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Volunteers of Des Moines Extinguish Riviera Blaze

VILLEFRANCE, France — Some 200 sailors and Marines from the heavy Cruiser USS Des Moines, flagship of the Sixth Fleet, recently helped battle a spectacular forest fire which threatened sections of Nice and Villefranche on the French Riviera.

The Des Moines fire-fighters, all off-duty volunteers, fought alongside a smaller number of local firemen for five hours before the blaze was brought under control.

Only the fortuitous absence of a wind prevented probable destruction of many mountainside villas, some of which were evacuated, Des Moines officers said.

There were no casualties, but two square miles of trees and crops were destroyed, the officers reported.

Capt S. P. Moncure, commander of the Des Moines, called the mayor of Villefranche when he saw a huge cloud of smoke atop Mount Vinaigrier and asked if ship personnel were needed to fight the fire. The mayor replied, "Send all the help you can spare."

More than 200 sailors and nine officers, led by Lt Leonard Kleeman, responded to the captain's call.

Armed with fire axes, picks, shovels, machetes and rolls of canvas, the Des Moines party loaded into the ship's small boats and set out on their mission. Navy vehicles and local buses took them to the scene.

Kleeman divided his force into two groups and maintained communications with them and with the Des Moines via Walkie Talkie radios.

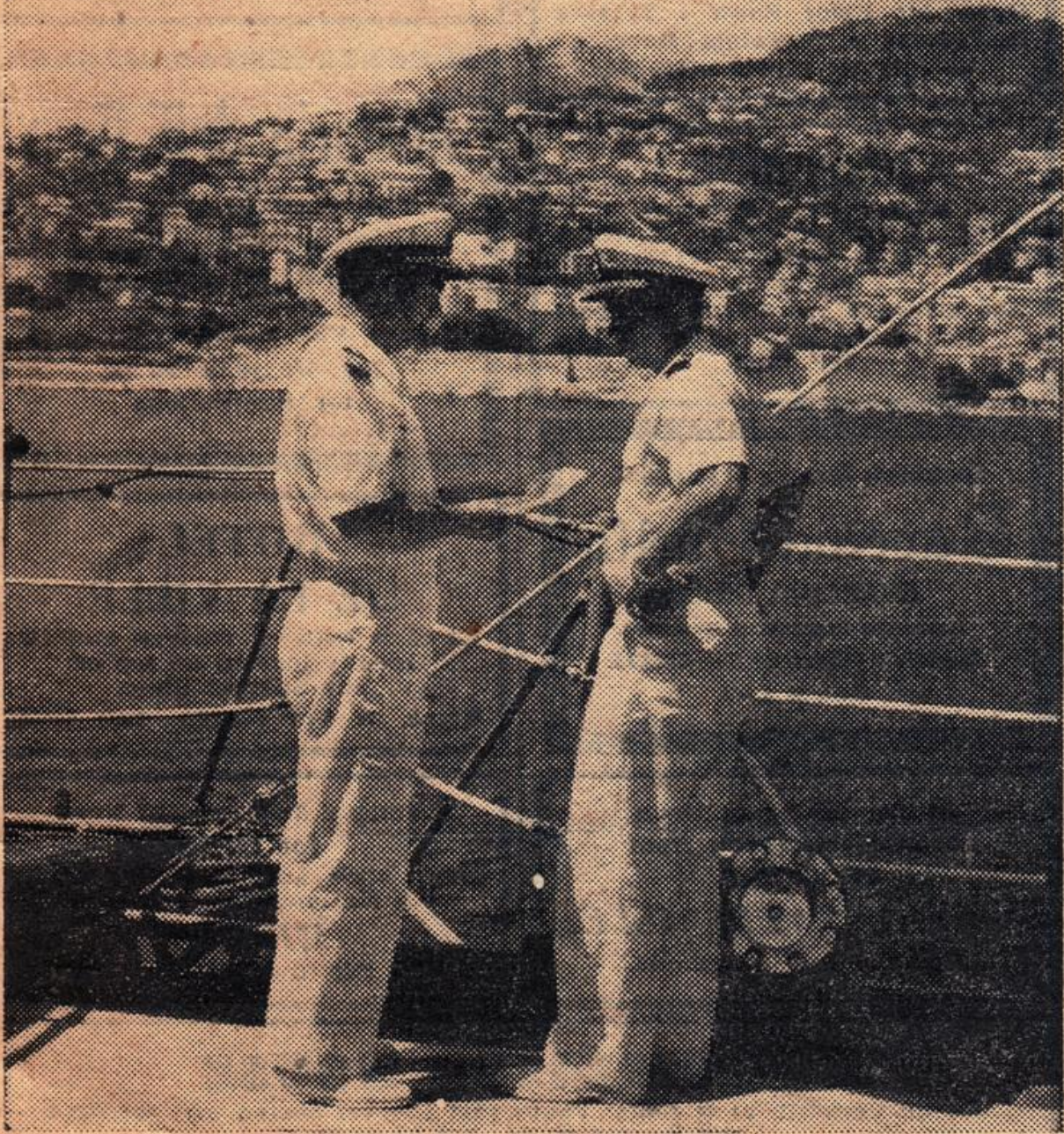
One particularly anxious moment came when a land mine planted by the Germans in World War II exploded. No personnel were in the immediate vicinity, however, and no one was injured.

When the fire was under control, the Navy men, their faces blackened by smoke, helped the evacuees move their furniture back into their homes.

The Nice newspapers praised the work of the Americans. Moncure gave them a "well done."



FRENCH POLICE lead a group of Navy and Marine fire-fighters toward the scene of a mountain-top fire near Villefranche, France. Their ship, the USS Des Moines, can be seen anchored in the background. The men had the fire under control some five hours later, then helped families return furniture to villas that had been evacuated when the fire broke out.



MEANWHILE, back at the ship, Capt S. P. Moncure, left, discusses possible casualty measures with the ship's medical officer, Lt Ronald Tepper. As it turned over, however, no casualty measures were necessary. None of the volunteers was injured.



A DETACHMENT of Des Moines sailors who ultimately numbered more than 200 heads for shore to join the fight. The volunteers answered a call by Capt S. P. Moncure, commander of the Des Moines, after Moncure had checked into blaze.



TAKING ADVANTAGE of nature, these USS Des Moines sailors attempt to contain the blaze by using green tree branches to beat out the fire which threatened mountainside villas in the Nice-Villefranche area. At one point the fire detonated a land mine planted by the Germans in World War II. However, no one was near it. The explosion caused no injuries.