

Chile's Unique American LaFrance 706 PFO Challenger

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American LaFrance is by essence synonymous of fire fighting apparatus and its quality has been appreciated world wide. This paper is an example of the significance American LaFrance can have in a firefighting organization.

Fire Fighting In Chile

Fire fighting in Chile is unique to say the least. All its members are volunteers and only drivers are permanent hired personnel. Chile is a country of some 15 million inhabitants. The country has about 306 Fire Departments with approximately 1100 fire companies. There are around 36,000 volunteers of which half are active.

Fire departments as such go back to the mid 19th century when foreigners, mainly businessmen and traders, envisioned the need for organized fire fighting in Chile.

It was in Chile's main port that an efficient fire fighting capacity was organized. Valparaiso at the time was a permanent stop over for all the ships and vessels trading from the Atlantic to the Pacific and vice versa, considering the Panama Canal did not exist. The city was flourishing and there were significant foreign colonies, mainly British, German, Italian, and American as well as the traditional Spanish immigrants.

In December of 1850, there was a meeting at the town hall where the attendees coordinated the means to combat fires. This meant asking for the necessary funding to purchase equipment abroad and formulating a series of measures to prevent fires.

It was on June 30th, 1851, that in a general assembly the first list of volunteers was produced. These men would form the first four fire companies in the city and hence in Chile. Two were water companies; Engine N° 1 *Americana* and N°2 *Salamandra*, while N° 1 *La Union* was a Ladder, Hooks and Axe Company and finally a *Property Guard* company to safe guard the property of the buildings damaged in fires.

Of the four founding companies, three survive through today as Fire Company N°1 *Bomba Americana*, Fire Company N° 2 *Bomba Germania* and Fire Company N° 10 *Eduardo Farley*. As it can be imagined there was a

strong British and American influence with N°1 company and German influence with Company N° 2. Their first baptism of fire occurred on July 8th, 1851, on board the steam vessel *Peru*.

The Valparaiso Fire Department

On September 1st, 1853, a fire started in the then wealthy *Almedral* neighborhood. Several houses were destroyed, but the existing companies managed to stop the fire at the steps of Mr. Matías Cousiño's house, an important local businessman. This event was the first stone towards the foundation of 3rd Fire Company. The 13th of August, 1854, 3rd Fire Company was formed and equipped with a hand pump personally purchased by Mr. Cousiño in Boston Mass.



The Company was immediately known as Almedral's fire company. It all happened a little less than 100 years before the arrival of the American LaFrance 706 PFO Challenger L-4009.

American LaFrance in Chile

The first know pumper of the then American LaFrance Fire Engine company reached Chile in 1918. It was a Type 75 triple expansion combination pump and hose car purchased by the 10th Fire Company of Santiago. Serial numbered 1921; it had a 6 cylinder engine of 105 HP and a 750 GPM rotary gear pump. It was shipped to Chile on the 31st of December, 1917, and reached Santiago on April 26th, 1918. It was baptized "España" on July 2nd, 1918, and became operational on the 31st of that month. It gave excellent service through March, 1937, when it was sold to the recently formed 2nd Fire company of the town of Buin.

A second and smaller pumper was shipped to Chile on June 19th, 1918. It was a Type 40 triple combination pumper assigned to 1st Fire Company of Viña del Mar. Serial number 2435; it came with a 6 cylinder engine that generated 75 HP and a 500 GPM rotary gear pump. It operated from September 8th, 1918 through September 18th, 1943, when it was sold to the Fire Department of Peñaflor.

Further more, there is evidence of at least 2 mid 1920s Brockway trucks, one of which may still be in existence in southern Chile.

3rd Fire Company and American LaFrance

As mentioned earlier, US built equipment was not new with 3rd Fire Company. The Boston built Hand Pump was later replaced by a British made Merry weather & Sons steam engine and then in turn replaced by an American Fire Engine Company steam engine which served the company from 1879 through 1896.



3rd Fire Company American Fire Engine Company

At the same time a newer steam engine, also built by American Fire Engine Company reached 3rd Fire Company serving through 1914. This was to be the last horsed drawn engine in service. Further equipment came from Germany and Italy until the late 20s and 30s when Packard and Chevrolet chassis once again equipped the Company.

In 1948 3rd Fire Company deployed 3 fire engines. The eldest was a 1928 Mercedes Benz with a GAF water pump, the small 1940 Packard with a Waterous pump and 1941 Chevrolet truck with a locally built frame (FANACAR built) and a Waterous pump.



Chevrolet Waterous Fanacar

The worn out Mercedes Benz had mechanical problems, hence in early 1949 an internal commission made up of Mrs. Guillermo Purcell Verdugo, Juan Lyon Sarratea, Guillermo Purcell Winter and Captain Jorge López Wolleter, met to choose and decide the equipment that was to replace the German pumper.



Mercedes Benz GAF

On the 27th of June 1949 in a Company meeting, 3 options were discussed; purchasing a commercial Ford Chassis and buy a pump for it; import a British made Merryweather pumper and take the offer for an American

LaFrance Scout type pumper. It's interesting to mention that the evaluation considered the smallest of the 700 series.

It is volunteer fire fighter Mr. Aníbal Cruzat who explained in detail the benefits and advantages of the Elmira product. Once the meeting was over, there was a unanimous vote in favor of the American LaFrance pumper. Previously in May, the local Valparaiso Town Hall had assigned the sum of 50,000 Pesos (approximately USD1600) for the purchase of the new truck. Further more, 3rd Fire Company would count on further funding from the Van Buren Foundation, its volunteer fire fighters and the selling of both the Mercedes Benz and the Packard.



Packard Waterous

In an officers meeting held on the 22nd of August, 1949, confirmation was given that a new pumper has been ordered from American LaFrance at a cost of USD 14,935 (about 450,000 Pesos). The builder informed that the pumper would be delivered in 100 days. In the mean while, 3rd Fire Company had already made the first payment via the Chase American Bank.

The Chilean 700 series was assigned sales order N° 4331. It would have a 150 gallon booster tank and would have no ladders. In stead it would have 2 extra hard suction, for a total of four, painted in a “special brown color” and would have an extra discharge gate on the left hand side and 2.5” adaptors specifically for Valparaiso. On September 23rd, 1949, an internal memo specifies that the correct color were to be “Royal Crown Maroon Metallic”

The price of the ALF was FOB New York, hence the financing for the shipments had to be solved. The freight for the pumper was USD 1500 plus USD 400 for 3 wooden crates that were going to be shipped with it.

At this stage an official request was sent to CSAV a local steamship company asking for a free freight. Due to international regulations, CSAV declined the request but in turn offered a money donation to help the shipment. While the Quillota Fire Department made an offer of USD 2300 for the Mercedes Benz, 3rd Fire Company decided to ship the new ALF with CSAV, unknowing the amount of the subsidy. While these events took place in Valparaiso, the new pumper moved ahead in the assembly line in Elmira.

In an internal memo, it was required that the pumper was simonized before loading and on the 26th of November, 1949, the registration number L-4009 was assigned. On the 2nd of December L-4009 passed the tests at the Experimental Pump Station with the following results:

Pump Pressure	Discharge GPM	Nozzle Pressure	Engine RPM	Pump RPM
120	481 490 971	52 54	1960	3136
150	411 377 778	38 32	2100	3360
200	589	42	1840	2944
250	490	54	1940	3104
300	389	34	2060	3296

It is winter in Elmira. Temperature at that moment of testing was 34° F and engine temperature 170° F. The pump is certified for 600 GPM at 150 PSI with a pumping ratio of 1-1.605.



706 PFO in its early years in Valparaiso. Notice the original position on the Federal Siren.

On that same day, the ALFCO inspector in charge fills out the owner's manual prior to the shipment:

Engine N°	F7-61	B.M. N° 7-123-466
Transmission N°	1012018	Model 5A-430
Pump N°	706F-6	B.M. N° 26-179-481
Steering Gr N°	TA-71003-FC	
Front axle N°	FA900IIPHX-II276678-J17-49-1	
Rear Axle N°	H100IIPHX26-II259817-J18-9-1	
Differential Carrier N°	8NI-A9-F370	
Frame N°	2913-9414	
Tires	8.25/20 Single Front – Dual Rear	
Front Axle weight	6190 Lbs	
Rear Axle weight	5950 Lbs	
Total	12120 Lbs	



Probably the first official picture of 706 PFO, taken in early 1950.

A special remark states: Consular Declaration: Carro Bomba.

For its transfer from Elmira to the New York docks L-4009 is given New York plate 608-208 with the instruction that it has to be returned after pumper is on board the vessel. On the separate wooden crates, ALFco has packed a Foamite fire extinguisher with respective additional charges, some portable lights, ropes, a jack and a full set of tools.

Early in the morning of December 26th, 1949, the M/V Aconcagua (IV) berths on one of the piers in Valparaiso. It is an ex US Navy C-2 cargo vessel built in 1943 during the war and now operated by CSAV. On board is the American LaFrance 706 PFO Challenger, which is quickly unloaded, going through customs in order to be driven to the fire house of 3rd fire company that same day. Due to its nature and futuristic appearance of the American LaFrance, the fire house is visited by fire men and citizens who wish to appreciate the new apparatus, unique not only in Valparaiso, but in Chile.

Two days later, the new American LaFrance was tested for the first time. The break-in took about one month and the man in charge was now Lieutenant Mr. Anibal Cruzat firm believer of ALF products, who 10 years later would die while crewing the pumper to an emergency.

A party is programmed for February 12th, 1950, to celebrate the new arrival, but other priority items still have to be solved. The pumper has to be paid for and the subsidy offered by CSAV is minimal to say the least, while the Mercedes Benz still hasn't been sold. It is only thanks to the volunteers that the loan is finally settled, but many years after the arrival.

Why a 706 PFO Challenger?

Regardless of the available information, it is still hard to give an exact idea of the reason behind this decision. Basically 3rd Fire Company received an open cab pumper with a 150 gallon tank, a 600 GPM pump, a 190 HP “F” engine with a single Stromberg carburetor and 2 Delco Remy distributors.

Considering the very few 700 series with the “F” engine, as well as the fact that the “F” engine had been introduced with the previous 500 and 600 series and the JO/JOX series, it may well be that the Chileans got a special price by adopting this motor. As per factory statistics the “J” engine was the most common. Also, it could well be that ALFco wanted to be more aggressive in the Chilean market and try to displace Mack, which in that same year had managed to place some pumpers in Santiago.

With regards to the pump, the decision was probably based on the volume of water the hydrants had in Valparaiso, where a larger pump would have been inefficient. Also the lack of hydrants in several parts of the city justified the booster tank which at a later stage was enlarged twice.

Significant episodes in the life of the L-4009

3rd Fire Company 706 PFO served for 30 Years. Many events and anecdotes took place while the unit was in service but it is the author’s belief that four were crucial for the truck itself and the Fire Company.

The city of Valparaiso was celebrating the new year of 1953. At 02:10 hrs the alarm struck to all available companies; the Schultz barrack were on fire and all units were dispatched there amongst them 3rd Fire Company. What the volunteers were not aware of was the fact that adjacent to the fire there was an illegal warehouse where dynamite, gun powder, gas and diesel were stored. An hour later the inevitable happened and 36 fire men were killed in the explosion, but none of 3rd Fire Company. Minutes before, one of the lines had burst and all the firemen on the scene had moved behind the ALF to change it. When the explosion happened, the American LaFrance had acted as a wall, saving their lives. Only five volunteers were injured.

Later on and around noon on August 4th, 1954, the ALF was sent to a call and on its way a commercial truck crossed its path. The impact was inevitable and although no one was injured, the pumper suffered considerable damage. The cab and part of the chassis were damaged

putting the unit out of service. 3rd Fire Company was about to celebrate its first centennial and parts had to be imported urgently from Elmira. The pumper was able to participate in the celebration, but was put back in service only on October 25th, 1954.

Another disastrous accident took place on January 23rd, 1959. L-4009 was exactly 10 years old, when on that Friday at 11:50 hrs the bells rang indicating a house fire. The truck was in charge of now promoted Lieutenant Aníbal Cruzat and crewed by 5 other firemen. Two blocks away from the fire House, the ALF was hit heavily by Mack 75A from 5TH Fire Company responding to the same call. A series of factors, including a badly parked pick up truck, the two Federal sirens, and a Pullman built Trolley just starting to move after stopping in a corner, made this a tragic accident. Both Lieutenant Cruzat who suffered fatal head injury from the Federal Siren and the driver Mr Urra died, as well as a volunteer from 5th Fire Company and a man passing by, who was actually run over by the ALF.

Once the survivors were rescued a small fire started on the ALF, promptly handled by the volunteers present.

This time the damages on the ALF were massive and the pumper remained out of service for over a year until an entire cab and all the spare parts were imported from Elmira. The order reached Elmira on June 4th, 1959, and more that USD 2000 were spent, USD 863.55 only on the new cab.

It is interesting to mention, that a new closed cab was offered by ALF with the latest modifications, but 3rd Fire Company decided that the pumper was to be rebuilt as it came originally, hence an original 700 series open cab was ordered and the pumper went back to service.



Massive damage on 706 PFO. Notice the loss of the Federal Siren.

By 1976 706 PFO was beginning to show signs of fatigue. In a meeting held in August, the Valparaiso Fire Department had authorized selling the pumper in order to obtain some funding for a replacement. A couple of years later members from the just formed 8th Fire Company from neighboring Viña del Mar inspected the pumper, but 3rd volunteers had done the trick. The engine and carburetor had been suitably manipulated and the “F” engine coughed and started with difficulty. Ultimately 8th Fire Company opted for a second hand Mack.

On the 8th of January, 1980, 3rd Fire Company was given the permanent custody of American LaFrance 706 PFO Challenger as an operational relic.

On the 25th of June, 2003, Valparaiso suffered two of the biggest forest fires in living memory. Units were mobilized from neighboring cities and considering there weren't any available units left, 3rd Fire Company decided to call the dispatcher and put the American LaFrance back in service. All available material was put on the pumper, the 12 cylinder “F” engine was started and lights and federal siren tested. The then 53 year pumper was ready to roll down Pedro Montt Avenue, but the call never came. When the volunteers came back from the fire, the feeling was unanimous; “I wish I had crewed our American LaFrance”.

Our L-4009 remains in working conditions. It is driven on a regular basis and used to baptize new probationary fire fighters. It is in need of repairs and thorough maintenance. It is the mission of every member of 3rd Fire Company to find funding to keep our soul alive.



Recent picture of ALF 706 PFO Challenger. Notice that after the accident the Federal siren was placed in the bumper.