



The Great Fire: Prologue¹

Lou Ureneck

Wednesday September 13, 1922

Smyrna was burning, and U.S. Navy captain Arthur J. Hepburn prepared to evacuate the one hundred twenty-five Americans under his protection. A destroyer dispatched from Constantinople stood by in the harbor waiting to take the Americans aboard.

In his navy whites, which seemed to gather the dying light of the Mediterranean dusk, Hepburn was a smudged and sweating emblem of American prestige. He stood on the waterfront only a few blocks from the massive fire that was consuming the city and waited for his sailors to take their positions before he gave the command to begin the evacuation. The American citizens waited in a movie theater on the city's quay, a two-mile promenade that traced the sweeping edge of the harbor.

This was no ordinary city fire. Huge even by the standards of history's giant fires, it would reduce to ashes the richest and most cosmopolitan city in the Ottoman Empire. The fire would ultimately claim an even more infamous distinction. It was the last violent episode in a ten-year holocaust that had killed more than three million people—Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians, all Christian minorities—on the Turkish subcontinent between 1912 and 1922. It would also serve as a marker of the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Hepburn was a practical officer, and as the fire raced toward him and his men he had no time to consider the fall of empires or the ways in which history pivots to crush old orders and create new nations. He had a job to do—and he already had made something of a mess of it by beginning this evacuation late. He had directed two navy whaleboats and a motor sailor to stand ready at the quay's mossy seawall to ferry the Americans to the destroyer, but he faced another big obstacle. It was as dangerous as the giant of wall of flame that was racing toward the waterfront.

¹ We wish to thank HarperCollins for allowing us to reproduce this section of Lou Ureneck, *The Great Fire—One Man's Mission to Rescue Victims of the 20th Century's First Genocide* (NY: HarperCollins, 2015).

The fire had trapped a huge and surging mass of people on the quay. The crowd was packed tight for a half mile or more in either direction—nearly an entire city of people was caught on the narrow strip of cobbled pavement between the wall of flames and the sea. Hepburn had to somehow move the Americans through the dense crowd to the waiting boats. The transfer would be dangerous, maybe impossible. The people on quay were desperate—they could see the flames and feel the intense heat just as Hepburn and his men could—and they too wanted to escape the fire, hoping that the American officer would take some of them on board. Surely the Americans would not leave them behind. America was the one country everyone in the Near East trusted—Arabs, Moslem Turks, Christians, and Jews—and at this moment Hepburn was standing in for America.

Hepburn had decided to form a detachment of American sailors into a double line as a tunnel through the crowd. Twenty young sailors, dressed in swabby whites and landing-force leggings and armed with pistols and police batons, had taken their positions, elbow to elbow, and created a passageway from the movie-theater door to the seawall through the frantic horde. Most of people in the crowd were women with small children. Wild and fighting for their lives, they tried to break through the sailors' lines to board the navy boats, which they saw as their only deliverance from certain immolation. The sailors had orders to beat them back, which they were forced to do by the sheer weight of the frenzied mass. It leaned and pressed against them as a single relentless body. Women were wailing, holding their babies over their heads. "Take my child with you. In the name of God, take him." It was a frightful chaos of smoke, heat, screams, wild eyes, black kerchiefs, and military batons. The young American sailors held their ground against the refugees' desperation and constant shoving and pulling, and their two parallel lines—the sides of the tunnel—held.

Hepburn gave the order to go, and the evacuating Americans passed quickly in single file out of the theater and safely between the sailors to the whaleboats bobbing at the splashing seawall. Some of the Americans were the wives and children of missionaries; some were agents for American tobacco companies; others were naturalized Americans of Greek and Armenian descent who owned farms and shops in and around Smyrna and faced possible execution if they remained ashore. Hepburn had orders to protect all of them. The destroyer, the USS Simpson, whose long gray hull, tall bridge, and deck guns came in and out of view through the thick smoke, was anchored less than one hundred yards from the quay, and it had lowered its gangway to the waterline to take the Americans on board.

As the Americans dashed between the sailors, a desperate man in the crowd jumped from the seawall into one of the half-full whaleboats, nearly capsizing it. The sailors immediately tossed him overboard. Other refugees leaped into the water and

tried to swim to the Simpson and a second American destroyer, the USS Litchfield. None succeeded. Some were clutching children when they drowned, weighted down by their clothes and pulled below the surface by mushrooming heavy skirts. There were other warships in the harbor, British, French, and Italian, and the people tried to swim to them too. Those who had managed to reach the ships by stripping off their clothes before jumping into the water found that the ships' hulls loomed over them like tall and unscalable metal cliffs. In the choppy water, they gasped, shouted, and begged to be taken aboard, all the time trying to stay afloat. They banged on the ships' steel plate and grasped anchor chains. Bodies floated on the surface, some of them mangled by the propellers of the warships.

There is no good time for a fire to break out in a city whose backstreets are narrow and congested and whose neighborhoods are packed with wood-and-masonry houses. But this was a particularly bad moment for Smyrna to have been torched. During the previous two weeks, three hundred thousand refugees, nearly all homeless and destitute, had flooded into the city seeking its safety—a grim and deadly miscalculation. The refugees had crammed into the city's streets, railroad stations, cemeteries, and school and church yards; and then the Turkish nationalist army, from which they had been fleeing, had also entered the city and occupied it with tens of thousands of troops. A nightmare of slaughter, rape, and robbery had ensued. As the fire spread across the city, residents were flushed from their homes, and the heat and flames pushed them and the mass of refugees to the quay.

Some few minutes before 7 p.m., by which time the fire had claimed nearly half the city, and the blaze was more than a mile wide and a half mile deep, Hepburn and his men had managed to transfer almost all the Americans to the destroyer. But two important evacuees were still missing—the American consul general, George Horton, and his wife, Catherine. They were nowhere to be found, and the flames drove closer to the waterfront. It was getting dark, though the fire cast a dome of rosy light into the night sky, and the wind was lifting and gusting with the force of a gale. The fire had created its own howling storm, sucking in air and blasting geysers of cinders and flames into the sky. Hepburn could feel the searing heat on his arms and face, and his lungs burned with the acrid smoke blowing over the quay. Hepburn, a veteran officer with a reputation for thoroughness, already was angry with the consul general, and now there was this damnable delay that endangered the captain and his men.

Hepburn looked again at his watch. It was now 7.30 p.m. The fire soon would reach the American consulate, then the movie theater. Leaving the consul general behind was out of the question. The captain had to assume that Horton was waiting until the last possible minute to board the ship, possibly supervising the loading of his personal collection of books, rugs, and antiques, and that if he were to delay much

longer, the sailors Hepburn had dispatched to get him would simply carry him and his wife to the quay. Hepburn estimated that the fire soon would breach the long line of waterfront mansions, hotels, and warehouses. He doubted that any of the crowd would survive if the fire came to the quay. It was too big and too hot, and the people had no barricade or shelter to protect them. The heat was so intense that the hemp hawser lines on some of the ships in the harbor had already ignited. Horses and donkeys were crazed and running up and down the quay and kicking madly to free themselves of the bundles on their backs that had burst into flame. "The practical destruction of the entire wretched horde either by fire or drowning," Hepburn would later note in his official report, "seemed inevitable."

Hepburn looked in every direction, his weak eyes straining. Then, coming up the street toward him, ahead of the fire, was the truck he had sent hours earlier to retrieve the consul general and his luggage. It inched through the crowd, plowing through the people. Hepburn felt a wave of relief.

As far as he knew, all the Americans he intended to evacuate were now accounted for—at least all those from the movie theater. But there had been a lot of confusion, and he had begun the evacuation late and without an appreciation of the speed of the fire. Hepburn knew it was possible that he might be leaving ashore some of the American missionary workers who had refused the evacuation order earlier in the day, before the fire had reached its full fury. He had sent sailors in search of them, but the search parties themselves had gotten lost in the fire.

There was also one American who had chosen to remain in the burning city, working furiously to cope with the nightmare around him. Asa Kent Jennings, small, mild mannered, and misshapen, had never before faced a situation so dire or dangerous. He was a former small-town minister employed by the YMCA in Smyrna who, in an effort to relieve suffering in the city, had set up several safe houses for refugee women in abandoned mansions on the waterfront. Many of the women he had taken in were pregnant; others had been raped and badly injured by soldiers.

Several hours earlier, Jennings had put his family aboard one of Captain Hepburn's whaleboats for evacuation. Though his wife would have had trouble seeing him through the masses of people on the quay, Jennings had been able to watch the destroyer his family had been loaded onto depart through the smoke.

Jennings's safe houses were at the far end of the quay, about a half mile north of the movie theater where Hepburn had loaded the Americans onto the destroyer. The young American sailors who had been watching over the houses were gone. Jennings could see the Litchfield through the smoke from the front of one of the houses, and of course he could see the enormous fire. Its flames towered over the city and were reflected in the harbor.

Jennings was an unlikely prospect for heroism by any measure, but within days, tens of thousands of the refugees surging through Smyrna and clinging to its burning quay would owe their lives to him. As he hobbled among the refugees, Jennings had no thoughts of heroism. He was absorbed with the work of caring for the people who had come to him for safety. In addition to the women, he had also collected hundreds of orphaned children, many of whom had watched their parents killed by Turkish soldiers. The children as well as the women looked to him for deliverance from the giant fire.

Before it burned itself out, the fire would destroy 13,100 buildings—homes, hospitals, school, warehouses, businesses, churches, and factories—and cause 250 million dollars in damage, billions of dollars in today's terms. Only the Turkish and small Jewish quarters of the city and a few patches at the perimeter would remain unburned. The number of dead would never be firmly established, though some would place it on this night in the tens of thousands.

Hungry, tired, and suffering terrible pain in his crooked back, Jennings retreated into the safe house and made his rounds of the women spread on its marble and parquet floors, some clutching newborn babies and others too frightened to speak. He prayed for their deliverance, as well as his own.

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