

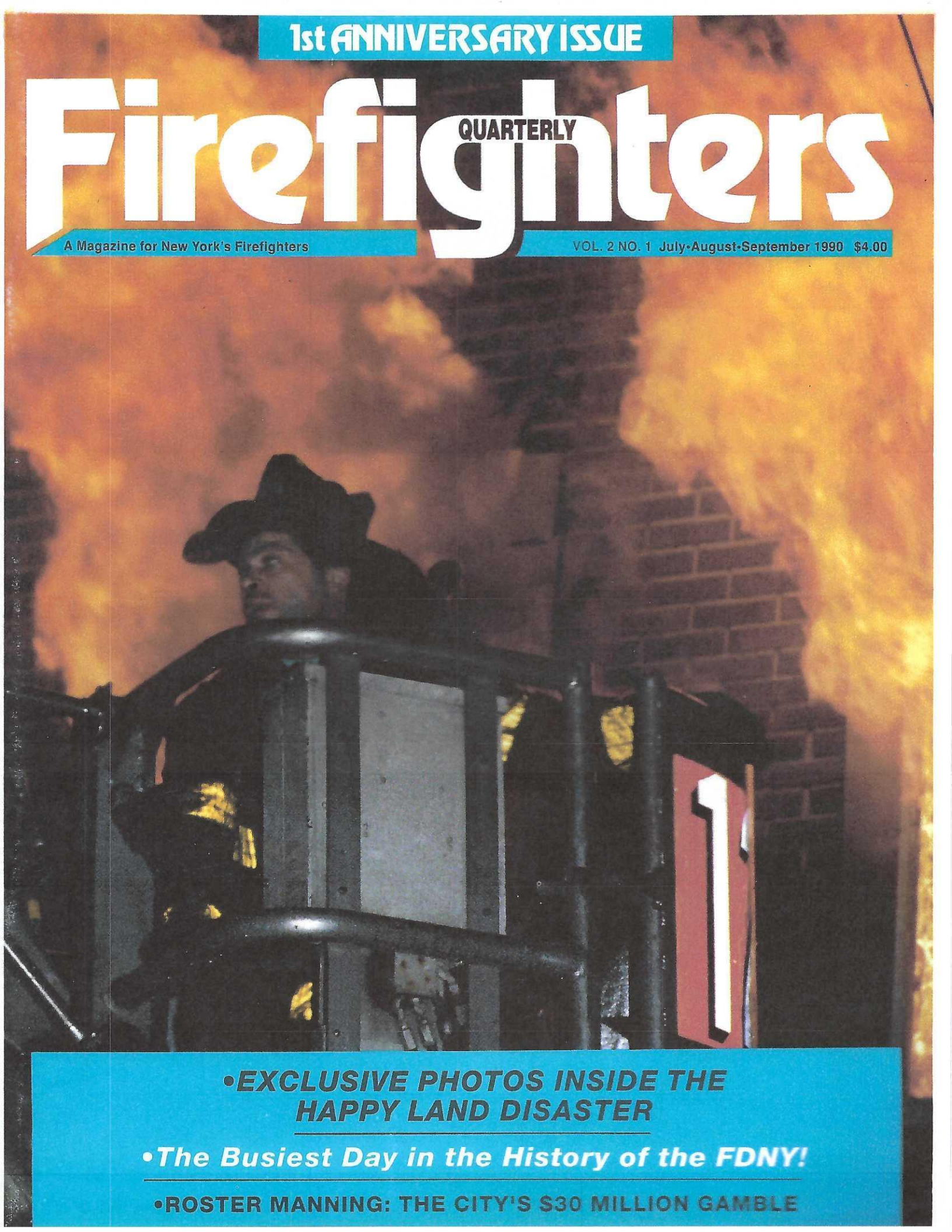
1st ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Firefighters

QUARTERLY

A Magazine for New York's Firefighters

VOL. 2 NO. 1 July-August-September 1990 \$4.00



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Firefighters

QUARTERLY

A Magazine for New York's Firefighters

VOL. 2 NO. 1 July•Aug. •Sept. •1990

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12/18/88 Queens Box 4095 59th Ave. and 55th St. A member of Ladder co. 124 surrounded by flames after the top floor of the fire (row frames) lit up.

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F.D. HAZMAT 1 N.Y.

Better Living Through Chemistry



Photo by Steven Stefanakos

Captain Howard Kennedy (right) stands beside seven members of his Haz-Mat unit.

by Steven Stefanakos

Since the formation of the New York City Fire Department 125 years ago, Fire Departments around the world have looked to the F.D.N.Y. as a leader in many fire related fields, including, high-rise fires, building collapse rescues, new tools, and other areas. No matter what the subject, outside departments have always looked to learn from New York's Bravest. Within the past six years the F.D.N.Y. has further enhanced its reputation by becoming the most experienced Fire Department in the handling of hazardous materials. This is due to the creation of Hazardous Materials Co. No. 1 (Haz-Mat 1), in October of 1984.

Housed with Engine 288 in the 46th Battalion in Maspeth, Queens, Haz-Mat 1 responds city-wide to any hazardous material incident or major fire. It is the only unit in the fire department that is required to have a manning of seven Firefighters and one Officer. It is also the first company ever to have a roster of four Officers and 35 Firefighters, making it the largest company in the department.

The official Haz-Mat 1 booklet defines hazardous materials as "any liquid, gas, solid, dust, or vapor that can damage or destroy by explosion, fire, corrosion or toxic reaction." To stay atop of the ever

changing world of chemicals and science, the members of Haz-Mat must continually attend schools and classes on all things related to this field, thus making them the best-trained response team in the country and probably the world.

Before Haz-Mat 1 was formed there was no one unit in the department designated to exclusively handle hazardous materials. Prior to 1984, hazardous material incidents were handled by Rescue Co. 4. But as the 1980's began to unfold city officials realized that large amounts of hazardous materials are transported through and even stored in the city, which could lead to danger. For example, a few years ago a trailer carrying 9,000 gallons of liquefied propane started to leak on an off-ramp of the George Washington Bridge. According to the Haz-Mat booklet it took several uneasy hours before a sanitary test plug was available to be placed in the valve opening so the gas flow was reduced and successful off loading could take place. (This task was performed by Rescue Co.'s 3 & 4).

Due to this incident and several others, former Mayor Ed Koch realized that the city needed to form a hazardous material team and in 1982 he designated the Fire Department as the agency that would handle these problems. With the preparation that it takes to form a new specialized unit, Haz-Mat 1



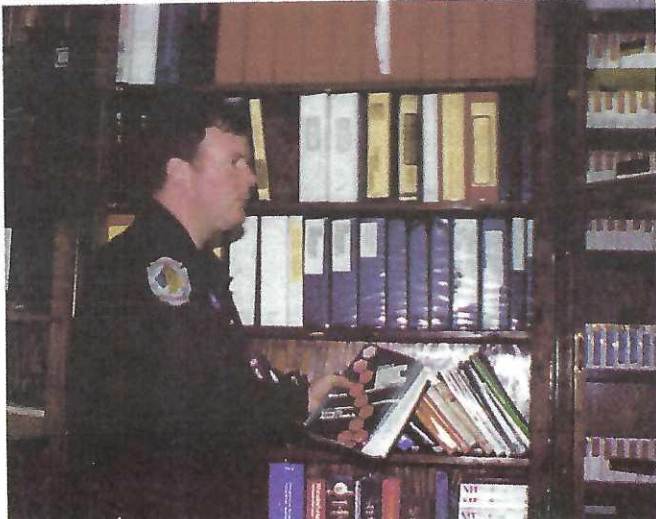
Firefighter Phil McArdle (left) shows off a Level A chemical-protection suit. Below, several Haz-Mat suits are on display during the FDNY Celebration 125. Firefighter Scott Kirchofer performs all the vital tests for these suits to ensure their safety. "There's no warning once the chemicals break through a suit, says Kirchofer. "And when they do they enter very rapidly." Level A suits range from \$5,000.00 and up.

Photo by Ben Stumbo



Photo by Ben Stumbo

Firefighter McArdle (right) conducts research in the company's state-of-the-art library where information on thousands of hazardous substances is kept on file.



did not go into service until October 15, 1984. Captain Joseph Gallagher (now Chief of Rescue Services), was named company commander.

Captain Gallagher interviewed some 75 Firefighters who answered the job description: "Looking for people willing to undergo an intense training program, who understood that there would be much time spent out of the firehouse, minimizing the chances to study for promotion." Chief Gallagher explained that when a firefighter becomes a member of Haz-Mat 1, "you are basically removed from actual firefighting. A few of the things that make this unit a success is the total devotion of the members. These Firefighters spent day and night researching equipment, looking into chemical protective suits, and setting the apparatus up to fit our needs." Another key component according to the Chief, was the support and commitment of the late Chief of Department, Homer Bishop (then Chief of Operations), who backed the unit 100%.

A BREED APART

Of Haz-Mat's seven Firefighters and one Officer, five of the working Firefighters must be members of Haz-Mat 1; the other two firefighters can be detailed there for a work tour but must come from the 46th Battalion. Firefighters in the 46th Battalion are specially trained in de-contamination, a process that ensures Haz-Mat 1 members are safely taken out of their chemically protective clothing.

The riding list for Haz-Mat 1 is different than engine, ladder or rescue companies. Naturally the officer directs all operations. The two Firefighters assigned to the entry team are the first ones into the hazardous area. The two who make up the safety team are immediate back-ups in case someone gets hurt or trapped. The safety team will even perform entry duties if the entry team's air from their self contained breathing apparatus runs low. Of the three remaining Firefighters, two make up the "de-con" team and the last is the "resource" man. The

resource spot is where all the vital information is stored; information on chemicals, hazardous materials, and other substances. The resource man is aided by an on-board computer, micro-fiche slides and a complex library on how to fight and contain hazardous materials. An important feature that helps the resource man is a cellular phone which enables him to be in contact with chemical companies and many of the country's leading scientists.

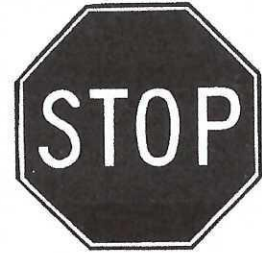
Haz-Mat 1 and Engine 288's quarters are also set up differently than other units. Many spare tools, equipment, clothing, and recovery drums are stored in-house. A decontamination room is available for the proper cleansing of protective suits and equipment. All of Haz-Mat's runs and drills are video taped and critiqued in their conference room, in which there is a computer, a library, a television and a video recorder so the members can review what they did at a past scene or drill.

"All Firefighters are aggressive, they go in and put the fire out. In Haz-Mat things are done differently," explains Firefighter and charter member Ray Meisenheimer. "Everything we do is a deliberate action. First a thorough size-up of the incident is made so that everyone becomes familiar with the scene." This must be done, he said, so that every possible area of the fire building or incident is understood. It is also essential that the proper channels of communication in a hazardous material incident are used. "Haz-Mat advises and is solely responsible for mitigation to control the problem," says Firefighter Jim Hay. "The officer and entry team must report to the command post and retrieve all the necessary information from the Chief Officer. They then can use the information to properly gain control of the incident." Company Commander, Captain Howard Kennedy, who has been a Firefighter for 30 years says: "The slower more deliberate approach to a situation gives you time to think things out, letting you prepare the best plan of attack possible. Being that the safety of our environment is

a growing concern, the Haz-Mat role in Firefighting is a very important one."

To properly prepare Firefighters for this demanding role, the members of Haz-Mat 1 must go through five phases of training. When all of these are completed the Firefighter becomes a "Hazardous Material Technical Specialist." The first phase of training is a 90-day detail to the unit. During the first 30 days the firefighters are mainly observers, familiarizing themselves with Haz-Mat's procedures and members. The next 60 days they become members of the de-con team. When this is completed the second phase begins which is the schooling. The instruction here includes the F.D.N.Y. "Hazardous Materials" class (40 hours) and the New York State classes, "New York State Emergency Control of Haz-Mat Incidents Levels 1 and 2" (40 hours). In the third phase the Environmental Protection Agency gives courses in "Personal Protection and Safety, Hazardous Material Incidents Response for Firefighters," and "Haz-Mat Incidents Response Operations." Next comes the National Fire Academy courses in Emmitsburg, Maryland. At the N.F.A. two of three courses must be taken: "Chemistry of Hazardous Materials," "Hazardous Substance Specialist" and "Haz-Mat Tactical Considerations." It is then along with the fifth phase, Continuing Education, that the F.D.N.Y. recognizes the Firefighter as a "Hazardous Material Technical Specialist" with a specially-designed technician insignia pin.

"The training is a long and lengthy process but much more comes out of it than schooling," says another charter member and N.F.A. Lead Instructor Phil McArdle. "After these phases you are eligible to take additional courses on the state and federal level to become an Instructor. Teaching is also a learning process. Every time myself or someone else goes out and teaches, new things are learned, and it helps maintain haz-mat skills which can be lost very easily due to the daily changes in this field." Rick Gimbl, who is also a Fed-



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eral Instructor and Suffolk County N.Y. Haz-Mat Coordinator, finds teaching "very rewarding, training our brother Firefighters to be aware of the dangers out in the field." Members of Haz-Mat 1 have taught their skills to Fire Departments and academies all over the country. The United States Military Fire Department and several state universities have also benefitted from Haz-Mat's expertise, as well.

WAVE OF THE FUTURE-

Firefighters volunteer for Haz-Mat 1 for many reasons. As a new and growing field, it is the future of firefighting and a way of discovering what you are up against. This holds especially true for 10-year veteran Al Awal. Awal worked in Harlem's busy "Fire Factory," (Engine 58 and Ladder 26) before coming to Haz-Mat. His decision to join Haz-Mat was prompted by one particular fire where an unknown product was burning. According to Awal, "people were passing out from the fumes. No one knew what they were walking into." The manner in which Haz-Mat

evacuated and secured the area caught the attention of Awal and led him to join the unit. "The only drawback you get from being in Haz-Mat 1 is missing the actual fire duty," says Firefighter Hay. "But Haz-Mat 1 takes you city-wide and you respond to multiple alarm and unusual commercial building fires that you might not ordinarily see."

Although a highly specialized unit, Haz-Mat 1 can deal with a variety of situations. When needed the company can operate as a rescue or ladder company. For example, when Flight 5050 crashed at LaGuardia Airport last September, Haz-Mat 1 members, Lieutenant Al Warta, Firefighter Kevin Smith, and others jumped in and swam to a portion of the plane that was unreachable by land. These men worked at freeing passengers who were trapped by wreckage. Because of their valiant efforts Warta and Smith received the "Lifesavers Benevolent" award and department medals at the June Medal Day ceremony.

In 1989, Haz-Mat 1 responded to 1,051 calls. Of these, 651 were

workers, which amounts to over 1,000 hours of operational time. Nevertheless the unit lends its help to any outside agency that needs it. One such case involved the fatal construction site collapse in Bridgeport, Connecticut on April 23, 1987, where 28 people died. Haz-Mat 1 remained at the scene for 10 days, helping with the removal of hazardous materials and aiding in the search for survivors. A year later when a giant earthquake hit Armenia in the Soviet Union, Haz-Mat 1 selected the necessary tools and equipment that would go if their services were required. And last year Haz-Mat 1 was placed on stand-by to go to San Francisco after an earthquake rocked the bay area.

"There is always something to do in this company, always something going on," says Captain Kennedy. This comes as no surprise. After all this is the most highly-skilled and experienced hazardous materials unit in the world. A unit whose members have come to realize that the motto "better living through chemistry" is more than just a catchy slogan. ■

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