

1962

Cadet Tells Of Tragic Train Crash

By JOHN FERRIS

"It was part of our training. We were just a group of young Americans doing what we saw we had to do."

That's how Jerry Aspland of Pittsburg, 22-year-old California Maritime Academy midshipman, modestly described the heroic action of a group of cadets at the scene of a shattering train collision in Columbia last month.

The cadets from Vallejo did a "magnificent" rescue job, said Capt. Carl G. Bowen, commanding officer of the Golden Bear.

"In spite of the language barrier, they were able to provide the leadership and the help when it was needed," Bowen said. "The people down there gave them a lot of credit."

Aspland, whose home is at 124 Cleveland Ave., Pittsburg, returned Friday after a 2½-month cruise aboard the Golden Bear, the Academy's 419-foot training ship.

As a first classman (senior) and battalion commander, it became Aspland's duty to direct the 87 cadets on the train after the crash. The men were on a pleasure jaunt to the city of Cali.

"We completely took charge of the rescue operation," Aspland recalled.

The accident occurred at 7:50 a.m., Feb. 22, an hour and a half out of the Colombian seaport of Buenaventura over

Continued Page 8, Col. 3

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Continued from Page 1

seaport of Buenaventura over the 140-kilometer route through the mountains to Cali.

More than 40 persons were killed and 60 injured when a freight train and the passenger train smashed headon.

"We were in good spirits," the midshipman said, "Looking forward to two days of fun in Cali."

"Several of us were riding up on a platform around the locomotive. It was the best seat in the house. All of the fellows from the Academy who were injured were there just before the collision.

"I'd just gone back to our cars at the rear of the train, or I'd have been up there, too.

"The men on the locomotive saw the train coming, but at first it didn't register. But when they saw there was going to be a headon crash, they jumped. The trains were approaching each other at 30 miles an hour."

One man, Paul F. Murphy, 22, of San Pedro, didn't jump in time. He was pinned between the two locomotives, in agony from a shattered arm and a broken leg.

Engineering students from the Academy, applying their knowledge of machinery, removed portions of both engines with virtually no tools in order to free Murphy.

Meanwhile, other cadets hastily dismantled one side of a wooden coach to free the dozens of injured and dead.

"First, we had sent men up and down the track to stop any oncoming trains," Asplund said.

"All the training in first aid we'd had at the Academy paid off. We applied splints and placed persons with back injuries on boards."

"We made stretchers out of doors, and used liquor both as an antiseptic and as an anaesthetic. Most of us lost our web belts, using them to bind up persons with broken bones.

"At no time did we know what was being done by railway officials, except for one doctor who came from an aid station about three miles away, we received no help for two hours.

Then a group of nurses and

a couple of doctors showed up on a handcar. Later ambulances and other medical personnel arrived. By then, though, the midshipmen had the situation completely under control, said Aspland.

Ten of the cadets, including Murphy and Terence Purdom, 20, of 838 36th St., Richmond, were injured in the crash, although several who leaped from the locomotive suffered only sprained ankles.

Many of the Colombians helped with the rescue effort, but others didn't know what to do, Aspland said.

One wooden coach had been telescoped into another and one had left the track. Still another, rammed by the three steel coaches at the rear, slammed into the two cars already jammed together.

Bad as it was, it could have been worse, according to Aspland, who said:

"We had just passed through two tunnels 200 or 300 yards long. Then three hundred yards further, the railway runs along a sheer 300-foot drop."

With the exception of the injured, most of the cadets on the ill-fated train returned by truck and bus to the Golden Bear without seeing Cali.



CADET JERRY ASPLAND Heroic Rescue Work