

Medical Review of the NY Telephone Co. Fire of 1975



The photo above is the *WNYF* cover, First Issue 1975. This photo by Western Electric Photographic Services shows the incredible amount of smoke generated at the NY Telephone Company fire, at 206 Second Avenue, Manhattan, on February 27, 1975, at Box 465. This blaze knocked out service on more than 170,000 private telephones. For more information about this fire, see *WNYF*, Third Issue 1975, "Communications Disaster at 'Ma Bell's'," by Deputy Chiefs Roger Rodriguez and Elmer F. Chapman, pages 4-9, and *Firehouse Magazine*, October 1993, "Disaster on Second Avenue, A Firefighter's Perspective," by Dan Noonan, retired FDNY FF.

By the directive of Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen and in an effort to reach out to those firefighters and officers who battled the 1975 fire at the New York Telephone Company building on Second Avenue and 13th Street, the FDNY Medical Office is spearheading a medical study based on data from this fire. Any FDNY members who were on the scene at this incident are urged to get in touch with the Medical Office at 9 MetroTech Center, Brooklyn, NY 11201 or call 718-999-1935.

This study will provide the Department with an enlightened awareness of deadly toxic smoke and its long-term effects on firefighters. The data generated from the study may establish a link between toxic smoke exposure and cancer and may answer the following questions:

- What are the most common forms of cancer?
- What respiratory ailments are most prevalent?
- Heart disease?
- Long-term health effects?

With this kind of information in hand, FDNY retirees can take proper preventive measures by instructing their physicians to examine for symptoms. Numerous firefighters lives will be saved and their quality of life improved as a direct result.

Results of the study will be reported in a future issue of *WNYF*. The Telephone Company fire was one incident that crystallized why it is imperative that firefighters wear full turnout gear and SCBA.



Iron Men in the Age of Plastic

by Lieutenant Ed Connelly

Firefighting in New York marked a transition in the early 1970s that gradually became apparent with a cataclysmic fire in 1975.

The evolution of this kind of fire began in the 1930s with the development of nylon and greatly accelerated in World War II. By 1970, the production of plastic had reached 350 times the capacity of 1940. A rash of fire in the 1970s highlighted the problem--particularly the problem of PVC.

The MGM Grand fire in Las Vegas left 85 dead of smoke inhalation from the burning of wire insulation. The Beverly Hills Supper Club fire left 161 dead of smoke inhalation, primarily from PVC. The release of hydro-

gen chloride and carbon monoxide, along with 75 other by-products, became a lethal combination. Hydrogen chloride becomes hydrochloric acid when it mixes with water or moisture in the body. This accounts for the burning sensation in the throat when it's inhaled.

The Telephone Co. fire was unique in a number of ways. It was the first major plastic fire that was fought with an interior attack. The fire load was 90% PVC. It was the last major fire where great numbers of members (239) reported sick at a time when members did not take sick leave. The fire called for the use of masks when some old-timers who fought wood fires shunned their use as the old-timers before them shunned the use of gloves.