XII. SAFETY AND INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENTS

1. The Safety Section

At the outbreak of the war in Europe in September, 1939, the Safety Section of the Norfolk Navy Yard consisted of a Lieutenant (jg) designated as Safety Officer and one clerk-typist. They operated as a minor sub-division of the Shop Superintendent's Office and were located in Building 33. (Ch. IV; Sec. 6).

At that time, compensation reports to the United States Employees Compensation Commission were handled by the shops and the Labor Board. Statistical information concerning lost-time accidents, and the days chargeable to accidents, was compiled in the Labor Board and provided to the Safety Officer. Data concerning man hours worked was accumulated by a clerk in the Shop Superintendent's Office and turned over to the Safety Officer. The Safety Officer and his clerk computed the frequency and severity rates and prepared only the few reports required at that time.

No separate allocation of funds for either personal protective equipment, or safety devices, or machinery-guarding, or safeguards of any sort had been made. Any work of this nature was conducted at the discretion of the Shop Superintendent and charged to shop expense. There were no field forces available to assist the Safety Officer in the investigation of accidents and the elimination of the causes of accidents.

The method of compiling accident statistics in use then was radically different from the code of the American Standards Association, which has been adopted by the Navy Department as standard, therefore

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direct comparison between the experience at that time and the experience as shown today is impossible.

The Yard was rapidly expanding at the time, both in area and personnel, and in 1940, at the recommendation of the Safety Section and the Medical Department, six sub-Dispensaries were established at various locations in the Yard area to furnish convenient medical treatment. (Med.Dept. His. Rept. III/P2)

During the building of the ALABAMA, the New Construction Superintendent became convinced of the necessity of some method for the control of hazards and dangerous conditions, and organized a group of laborers from Shop 72 to patrol the ship, reporting and correcting obvious accident hazards and fire hazards.

This initial group functioned with encouraging success, but it was soon realized that being laborers they were in a poor position to talk to mechanics about unsafe practices that they might observe, therefore, the membership of the group was revised to include mechanics in November, 1942. It is significant to note that the operation of this group was confined to New Construction activities exclusively, consisting of the Buildingways, Drydock No. 8, Drydock No. 2, Turret Shop, Pier 6 and St. Helena, the latter two locations being used primarily for outfitting. This was the start of the Safety Marshal Corps. Safety Marshals did not come under the cognizance of the Safety Officer during this period.

In late 1940, the Safety Officer was given one civilian assistant. This number was increased to three by November, 1942. Safety indoctrination of new officers was established in early 1941, and much of

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the time of the civilian assistants was spent in this work. In the meantime, funds had been allocated for safety work and a Safety Charge Job Number was set up in January, 1942.

In December, 1942, at the direction of the Safety Officer, the Shop Masters appointed Shop Safety Marshals who, under the supervision of the Safety Officer, were to follow up on accident control in the operations of their respective shops. The Supply Department was not included in this arrangement until March, 1943, at which time they appointed four Safety Marshals which made a total of 27 men for the Yard. In May, 1943, the New Construction Safety Marshals were brought under the cognizance of the Safety Officer.

In the meantime, the Safety Section was expanded. The Safety Officer's billet was taken by a Lieutenant Commander, several junior officers were added as assistants, and some civilian employees were designated as Safety Inspectors and Safety Engineers. In addition to his regular duties, the Safety Officer was charged with the responsibility of setting up the Passive Defense Organization covering organization of various groups required in Air Raid Defense. (Ch. VII; Sec. 1).

In order to accommodate the increased responsibility, the office was shifted to Building 68. At this time, the Safety Officer was designated by the Commandant to be the "Official superior" of all civilian employees in the Yard, in so far as the United States Employees Compensation Commission is concerned, and to assume full responsibility for the transmitting of all accident reports and investigations to the U. S. E. C. C.

Assumption of this responsibility by the Safety Section required

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additional clerical help and expansion of the office space, with the result that in the spring of 1943 the office was again moved to larger quarters. The second floor of Building 64, south end, was fitted up as the yard Safety Office and is in use today as the headquarters of the Safety Section.

Prior to 1943, the procurement of personal protective equipment was normally left up to the individual shops with little or no guidance in the matter of selection of correct equipment. Actually little equipment was used or was available in the Yard. During 1942, authorization was received in the yard to establish a central tool room to act as a distributing center to various shop tool rooms in housing safety equipment and supplies. At the same time authorization was given to procure equipment and supplies as necessary and as approved by the Safety Officer.

In general this list included rescue breathing apparatus, hard hats, goggles, gloves, safety shoes, toe guards, aprons, respirators, ladder safety shoes and many other types of devices for the protection of the individual worker. All safety equipment and supplies are made available to workers without charge except safety shoes. A safety shoe store, established in March, 1944, by a private contractor, operates inside the Yard on shifts convenient to yard workers. Several types of safety shoes for men and women are sold at normal cost to yard workers.

In the early part of 1943, arrangements were made in Shop 31 to clean, sterilize, and repair certain types of personal protective equipment. This beginning, although small, has developed into a

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fairly large size project. The sterilizing and repair of this equipment has since been transferred from Shop 31 to Shop 74, where an average of about ten thousand units are cleaned and repaired every month. The equipment of this nature in the yard today constitutes a volume and variety of such an extent that practically any type of emergency or normal work procedure can be handled.

Although comparison of current accident frequency and severity rates with 1942 and prior dates is impossible, comparison can be made with 1943 and 1944. The 1943 frequency and severity rate was 23.2 and 1.39 respectively and in 1944 these rates were 19.06 and 1.79. The 1945 accumulative rate including September is 13.17 and 1.02. Examination of these figures shows a substantial reduction in both frequency and severity, which can be translated into definite evidence of improved productive efficiency thereby justifying the cost and effort of the entire accident prevention program.

2. The Saturn Fire

During 1944 and the early part of 1945, the period of the Yard's heaviest work load, four major fires occurred, one of them with heavy loss of life.

The first of these, and the greatest tradegy in the modern history of the Norfolk Navy Yard, occurred on April 27, 1944, when fifteen employees of the Yard lost their lives and twenty other employees and two Navy enlisted men were injured in a fire aboard the USS SATURN, AK-49, then undergoing conversion.

The SATURN was a hot job. Welders, burners, joiners, shipfitters

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