

Looking Back:

Potomac — the Night the World Burned

When Wade Stanley and William Massingill of Four Oaks, along with William Massingill Jr. of Washington, D.C., tied their fishing boat off at the causeway bridge over the Newport River between Morehead City and Radio Island late one afternoon on Sept. 26, 1961, they had no idea their evening of fishing would turn into a trip through Hell's Kitchen.

Earlier in the day the tanker *Potomac*, a 640-foot long, 84-foot wide T-5 tanker, had docked at the Port Terminal. The ship, a baby super tank class, was

men untied from the trestle, slid out from under the bridge and moved the boat further up the river.

Bob Simpson, a sports writer for the Carteret County News-Times, had spent the day photographing fishermen and their catches on the Morehead City waterfront, gathering stories for his outdoor news column. He returned to his boat in the Morehead City Yacht Basin less than a mile from the port. He was tired and hungry, and a can of chili beans looked fine to him. He had just heated his chili and was coming topside

when a deafening roar filled the air followed quickly by a concussion blow.

"The explosion was so great it knocked the chili from my hand," Simpson said. "I turned to see a great pillar of smoke and flames rising from the direction of the port." Grabbing his movie camera, he jumped in his car and raced toward the port.

G. L. Bennett, manager of Aviation Fuel Terminals, had just arrived home in Beaufort when he got a call saying the trestle running next to the bridge was on fire and the fire was coming toward the tanker. "My God, the whole world's on fire!" he yelled.

The whole world wasn't on fire, but for the next two days many living near the port in Morehead City thought it might be coming to an end.

Witnesses said later that when the flames following the trail of fuel on the water leading from the river bridge back to the tanker reached the ship, they wrapped around the *Potomac* like a blanket.

One account says the ship's purser, D.C. Newton, had stopped by the radio shack on the upper part of the ship 10 minutes before the fire started and asked Peter

Salopek, one of two crewmen who died in the ensuing fire, to go ashore with him. Salopek declined. Newton returned to his quarters and was dressing to go ashore when he heard the third mate yelling, "Something's afire somewhere!" Newton said he looked out the window in time to see the ship lit up by a wall of fire. "When I saw that sheet of flame coming, I knew nothing could help us," he said. "Three seconds later the fire was under the dock." Approximately 500 feet away from the tanker was the Port Authority fuel farm with holding tanks collectively containing 10 million gallons of fuel.

Eleven years earlier in July 1950, an article in the Carteret County News-Times pointed out that the oil tank farm was potentially dangerous in respect to fire. The oil company was not pleased, and urged the newspaper "not to get people excited." Morehead City officials and local firemen discussed the dangers arising from potential fires and the fact the town could not finance equipment to fight such a fire. They recommended that the Coast Guard and the port authorities consider obtaining equipment.



commissioned in January 1957. The *Potomac* left Savannah earlier where she had off-loaded 99,000 barrels of jet fuel. She put ashore at the Port Terminal and was off-loading an additional 101,000 barrels of jet fuel.

After docking, the crew from the tanker and port personnel began the process of pumping the fuel from the tanker to the large fuel tanks located nearby at the port.

The three fishermen upriver were starting to fish when they noticed the smell of gas — so strong it burned their eyes and belabored their breathing. The



Unfortunately, that had not happened.

When the flames on the water reached the tanker they ignited the gas fumes in the forward section of the ship. Forward hatches to the holds were open and the flames ignited residual fumes from off-loaded fuel.

With the first explosion the three fishermen at the river bridge were blown into the water. On the *Potomac*, crewman Salopek was never seen again and one mate, referred to only as Leonard, was later found floating dead in the water. The fire also ignited some of the pillars under the train trestle next to the bridge.

Fisherman Stanley had been able to climb up on to the trestle, but William Massingill Sr. was injured and could not make the climb. His son stayed with him, both clinging to a pylon, while Stanley went for help. All three men suffered second and third degree burns.

Twenty of the 42 crewmen from the *Potomac* were still aboard the tanker when the explosion occurred, and most began jumping overboard. Only three could make it to the gang-plank on foot and safely to shore.

The charter fishing boat, *Bunny II*, captained by Arthur Lewis of Morehead City was nearby when the first explosion rocked the port. Risking his life and the lives of others on board, he ran the charter boat up under the stern of the *Potomac* and began picking up survivors. Just as the *Bunny II* reached the stern a second explosion surrounded the ship and engulfed the charter boat in flames. Tom Kellum, piloting a Marine Fisheries boat, and the Coast Guard cutter *Chilula* joined in the effort.

Bob Simpson said he witnessed the *Bunny II* and the Coast Guard cutter attempting to save crewmen when the second explosion occurred. He firmly believed that all must have perished. "But, miraculously, the flames that I was certain had consumed them had been deflected upwards and over the top of the ship," he said.

Finding relative safety in a depression behind a bulkhead, Simpson continued filming the fire. As he filmed he watched the flames rise as more oil from the tanker spilled into the river. "The incoming tide and southwest breeze began carrying the column of burning fuel back toward the

bridge," he reported. "It appeared the whole world really was on fire."

On shore, firefighters arrived and frantically began trying to control the flames. With the second explosion, 1.5 inch thick steel plating panels were blown off the deck of the tanker. The white-hot rivets that once secured the panels screamed through the air like buckshot, striking the holding tanks on shore and covering them with dents. Firefighters worked frantically to spray the tanks with water. Officials later estimated that nearly five million gallons of water were used over the next 12 to 24 hours to keep the tanks cool.

In the meantime an evacuation of residents living on the causeway near the bridge began, and officials considered evacuating residents in Morehead City from 6th Street to the bridge.

Fire crews from nearly every fire department up to 150 miles away began showing up over the next several hours and joined crews from Carteret County Fire Department already on the scene. Marines from Marine Air Station Cherry Point and a foam crash truck, along with units from Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville and New River Air Station, also began arriving.

Marine helicopter pilots began to fly to the edge of the flames, at terrific risk, using the turbulence from the prop blades to fan flames away from the port. The pilots later said they dodged flames reaching more than 1,500 feet into the air.

The Coast Guard cutter *Chilula*, returning from dropping crewmen on shore, was equipped with fire and salvage pumps and nine fire hoses. She was also equipped with foam and began fighting the fire. Canisters of foam were continually transported to the scene and shuttled out to the cutter.

The Navy ships *Terrebonne Parish* and *Wabkiakum County* along with the air craft carrier *Valley Forge* were laying offshore alongside the assault transport *Oglethorpe*. They all sent in rescue crews and firefighters. The *USS Mosopelea* and *USS Occookeek* later joined them, as did the US Army boat SP-1298. The *Pallium*, a British tanker docked nearby kept her stern engines going. The wash from the props kept the fire on the water from reaching the port. Some reports say other boats kept running through burning fuel



Local newspaper writer Bob Simpson (standing) and Tom Kellum, who was piloting the Marine Fisheries boat, were both witnesses to the explosions.

slicks on the water, breaking them up into smaller fires.

After 12 hours of battling the blaze and having the fire contained to the ship, the decision was made to let the fire burn itself out. At 4:30 p.m. on Oct. 1, 1961, six days later, the fire was considered extinguished.

Of the 44 crewmen who arrived on the *Potomac*, two died and about 20 sustained minor to serious injuries. Other than exposure to heat and exhaustion, no one else was hurt. The only damage to port buildings was the buckling of doors on building nearest the dock.

Officials say a leak caused the fire and the discharge of aviation fuel through the port sea suction valve may have been the culprit. It appears the valve was in an open position at the time the seals were applied. The leaking fuel was deposited into the river and initially spread in the direction of the bridge.

Fuel carried by the current reached the bridge and was possibly ignited there by a Coleman lantern falling overboard

from a fishing boat. The flames started there and made their way back to the tanker on the then outgoing tide.

Only the stern of the *Potomac* remained after the fire. It remained in the harbor for one year. It was recovered and rebuilt into another ship by Keystone Shipping and was given the name *Shenandoah*. The tanker was later purchased by MSC and renamed the *Potomac*. She was activated for Operation Desert Shield in 1990 and stationed overseas for more than 10 years participating in military training. *SS Potomac* also assisted in humanitarian food relief efforts, bringing food and water to famine-devastated areas. After assisting in Bosnia she earned the US Navy's "E" for excellence during convoy exercises in the Indian Ocean.

Helen Kerr Outland is a reporter for the Carteret County News-Times in Morehead City. She wrote this article using numerous articles and reports about the fire, as well as an interview with Bob Simpson, who still lives in Morehead City.

