

“The Ocean Beach Disaster”

Caught in a terrific tide-rip which swept upon them without warning yesterday afternoon at Ocean Beach, scores of bathers fought for their lives, sixty were rescued by life guards and other bathers, two of them were drowned and their bodies recovered, and at least eleven others are missing.

--San Diego Union, May 6, 1918.

Under partly cloudy skies with air and water temperatures in the low 60s, an estimated 5000 beach goers were enjoying the sand at Ocean Beach on Sunday afternoon, May 5, 1918. Among the crowd were scores of off-duty soldiers from Camp Kearny, many of whom were experiencing ocean surf for the first time in their lives.

Several hundred people were in the water in the mid-afternoon and the swimming conditions appeared good. Police lifeguard Louis Chauvaud tested the water at 3:25, wading into the surf toward a group of bathers. Without warning, the tide swept him off his feet.

About twenty soldiers--wading and laughing as they trudged through shallow water--appeared oblivious to the changing conditions. Chauvaud yelled a warning about the rip tide. They ignored the lifeguard and swam off. “The next thing I knew the sea rose and they were caught in the current and carried off.”

For the next two hours, Chauvaud, six other lifeguards, and scores of volunteers fought the surprise rip tides, saving sixty people. But other swimmers appeared beyond reach of the rescuers.

“Never, in the opinion of old residents at Ocean Beach, has the rip been so strong or so unheralded,” the *Union* would later report. The beach area between Niagara and Santa Monica streets appeared particularly affected by the surge.



Lifeguard Louis Chauvaud.

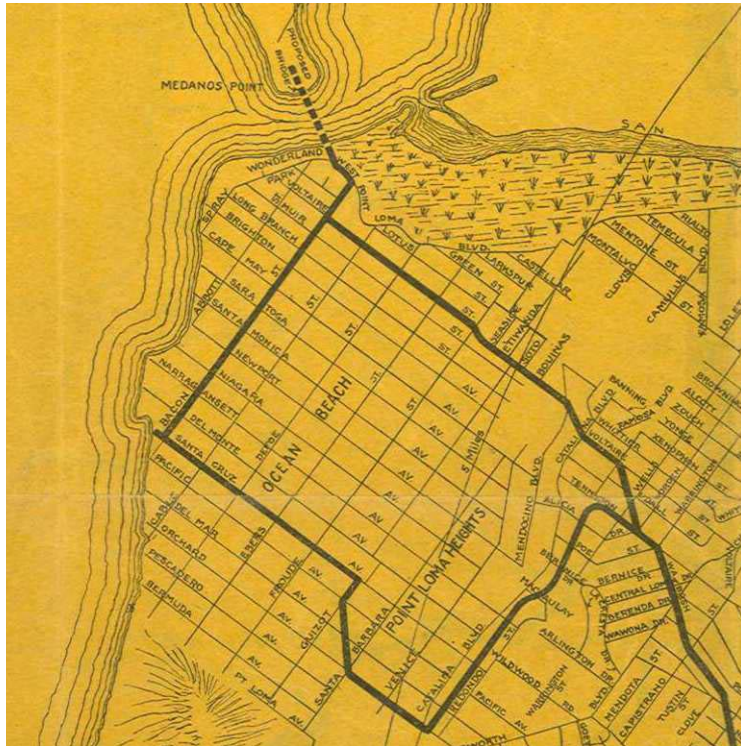
Courtesy San Diego City Lifesaving Association.

Reaching the struggling swimmers was difficult. A city lifeboat proved almost impossible to launch in the heavy breakers. After several attempts it managed to reach one struggling bather. He was pulled into the boat, which immediately capsized. The swimmer sank and was not seen again.

The rescuers had more success with a lifeline. Frank Merritt, a motorcycle patrolman detailed for beach duty that day, dragged a line out into surf and retrieved several people. Others were rescued using floats or pontoons. But a dozen swimmers were beyond help—swept out to sea and presumed drowned.

As the rescued were carried from the surf they were laid on the sand “where willing hands wrapped them in overcoats and shawls and men and women bent themselves to the task of resuscitation.” Other volunteers formed a human chain to hold back the crowds of onlookers.

Most of the victims were servicemen from Camp Kearny or sailors from North Island. The body of Hugh E. Burr, a private from Deming, New Mexico, was pulled from the surf by lifeguards. Private Charles Humphreys, a baker from the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, washed ashore in Mission Bay. The police tried to revive Humphreys with a respiratory device called a “pulmotor” but without success. Other victims would never be recovered.



Ocean Beach, c. 1915 *Thurston's Auto Road Map*

just beyond the breakers. Lifeguard Glen Freeth proposed a last ditch measure for rescued bathers: a beach patrol motorcycle with sidecar that could quickly whisk ocean victims to a hospital.

Three days after the calamity the coroner's jury reported their findings on the deaths of Hugh Burr and Monroe Humphrey. The jury ruled the men died “by accidental drowning, due to unusual condition of tides and currents.” They recommended new equipment for the lifeguards: floats, lifelines, and modern lifeboats—all inspected regularly by the city police.

In the wake of the tragedy, a blame game began. The first targets were owners of three bath houses fronting the beach that rented bathing suits and lockers to the public. The owners had failed to warn bathers when the surf conditions became dangerous, it was alleged. The police threatened to arrest one operator for not keeping basic safety equipment, including a proper lifeboat.

Many noted that most of the victims were servicemen from out of state, who probably had little or no experience swimming in the sea. But an Ocean Beach community leader blamed the soldiers for not listening to the civilians: “When they were directed by Lifeguard Chauvaud to stay away from the danger zone they disobeyed. This heedlessness caused the tragedy.”

The next day a somber city council met on the beach with the mayor and other city officials. Police Chief Steward McMullen announced that conditions at Ocean Beach were still dangerous and the beach was closed. “I have ordered all bathing stopped, at this beach, until you gentlemen can devise some means whereby a recurrence of yesterday's incident will be impossible.”

The councilmen were anxious to help. “I don't propose to sacrifice souls for the sake of dollars,” said Councilman Virgil Bruschi. The lifeguards offered multiple suggestions for spending the city's money including: fencing off dangerous areas, buying modern “surfboats” with well-trained crews, posting warning signs, and anchoring a permanent safety float

Repairing public relations was critical to the local business community. The public was urged to return to the beach--not to swim but to enjoy the dancing pavilion, the skating rink, the merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries, and first-class restaurants. The Ocean Beach Advertising Club promoted a treasure hunt for a buried chest valued at \$2000 with cash, merchandise, and an order for a Maurice Braun landscape sketch.

Six days after the drownings, a quarter-page advertisement in the *Union* would proclaim “The slogan of Ocean Beach is ‘Safety First!’ ” Safe for locals, anyway. “It was the visitors,” the ad claimed, “the strangers to these shores, particularly the stranger in uniform, who perished in Sunday’s deplorable catastrophe.”

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