The Yokohama facility aided Sailors that called the Asiatic Squadron home, provided relief for those sent out to quell the Boxer Rebellion, took in casualties during the Spanish-American War because of occupation of the Philippines and Guam, and admitted some casualties from the Philippine-American insurrection. On the day of the earthquake most of the buildings collapsed, pinning Japanese workers, Sailors, nurses, and even Doctor Webb under the rubble. People scrambled to safety, even jumping off the cliff side and into the ocean. Eight individuals attached to the Naval Hospital died. The media reported that the American Consul Max David Kirjasoff, and his wife Alice, perished while staying in Yokohama.

Reports to the Department of the Navy came flooding into Washington, D.C. On September 2nd, Secretary of the Navy Edwin Denby ordered the United States Navy vessels attached to the Asiatic Squadron, under the command of Admiral Edwin Alexander Anderson Jr., to proceed to Yokohama. This began the largest humanitarian aid operation in human history from a global perspective. American vessels left their stations in China and traveled to Japan to offer support for the ailing country and its citizens. Three days later on September 5th, USS *Stewart* (DD-224) arrived in Yoko-



The ruins of the Japanese Naval Arsenal in Yokohama. Battleship *Amagi* is pictured in the center with the scaffolding. (Toshio Matsumura)



One wall standing and piles of rubble from what is left of the Yokohama Naval Hospital. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 91404)



American Sailors search the ruins of the Yokohama Naval Hospital for both the injured and the dead. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 91402)



Commander of the Asiatic Squadron, Admiral Edwin Anderson Jr. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 56034)

hama but the Japanese Coast Guard pushed the destroyer away. One day later, another destroyer arrived in Kobe to pick up evacuated citizens. Six other destroyers traveled with full loads of supplies from the US Army warehouses in the Philippines. The flagship USS *Huron* (CA-9) arrived with supplies on September 7th.

Three US Navy destroyers entered ports at Hakone, Hayama, and Kamakura around Tokyo Bay to rescue United States citizens. The commanding officer of battleship *Yamashiro* committed a misstep by letting the three destroyers in because the Japanese government did not want to give access to the fortified zones of Shibaura and Shinagawa, allowing the US Navy to spot Japanese military production factories and fortified structures. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs laid down a schedule that entailed direct travel to a Yokohama rescue center and placed USAT *Meigs*, USS *Black Hawk* (AD-9), USAT *Merritt*, and USS *Pecos* (AO-6) on supply duty traveling different routes throughout the day. The Japanese government continued with their guidelines and remained rather strict by not wanting personnel, transportation vessels, or a field hospital in Yokohama to be constructed. Officials also wanted full inspections conducted before foreign crews could handle offloads. Upon reaching port on September 10th, *Black Hawk* arrived with 867,100 pounds of supplies. They also unloaded crates of fresh eggs, cases of milk, canned fish and meat, fruit, and gasoline. In total, more than 20 Navy vessels arrived to provide some type of help (Appendix A).



US Navy Sailors assigned to USS *Black Hawk* (AD-9) load relief supplies, while in port at Tsingtao, China, for transportation to Japan. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH



Japanese sailors on a large barge assist in offloading supplies from USS *Black Hawk* (AD-9). (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 100371)

Even though relationships strained and the Japanese made their suspicions and distrust known, the United States Navy remained on-site to do as much as they could. By September 8th, the US homefront response was similar to the fleets' and they attempted to provide as much aid as possible. The Red Cross Relief Fund asked cities to reach a giving quota. San Francisco, for example, raised \$20,000 out of its \$500,000 mark and sent "five thousand tons of California rice and large quantities of canned foodstuffs" to Japan aboard USS *Vega* (AK -17). In total, the Red Cross raised \$12 million

and the United States Navy gave more than \$2 million in relief supplies. Japanese cities suffered greatly with a casualty list growing more and more every day, eventually reaching 140,000 dead and missing.

Tales of courage remained unseen until after the event. During the earthquake, 22-year-old Ensign Thomas J. Ryan saved a Japanese woman, Mrs. Slack, from the Grand Hotel in Yokohama. She broke both her legs and he carried her to safety. For his actions, the 1921 Naval Academy graduate received the Medal of Honor. Nonetheless, all of the Asiatic Squadron vessels stayed at their duty stations to aid relief for almost three weeks. They finally left on September 21, 1923. The Japanese people praised U.S. Ambassador Cyrus Woods but he knew that their initial resentment and resistance to foreign aid stemmed from deeper distrust and interference from the outside world. In the aftermath of the earthquake, this led to radical positions about the nature of the country, modernity, and the effects of reconstruction. The Japanese government and official agencies attempted to shift control of Asian-Pacific economic entities. They also became stagnant during the global impacts of the Great Depression, and by the 1930s, gave way to a far more militaristic government.



President Calvin Coolidge and Ensign Thomas J. Ryan during a ceremony for the presentation of his Medal of Honor. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 86991)



An artist's depiction of Ensign Ryan's actions during the earthquake and fire. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 86991)

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## Appendix A

US Navy vessels that brought supplies to Japan, 1923.

<b>Ship Name and Hull Designation</b>	<b>Type of Vessel</b>	<b>Ship's Complement</b>
USS Asheville (PG-21)	Gunboat	162
USS Sacramento (PG-19)	Gunboat	171
USS Smith Thompson (DD-212)	Destroyer	121
USS Barker (DD-213)	Destroyer	132
USS Tracy (DD-214)	Destroyer	132
USS Borie (DD-215)	Destroyer	122
USS John D. Edwards (DD-216)	Destroyer	124
USS Whipple (DD-217)	Destroyer	101
USS Pope (DD-225)	Destroyer	122
USS Peary (DD-226)	Destroyer	101
USS Pillsbury (DD-227)	Destroyer	116
USS John D. Ford (DD-228)	Destroyer	101
USS Truxton (DD-229)	Destroyer	122
USS John Paul Jones (DD-230)	Destroyer	145
USS Hulbert (DD-342)	Destroyer	126
USS Noa (DD-343)	Destroyer	150
USS William B. Preston (DD-344)	Destroyer	138
USS Preble (DD-345)	Destroyer	129
USS Sicard (DD-346)	Destroyer	122
USS Pruitt (DD-347)	Destroyer	195
USS Abarenda (AC-13)	Collier	69
USS Bittern (AM-36)	Minesweeper	72
USS General Alava (AG-5)	Miscellaneous Auxiliary	76