

A Deadly April in 1947

By Steven W. Hooper

Protecting our nation's borders has always been a dangerous job. When we think of the risks to U.S. Customs officers, we tend to think of armed assaults by criminals. But other major causes of death to officers are communicable diseases, natural disasters, and accidents. Almost 75-years ago on April 16, 1947, one of these accidents occurred in Texas City, Texas.

The Port of Texas City is located on the mainland adjacent to Galveston Bay across from Galveston Island. U.S. Customs Deputy Collector Peter H. Bima was on duty this Wednesday morning when the trouble began. At 8:00 a.m., a small fire was detected in the hold of the 437-foot French cargo ship *SS Grandcamp* which held an export cargo of ammonium nitrate to be used as fertilizer by French farmers.

Firefighters were called to the scene and over the next hour attempts were made to extinguish the fire without success. At approximately 9:00 a.m., the captain of the *Grandcamp* ordered his crew to "steam the hold," a firefighting method where steam is piped in to extinguish the fire. But this tactic proved ineffective and dangerous.

At 9:15 a.m., the heat and pressure in the hold of the *Grandcamp* caused the ammonium nitrate to reach an explosive threshold. The ship detonated with a force that leveled over 1,000 buildings and shattered over half the windows on Galveston Island. The explosion was so powerful that two private aircraft flying 10-miles away were knocked from the air by the shockwave. The *Grandcamp's* 2-ton anchor was found 1.6 miles from the ship's berth.

Deputy Collector Bima was one of the 567 casualties of the largest non-nuclear explosion in the United States. But the tragedy was still unfolding. Docked next to the *Grandcamp* was the *SS High Flyer* which also contained a cargo of ammonium nitrate and sulfur. The *Grandcamp* explosion ignited the *High Flyer's* cargo. The crew began racing against the clock to cut the ship free of its moorings and move the ship out to sea without success. Fifteen hours after the *Grandcamp* explosion, the *High Flyer* exploded killing at least two more people, destroying another cargo ship, and increasing the damage to the port area. One of the propellers on the ship was thrown a mile inland.

What became known as the Texas City Disaster is still considered the worst industrial accident in American history. In addition to the estimated 567 people killed, more than 5,000 people were injured and over 1,784 were admitted to area hospitals. Fires from the disaster were still burning a week later and the process of recovering bodies took nearly a month. Property damage included over five hundred residences, a chemical plant, and a tank farm. Incredibly, some people as close as seventy feet from the explosion survived; but unfortunately, Deputy Collector Bima was not one of them.

Deputy Collector Pier (Peter) Harry Bima was born in Monte Carlo in the Principality of Monaco on October 30, 1886. He immigrated to the United States in 1908. He was a U.S. military veteran and had been employed by U.S. Customs for 28-years. Bima was married to Florence Helen *Broughton* and they had two children, Marjorie and Thelma. Deputy Collector Bima and his wife are both buried at the Oleander Cemetery in Galveston, Texas.

Peter Bima is honored on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Wall of Honor in Washington, D.C.

Primary Sources:

Anonymous, "Texas City Disaster", *Texas State Historical Association, Handbook of Texas Online*, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-city-disaster>.

"Pier Harry Bima," *Find a Grave* website, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/124438503/pier-harry-bima>.

"Texas City Disaster," *Wikipedia* website, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas_City_disaster.

Woolley, Roi B., "Ammonium Nitrate Explosion Held Cause of Texas Disaster", *Fire Engineering* website, May 01, 1947, <https://www.fireengineering.com/leadership/ammonium-nitrate-explosion-held-cause-of-texas-disaster/#gref>.

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Figure 1: Deputy Collector Peter Bima, age 60, was fatally injured in April of 1947 when the SS *Grandcamp* exploded while docked at the Port of Texas City, Texas. Bima was employed by U.S. Custom for 28 years. He began his career as an examiner at the Port of Galveston.

Source: Officer Down Memorial Page website,
<https://www.odmp.org/officer/reflections/1728-deputy-collector-pier-harry-bima>.

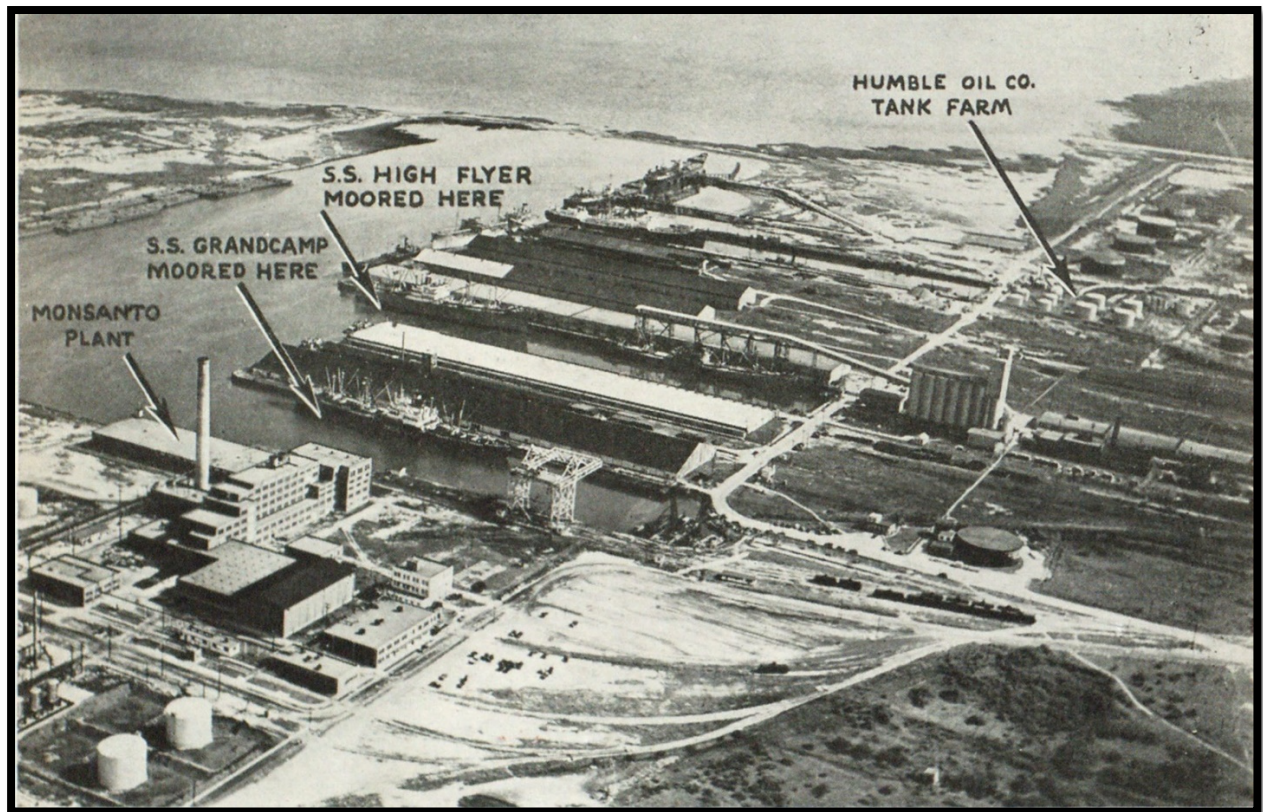


Figure 2: Aerial photograph of the Texas City docks illustrating the position of the vessels *Grandcamp* and *High Flyer*. The Monsanto Plant and the Humble Oil tank farm were also destroyed by the explosion of the two vessels. Both vessels were loaded with ammonium nitrate.

Source: Fire Engineering website, <https://www.fireengineering.com/leadership/ammonium-nitrate-explosion-held-cause-of-texas-disaster/#gref>.



Figure 3: Photograph of the SS Grandcamp prior to the explosion and fire at Texas City, Texas in April of 1947. A combination of fire in the hold of the ship containing ammonium nitrate and steam pumped into the hold of the ship to extinguish the fire caused the largest non-nuclear explosion in United States history. The cause of the fire was never determined.

Source: Moore Memorial Public Library website, <https://library.texascitytx.gov/466/The-Grandcamp>.



Figure 4: Parked cars located a quarter mile from the SS Grandcamp explosion.

Source: University of Houston Digital Library, Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11834231>.



Figure 5: View from the Texas City Post Office where Deputy Collector Peter Bima's office was located. Note the shattered glass in the open window. U.S. Customs also had an office on the dock near where the *SS Grandcamp* exploded. Bima's exact location at the time of the blast is unknown.

Source: The Portal to Texas History website,
<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth11799/>.



Figure 6: View of smoke from the SS Grandcamp explosion from downtown Galveston which is located approximately ten miles from the Texas City docks.

Source: The Portal to Texas History website,
<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph11803/>.