

Rockaway Plane Crash Kills 265; FDNY Members—as Usual— Perform with Distinction

by Battalion Chief Howard Carlson



Rockaway Plane Crash 11/12/2001
Photo By
Det. Greg Semendinger
NYC Police Aviation Unit

photo courtesy of the NYPD Photo Unit

November 12, 2001, started as a beautifully clear and mild day in Belle Harbor, Queens—a middle-class neighborhood on the Rockaway Peninsula. Schools were closed for the Veteran's Day observance and some residents were starting to enjoy a day off from work. The peaceful setting of this holiday morning was shattered when an American Airlines jetliner crashed into the area.

Box 1398 was transmitted as a pulled Box with a two and two response at 0917 hours. Upon leaving quarters, an extremely large, wide column of smoke was visible to Battalion 47—Chief Howard Carlson—from two miles away. He requested the immediate response of four tower ladders. Because Rockaway is a peninsula, it increases the response time of Companies, so Officers must be proactive in calling for additional units.

Lieutenant Raymond Creede of Engine 268 transmitted a second alarm at 0920 hours. Lieutenant William Gallagher of Ladder 137 ordered a third alarm a minute later, as well as a 10-60 signal (Major Emergency Response) for a confirmed plane crash. Chief Carlson arrived on the scene at 0923 hours and he and his Aide, FF Thomas McVeigh, were met by extremely heavy fire conditions. There were houses heavily involved in fire on five different blocks. High-voltage electrical lines were dropping into the street and electrical manholes were exploding. Chief Carlson skipped the fourth alarm and immediately transmitted a full fifth alarm.

Off-duty Deputy Assistant Chief Peter Hayden (now Assistant Chief of Operations), a nearby resident, was on the scene and had

started directing operations. Within the first few minutes, there were 80 to 100 off-duty and retired Firefighters, who live in the immediate area, on the scene and numerous hand-lines were being stretched. The incoming units were divided via radio to cover the different sides of the fire. The second-alarm Battalion Chief Norman Whelan—Battalion 33—was notified to come in from the south side to determine the extent of the fire spread in that direction.

The main body of fire was located at the intersection of Newport Avenue and Beach 131st Street, an area composed of one- and two-family private dwellings. The plane had crashed directly into 258, 262 and 266 Beach 131st Street, destroying all three houses. There were eight private dwellings fully involved in this immediate area and the fire involved four other dwellings to varying degrees. Beach 131st Street, south from Newport Avenue, was impassable due to fully involved houses burning on both sides of the street and debris and plane parts burning across the roadway.

Primary searches were initiated by off-duty members before Department units were on the scene and then by Ladder Companies upon their arrival. It was necessary to enter many of the buildings from the rear because of the heavy volume of fire in the front street. Fire buildings and exposures in the path of the fire were searched and there were numerous meritorious acts performed. For example, off-duty Captain William Mundy of Ladder 159 removed two elderly civilians from the second-floor front porch of a fully involved dwelling by means of a civilian ladder

with only seconds to spare before the porch area itself became fully involved.

Engine 329, under the command of Captain Donald Mischke, took a hydrant at the corner of Newport Avenue and Beach 131st Street and started operating their deck-pipe while hand-lines were being stretched. Tower Ladder 121, led by Captain Matthew Corrigan, and Tower Ladder 159, with Lieutenant Arthur Darby, also set up at this location and began operating on the six fully involved private dwellings on the south side of Newport Avenue, as well as extinguishing flaming debris from the plane. Lieutenant John Hodgens and members of Tower Ladder 157 set up on the opposite side of Beach 131st Street and operated on the main body of fire. Numerous hand-lines were stretched into the many buildings involved, as well as the fuselage of the plane, which had disintegrated on impact.

Units were assigned to operate on the north side of Newport Avenue at Beach 130th and 131st Streets, where the corner house on each block was fully involved. Tower Ladder 107, commanded by Lieutenant Stephan Trogele, set up on Newport Avenue, midway between Beach 130th and 131st Streets, and operated on the fully involved house on each corner on the north side of this street.



View looking south on Beach 131st Street from Newport Avenue. Crash completely destroyed the first three houses on the left side of the street on impact. This is the area where Captain Mundy rescued an elderly couple from the front porch.



Firefighters operate hand-lines onto burning parts of the airliner. Note the stokes baskets in foreground.

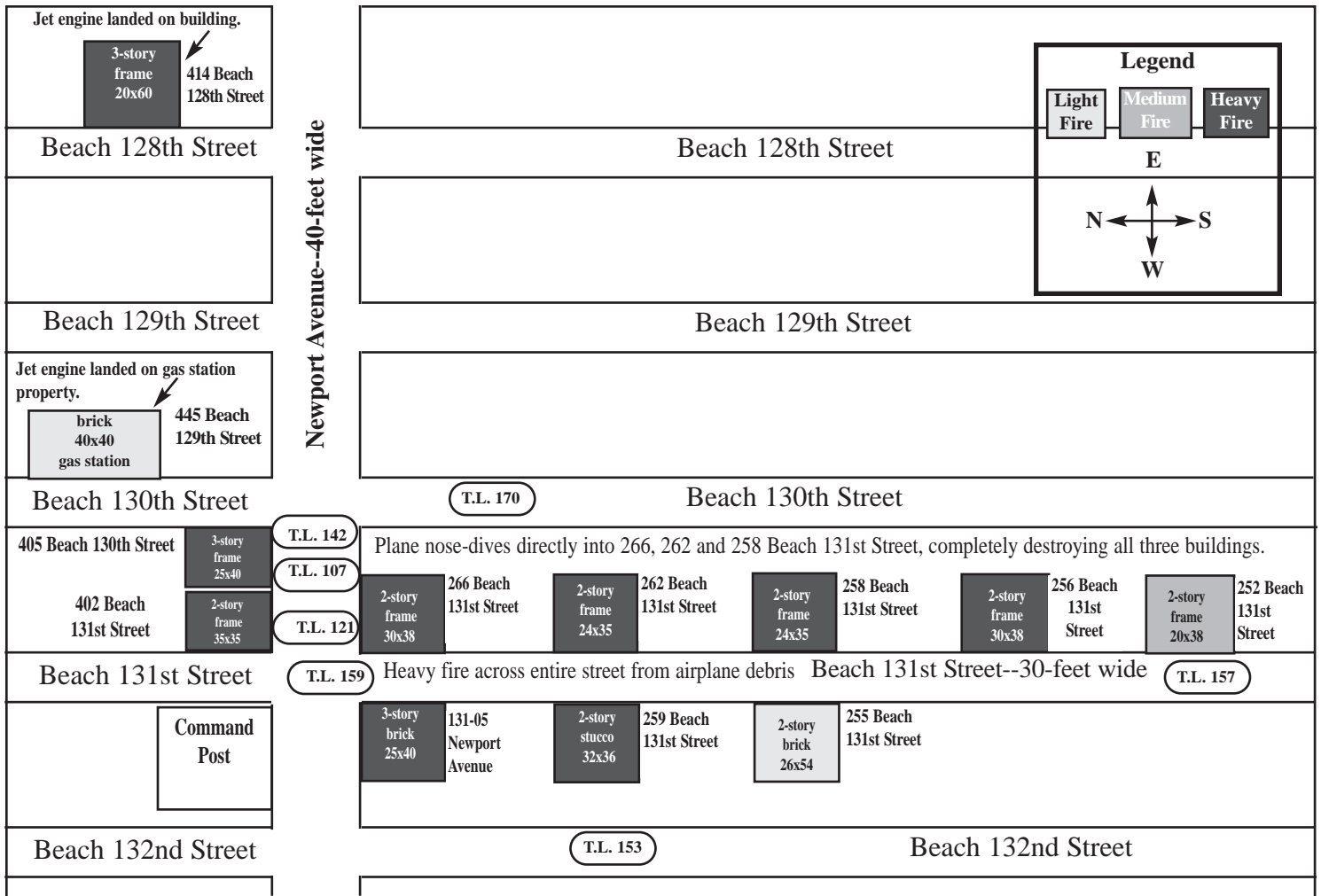
Additional hand-lines were stretched for final extinguishment.

An urgent request was made to the Long Island Power Authority (LIPA) for an immediate response to address the problems of fallen high-tension wires and the fires resulting from the exploding electrical manholes. Marine Companies 6 and 9 were special-called to Jamaica Bay at Beach 130th Street, where they stood by as an additional water supply, but their services were not required.

The plane, American Airlines Flight #587, was a 1988 Airbus Type A-300-600. It had lost its tail section shortly after takeoff while over Jamaica Bay. The plane spiraled directly into the ground, destroying three houses. In the process, one engine landed in the rear of 414 Beach 128th Street, a three-story frame dwelling, and started a fire that required a full first-alarm assignment. The second engine landed in a clear area of a gas station at 445 Beach 129th Street, narrowly missing a 10,000-gallon gasoline truck making a delivery. The plane crash itself killed all 260 crew members and passengers onboard, as well as five occupants of houses on the ground.

At 0942 hours, Chief of Operations Salvatore J. Cassano ordered a 10-86 for a foam operation. Three foam hand-lines eventually were used in the basements and crater that resulted from the crash to extinguish the burning fuel from the plane and household heating oil. Hand-lines were stretched into the dwellings and Truck Companies performed secondary searches and overhauled.

Units began the grueling task of removing the victims. Some of them were telescoped in their seats into the basements of the buildings and it took many days to complete their removal. The fire was declared *probably will*



hold at 1207 hours, but was not under control until 2016 hours. The incident became an ongoing operation of victim recovery and debris removal. Units were special-called and relieved at regular intervals until operations finally were concluded at 1545 hours on November 21, 2001.

Lessons reinforced

1. FDNY must be proactive in calling for additional help and transmitting multiple alarms--especially in remote areas.
2. Tower ladders continue to prove their versatility to deliver large-caliber streams to stop large, fast-spreading fires. They



The second plane engine landed in the gas station above at 445 Beach 129th Street. Fortunately, it missed the pumps and a 10,000-gallon gasoline truck that was making a delivery.

were also extremely useful in operating above the debris to extinguish it. This would have been an almost impossible task with hand-lines.

3. Directing multiple-alarm units by Department radio allowed the Incident Commander to cover the four sides of the fire with Companies, as well as the separate fire that was burning at 414 Beach 128th Street.

This was the last day in the New York City Fire Department for 47th Battalion Firefighter Thomas McVeigh. After a 20-year career, one of his final messages "on the air" was the transmission of this fifth alarm and on the last run of this day of his retirement, he rolled in to find houses fully involved on five different blocks.

Under extremely difficult conditions, all members on the scene operated in the finest traditions of the New York City Fire Department. The fire never extended to a single building after the arrival of the Fire Department. All five victims who were killed on the ground died as a result of the impact of the plane crash. No one died in his/her house because FDNY members were unable to reach the victims. Eleven Companies received Unit Citations for outstanding operations. Another heroic page has been added to the history of the FDNY.

About the Author...

Battalion Chief Howard Carlson is a 34-year veteran of the FDNY. Currently, he is working in Battalion 51 in Queens. Previously, he worked in Engine 277, Ladder 175, Rescue 4, Ladder 120, Engine 294 and Ladder 124.



artwork by Thomas Trycheria