

MANY VOLUNTEER WORKERS

SERVICEMEN AND CIVILIANS

CROWD KEPT BACK BY HOSE

Although generally the public stood well back from the fire, a hose had to be turned on a crowd at the corner of Cashel and Colombo streets to drive them away. At the time the collapse into the street of Ballantyne's building was likely.

The hose was also used to disperse a crowd which had gathered on the veranda of the shop opposite Beath's corner. Collapse of the veranda would have added to the problems of keeping order, fighting the fire and waiting for emergencies.

It was a hushed crowd which waited at Lichfield street and in Colombo street beyond Kincaid's to the north beyond the Grand Hotel in Cashel street and to the east, in Cashel street beyond Bates' building for confirmation of the fears that tragedy had stalked with the fire. As rumours trickled through of the mounting death roll, the crowds became silently horror-stricken.

All the men at Military District and Army Headquarters were detailed to help at the fire and two engines were brought from Burnham to the city. A fire engine from Wigram was also brought in and members of the Air Force assisted the City Fire Brigade. Naval ratings helped with the fire hoses throughout the fire.

Tributes to Assistance

Men from every Army establishment near Christchurch, airmen from Wigram, and sailors and Royal Marines from the two warships in Lyttelton were foremost among the willing helpers at the fire yesterday afternoon and last evening. A great tribute to their work was paid by the superintendent of the Fire Brigade (Mr A. Morrison) and the superintendent of police (Mr H. Scott).

Sailors from the Bellona and the Arbutus who were on leave in Christchurch maintained the tradition of the British Navy in being the first to help in any disaster. Many tossed their jackets on to the footpaths, and rushed to the assistance of firemen handling the hoses, while others helped the police to control the crowds.

The Press, Nov 19, 1947. p.8.

TELEPHONE EXCHANGE OVERLOADED

A few minutes after the fire at Ballantyne's store started yesterday, telephone lines throughout the city were paralysed as the maximum number of calls the central exchange can handle was reached. By 4.30 p.m. it was impossible to make a telephone call from most city offices and it was not until 5.30 p.m. that the volume of calls reached a normal size. Police officers, officials, and business men from buildings near the fire were embarrassed throughout this time by being deprived of the use of the telephone when it was most needed.

The Press, Nov 19, 1947. p.8.

SEARCH AMONG RUINS DELAYED BY DANGER FROM DAMAGED WALLS

With unsearched parts of the gutted building deemed unsafe for workers, recovery of the remains of victims of Ballantyne's fire was postponed this morning while the debris was cleared.

It is believed that there may be more bodies in the building, particularly in the rear portions, and round the entrance on the corner of Colombo and Cashel Streets, where it is still too dangerous to work.

Pumps clearing the basements of water were nearing the end of their task this morning.

There may be bodies in the tangle of girders, beams, twisted piping, and workroom machinery littering the basements.

Great baulks of charred timber, a foot or more square, and between thirty and forty feet long, and steel girders weighing several tons, were wrenched out of the wreckage this morning, to clear the way for completion of the search.

With a big Army crane used as a winch from Colombo Street, the wreckage was pulled out into the roadway from the main entrance block, on the corner of Cashel and Colombo Streets.

Chunks of masonry, roofing iron, twisted piping, and assorted debris crashed down as the heavy beams came clear. Second floor joists, rafters, and other materials from the upper part of the block had fallen on to the heavier beams supporting the first floor.

Searchers were ready to comb this section of the building yesterday afternoon, but it was deemed unsafe until the precariously-balanced top-hammer had been removed. Some of the big baulks of timber had fallen at an angle, and it was feared that

if they were removed parts of the walls would fall, but this did not happen this morning.

Draining Basements

Before the pumping out started, the basements had between six and eight feet of water in them. By mid-day, the level was down to a few inches, and the pumps were having trouble with cinder and paper-choked intakes.

Operations were again under the direction of the City Engineer (Mr E. Somers), who had at his disposal more than 100 men, drawn from the City Council, the Public Works Department, and the Army.

Heavily pedimented, and bulging ominously, the remaining and higher three-storey section of the Colombo Street frontage has been worrying salvage workers since the afternoon of the fire, for it appeared to be ready to fall at any time.

Held by Cables

Yesterday afternoon, this was pinned back to remaining steel floor joists with wire ropes, and to-day was declared to be safe. The Oamaru stone and brick structure may be felled at the week-end. The Cashel Street frontage, though bulging a foot out of plumb at its centre, is deemed to be reasonably safe.

Although the overhead power cables were in place yesterday afternoon, trams were not able to run past the building this morning because of the salvage operations.

Late yesterday afternoon, the strong-room door, perched high up on a wall visible from Colombo Street, was prized open by hydraulic jacks and heavy timbers. As soon as air was admitted, the oven-hot interior burst into flames. Firemen quickly subdued the blaze.

It was thought that someone might have taken refuge in the strong-room, but this was not the case.

The Star-Sun, Nov 20, 1947. p.3.

Strict Control for Traffic in City

Strict supervision of traffic in the area affected by the fire will be maintained until the restoration of the lights at the intersection of Colombo and Cashel Streets makes possible the re-establishment of a normal flow. Since the outbreak traffic has not been allowed in Cashel Street between Oxford Terrace and High Street, nor in Colombo Street between Hereford and Lichfield Streets.

As diversion of transport is necessary, double-banked parking in Hereford and Lichfield Streets, and in Manchester Street between Armagh Street and Moorhouse Avenue, will be strictly prohibited.

The Star-Sun, Nov 19, 1947. p.1.