

The Deadliest Fires to Strike New York City and the FDNY

by Firefighter Paul Hashagen, Rescue 1

The mission of the New York City Fire Department is saving lives and property from the ravages of fire. These front-line battles in the war that never ends have taken their toll on both firefighter and citizen alike. In the history of the city, the following fires stand out for taking the greatest number of lives.

23rd Street Collapse, Manhattan, October 17, 1966 Responding companies encountered a heavy volume of smoke in the cellar on the 22nd Street side and the



lower floors of this building, occupied by lamp and lamp shade manufacturers. Members on the first floor of the drug store were unaware that they were directly above a major fire that had been burning for a prolonged period, shielded from detection by the insulating effect of the five-inch-thick cement floor beneath

their feet. When the beams beneath them burned away to the point they no longer could support the weight, they collapsed without warning. The members operating in the store were thrown into the blazing cellar.

Regrouped firemen in the street outside the collapse began a rescue effort, but were hampered by three major collapses and a series of minor collapses of the first-floor flooring. Fourth and fifth alarms were transmitted and additional rescue operations attempted. The east wall of the building was breached in two places from the adjoining cellar. From this point, firemen were able to reach their fallen comrades. The 12 fallen firefighters left behind 12 widows and 32 children.

Jennings Building Fire and Collapse, Manhattan, April 25, 1854 The members of the New York City Volunteer Fire Department responded to a fire in the clothing store of William T. Jennings & Company at 231 Broadway, opposite City Hall. Firemen struggled to contain the blaze and protect the American Hotel to the south and the Meade Brothers photographic shop to the north.

Assistant Engineer John Cregier was directing operations on the roof of the five-story Meade building, while Assistant Engineer Harry Howard led a group into the burning second floor of the Jennings building. Making little progress, Howard ordered his men out of the fire building and onto the two-story setback in the rear. Before all the men could exit the building, the rear wall of the Jennings building collapsed. The two upper floors and a large safe came plummeting down onto the firemen working below.

Other firemen, unmindful of further collapse, swarmed into the blazing ruins to rescue their trapped Brothers. For the rest of the night, the rescue work continued. Firemen, facing danger with every move they made, dug until dawn. Twenty injured firemen were pulled from the burning ruins. Eleven firemen had answered their last alarm.

Ritz Tower Hotel Fire and Explosion, Manhattan, August 1, 1932 The FDNY responded to Park Avenue and 57th Street for a fire in a paint storage vault in a storeroom in the second sub-cellar. The vault--vented to the outside air--contained paints, kerosene, gasoline, turpentine, varnish remover and other flammables. Members descended to the base of the small shaft to force the door leading into the building from the hoistway shaft. Engines 39 and 8 followed Ladders 16 and 12 as they continued searching for a way to reach the fire. Rescue 1 arrived and, wearing filter masks and smoke helmets, began to enter the building.

As the door at the base of the sidewalk hoistway was forced open, a violent

explosion shook the building. The tile partition of the paint locker crumbled and became airborne shrapnel. The sidewalk hoistway elevator track was twisted and deformed and the two 15-ton machines of the ammonia system ruptured. Flames roared over the heads of the firemen in the hallway just outside the storeroom as they were hurled violently to the floor and covered with debris.

All electric power to the building was knocked out, plunging the smoke-filled structure into darkness. Injured men groped, searching for their Brother firemen. Stunned, they tried to lead each other out; many were injured seriously. Three minutes after the first blast, a second--even more powerful--explosion occurred. The windows in a jewelry store splintered and, along with gems from the displays, were blown across the Avenue. Firemen, police officers and civilians in the immediate area were thrown to the ground. One fireman was thrown up through the hoistway shaft, from the sub-cellar to the street.

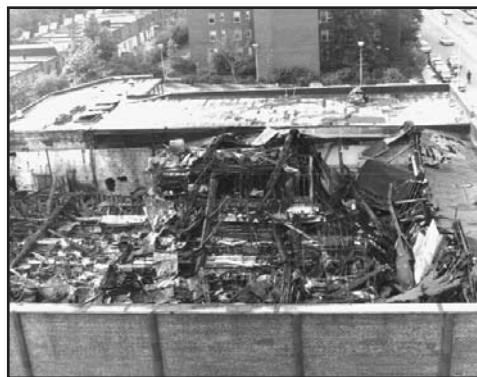
A second alarm was transmitted and ropes were lowered down the shaftway. The dead and injured were hauled up. Firemen sat in the glass-covered street, burned, cut and bleeding, blackened from the blast. They tended the wounded as best they could until arrival of the ambulances and second-alarm units. Firemen arriving on the second alarm began to attack the fire. The cost to the Department was extreme--eight men dead, eight injured seriously and many other firemen, policemen and civilians injured, mostly from cuts inflicted by flying glass.

Nassau Plant of Brooklyn Union Gas Company Flammable Liquids Fire, Brooklyn, February 26, 1920 Acting Battalion Chief Issac Ludgate began his size-up; fire was raging in a tank of highly volatile drip oil. There were two rows of these tanks with a seven-foot passage between them. The tanks, open at the top, were housed inside a sheet-metal shed used as a pump house. The piping, pumps and valves needed for the tanks made the tight area inside even more cramped. Immediately alongside the shed were tanks of coal tar.

The fire had been fought for some time when Ludgate noticed oil coating the water on the floor of the shed, creating a very dangerous situation. He ordered the line to be backed out and as he helped with the withdrawal, there was a sudden flash. The firefighters were engulfed in a sheet of flames that danced across the surrounding area. Firemen staggered from the shed, their gear in flames. A line was directed on them to extinguish the fire. Deputy Chief Patrick Maher transmitted second and third alarms as a badly burned Ludgate approached him with the report of men trapped. Maher ordered men to hold the fire spreading toward the coal tar tanks as others plunged into the dense smoke surrounding the downed firemen. All were removed from the inferno and all the members of Engine 251 died as a result of their injuries.

Waldbaum's Collapse, Brooklyn, August 2, 1978 Inside the Waldbaum's supermarket, workers were busy on a major renovation within the store. Smoke was spotted in the mezzanine area, the Fire Department was called and the building evacuated. Twenty-four firemen climbed to the roof to ventilate the blazing cockloft of the Sheepshead Bay store. Ladder Companies 153 and 156 and Engine Company 254 were busy with saws and hose-lines when suddenly, 32 minutes after arrival, the roof collapsed. Twelve firemen plunged into the raging fire below, while several men clung to the parapet wall at the roof's edge. A rescue effort was started immediately. The men at the edge were removed by aerial ladder and firemen pushed their way into the burning store in search of the fallen men.

Inside the store, a number of companies were at work when the roof collapsed, narrowly missing them. One by one, the fallen men were found and carried out with a reverence known to few. The entire fire, rescue and recovery operation lasted more than 16 hours. Six members had answered their



Firemen breached through the side wall, which allowed them a direct route to where they believed the trapped men were located within the supermarket.

last alarm and 31 firemen were injured.

Bronx Fire and Parapet Wall Collapse, April 4, 1956 Tragedy again struck the Department when six firemen lost their lives at this four-alarm fire in a commercial building at Third Avenue and 173rd Street. Companies went to work, ventilating the stubborn, smoky blaze. Members of Engine 48 set up a cellar pipe and operated in front of the building. During the height of the fire, the entire parapet wall of the fire building--which also supported a marquee--collapsed, pinning numerous firemen. A frantic rescue operation was launched to free the trapped men. Many men were removed from the debris, several with serious injuries. Six members could not be saved.

Queens Fire and Collapse, October 26, 1962 A fire swept through the two-story building at 44-15 56th Road in Maspeth. Flames fed on stored fat in the Sefu Fat and Soap Company plant. Chief of Department George David declared the fire under control at 10:42 p.m. and left the scene in his sedan. David had driven about two blocks when he heard a sound he



Fed on fat, this blaze went to four alarms, caused the masonry to fall and killed six firemen.



dreaded--the roar of a collapse. Firemen were overhauling under a loading shed when the wall above them started to collapse. Twenty firemen were caught beneath the pile as their comrades moved in to save them. Chief David transmitted a fifth alarm and returned to the scene.

Injured men crawled from the rubble as the dust settled around them. Firemen worked their way into where the men were trapped. The Chief's fears became bitter reality--six firemen were trapped by the collapse. One by one, the men were located and removed. All the men still trapped were dead--six men, six firemen lost.

Manhattan Wall Collapse, March 26, 1906 Four alarms were transmitted for a fire at 35-43 Downing Street. At the height of the blaze, a wall collapsed and pinned a number of firemen. A rescue effort commenced, but the falling wall had killed three members of Engine 14 and one member of Ladder 24.

Manhattan Building Collapse, Valentine's Day, 1958 A fire on the fifth floor of the loft building at 137 Wooster Street was ignited by a careless smoker and resulted in the deaths of two firemen and four members of the New York Fire Patrol. The first five floors were supported by cast-iron columns. Above the sixth floor and roof were timber supports. The building was stocked with paper in 800-pound rolls, twine and other materials. There was also twine-making machinery within the building. Approximately 12 minutes after arrival of the fire units, the building collapsed without warning. The men on the roof scrambled for the safety of the adjoining building. As the roof dropped away, the Captain of Ladder 20 hung from a window ledge until his men could pull him up. The ladder officer looked around and realized that two of his men were missing.

Additional alarms brought more than 200 firemen to the scene. Icy conditions became so severe that the thawing apparatus was special-called. The flames were brought under control by eight p.m. and the work of digging and clearing rubble in search of those trapped began in earnest. At about 11 p.m., the bodies of the two firemen were found. The search for the other missing men from the Fire Patrol continued.

At 2:40 a.m. (now Saturday, February 15), the Signal 65-2 was sent over the Department radio: Urgent: The Commissioner calls for off-duty firemen to report to Box 334. The work stopped only long enough for a wrecking crane to clear the threatening front wall on Saturday morning. Three Rescue companies and hundreds of on- and off-duty men pushed their way through the frozen, charred building remains. Hampered by the nine-inch-deep snow and temperatures that went as low as four degrees, the digging and clearing operation continued on through the next two days until the last man was recovered.

General Slocum Fire, June 15, 1904 The worst civilian disaster in the history of New York City occurred on the East River near the Bronx. The congregation of Manhattan's Saint Mark's Lutheran Church chartered the excursion steamer, *The General Slocum*, to cruise up the river to a Sunday School picnic at Locust Point in the Bronx. As they passed Randall's Island just opposite 125th Street, a fire

broke out in a cabin and began to spread.

Captain William Van Schaik did not attempt to beach his burning ship but, instead, raced upstream around the Island and along the Bronx shore. The alarm was transmitted, but responding land units only could watch as the blazing ship motored by. The pilot finally beached the ship on North Brothers Island, across from 149th Street. The poor angle of the ship still left most of the vessel over deep water. Women and children forced to jump from the flames faced

drowning if they could not swim. Engineer of Steamer Lynch of Engine 60 was able to rescue 15 people by making several trips with his rowboat. Of the 1400 people on the ship, 1031 were killed.

Brooklyn Theater Fire, December 5, 1876 A fire broke out backstage during a performance of "The Two Orphans." The house was packed with more than 1000 people as flames began to eat across the scenery. The stairway soon was overloaded, trapping hundreds, as the fire swept across the ceiling of the theater and roared into the balcony. When the fire finally was brought under control, 296 people were dead.

Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, Manhattan, March 25, 1911 A fire broke out on the southeast corner of the eighth floor and spread quickly, due to large numbers of finished garments hanging above the work tables. More than 700 people (600 of whom were girls between the ages of 16 and 23) were at work in the building as the alarm of fire was raised. Most of the girls at work on the eighth floor were able to escape aboard a large freight elevator that just had arrived at the floor; the rest fled down the stairs. Fifty-five people on the 10th floor also were able to escape by breaking open a skylight to the roof. Many exited onto the fire escape that soon was overloaded. Two people, however, were hurled to their deaths as the fire escape pulled away from the wall. Dozens of girls were cut off from the elevator and had only one choice--the windows. They waited as long as they could but, one by one and in groups, they jumped from the raging ninth floor.

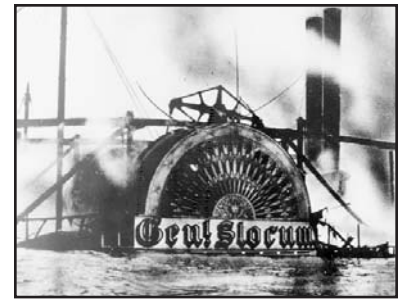
Arriving fire companies had difficulty getting into position as body after body plummeted to the ground before them. Firemen raced to help those they could. Scaling ladders were climbed and life nets were opened. It became apparent that the life nets were ineffective due to the height. Hose-lines were stretched as quickly as possible. Second, third and fourth alarms were sent in to bring more help to the scene.

Before any of the frantic efforts of the firemen could make an impact, the desperate situation was over. Those who were trapped had jumped or fallen back into the growing wall of fire. High-pressure streams were directed into the building, but the damage had been done. The fire was extinguished quickly, but the grim task of searching for survivors proved fruitless. Dozens of bodies were found piled up against a wall; dozens more lay broken on the sidewalk and in the street. In total, 146 people died at this fire.

Happy Land Social Club Fire, Bronx, March 25, 1990 An arson fire burned on the first floor of a two-story building and took the lives of 87 people. The structure at 1961 Southern Boulevard contained the illegally operated Happy Land Social Club. A lack of second-floor exits left trapped patrons nowhere to go as the smoke and super-heated gases closed in.

A.B. Taylor & Co. Explosion, Manhattan, February 5, 1850 At 8:20 a.m., the 200-hp boiler of the A.B. Taylor & Co. machine shop at 5 Hague Street exploded. The two eight-story buildings housing the company were blasted into the sky. The alarm was sounded and firemen rushed to the scene.

The second of the two buildings was occupied by a hat company and filled with workers when the explosion occurred. Under the command of Chief Engineer Alfred Carson, the firemen, faced with reports of more than 100 people trapped in the collapsed building,



A sunny day's excursion turned into a nightmare, both for those onboard and watching from shore.



The actual firefighting operation at Happy Land required the services of only a first-alarm assignment to control. The subsequent overhaul, investigation and removal of victims led to the assignment of 50 units.

plunged into the flaming debris. The flames were brought under control quickly, but the rescue work was just beginning. Twenty hours of dangerous digging, tunneling and firefighting continued as people were rescued and pockets of fire hidden in the debris were extinguished. In all, 64 people were killed and 70 were injured.

Taylor Building Collapse, Manhattan, August 22, 1891 The Taylor Building on Park Row suddenly crashed to the ground, taking dozens of people inside with it. Beneath the piles of debris, people were trapped, crying for help and struggling to free themselves; then the fire broke out. Arriving firemen were faced with a horrible scene, as the mounds of collapsed rubble burned with a vengeance, ending the lives of those pinned inside. The death toll was 61.

U.S. Constellation Fire, Brooklyn, December 19, 1960 The huge aircraft carrier, the *U.S. Constellation* (at the time of the fire, one of the largest ships ever built), was in the final stages of fitting-out. Because construction still was being completed, the steel ship had a tremendous amount of wood below decks. Onboard the carrier were 3200 workers, with most of them working below decks. The ship was protected by the Navy Yard's fire department of 15 men, manning two pumpers and a ladder truck.

At about 10:20 a.m., a dumpster truck working on the hangar deck pushed a heavy trash bin into a steel plate, which bent upward and sheared off the plug of a 500-gallon tank. The contents of the tank, 450 gallons of JP-5 fuel (used to power emergency generators and other equipment), began to pour out onto the hangar deck. With no coffer-dam or dike protecting the spill, the call went out to halt all cutting and burning on the deck. Some of the escaping fuel ran down a bomb elevator, where a welder was at work, touching off a fire. Hose-lines were placed into operation and CO₂ was discharged with no effect. The fire then spread rapidly as the flaming fuel came into contact with wooden scaffolding and other flammables

The *U.S. Constellation* was more than 1000 feet long and 250 feet across at its widest point.



on the deck.

The F D N Y received their first notice of the fire at 10:30 a.m. Within the next

37 minutes, five alarms were sounded for the fire. Arriving units were faced with a well-advanced fire situation in a structure the equivalent of five city blocks long, a block wide and 14 stories high. Shortly after the fire started, the

lighting in the ship failed, plunging the entire vessel into total darkness. Deep within the maze of black compartments were hundreds of workers, cut off from any avenue of escape with acrid, dense smoke and flames closing in. On arrival, the fire was in complete control of a large section of the hangar deck, forward of amidships. Fire also had extended to galley decks (01, 02, 03 decks), immediately above the hangar deck and the flight deck. Firemen placed ladders to every opening they could reach in the ship and removed more than 250 trapped workers. Quick-thinking crane operators swung a large platform onto the carrier deck and lifted workers to safety. The crane platform then was converted by firemen into a makeshift ambulance, as injured and unconscious workers (and firemen alike) were lowered to medical treatment on shore.

Two outboard elevators, used to raise and lower planes, were positioned at the hangar deck level and from each of these, stairways went down pier. Handlines were stretched. Members of the Rescue, Squad and Ladder Companies donned masks and made their way below decks and began one of the most difficult and dangerous search and rescue operations ever attempted in the history of the New York City Fire Department. Despite the amazing rescue work conducted by members of the FDNY, 50 workers died in the fire.

Windsor Hotel, Manhattan, Saint Patrick's Day, 1899 The Windsor was primarily a residential hotel, but had some transient guests among the 275 people registered. Many other people had taken positions at the numerous windows overlooking the Avenue to view the parade. A discarded match apparently started a fire that quickly was out of control inside the hotel. Wisps of smoke at the second-floor windows soon became dense clouds of smoke that pumped from the building. Fire then burst through the windows on the Fifth Avenue side of the building. The parade halted. The music stopped. The crowd stood in muted silence as people began appearing at the hotel windows. Fire apparatus inched through the throng. First-due units were confronted with nine victims who had jumped to their deaths from the smoke-filled windows above. Firemen then raced into the lobby and

attempted to gain control of the stairs with a hose-line. Time after time, they pushed forward, only to be driven back.

The fire escapes were in danger of failing due to the number of people fleeing the dense smoke. Firemen used aerial ladders, portable ladders and then extended themselves above those by operating from scaling ladders. In fewer than five minutes, Chief John Binns transmitted a second and third alarm and special-called numerous public ambulances. Deputy Chief Purroy then sent in fourth and fifth alarms. Chief of Department Hugh Bonner arrived and took command of 24 engines and six ladder trucks. Twenty minutes after the arrival of the Department, the center section of the Fifth Avenue front wall collapsed. Forty-five lives were lost in the blaze.



The concrete roof of the Staten Island gas tank collapsed, killing and burying the workers inside.

Liquefied Natural Gas Tank Explosion, Staten Island, February 10, 1973 Forty-three workers were killed in a huge liquefied natural gas tank explosion in the Bloomfield section. The explosion occurred at 1:40 p.m. in the 600,000-barrel, eight-story, domed structure. The tank, which was undergoing repairs, was designed with a heavy, reinforced concrete roof that was intended to collapse into the tank in the event of an explosion, thereby suppressing the explosion. The roof did exactly what it was designed to do. Unfortunately, the tank was not designed to have people inside and the workers were buried under tons of concrete.

Rescue Companies 1 and 2 were special-called quickly and, despite the heavy smoke and high heat, a rescue effort was started. When it was determined that it would be a recovery and not a rescue operation, a rotation system was devised. One Rescue company and several Truck companies worked together for several hours until relieved by another Rescue company and several other Truck companies. This system continued for several weeks until the last body was recovered. This operation was conducted under some of the most severe weather and cold temperature conditions ever encountered in the city.

Knickerbocker Ice Company Fire and Collapse, Manhattan, December 11, 1946 FDNY units were dispatched to a fire in an abandoned ice plant, located at 2517-19 Amsterdam Avenue, near 184th Street. The fire was reported at 5:45 p.m. and was extinguished using a first-alarm assignment. Just before midnight on that same night, a tenant in the apartment house next door smelled smoke, then saw sparks coming from the roof of the ice plant. He ran to a fire alarm box a block away and transmitted the alarm. Box 1753 was transmitted again, sending units to the ice plant building that formerly was occupied by the Knickerbocker Ice Company and had been unoccupied for eight years. The plant building was the same height as the tenement next door and had massive brick walls insulated with cork, supporting a heavy concrete roof, supported on steel members.

The fire apparently was started near a pipe shaft on the east end of the structure, where a partition wall separated the storehouse and the main plant. Flames extended through the shaft to the hanging ceiling and the cork insulation in the walls. Lines were stretched and companies operated to extinguish the intensely burning fire. Twenty minutes after firemen went to work, Rescue Company 3 was special-called to join in a search for a suspected ammonia leak inside the old structure. At about one a.m. (now December 12th), without warning, the roof of the ice plant collapsed onto the top floor, pushing out a fire-weakened, 36-inch wall onto the adjoining occupied tenement next door. Inside the tenement were more than 60 unsuspecting, sleeping residents. On the roof were a number of people watching the firemen battle the flames.

The rear of the tenement tore away from the front section and collapsed. The icehouse wall and the shattered tenement became one large pile of twisted debris and rubble, entombing many people. The Department began operations in earnest as members began the dangerous task of digging, tunneling and shoring in an attempt to reach those trapped within. A second alarm was transmitted at 1:09 a.m. and numerous ambulances were special-called. Ten minutes later, a third alarm was transmitted and two minutes later, a fourth. Five alarms and many special calls were placed, including Rescue 1, to provide the necessary manpower for the mammoth undertaking. The firemen worked for more than 48 hours and pulled off many heroic rescues. In all, 37 people were killed, including a member of the Department. Forty people were injured.

About the Author...

Firefighter Paul Hashagen is a 22-year veteran of the FDNY. He is assigned to Rescue 1. He is the author of *A Distant Fire* and the soon-to-be-published FDNY Millennium Edition Book, which provides more detail about the incidents mentioned in this article.

