

# Buck JONES



## COCOANUT GROVE CONTROVERSY

by Boyd Magers

Buck Jones was the 481st person of, eventually, 492 who died in the 12-15 minute Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire in Boston, MA, Saturday, Nov. 28, 1942. Buck died Monday Nov. 30 of critical second and third degree burns to the face, mouth and throat and smoke inhalation. He would have been 51 December 12. In the ensuing 53 years many reports and stories have been perpetuated concerning Buck's heroism, leading trapped victims to safety and returning to the raging inferno to help others. Did it happen? Let's look objectively at the facts and then decide. First, a bit of background on why Buck was even at a nightclub. Buck's contingency was on a combination war bond selling tour and promotional junket for his Monogram films. On Nov. 27 Buck phoned his wife, Odille, to tell her he'd caught a cold on his cross country tour. Altho not in the best of health when the group reached Boston, he stayed on rather than disappoint children who expected to see him Saturday, Nov. 28. That Saturday as Buck visited a children's hospital, several pictures of him were taken. One of those has been widely publicized over the years as the last photo taken of Buck. Actually, the last picture taken of him was with promoter Martin Sheridan at their hotel following an afternoon radio interview. Mid-morning, Buck went to the Boston Garden for a rally of about 12,000 children. In a drizzling rain that afternoon Buck and a group watched the Boston College—Holy Cross football game from the Mayor's box. Buck also gave a newspaper interview. In an Aug. 21, '95 letter to us, the tour's Boston publicity representative, Martin Sheridan, stated, "I arranged Buck Jones' schedule in Boston with the exception of the Cocoanut Grove dinner. We were supposed to have been at the Buddies' Club on Boston Common (sort of a USO) at 9:30pm to meet servicemen for a couple of hours." Buck begged off due to his cold. Theatre owners had arranged a testimonial dinner for him at the Cocoanut Grove. He attended out of courtesy to the distributors honoring him. The squat, one and half story, block long Cocoanut Grove was the in-place to go in Boston at that time. Fronting on Piedmont, the rear faced Shawmut Street, one end bordering Broadway, the other adjoining a block of buildings. The Broadway side was

about half the width of the rest of the building, an open air parking lot occupied the remaining space.

Entrances to the Melody Lounge and the entrance to the entertainers dressing rooms flanked the band stand. The club featured a Polynesian motif with fake palm trees. The walls and ceiling were hung with colored cloth. In the main room rope braiding ran up several poles, topped with artificial palm leaves and coconuts. On Nov. 30, 1942, Associated Press printed details of an inquest probing how the "flash fire" began: "Among the first of the Cocoanut Grove employees to testify was Stanley Tomaszewski, a 16 year old bar boy, who told police he lit a match to screw in an electric light bulb, a moment later flames shot up from a palm tree, enveloping nearby drapes. 'I led some people to the street. The smoke was so thick I couldn't breathe.' Bartender John Bradley, his head swathed in bandages, testified, 'There was a flash. Fire ran right across the ceiling. I got out through the kitchen.' Bradley told of hooking open a door and shouting, 'Come this way—but no one came,' he added. 'Smoke hit me in the face. I put my hands to my head and my hair was ablaze.' Fire Department officials told of body clogged doorways when they arrived on the scene around 10:20. The first firemen there were forced to crawl over bodies of trapped victims before they could get inside." According to NEWSWEEK (12/7/42),



the fire began shortly after 10pm. Panic set in as a girl, her hair ablaze, ran from the Melody Lounge in the basement where the fire had begun, screaming "Fire!" Flames flashed with incredible swiftness through the imitation palm trees and flimsy decorations. Smoke swirled in choking masses through hallways. Blazing draperies fell, setting clothes and hair on fire. Patrons were huddled under tables and trampled to death. Others tripped and blocked the six foot wide stairway up from the lounge. An estimated 800-1,000 people were thrown into pure bedlam attempting to get out of the flaming, choking inferno. Flames moved upstairs to the main bar and dining room within 5 minutes. At the Nov. 30 inquest, Deputy Fire Chief John McDonough testified a side door was equipped with a panic lock which would

shape than I. My head and eyes were bandaged so even if I knew Buck was also in Mass General there was no way I could have seen him." Sheridan's wife died in the fire. Buck's fire ravaged body was found by a Coast Guardsman and a taxi driver aiding in rescue efforts in the very area Marty Sheridan alludes to. It is highly doubtful, had Buck gone in and out of the fire twice to rescue people, his body would have been found in the exact area where his party was seated. It is also known lights went out within 2-3 minutes of the start of the fire. Remember, we are dealing with a heavy smoke flash fire in a 12-15 minute period. How could anyone have been able to see to accomplish rescue efforts? How could Buck have made his way to the body clogged revolving door, let alone re-enter it to rescue people? Some *later* accounts have Buck getting out through the roof. Armand Dubois, quoted in Buck Rainey's LIFE AND FILMS OF BUCK JONES, states, "The roof was a sliding roof and it was locked at the time." Dubois went to Boston to research Jones' death. In all the newspaper accounts of the fire, the ensuing inquests and in further magazine articles (NEWSWEEK, LIFE, etc.) and statements by city and fire officials, there are *no* accounts of Buck (or anyone) leaving the inferno and re-entering it to save others. Buck's widow, Dell, takes umbrage to these reports. She believes differently after hearing from Trem Carr, head of Monogram, who flew to Boston after the fire. With all due respect to Dell, she was not there and neither was Trem Carr. What accounts Carr relayed and his motivations for them will never be known at this late date. Rough Riders producer Scotty Dunlap (below) was with Buck at the Cocoanut Grove. He was badly burned and hospitalized for some



**The last known photo ever taken of Buck Jones as he visited a children's hospital on the morning of the Cocoanut Grove fire later that night.**

open under pressure, but it was out of order and the door was secured by another lock. This left only the main revolving door as an escape route. This door quickly became jammed. Nearly 200 people died in heaps behind this revolving door. Fire Commissioner William Reilly later said the leather covered walls of the club had been treated with a fire resistant compound which kept them from bursting into flame but caused them to give off dense clouds of thick choking smoke. City building commissioner James Mooney said the dead and injured were piled in heaps. To him it was evident a terrific fight had taken place in the panicking darkness, "Many of the bodies were actually torn apart." Where was Buck Jones in this fiery melee? We again quote from Marty Sheridan's 8/21 letter, "Our group was at two or three different tables on the mezzanine. When the flames, fumes and smoke hit us I passed out and later came to on the floor. Shock had already set in and there was no way I could have gotten to my feet and attempted to rescue my wife or anyone else. I never saw anything in the few newspapers I still have to the effect Buck got out of the Cocoanut Grove and rescued anyone. Furthermore, in a book published by the Mass General Hospital on the treatment of their patients there was no reference to Buck Jones (where all of us were referred to as 'Case 36'). The fact he died two days after the fire would seem to indicate he was in worse



time. For reasons known only to Dunlap, he never released a statement as to how he got out of the Grove that tragic night. He was found outside near a fire engine. His hands badly burned, he reportedly asked a youngster to reach in his pocket, take out \$100 and phone an ambulance for him. Scotty Dunlap, Monogram's Trem Carr and Buck had earlier formed Great Western Pictures to produce

the Rough Riders series for release through Monogram. Each man invested \$3,300. Years later, the mercenary Dunlap purchased back Buck's stock in Great Western from Dell Jones for exactly what Buck had invested, \$3,300. Apparently having also acquired Carr's share, Dunlap, now sole owner of the Rough Riders series, sold the films to TV for \$250,000. Dunlap died in 1970 at 77. No one can say for certain exactly what transpired in the bedlam of the 12-15 minute holocaust. We can only rely on the testimony and facts we have. We would all like to believe Buck was a hero. And he was. All 492 who died that night are heroes who have saved other lives through the years because of fire laws that have been changed and enforced to prevent any such mass tragedy from ever occurring again.

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