

# SPECIAL APPARATUS

## The Utility Support Unit

by Battalion Chief John A. Calderone

During the early days of World War II, several members of this Department were sent to London on a secret mission. Their task was to observe the operations of the London Fire Brigade during the London Blitz and, upon their return, formulate plans and operational procedures for the FDNY to implement to empower the Department to deal with similar aerial attacks. At the time, it was felt that New York City would become a prime target for fire bombing attacks as soon as bomber aircraft with sufficient range could be constructed.

Among the observations made in London was that following a bombing attack, damaged water mains resulted in severe flooding conditions, especially in cellars of public and commercial buildings and in the subways. As a result of this, a recommendation was made to designate and equip a specialized vehicle to provide large-capacity de-watering pumps to deal with these emergencies.

During 1942, Utility Unit 1, officially designated the Emergency Utility Unit, entered service, carrying portable pumps, generators, suction and discharge hoses and related fittings. Thankfully, New York City was spared the aerial attacks and resulting destruction. Nevertheless, the Utility Unit performed its intended functions at many incidents--

especially flooded conditions resulting from broken water mains--and continued to do so until disbanded in 1960.

Four years later, as a result of several incidents requiring its services, a similarly equipped unit, designated the Utility Services Unit, was organized. This unit remained operational until 1972. Again, a few years passed and the demand for such services warranted action. During 1978, five Borough Utility Vans were placed into service, one in each borough. These vans were equipped with a large de-watering pump and associated equipment. Demand for their services increased to the point where the Department began purchasing de-watering pumps and assigning them to line units citywide, eliminating the Borough Utility Vans.

While line units carrying de-watering pumps have worked well under most operational conditions, when a major situation occurs, a logistical nightmare takes place. When the need for many pumps at one location arises, many units must be tied up, each delivering its pump to the scene and possibly staying there to operate it. These flooding conditions often would occur in basements or subways with limited ventilation, resulting in a carbon monoxide build-up from the gasoline-powered pumps' exhaust. As a result, additional units, equipped with exhaust fans, then had to be




The Utility Support Unit, commonly known as the De-watering Unit, is equipped with numerous pumps, smoke ejectors and related support equipment and is capable of sustaining a large-scale de-watering operation. *photo by John A. Calderone*

committed to the same incident to deal with this secondary problem.

Another logistical problem that resulted from these incidents was that gasoline and spare parts, such as washers, were needed at the scene in sufficient quantity and most units did not carry enough to sustain any prolonged operation. To rectify these shortcomings, the Utility Support Unit was established during 1992. This unit has become more commonly known as the De-watering Unit.

The Utility Support Unit currently is assigned a hybrid apparatus. This vehicle was assembled by FDNY shop personnel, using a Mack chassis that formerly was a Satellite hose wagon and a rescue-style body that formerly served as a Salvage Unit. A major de-watering operation can be tackled by eight submersible pumps and eight trash pumps that are carried. Also, there are four 6000-watt and one 9000-watt generators, six smoke ejector fans, portable lighting equipment and a large assortment of electrical connections and extension cords. Suction and discharge hoses, an assortment of fittings, spanners, hydrant wrenches, educators, suction strainers, tool kit, spare parts (washers, gaskets, spark plugs, drain and fill caps, etc.), a supply of gasoline and oil, funnels, starting fluid, utility ropes and anything else required to sustain an operation are onboard. Rounding out the Utility Support Unit's equipment are fire-fighting hand tools, canvas tarps, a chain saw, dry chemical

extinguishers, a supply of duct tape, hand trucks and dollies, squeegees, an inflatable tent and a commercial shop-vac.

The Utility Support Unit is staffed by Special Operations Command personnel and quartered with Tactical Support Unit 1 at 750 Main Street, Roosevelt Island. This unit responds on special-call only. Basically, it can be self-sufficient at the scene of any major de-watering operation, providing a quantity of pumps and equipment at one location without the commitment of a large number of companies. It also is useful at incidents requiring many smoke ejectors. The Incident Commander special-calling the Utility Support Unit should assign at least one other unit to assist the Utility Support Unit's personnel in setting up, operating and monitoring the operations. 

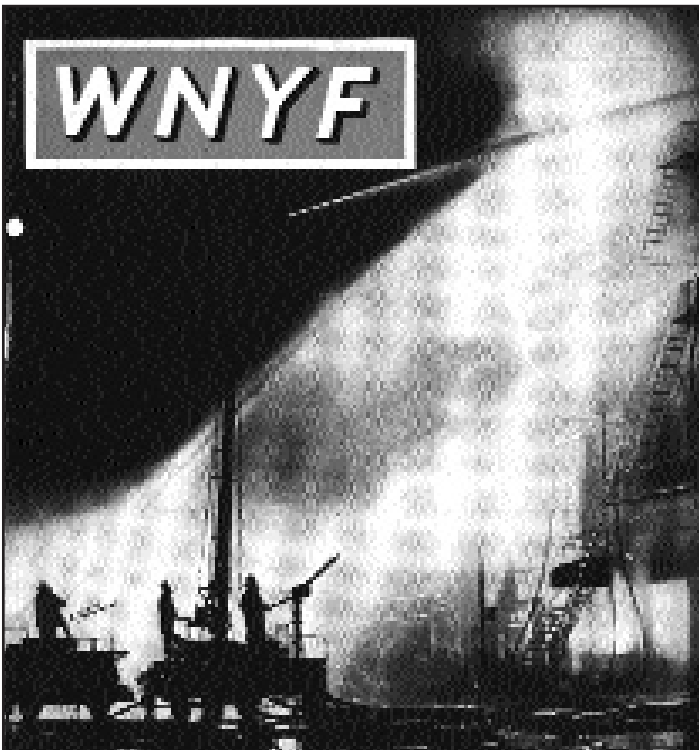
### About the Author...

*Battalion Chief John A. Calderone is a 25-year veteran of the FDNY and was the 1978 winner of the Steuben Association Medal. He holds a degree in Fire Protection from New York City Community College and has written extensively on the subject of fire apparatus.*



## A Look Back--WNYF 50 Years Ago

by Captain Bill Groneman



Firefighters use fire towers and high-caliber streams at Box 44-321, 540 Broadway, Manhattan, March 4, 1948.

*Photo by Hellriegel*

The April 1948 issue of *WNYF* contained the following articles:

- "First Skyscraper Fire" by FF Cornelius J. Flynn, L-48
- "Fifth on 58th Street"--Noxious rubber smoke and extension hazards give midtown firefighters difficult worker--by FF Frank Farrell, L-2
- "Dot...and Dashes"--Telegraph Bureau's famous Operator 40 has developed radio hobby into real adventure--by FF James J. Nugent, E-76
- "Years Ago--in Brooklyn"--Physician, fire enthusiast of long standing recalls the scenes of borough of his youth--by Thomas F. Nevins, MD
- "Recent Big Fires"--Summaries of some important greater alarms fought in City during the past busy winter--by FF Frank Hanifin, L-80, and FF Samuel M. Ribman, E-228
- "Annual Report for 1947--Fire Statistics"
- "Blizzard of 1947"--Firemen's all-out services help City conquer nine-day emergency of snow and sleet storms--by Captain Albert B. Whitley, LSS #1
- "Company Chart" by FF John F. Begley, L-163
- "Helping Hands"--St. Charles Hospital's crippled children are favorite charity of Brooklyn blaze beaters--by FF Alfred H. Jahn, E-214
- "In the Books" by Rebecca B. Rankin, Librarian, Municipal Reference Library

The issue also contained regular features such as "Photo Studies of Recent Fires," "Firemanecdotes," "Through the Bag," "Sports Review," "All Hands," "Retirements," "Amendments and Orders" and "In Memoriam."