

# Lompoc Legacy



## Lompoc Valley Historical Society, Inc.

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### QUARTERLY BULLETIN

No. 79

SHIPWRECKS AT POINT ARGUELLO

SEPTEMBER 1998

## SEVEN DESTROYERS ARE WRECKED ON THE ROCKY COAST NEAR PT. ARGUELLO PART I

### Story of Marine Tragedy Written By Member of First Rescue Party

*Ronald M. Adam was the editor of the Lompoc Record in 1923 when seven U.S. Navy destroyers crashed on the rocks near Pt. Arguello. His account of the Marine Tragedy was thorough and complete and amazingly it was printed in the Friday, September 14, 1923 Lompoc Record just 6 days after the wreck! The following is his story of the events under the headline, SEVEN DESTROYERS ARE WRECKED ON THE ROCKY COAST NEAR PT. ARGUELLO.*

(The editor of the Record was at Honda 14 hours ahead of any other newspaperman and his story of the wreck of the destroyers is submitted to our readers as the first accurate account that has been published of what really happened there that night.) [Saturday, September 8, 1923]

When the call came in from Honda on Saturday night that help was needed at that point no one realized that one of the greatest naval disasters in history--one that would make the famed battle of Manila bay look like a ten cent

side show--was happening at that moment at our door.

The message came to City Marshal W. S. Bland that a war ship was reported ashore near Honda Station and the officer quickly summoned Glenn Baker, motor traffic officer, Clifford J. Smith and the editor of The Record to go with him to investigate the report. The message was received in Lompoc about 10:30 p.m., and in a very few minutes this party had loaded a coil of rope into Bland's car and was rolling toward Surf at a high rate of speed. At Surf a motor track car was waiting to take us to Honda and the perilous dash was made over the Southern Pacific rails. G.T. Gunderson and Harry Seerey joined our party at Surf. Railroad men at Surf operated the track car--or attempted to. Something was wrong with the timer on this particular car--anyway the timer got all the blame--for the vehicle balked about every mile. Once during a stop for repairs the train which we were expecting came rushing upon us and the track car was removed barely in time to prevent a smash-up.

### **Night Extremely Dark**

The night was pitch dark and an extremely heavy fog made it impossible to see but a few feet even with the aid of a lantern. The track car never missed a shot during the last three miles of the journey but rushed through the black, chilly night together with the dread of meeting a train head-on was one of the thrilling incidents that the rescue party experienced.

### **Distress Signals**

As we arrived at Honda station we discovered that a vessel was sending up distress signals from off Saddle Rock and the party was hastened to this point. Although the fog was extremely thick, the rockets that were sent up made it possible for us to distinguish the outline of a vessel close in shore. The vessel that we could see was the S. P. Lee, ship No. 310, and we did not learn until later that another vessel further out than the Lee was the one sending up the distress signals.

### **Meet Captain**

A consultation was held by the party and it was decided that the best aid we could render would be the building of a big bonfire on shore and to have our coil of cable on hand if it was needed. No wood was to be had in this bleak region and some of the party started back to Honda section house to procure wood and kerosene for building the fire.

On the way to the section house the party encountered Captain R. Morris who was wandering in a bewildered state on the sandy mesa that separates Honda from the ocean.

It was from Captain Morris that we learned that there were several vessels in distress and that all of his men had been landed from his ship, the S. P. Lee. He did not know where his men had disappeared to and inquired and was given direction to the station.

### **Uproar is Heard**

Going to the south side of the Saddle Rock the shouts and screams of hundreds of distressed men reached our ears and on arriving at this point we found three more vessels pounding on the rocks. The men from these vessels at the time were coming ashore and their shouts and cries could be heard above the booming of the surf. There were no lights to aid them as the generators on the vessels went out of

commission as soon as they struck, and rendered the large spotlights useless.

### **Build Fire on Cliff**

Some of the Lompoc men took it upon themselves to go back to Honda section house, secure wood and kerosene and enlist the aid of the sailors from the Lee in helping them carry the fuel to the beach. A fire was soon built that was real effective in furnishing light for the rescue work from the three vessels--the Chauncey, the Delphy and the Young--which came ashore at this point. The fire also furnished light for the doctors to work by, and warmth for the wet and half-clad boys that came ashore.

In addition to this bonfire on the bluff, an immense fire was built near the section house and here the sailors gathered by the hundreds soon after they got on shore.

### **Local Doctors There**

Dr. M. S. Kelliher and Dr. L. E. Heiges were the first and only doctors on the scene. They had arrived about midnight and had their hands full for the next few hours. About a dozen men were seriously injured and after they were given first aid treatment by the doctors they were placed aboard train No. 102 at about 4 a.m. and taken to a Santa Barbara hospital. The majority of these casualties were men from the boiler rooms who had been gassed by the smoke following the crash. One sailor had a broken arm and another a broken collar bone the doctors reported.

### **Hospital of Section House**

The section house at Honda was made into a hospital for the time being as it was the largest building in the locality. About one hundred were treated there by the doctors, the majority of these cases being cuts and gashes that were sustained by men who jumped bare footed on the rocky reefs and clambered up the slippery rocks.

After getting the big bonfire going at the top of the bluff where three of the ships were ashore the writer returned to the section house. Hundreds of the men were huddled around the bonfire that had been built there. This was a pitiful sight indeed. Half of the men were without shoes and some were clad only in their under clothing. Nearly all the men had been



drenched in the sea. A cold wind was blowing from off the ocean and the heat from the bonfire was most welcome to the men.

#### **Men Were Cheerful**

But withall they were the most cheerful lot of men one could hope to find anywhere. They had saved practically nothing of their personal belongings but as they stood around the fire turning around to warm first one side and then another, they laughed and joshed with one another much the same as a crowd of young fellows will carry on after a football game.

#### **Mexicans Help**

The Mexicans of the section gang had already begun to hold "open house" for the sailors. Every one of the huts built of railroad ties where the Mexican laborers live had a fire going and cans of coffee stewing. All were full of sailors who sat on bunks and stools and sipped the red hot coffee.

#### **Coffee is Made**

In the kitchen at the section house there were as many sailors in the room as could possibly crowd inside. A roaring fire was going in the range and two big cans of coffee were boiling. A sailor who had lost all but a thin suit of underwear was dispensing the coffee as fast as he could but as there were only three cups on the premises and the beverage was steaming hot the service was rather slow.

The kitchen was stifling from the heat of the range and the steam from the garments of the sailors. Several of the boys who had been hurt were curled up on the floor and the others who crowded within the room were driven there by the cold without.

#### **Injured Cared For**

The living room was almost as crowded as the kitchen. Doctors Kelliher and Heiges were working over the injured. The men who were in a bad way were lying along the walls. They were the first to receive attention from the doctors. Others with minor injuries were waiting their turns.

The two telephones—one of the railroad company and one of the Santa Barbara Telephone Company—were in this room that was serving the purpose of a receiving hospital. Several of the officers from the ships were here sending out messages when we arrived.

Messages were sent out over the Southern Pacific wires and over the telephone company's lines by way of Lompoc. Other messages were dispatched by railroad motor cars to the Arlight Radio Station three miles south.

#### **Install Special Wire**

By 2 a.m., Sunday morning the railroad company had run a wire into a hand car shed across the track from the section house and a dispatcher was installed therein and was busy with the telegraph instruments.

#### **Supplies Arrive**

Train No. 102 arrived at Honda at about 4 a.m. with blankets and comforters from Lompoc, dozens of them, and these were distributed among the sailors. It is needless to say that they were a welcome gift to this mass of shivering humanity. On this same train the dozen badly injured men were loaded and sent to a Santa Barbara hospital.

Twenty-five or more people had arrived from Lompoc by 4 a.m. but there was nothing that they could do for the comfort of the men. Some of the people came on the early morning train while others made the trip in automobiles by way of the Sudden grade.

#### **Life Raft Heard From**

The doctors had just finished with the last of the injured at the section house when a call came that they were needed at Pt. Arguello where five men had come ashore on a raft. Don Sudden was there with his automobile and took the doctors to Arguello.

#### **More Wrecks Discovered**

It was not until daylight on Sunday morning that we knew that more than four destroyers were ashore.

The ships that were accounted for on Saturday night were the Chauncey, Ship No. 296, the S. P. Lee, No. 310, the Young, No. 312, and the Delphy, No. 261.

These four ships had landed all of their officers and most of their crews, but it was not until after daylight on Sunday morning and after the fog had lifted somewhat that the full proportions of this maritime tragedy was revealed.

#### **Find the Nicholas**

The first ship that was sighted on Sunday morning was the Nicholas, No. 311. This vessel

was just a little ways out from the S. P. Lee and was the vessel whose distress signals we had seen the night before.

There was not a sign of life on the Nicholas when the ship was first discovered at daylight and it was thought for a time that all aboard had been lost. After repeated signals from shore an answering signal came from the vessel and we were soon able to distinguish human forms aboard.

#### All On Board Safe

Soon a man on board signaled the message that all the Nicholas' crew were safe on board. It was news that overcame a breathless suspense. Capt. E. H. Watson, Commander of the squadron, then ordered that preparations be made for getting a line aboard the Nicholas.

#### Shoot Line Across

Men from the S. P. Lee were called upon to assist in landing the men from the Nicholas.

Some of these were ferried back to the Lee on the life raft on which they had made shore the night before and from the deck of the Lee a line was shot across the bow of the other ship. The Lee was lying close in shore against the cliffs at Saddle Rock and the Nicholas was fast on the rocks at a right angle to the Lee with her stern (bow) toward the sea.

*From Ronald Adam's vantage point, looking out toward the Nicholas, he did not notice the bow of the ship was pointed out to sea. It was perhaps natural to assume the ship came straight in and crashed on the rocks, when in fact the Nicholas was turning swiftly to the port, to avoid the Woodbury turning right and the Young straight ahead. She had made a U-turn and was headed out to sea, however, her screws were damaged on the rocks and she became stranded very close to where the Santa Rosa steamship ran aground in 1911.*

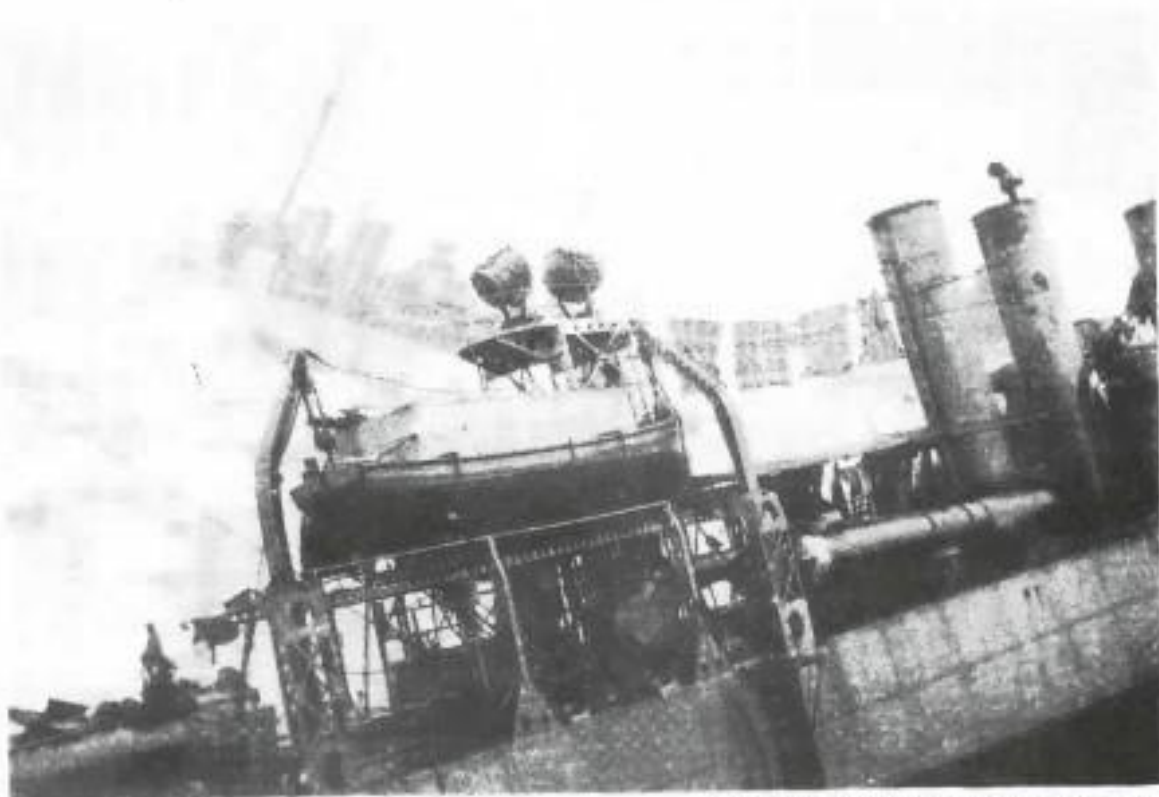


PHOTO BY LEIGHTON C. NEWCOMB, SEPT. 9, 1923

Foreground: USS S. P. Lee - No. 310

Background: USS Nicholas - 311

The S.P. Lee came to rest against the cliff at Saddle Rock. Its bow extended toward the beach where Honda Creek flows into the sea.

The Nicholas made a U-turn and was pointed toward the sea before being caught on the rocks.



Several attempts were made before the men from the Lee got the range of the other vessel and succeeded in getting a line across where the Nicholas' men could reach it. Heroic efforts were made by the men on the Nicholas to grab the line and often it seemed that the huge waves would wash the men overboard.

When the light line was finally secured a heavy cable was attached to it and one end of it was drawn to the Nicholas. The light line was then shot ashore from the Lee and the big cable was stretched between the Nicholas and almost the exact spot where the survivors from the ill fated Santa Rosa passenger ship were landed some dozen years ago (1911).

#### **Rescue Work Dangerous**

A heavy sea was running by the time the life raft had been secured between the Nicholas and the shore and the work of rescue was extremely hazardous. A life raft or "doughnut" as the sailors called it, was used to ferry the men ashore six or seven at a time. Crude oil from the bursted tanks of the ships covered the surface of the little bay and the men as they were pulled ashore not only receiving a hard ducking but were covered from head to foot with a slimy oil.

#### **Washed From Raft**

Farmers from the nearby ranches brought quantities of cable early in the morning and there was sufficient for every purpose in connection with the rescue work. About fifty men were down on the beach to haul in the raft with its human freight every time it was loaded. All the sailors wore life jackets and although the waves washed over the raft and some were carried overboard all managed to reach the shore. As soon as they got near land they would jump overboard and half swim and wade ashore.

#### **Ship Settling**

The Nicholas appeared to lie in a very dangerous position by the time the last load was taken off. The ship had sunk considerably since morning and indicated that it might roll over on its side at any moment. The forward (aft) section was all awash and it was difficult for the men to get on the raft.

#### **Officers Almost Drowned**

The last load with the captain and other officers had the most exciting voyage of any.

Soon after they cut loose a huge swell tossed the raft as if it were a chip and all on board were thrown into the sea. Some were able to clamber back upon the raft in a few moments but others were carried away from it by the tide. Another swell threw them toward the shore, and another still closer until all were able to get near enough to the raft again for their companions to pull them on board.

#### **Morale Still High**

On the cliff above the little beach a bonfire had been built and here the men gathered to warm themselves. Around the camp fire their spirits were high as boys who had been having a big time in a swimming hole. The officers in their bedraggled gold braid were the only ones who for a moment grasped the each others hands and in low tones congratulated each other on their deliverance.

In view of the fact that the sailors had spent the entire night in the upper part of the boat (the hatches having been battened down soon after they struck) and had kept each other warm by huddling close to each other, together with a prospect of almost certain death, their care-free attitude when they reached shore was quite remarkable.

#### **Some Are Overcome**

A few of the men were overcome and needed assistance in getting up the cliff but soon recovered. One man was washed from the Nicholas while this rescue work was going on and the waves carried him out beyond the big rocks that are out in the little bay. Another wave cast him upon a reef where he held for a moment but he was finally able to swim to shore where he arrived in an exhausted condition. Dr. Kelliher attended the man and expressed the opinion later that he was not in a bad way.

#### **Two More Destroyers**

In the meantime the fog had lifted and revealed two more vessels on the rocks between Saddle Rock and Pt. Arguello. These ships, the Woodbury, No. 309 and the Fuller, No. 297, were against some big rocks about a half mile from land and were lying close to each other.

The crews of both vessels had sought safety on these barren rocks soon after the ships struck. The majority were high and dry but a few had sought safety on some very low reefs over

which the waves had dashed all night. But even those on the big rocks had suffered severe hardships during the long dark night. From the amount of dunnage that each brought ashore it was evident that the men from these ships saved more of their personal belongings than any of the others.

#### **Whale Boat Rescues Men**

A little whale boat put out from the Chauncey and got near enough the rocks so that the men could jump aboard. They were brought back to the Chauncey on the Whale boat and from there they came ashore on the line that had been stretched the night before to save the men from the Chauncey and the Young.

#### **Rescue Work Slow**

The rescue work seemed to us very slow and rather inefficient. One little whale boat was provided that could not carry over a half dozen men at a time besides the four oarsmen. At last a fishing boat from Santa Barbara came upon the scene and brought a large number back to shore. The attempt to land the second load was not carried out, whether the landing was too dangerous or the orders were changed we did not learn. Anyway, the fishing boat took the next loads out to the destroyers that were standing by a mile or more out to sea.

#### **Other Destroyers Near**

That other destroyers were standing by was known on shore early in the morning, as their hoarse sirens could be plainly heard. When the fog lifted in the forenoon four destroyers were seen at anchor but they made no attempt to render aid. A launch came in near shore from one of the vessels and signaled a message once during the forenoon.

#### **Fishing Boat Makes Good**

The Santa Barbara fishing boat that participated in the rescue work of the men from the Fuller and Woodbury performed a great service, for the men from the destroyers would have been stranded on the rocks for hours longer at the rate the navy outfit was working.

#### **A Marine Grave Yard**

The scene of this terrible marine disaster is the grave yard of many ships that have foundered there in the past. The Nicholas struck in almost the exact spot where the coast passenger steamer foundered a dozen years ago.

Lives have not only been lost through marine disasters at this place but in other catastrophes. It was at Honda station about fifteen years ago that a special train of Shriners from the east was wrecked and many killed and injured.

#### **Dangerous Coast Line**

The coast between the point at Saddle Rock and Pt. Arguello is very rough and the sea dashes against almost precipitous cliffs of rock. Hidden rocks and reefs are numerous in the sea along this section of coast.

It was into this haven of disaster that the flagship Delphy, Captain E. H. Watson, squadron commander, in charge, led the seven destroyers that foundered. Captain Morris, division commander, told us that the ships were making 20 knots or about 25 miles an hour when the crash came. The ships were following the Delphy in single formation and were about 300 yards apart.

#### **Follow Like Sheep**

The Delphy it seems was doing all the reckoning and the others were following like a band of sheep. There were fifteen ships in the fleet, bound from San Francisco to San Diego. Eight of the destroyers veered off in time to escape the fate of the other ships.

#### **Delphy Struck First**

The flagship Delphy was the first to strike on the rocks close in shore, followed by the Young which hit on a reef further out. The Chauncey came next, coming in between the Delphy and Young and passing along side the Young just as this vessel was turning over on its side. The S. P. Lee was the next vessel to strike and it hit almost on the point of Saddle Rock. Further out from the Lee the Nicholas grounded on a hidden reef. The Woodbury and Fuller circled out further when they got the alarm signal and hit on the rocks between Saddle Rock and Pt. Arguello.

The Friday, September 14, 1923 article written by Lompoc Record editor, Ron Adam will be continued in Lompoc Legacy No. 80. Also in Legacy No. 80 will be an account of the total eclipse of the sun, September 10, 1923.

Some old-timers remembered the eerie scene as the shipwrecks were enveloped in total darkness at one o'clock in the afternoon during the eclipse!



On Saturday, September 8, 1923, shortly after 9:00 p.m., seven destroyers ran aground north of Point Arguello at Point Pedernales (also called Honda Point). Leighton Newcomb went to the scene and took four shipwreck pictures on Sunday morning, September 9, 1923. The crew of the Fuller spent a fearful night aboard the ship and were transferred to the destroyer anchored at sea (upper left). The men from the Woodbury had made their way to "Woodbury Rock" and were also transferred to the destroyer standing by. The two crews were shuttled to safety by a small Santa Barbara fishing boat.

1. Foreground: USS Delphy - No. 261  
(The Flagship) broken in two pieces.
2. On it's side: USS Young - No. 312  
Capsized in about 90 seconds after running upon a submerged reef.
3. Stern visible near Young's bow:  
USS Chauncey - No. 296
4. On "Woodbury Rock": USS Woodbury - No. 309
5. Behind Woodbury: USS Fuller - No. 297

Background upper left on the open sea:  
One of the seven destroyers saved from destruction. Two ships, the Farragut and Sommers were damaged, but were able to escape to deeper water and avoided the fate of their sister ships. The Percival, Kennedy, Hamilton, Stoddert and Thompson were unscathed.

The Lompoc Legacy editor, born two and a half years after the incident, remembers, as a child, seeing his father's stereopticon glass plate slides of the shipwrecks, and upon moving to Lompoc in 1959, was curious about the event. When, in 1973, divers from the Aqualiers were raising the anchor of the Chauncey in commemoration of 50 years after the tragedy, it seemed fitting to have "Tragedy At Honda" reprinted. The Lompoc Valley Historical Society has taken the initiative to have the comprehensive book by Charles A. Lockwood, Vice Admiral, USN, Ret. and Hans Christian Adamson, Colonel, USAF, Ret., reprinted. Copies of "Tragedy at Honda" and other books about the event are available at the Lompoc Valley Historical Society Pioneer Home and the Lompoc Museum.



PHOTO BY LEIGHTON C. NEWCOMB, SEPT. 9, 1923

3 seamen were missing from the Delphy (foreground) which had broken in two in the early hours of Sept. 9, and 20 were lost from the capsized Young (center). Rescue searches may have been under way.



PHOTO BY VANCE NEWCOMB, SEPTEMBER, 1974

This photo of Woodbury rock, taken by the editor of Lompoc Legacy, is a view from a vantage point very near where his father had stood that fateful Sunday morning 75 years ago. Leighton C. Newcomb apparently set up his camera tripod on the promontory at the lower right in this picture to capture the dramatic scene above.



PHOTO BY LEIGHTON C. NEWCOMB, SEPT. 9, 1923

Foreground: USS Chauncey - No. 296  
 By Chauncey's stern: USS Young - No. 312  
 (capsized)  
 Background on rocks: USS Woodbury - No. 309  
 USS Fuller - No. 297  
 Background on open sea: Three of the seven  
 remaining destroyers from DESDIV's 31 and 32,  
 standing by prior to departure to San Diego at 3 p.m.,  
 Sept. 9, 1923.  
 Lompoc citizens can be seen viewing the stranded  
 ships.  
 Leighton Newcomb had come from Santa Cruz,  
 California to view the total eclipse of the sun which  
 occurred on September 10, 1923. He had chosen  
 Point Conception to see the eclipse, and made his way  
 to "Honda" point to take four pictures.

Continued in Legacy No. 80

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