

Box 598



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October 17, 1966 was one of the darkest days in the history of the F.D.N.Y. On that day twelve members of this department were killed in the line of duty. The following account is one man's personal experience on that tragic day; the mixed emotions that bombarded him; the final crushing realization that twelve of his brother firefighters had died; and that every man's life is irrevocably tied to another's.

I got to work at 5:15 yesterday afternoon. Another Tuesday, no different than the other six days of the week to a man in my occupation. I opened my locker and carefully hung my suit in it, replacing the blue chino trousers and blue shirt that are the work clothes of a New York City Fireman. It was all so automatic. I had gone through those motions hundreds of times before. Just as hundreds of times before, I had left my family in my home in Patchogue, Long Island to initiate the uneventful hour-long ride to Engine Company 24.

THE MEN OF E. 18

When I descended the stairs it was 5:48 and the bells were sounding. It was nothing new, but the adrenalin started motivating the body of every man in the firehouse. No man ever grows completely indifferent to that sound, no matter how long they've responded to it. Box 539 clanged in and we rolled to Jane and West Fourth Streets just as Engine 18 pulled up with little Jimmy Galanaugh in the seat. Jimmy was the type of kid you always reacted to by wanting to protect because of the impression he gave of being frail. He looked so damn out of place in the seat of that huge fire engine. He had the blond good looks of a college kid, and wasn't at all the average New Yorker's idea of what a fireman should look like. It was just one more example of how appearances can be deceiving. He was good at his job, which is what really counted.

On the back step of 18's pumper were Kelly, Tepper, and the "probie," Rey. More faces I had seen innumerable times

before and taken for granted, for the simple reason that people tend to consider their relationship with each other as continuous and without end. Engine 24 had worked with 18 many times before. Our men working alongside their men was an inevitable fact of all our lives. An integral part of many operations; an integral part of a pattern we call procedure.

Kelly had been assigned to our company during most of last year's, subway strike. He was never without his pipe, his books (he was always studying for the next Lieutenants' test) and a ready smile. Kelly always smiled. Not just most of the time. Always.

Tepper was a man whose face had no age stamped on it. I could never reconcile myself to the fact that he was 41, and not just on the threshold of his thirties. He was just perpetually young. They were both, like Jimmy, two guys a person had to like.

I had only seen the "probie" Rey a few times, but his face was familiar nevertheless. All probies wear that same expression of loneliness, mixed with a tremendous eagerness. I had experienced the feeling behind that expression myself, just as every man in the department has. And that includes my buddy Toby Vetland, who was working with me tonight and reading my mind. We had the simultaneous desire to make Rey feel more comfortable, so we went over and spoke to him. Small talk and jokes. He laughed with us gratefully—but he was waiting all the time.

He was anticipating his "big fire." All probies do. They feel that once they've gone through it, and proved themselves to the men they admire, they'll finally be accepted.

He had no way of knowing that every man there always had one eye on him for his sake, not their own. They'd break him in and watch over him at the same time, until he was capable of taking care of himself.

When I was in Japan, the people had a saying about their mountain. "He who doesn't climb Mt. Fuji once is a fool. He who climbs it twice, is an even bigger fool." Only a fireman can understand the logic behind that and apply it to his breed. Each one anxiously awaits that first big fire, and when it's all over he prays that he never sees another one. This fire had been a small one and we returned to our respective quarters when it was out.

EVENING LOOKS ROUTINE

At 7:15 a complaint came in. Since I was scheduled for the detail, I signed myself out to investigate it. Combustible rubbish in a hallway at 71 Barrow Street. It turned out to be a valid complaint, so I issued a violation order to the super of the building. He was to remove the rubbish immediately.

I was on my way back to the firehouse when a civilian called to me and pointed out an open electrical box, located in his building, with the wires exposed. I would have issued another violation order except that the super of that particular building lived just a few doors out of my district, so I called Engine 18 through headquarters. Kelly turned me over to the Lieutenant Priore who told me that he'd send a man out on it right away.

When I signed myself back in quarters a few minutes later, it appeared that the evening was going to be a quiet one. A lot of routine. Not that any one of us had ever been guaranteed a completely routine evening; there are no guarantees in this job. But the overall mood of the firehouse was a quiet one.

We began our evening meal at 8:35.

E. 24 RESPONDS TO 4TH

At 9:36 Box 598 came in. At 9:58 the 'All hands' came in, which meant that the companies that responded to that first alarm had a fire and were hard at work. We checked the response card. Engine 18 was scheduled to respond on the second alarm and we had to go on the fourth. It didn't necessarily mean that there would even be a second, third, or fourth alarm. But we stood by.

It was 10:06 when the second alarm came in.

We heard the third at 10:37 and the calm that had prevailed up until then was obscured by a tense, busy, silence as every man prepared himself for a really big one. I remember climbing the 101 year old spiral staircase telling myself that we had a good crew on tonight. That wasn't just blind reassurance, it was a good crew. I took the long staircase up to the third floor and put on some heavier clothes. There was a cold wind blowing out there. With an extra pair of socks in my back pocket, I checked for my hostrap and spanner and then went down to wait with the rest of the men on the apparatus floor. All our gear was on the rig.

When the fourth alarm came in we were ready.

I was cold when we left quarters. Nervous cold. Every man in the crew was feeling that same chill and we remained silent as Bill Miller drove out. Our regular chauffeur, Vic Bengyak, was on vacation and I recall wishing that Bill was on the backstep with us. Every man was evaluating the crew, assuring himself that it was a competent one.

An entire group of stores was burning. It was a big one.

We reported to the chief in charge and were ordered into a bookstore on Broadway, between 22nd and 23rd Streets. I had the nozzle. Toby was behind me, followed by Joe Tringali. More reassurances.

When the Ladder Company forced the door open, we had our water and were to initiate an operation that we had executed many times before. We went in with two lines; Engine 24 to the right and 13 to the left. As we moved in together, 13 caught a large body of fire to her left. Straight ahead of us was the orange glow of still another body of

fire. The heat was intense. There were obstacles in our path no matter where we turned—boxes of books, bookcases, and all sizes and shapes of debris.

Toby jumped onto a crate and I passed the line up to him just as 13's Lieutenant was yelling for his line. A wall to his left had dropped and, when it did, we discovered that the floor in the next store had collapsed.

Both companies were on top of it immediately, hitting the fire together, pouring water directly into the cellar. It had never occurred to any of us up until then that this fire, which was raging so fiercely all around us, was also burning right below us under the very floor we stood on. Suddenly, the Lieutenant was ordering us out. The floor near the doorway was getting soft and it didn't take us long, once we heard that, to get out. When our last man was out on the sidewalk, the entire floor that had supported us just seconds before gave way. An overwhelming sense of what could have been passed through me, accompanied by a deep feeling of relief.

There wasn't even time to talk about our close call. The spectators across Broadway were gasping in unison, and when we heard the ensuing shouts we directed our eyes upward. There were still companies scrambling to get off the roof of the doomed building and the fire was lapping dangerously close to the aerial ladder that was their only means of escape.

No one had to order us to open our lines. We shot water at a ninety degree angle up towards them, to shield them from the out-stretched hands of the blaze that was slapping at them persistently. We held that stream steady until the last one of them was safely off the roof.

When the building came down, every company was engulfed in smoke and bombarded by debris. When it was all over, the outside walls stood firmly—a monument to something that no one was sure of yet.

MEN MISSING!

The fire had apparently burned itself out and we were all sure that the worst was over. But it was about then that the rumors started to circulate. Missing men! I don't know who, near us, first spoke those words, but I remember that we were all tight-lipped. Every one of us was outwardly rejecting the rumor, and inwardly praying that we were right—that the reports were false.

The head count seemed to take an eternity. When the results got back to us it was difficult to believe. There were twelve men unaccounted for.

Our company was all together and so was Engine 13. "Who's missing?" I was asking, as was every man at the scene who had heard the rumors. I wasn't even sure at that point exactly how many companies had responded to the alarm. There were finally whispers of some of the chiefs and their aides as possibilities. Then someone mentioned Ladder 7. I didn't want to believe any of the talk, but the next bit of news was even harder for me to believe. Someone said that they couldn't locate Engine 18. I can still hear my own voice insisting, "You guys better get your head count straight." There was no basis for my doubt, just pure obstinacy. I refused to believe what, by that time, everyone was sure of. I had just been with those men earlier in the evening. Their faces flashed vividly through my mind. I had contacted and spoken to them about that violation. They couldn't have just disappeared since then.

I released my breath in relief when I saw John Donovan of Engine 18 approaching us. We were all thinking the same thing. See, there's someone from 18. They must have been located. It was all a rotten mistake.

But then, as he came closer to where we stood, his face became visible. It was masked with horror. He was nearly incoherent when he spoke to us, trying desperately to relate what had just happened to him. He had been dangling; swaying over the inferno after the floor gave way. He was hanging onto the handle of the controlling nozzle by just three fingers. His rubber coat had started to burn and he was slipping, sure that there was no hope, when a hand reached out and grabbed the rescue loop on his Scott Airpak. Then there was another hand, and another. . . .

He had been the man who was sent out on my complaint, so he hadn't been with 18 when they responded to the alarm. He had gone with another company to search for them when they were reported missing.

Manny Fernandez, 18's regular chauffeur, appeared out of the night, and there was a lot of confusion as everyone started to ask questions. He had been changing when the alarm came in, and Jimmy Galanaugh had offered to drive.

Engine Company 18 and Ladder Company 7 had perished when that third alarm had come in, before we even arrived at the scene. There was no time to grasp that terrible fact because we were being ordered around the corner from where we had been operating.

When we turned the corner I, for one, could hardly believe my eyes. I just wasn't prepared for the sight before us. There was smoke and flames everywhere and we were sure that it was another 5th alarm of similar magnitude. But there, staring us in the face, was the same fire that we thought was extinguished.

SILENT PRAYER OFFERED

We were told to stand by until ordered to take our line into a haberdashery store. We waited, feeling the cold and dreading the fire.

As we stood by, we became increasingly aware of the commotion in front of the burned out drugstore. They were carrying out bodies. Two of them in body bags. I didn't know who they were. And I wondered, as we removed our helmets to say a silent prayer, if every man felt as sick as I did at that moment. Something that John McCole, a man in my company, had once said came back to me instantly. He had been referring to the Times Tower fire that he had been to a few years back, and the feeling he had when they carried out two dead firemen. "You'll never know how it feels until you see it with your own eyes."

I was feeling it then.

We were the next company to enter the building and, with the previous scene still fresh in our minds, I wasn't the only one who was experiencing a fear that was brand new.

We were to put a distributor to work in the haberdashery. It would enable us, we hoped, to pump a large volume of water into the fire below us through a hole that one of the ladder companies had chopped in the floor. Ladder 17 was working with us, but we hadn't even begun the operation when our Lieutenant was ordering us out. His judgment was sound, for as we backed away, about eight feet of the floor in front of us dropped like a bar of chocolate in one and two foot sections. We watched from the doorway as the semi-circle widened.

We asked the Chief if he could get a company to cut a hole in the floor near the door so we could at least get to some of the fire. "No, back away," he quickly replied. "That floor isn't safe. No one is to enter that store." One of the men asked the Chief if we could just walk over to the existing hole and drop a distributor into it. Again the Chief responded with a quick and firm 'no.' Just then, as if in affirmation of the Chief's decision, the entire floor collapsed into the cellar. The man who had suggested walking over to drop in the distributor looked slightly sick; his self-confidence suddenly gone. He was just thankful that he hadn't been allowed to take even a few steps toward that hole.

FIREFIGHTING GOES ON

We were relieved by another company for a few minutes, and the events of the evening were temporarily replaced in our minds by the hot coffee we were smelling and tasting. The damp cold night had penetrated my body to the bones, and I never appreciated a cup of coffee more in my life.

The Mayor was there, viewing the continuing disaster with a look of repressed anxiety on his face. And he was only seeing it from the sidewalk.

We were then sent into another section of the building.

We were to take our line up a staircase. The men who were coming down, as we were going up, warned us that the staircase was listing. We had advanced up two flights when the Chief in charge of the fire ordered us down. We could still see the fire raging at the top of the stairs and by this time we were striking at it in anger, hitting it from where we stood at the bottom of the stairs. That fire seemed like an enemy, more hated than any enemy in war or peace had ever been. It was as if it had taken on a distinct personality. We were frustrated at not being able to defeat it yet.

A LIFETIME'S EMOTIONS

We set up a multiversal nozzle, which develops a large calibre stream, and kept hitting it from below.

Another break. Hot broth this time. The cold that gnawed away at us was becoming almost as much of an enemy as the fire.

We were needed at the drugstore to assist in the search for bodies.

As we lowered the men of Ladder Company 24 into the gaping hole, their Lieutenant told us to be extremely careful. He immediately set about the task of inspecting a wall next to the area where we were working. After a careful examination, he found it to be sound and we continued on our grim assignment. By then we were suspicious of every last piece of material in the building. It was all heavy stuff, not just plaster board. However, all the officers on the scene were well aware of the dangers involved and were determined that there would be no further fatalities. They quietly and efficiently examined all the standing walls and beams, making sure that there would not be another collapse.

Toby was holding the rope as we lowered them down and we formed a chain, passing the debris along from the bottom until it found its way onto the sidewalk outside. Fifteen minutes or so passed and we heard a rumbling sound. I thought that I was the only one who had heard it, but when I turned to ask the Lieutenant about it, I saw that he was returning from another area. He too had heard the noise and had immediately investigated it. It turned out to be just another company doing some drilling. We were reacting to our own fears.

Soon after that, one of the Chiefs gave the order for us to move out. We were being relieved.

I realized for the first time that it wasn't night anymore. Where had all those hours gone? Where is the fatigue I should be feeling? I had to get a call through to my wife. She must have heard about the fire on the news I thought, as we were leaving the building.

Suddenly I was completely captive to a strange, indescribable sentiment as I caught sight of the off-duty members of Engine Company 18 arriving at the scene. They had come, true to Fire Department tradition, to join in the search for their lost brothers. One thing was certain. No one would carry the bodies out but them.

It was the saddest, blackest night in the 101 year history of the New York City Fire Department, but I was experiencing a renewed pride in being a small part of what no one can deny is the greatest Fire Department in the world.

I had experienced an entire lifetime's worth of emotions in those hours. Panic, self-control, fear, relief, defeat, pride, all running into and over one another. Sadness and a sense of personal loss for real men I worked with and liked, and who were now just memories. Sorrow for their wives and children, and an undirected anger because twelve of them had to die to extinguish a fire. Love for a wife who was beside herself with worry, until I finally reached her by phone a short while ago, and for my children—my five year old daughter had asked if her daddy had died. I never realized that I could miss four kids so much.

The most distinct emotion—one that I'm experiencing still—is a true, undiluted awareness of living and breathing and being able to feel in so many different ways. Every second of that is sacred to me now. ▲