

TO: Mr. Charles A. Gates, Disaster
FROM: Mr. William D. Dyer, First Aid Service
SUBJECT: REPORT ON COCOANUT GROVE DISASTER

December 1, 1942

A phone call to my home was received in the proximity of two o'clock in the morning of November 29th from Mr. H. G. Gilson directing me to report to the Southern Mortuary as soon as possible to assist in identifying the dead casualties of the Cocoanut Grove Fire. Mr. Gilson also requested that the "emergency" list be called so that ample help would be available.

Inasmuch as neither of us knew where the Southern Mortuary was located, a call was put to Boston Police Hdqts. who stated the location but that it was believed that aid was needed more at the Northern. Made a call to the Chapter House directly after the call to Boston Police. Spoke to Mr. Tim Hurley and to you. You confirmed the police information, so I made my way as rapidly as possible to N.Grove Street with one of our crew, Mr. Carl Hugelman.

We reported to Dr. Brickley at the Garage of the Northern Mort. at 2:20 a.m. The Dr. and his several assistants kept us busy looking for identifiable objects on the badly burned bodies. Later several of the "emergency" list arrived, responding to the phone calls from Red Cross Hdqts. Dr. Brickley assured me they could be of no assistance as there were all ready almost too many under foot so they were dismissed with thanks. Dr. Brickley was very courteous about the whole matter and said he appreciated our willingness to help. At approximately 3:30 a.m. all we could do had been done and it was suggested that we take the Brighton District 14 Ambulance to the scene of the fire and do what we could there.

This we did, but upon arriving at Piedmont Street, we were not allowed to go into the area because of no suitable, visible identification and because there was no one in charge to whom to report. At 4 a.m. we went back to the Northern Mortuary offering our services again to the Army and Navy ambulance crews but again, due to lack of visible identification were not accepted as much more than morbid, curious spectators. At 4:30 a.m. our group left. Mr. Harper met a Captain Harvey of Div. 16 and went with him to the temporary morgue on Piedmont St. The rest of us went to our homes.

The group that responded to the phone calls from the Chapter House felt that there should have been some one to whom they could have reported. They felt that because we have organized Disaster First Aid Squads they should have been called much earlier than they were so that real service could have been rendered.

The disaster seemed to prove that we need some sort of identification that will be recognized by our public officials, not only on our men's persons, but a n illuminated (or otherwise) identification for the cars.

Maybe what is needed more is an educational (if it could be called that) program so that the Public, Police, Fire and other Depts. would look to the Red Cross as the logical organization to step into any disaster.