

FDNY Mitigates Helicopter Crash in Brooklyn

by Battalion Chief Richard Alles

The news business in New York is every bit as competitive as one would expect in the biggest city in the world. May 4, 2004, proved no different in that regard. All of New York was enjoying a beautiful, warm and clear spring day, but for residents in Flatbush, Brooklyn, the tragedy of a neighborhood shooting brought out a huge police dragnet to the area. This incident occurred during the evening news broadcasts and the ratings competition was evident by the live coverage via helicopter by all the major local stations.

On the 6 x 9 tour of May 4, 2004, Battalion Chief Richard Alles was assigned Acting Deputy Chief in Division 15. After the exchange of information with Division Commander Daniel Butler at approximately 1820 hours, he witnessed via live news what the night tour duties would entail.

A Channel 4 News helicopter, while covering the police incident, developed trouble with the rotor blade and spiraled downward toward the tenement buildings below. After a courageous but futile attempt to control the aircraft by former Vietnam veteran combat pilot Russ Mahoney, the aircraft clipped the exposure #2 side parapet wall of 2514 Cortelyou Road, a four-story, non-fire-proof multiple dwelling that later was designated exposure #4. The helicopter belly-flopped onto the roof of 2516 Cortelyou Road, subsequently sinking into the roof of this two-story private dwelling. Striking the parapet wall slowed the craft's descent enough to prevent it from skidding across the roof of the smaller building and into the intersection below. Had that occurred, there most certainly would have been a tragic death toll, both inside and outside the craft.

The Brooklyn dispatch office immediately was inundated with calls and at 1825 hours, Box 3729 was transmitted. The following units were assigned: Engines 248 and 281, Ladders 157 and 147 and Battalion 41. At 1827 hours, Engine 255 and Ladder 157 arrived first-due and transmitted a 10-75. Both units initially had a difficult time gaining access to the front of the building due to numerous police vehicles blocking the surrounding area.

Division 15 was assigned to the Box at 1826 hours and as Chief Alles began to envision the operation while responding, he checked the Chief's riding list to see which Battalion Chief was working the tour in Battalion 41. He was gratified to find that it was Battalion Chief John Pritchard, an experienced and knowledgeable Commander in the job for 35 years. He was confident that Chief Pritchard would have a good handle on the situation.

At 1829 hours, Ladder 147 arrived second-due and transmitted a 10-60 upon receiving information from Ladder 157 for a confirmed helicopter crash into an occupied building. Chief Pritchard immediately ordered Ladder 157 to set up in front of the fire building and raise its bucket to the roof. Engine 255 was ordered to secure a hydrant and stretch a hose-line to the roof. Engine 248 secured a hydrant and stretched a back-up hand-line. Engine 281 secured a hydrant and assisted both units.

Going to the roof level, Chief Pritchard was confronted with three injured passengers of the helicopter, including the pilot, news reporter Andrew Torres and observer Hossam Taamarin; all were inside the aircraft with the engine still running.

At 1836 hours, Chief Alles arrived and assumed the role

of Incident Commander from Chief Pritchard. After a quick briefing of the situation with Chief Pritchard, Ladder 157, commanded by Lieutenant Michael Cummings, notified Chief Alles that there was a small fuel leak from the helicopter's 100-gallon fuel tank. With the engine still running and the volatile aviation fuel a threat to ignite, Chief Alles ordered the first line converted to a foam operation.

At this time, Ladder 147, commanded by Lieutenant David Deering, reported a negative search of the rear and sides of the fire building for victims and was ordered to the roof to assist Ladder 157. The units operated together and, with the technical assistance of the injured pilot, were able to shut down the helicopter engine. The three passengers then were extricated, packaged and brought to the street via Ladder 157's bucket and turned over to EMS. With the passengers now safely removed and the engine shut down, the three remaining problems included the fuel leak, search and structural stability of the fire building and a complete search and structural assessment of exposures #2 and #4.

With the Field Communications Unit now on the scene, along with the units assigned on the 10-60, all the tools necessary for an organized command structure were in place. Battalion Chief Kevin Byrnes, Battalion 38, was assigned as Victim Tracking Officer. He ascertained all necessary information on the injured passengers and investigated any other reported civilian injuries by anyone who might have gone directly to EMS.

Battalion Chief James McNally, Battalion 44, along with Ladder 132 and Squad 1, commanded by Lieutenant Louis Rufano and Captain George Healy, respectively, were assigned to do a complete search of exposure #4 and assess any structural damage to the building. Chief McNally reported damage only to the exposure #2 side parapet wall and a crack down that side of the building. Although there appeared to be no threat of collapse in exposure #4, Chief Alles evacuated the building until a Building



The Channel 4 News helicopter belly-flopped onto and subsequently sank into the roof of a two-story private dwelling.

photos by Kristian Portella



The helicopter was hoisted via crane to a large flatbed truck and taken to a Federal storage facility for investigation by the NTSB.

Department engineer could arrive to make a more definitive assessment.

At 1854 hours, Assistant Chief Thomas Galvin arrived, assumed the role of Incident Commander and assigned Chief Alles as the Operations Chief. After a briefing of the current tactics being employed, Chief Galvin assigned Special Operations (SOC) Battalion Chief Fred LaFemina to do a structural assessment of the fire building. (See Chief LaFemina's sidebar article on page 7.) The added weight of the helicopter had broken roof beams and the weight was being born by the bearing walls.

Squad 252 and Rescue 2 were assigned to Chief LaFemina and ordered to set up a cutting station in anticipation of a shoring operation of the roof down to the basement. Rescue 5 was ordered to shut down all utilities in the fire building. Chief Galvin then consulted with Chief Alles regarding the individual units and Chiefs who were staging.

Chief Galvin, in assuming the role of Incident Commander, also interacted with other agencies and enlisted the assistance of the NYPD resources in the evacuation of exposure #4 and setting up portable lighting as the operation continued through the night. The additional portable lighting supplemented that of the FDNY Tactical Support Units.

After Chief Pritchard reported that the aviation fuel leak was extremely minor, Chief Galvin decided to have the Hazardous Material Unit assigned to the Box off-load the fuel from the helicopter. This would relieve the building of the additional weight and also promote fire safety prior to bringing in a crane to hoist the helicopter off the roof.

At this time, Chief LaFemina recommended a complete shoring operation from the basement to the roof and SOC units were assigned to the task. SOC Support Truck, Ladder 132, along with Ladder 123, commanded by Captain Michael Dugan, set up a cutting area in the street and did an outstanding job of supplying the necessary cut timber required for shoring. These units worked for several hours on the task and completion of the job set the stage for a safe de-fueling and eventual removal of the aircraft.

With the danger of fire from a leaking fuel tank averted and the threat of collapse no longer an issue, Chief Galvin put the incident under control at 1951 hours. Relief units then were called to the scene and Haz-Mat Unit 1 was positioned in front of the building. Battalion Chief Michael Maloney, Battalion 32, was assigned to supervise the de-fueling and manpower from Engine 280 and Ladder 172 were assigned to assist Haz Mat.

Additionally, a watch line--consisting of one Battalion Chief, one Engine and one Tower Ladder--was established to maintain scene safety until 0800 hours on May 5, 2004. At that time, the full first-alarm assignment, along with Division 15 and Brooklyn Borough Command, responded to the scene for final removal of the helicopter. A crane was obtained through the Federal National Transportation Safety Board and moved into place. The helicopter was hoisted to a large flatbed truck and taken to a Federal storage facility for the necessary NTSB accident investigation.

Lessons learned/reinforced

- Use of the Incident Command System was critical for this large-scale event. At an operation of this nature, it is necessary to interface with other City and/or Federal agencies. Additionally, by delegating various command responsibilities, the Incident Commander can focus attention on operational strategy.
- When operating at an incident of this magnitude, the Incident Commander should assign a Battalion Chief as Victim Tracking Officer to function as liaison to the EMS Commanding Officer. The large media presence at this incident made it vital to have up-to-date information concerning the injured passengers. Also, the Public Information Officer (PIO) assigned should designate a safe area for the news media and brief the press at regular intervals. The PIO can schedule a news conference when the Incident Commander is available.
- All Engine Companies after the first arriving are reminded to test and secure a positive water source at all operations. All three first-alarm Engine Companies were able to secure a working hydrant and provide more than enough water for this operation. If the incident had expanded due to fire, FDNY would have been very capable of stretching the additional hose-lines necessary.
- The Department has trained certain Ladder Companies as SOC Support Units to be used by the Incident Commander to assist Special Operations units. At this operation, SOC Support Ladder Company 132 assisted in shoring the incident building.
- The Tower Ladder again proved to be the most versatile apparatus in FDNY's fleet. Ladder 157's position in front of the building gave the Fire Department control and provided a stable platform for moving personnel and equipment to the roof and the safe removal of injured civilians.
- As with any operation that runs through the night, the Incident Commander must remember to rotate and relieve units to help prevent injuries that occur to members when fatigue has set in. Include Chief Officers in this rotation.
- When working at a large-scale event and it becomes obvious that the operation will continue into and/or through the night, be sure to have portable lighting in place well before it is needed.
- A signal 10-60 assigns numerous special units and Battalion Chiefs. As soon as the Incident Commander determines what resources are needed, all other units should be made available so other areas of the City are not depleted.



Members are urged to read "SOC Support Ladder Company Training," by Lieutenants Joseph M. Jardin and William F. Ryan, in the 3rd/2003 issue of WNYF.

About the Author...

Battalion Chief Richard Alles is a 26-year veteran of the FDNY. He is assigned to Battalion 58. As a Captain, he served with Ladder 106. He served as a Lieutenant in Ladder 174 and as a Firefighter in Ladder 43 and Engine 91. He holds a BS degree in Criminal Justice from St. John's University. This is his second article for WNYF.

