
463 BROADWAY, MANHATTAN:

On a late Friday afternoon on November 18, 1960, the streets of Lower Manhattan were crowded with people going home for the weekend. Events took place that afternoon and evening that would be remembered in the history of the New York City Fire Department (FDNY). A conflagration occurred that would have a tragic component.
Shortly after 1700 hours, a Class 3 alarm (automatic alarm) was transmitted for Manhattan Box 199 for the address 463 Broadway. Engine 31, Ladder 20 and Battalion 2 were dispatched. Four minutes after the box was transmitted, Battalion Chief Harold Anderson arrived. He saw that there was a structural fire at the location and radioed to the Manhattan Fire Dispatcher to “transmit the box”. Two more Engines, another Ladder and Squad 8 were sent to 463 Broadway. Box 199 was located in the middle of Lower Manhattan’s infamous “Hell’s Hundred Acres” neighborhood.

Six minutes after Box 199 was transmitted, another box was transmitted in Lower Manhattan. Box 98 was transmitted for the location of Frankfurt Street and Gold Street. Veteran Chief Dispatcher Thomas Redmond had fears that there may be two working fires within 15 blocks of each other. At 1723 hours, Battalion Chief William T. Heiden of Battalion 1 transmitted a 10-75 for Box 98 at Gold and Frankfurt Streets. At 1728 hours B.C. Heiden transmitted the “All Hands” for a fire in an air shaft of a 5-story warehouse. At 1729 hours, B.C. Heiden transmitted a 2<sup>nd</sup> alarm for Box 98.

The pace of events started to rapidly escalate at 1730 hours. Battalion Chief Harold Anderson of Battalion 2 radioed the Manhattan Fire Dispatcher and transmitted a 2<sup>nd</sup> alarm for Box 199 at 463 Broadway. The units that would normally be assigned to Box 199 were already dispatched to Box 98. The 2<sup>nd</sup> alarm units for Box 199 would be coming from a distance and would have a delayed response.

463 Broadway was a 5-story loft building at the corner of Broadway and Grand Street. The dimensions were 110’ x 160’. The fire building was a textile factory with many wholesale textile firms as tenants within the building. Exposure 3 was a 5-story loft building at 112-114 Grand Street. Exposure 4 was another 5-story loft building at 469 Broadway and Exposure 4A was a 5-story loft building at 471 Broadway.

Engine 31 was commanded by Lieut. John A. McDermott. He saw that the fire was located in the cellar of 463 Broadway. The cellar was rented by the tenant of the first floor and it contained large bolts of textiles. There was a heavy
smoke condition coming from the cellar. Lieut. McDermott found the stairway that led to the cellar. It was only 3 ½ feet wide. Two feet of the width of the cellar stairs was covered with a hinged wooden chute. The hinged wooden chute was in place to aid the first floor tenant in moving stock. This hampered access and egress to the cellar. Lieut. McDermott had the chute raised out of the way. He ordered his unit to stretch a 2 ½ inch hand line into the cellar. On the nozzle was Fr. Francis J. Sammon, E-31.

Squad 8 responded from their quarters on 243 Lafayette Street. When Squad 8 arrived at the fire, B.C. Anderson ordered Squad 8 to enter the cellar and assist Engine 31 on the hose line. Entering the cellar from Squad 8 was Capt. Howie Borden, Fr. Royal Fox, Fr. Robert Barnickle and Fr. John C. Cosner.

**Historical Note:** In 1960, Engine Companies had only two Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA). Squad Companies had 6 SCBAs, and Rescue Companies had 6 SCBAs.

Engine 31 and Squad 8 were searching for the source of the fire. The cellar was heavily charged with smoke and heat. The large bolts of textiles were hampering the operations in the cellar and, as it turns out, was providing a fuel source for the expanding fire. Capt. Borden Sq. 8 went up the stairs to the first floor to give Battalion Chief Anderson a report of the high heat and heavy smoke condition in the cellar.

The Firefighters working in the cellar were experiencing punishing conditions. They continued to search for the location of the fire. Although the source of the fire eluded them, the heat was extreme. When water from the hose was played upon the walls of the cellar, it turned to steam.

Lieut. McDermott E-31 and the other four Firefighters in the cellar decided to evacuate their position in the cellar. They all headed for the stairway. Fr. Robert Barnickle of Sq. 8 was the first to hit the stairway. His head reached the ceiling level of the cellar when the opening erupted in flame. He stumbled backward. Behind him was Fr. Royal Fox of Sq. 8. Fr. Fox pushed Fr. Barnickle back up the stairs. They both pushed through a wall of fire to make it to the first
floor. Every part of their bodies that was not covered by their SCBA mask or their turnout gear was burned.

As second alarm units arrived at the fire at 463 Broadway, they saw Fr. Barnickle and Fr. Fox staggered by burn injuries they received in their climb to the first floor. Firefighters Barnickle and Fox thought that the other three Firefighters in the cellar were behind them. They were not. The two burned Firefighters were immediately transported to nearby Bellevue Hospital.

Firefighters on the first floor attempted to advance a hose line down the cellar stairs to rescue the other Firefighters. Their hose stream had little effect on the blow torch fire. Lieutenant McDermott, E-31, Fr. Sammon, E-31, and Fr. Cosner, Sq. 8, were trapped in the cellar. They continued to search for a way out. Lieut. McDermott had a handi-talkie and was communicating to B.C. Anderson. Then, the handi-talkie stopped working. They were also running out of air.

The fire in the building was now erupting. The fire extended to the upper floors via voids and airshafts. The stored flammable textiles in the building began to ignite. The fire started extending horizontally. The fire started eating its way through the roof and illuminating the evening sky.
At 1754 hours, Assistant Chief Arthur Massett declared the fire at Box 98 at Gold Street “under control”. Units from Box 98 were sent up to Broadway and Grand Street as quickly as they could take up their hose lines.

Assistant Chief Massett left the fire at Gold Street and made it to Box 199 at 463 Broadway. A heavy smoke condition from the fire blanketed Lower Manhattan. The fire was attracting thousands of onlookers. At 1800 hours, Assistant Chief Massett arrived at Box 199 and transmitted a 4th alarm. At 1820 hours, he transmitted a 5th alarm. The fire started to extend to exposure 4 and exposure 3. The fire extended in the exposures and flames were visible from windows on all floors. The fire could be seen from Brooklyn and Jersey City where fire alarms were transmitted upon seeing the smoke and flames dancing in the sky 100 feet above the 5-story building.

At 1856 hours, shortly after the 5th alarm was transmitted, the BMT Subway lines that ran under the fire building down Broadway was ordered to be shut down in both directions from Canal Street to 34th Street. The danger of the building collapsing and causing the collapse of the subway tunnel was a real concern.

In Brooklyn, a 4th alarm was transmitted to respond to the fire in Manhattan. All the Brooklyn units were directed to report to the Mercer Street side of the expanding fire. Fire would eventually reach
two buildings there, 44 and 46 Mercer Street.

Fire Commissioner Edward Cavanaugh and Chief of Department George David arrived at the scene. They were advised about the trapped Firefighters. Chief David ordered a rescue team of 10 Firefighters to muster at the corner of Broadway and Grand Street.

Rescue 1 led the team in trying to reach the trapped Firefighters. Using the staircase where they originally made access to the cellar was not possible. The staircase had burned away and flaming debris was dropping down on that location. They started to break through the sidewalk gratings and sidewalk cellar vaults by using sledge hammers and crowbars to gain access to the cellar where the three men were trapped. While the rescue team was working feverishly, the weakened 5-story wall threatened to collapse on them. They finally breached the wall into the cellar. Two Firefighters from Rescue 1 descended into the hole and attempted to gain access to the cellar. They were unable to enter the cellar due to being met by a wall of fire. Hope for the three trapped men was beginning to diminish.

Chief of Department George David refused to surrender the rescue effort. He ordered an Engine Company to direct their deck pipe nozzle into the erupting fire from the sidewalk opening. Attempts were being made to breach walls from the exposures, but they were thwarted by the fire.

At about 2100 hours, the flames had diminished to the point where rescue teams could re-enter the cellar. The heat was still debilitating and
water had accumulated in the cellar to the point of being waist deep. Smoldering and burning textiles filled the cellar space as searching Firefighters keep looking for their trapped comrades. Finally, the searching Firefighters came upon the trapped men. They were found floating in the water, and their bodies were badly burned. They attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and applied oxygen. These efforts were unsuccessful in bringing back the gallant Firefighters. They were found 10 feet away from the location of the stairway entrance.

At 2138 hours, the bodies of the three Firefighters were pulled out of the hole in the sidewalk where the rescue attempts were forged. 200 Firefighters assembled around the sidewalk hole at Broadway and Grand Street to pay homage to the fallen. The bodies were covered, and the last rites were administered by Fire Department Chaplains.

The fire was far from being contained. At one point, during the rescue effort, the rear wall of 112-114 Grand Street collapsed onto a parking lot, burying several cars and trucks. Another wall at 112 Grand St. collapsed onto Grand Street. The collapsing wall injured Fr. Paul Meyer of Ladder 9 while he was standing next to Fire
Commissioner Edward Cavanagh. Fire Commissioner Cavanagh was slightly injured and he helped bring Fr. Meyer to an ambulance.

The fire destroyed the original fire building, 463 Broadway. It also destroyed 469 Broadway, 471 Broadway, and 112-114 Grand Street. It also damaged two other loft buildings at 44 and 46 Mercer Street. The fire required 9 alarms to be extinguished. The fire was declared “Under Control” at 0115 hours on November 19, 1960.

Fire Commissioner Edward Cavanagh had presided over the FDNY during many tragic fires in the Hell’s Hundred Acres neighborhood. He was the Fire Commissioner on February 14, 1958, when the Wooster Street fire claimed the lives of two Firefighters and four members of the Fire Patrol. He was also the Fire Commissioner for the loft building fire at 623 Broadway on March 19, 1958 that claimed the lives of 24 people. (see photo on last page) He was determined to improve the conditions within the factories and warehouses in the neighborhood. He took some eye-opening steps to change conditions. One was that he urged workers to walk off the job if they found poor housekeeping, smoking violations, blocked or locked exits. He then said to “call the Fire Department and we will do the rest.”
Another action that Commissioner Cavanagh took occurred four days after the fire at 463 Broadway. He held a press conference at the fire building to bring awareness to the fire breeding conditions in the factories and warehouses in the neighborhood. He special called five Engine Companies to play water on the fire building for the television cameras. The response of the five Engine Companies was recorded in Fire Department records as being for “demonstration purposes.”

**The Supreme Sacrifice — Died in Line of Duty**

Lieut. John A. McDermott of Engine Co. 31 was 34 years old. He left behind a wife and six children. Fr. Francis J. Sammon of Engine Co. 31 was 34 years old. He was a former Police Officer with the NYPD and had been a member of the FDNY for two years. He left behind a wife. Fr. John C. Cosner of Squad Co. 8 was 25 years old and was a member of the FDNY for only 13 months. He left behind a wife and a 5-week old daughter. May they all rest in peace. Never forget!
BATTALION CHIEF ROYAL FOX: Retired Battalion Chief Royal Fox is 83 years old. At the time of the fire at 463 Broadway, he was 26 years old and was a Firefighter assigned to Squad 8. He is the last survivor of the horror that happened at the corner of Broadway and Grand Street in 1960. On November 18, 2015, the 75th anniversary of this tragic fire was observed. Every year, on the anniversary date of this fire, Royal Fox visits the graves of Fr. Francis Sammon and Lieut. John McDermott.

Battalion Chief Royal Fox (Ret.) is also a survivor of another tragic fire. He was a newly promoted Lieutenant and working in Ladder Co. 3 on the night of October 17, 1966. Ladder Co. 3 responded to Box 598 at 2136 hours which was the infamous fire known as the “23rd Street Collapse.” The “23rd Street Collapse” is well known in FDNY history for causing the death of 12 Firefighters. Ladder Co. 3 and Engine Co. 5 were operating in the cellar on the 22nd Street side of the building when the call came over the radio to evacuate the cellar. Lieut. Fox made sure everyone was out of the cellar. When it was just Lieut. Fox and another Firefighter left in the cellar, the other Firefighter could not make it through the intense heat at the cellar entrance. Lieut. Fox pushed and carried the other Firefighter through the intense heat to the street. Lieut. Fox and the other Firefighters that were evacuated out of the cellar were hospitalized at Bellevue Hospital with burns. A Chief Officer commented: “When these men came out of the cellar, I went to help one of them. His coat was so hot that I had to pull my hand away.” Deputy Chief Vincent Dunn (Ret.), also a veteran of the “23rd Street Collapse”, stated that Royal Fox is the reason that we only had 12 Firefighters die that day. If it wasn’t for him, there would have been 20 Firefighters dead. Lieutenant Fox’s actions at the “23rd Street Collapse” in 1966 were remarkably similar to his actions at Broadway and Grand Street in 1960. Lieutenant Royal F. Fox was awarded the “William F. Conran Medal” for his actions at the “23rd Street Collapse.”

Retired Battalion Chief Royal Fox is the Father-in-Law of Captain Vincent DiStefano of Engine Company 67.
Engine Co. 31 was originated on October 20, 1865. That was when the FDNY Paid Fire Department was formed. It protected the “Hell’s Hundred Acres” neighborhood in Lower Manhattan. On December 15, 1905, they moved into a new firehouse that is arguably the most beautiful firehouse ever built in New York City. It was designed by architects Napoleon LeBrun & Sons. They shared the quarters with Battalion 2. While the firehouse was active, it was designated a New York City Landmark in 1966. The firehouse was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1972. Engine Co. 31 was disbanded on November 25, 1972. Battalion 2 is now quartered with Engine 24 and Ladder 5 at 227 6th Avenue. The firehouse at 87 Lafayette Street was sold at auction and it is now occupied by the Downtown Community Television Center.
A cellar fire should be suspected when units on a first floor are having difficulty finding the source of a fire and the Roof Firefighter reports smoke coming from vents, shafts, and dumbwaiter bulkheads.

Priority

The priority for access at cellar fires is: 1) An enclosed interior stairway with a fireproof self-closing door, 2) An unenclosed interior stairway, 3) A sidewalk cellar entrance, 4) A trap door. The use of an elevator to make access to a cellar fire is unsafe!

If a stairway has chutes or rollers in place, they must be removed before using that stairway. These chutes will inhibit your access to the cellar and will block your escape. Never use a chute to make access to a cellar. You may be taking an express route into a dangerous situation with no escape.

If you are making access to a cellar fire via an enclosed stairway with a fireproof self-closing door, you are descending past the thermal levels inside the stairway. You will be in relative safety. On the other hand, if you are descending down an open stairway, you will have to go through the thermal levels at the ceiling level of the cellar. Firefighters must descend through this thermal level as quickly as possible. Conditions should be better at the floor level of the cellar.

Photo by Steven Spak
If a building has a cellar fire and it is equipped with a sprinkler system, the sprinkler Siamese must be supplied. If it is a non-automatic system, the Siamese will be painted “silver” and a sign will indicate the areas the sprinkler system protects.

In order to properly use a hose stream to extinguish fire, the stock must be at least three feet below the ceiling level. The flames can then be driven back by using the reach of the hose stream.

**Locate, Confine, Extinguish**

Locate, Confine, Extinguish. At cellar fires, sometimes it is difficult to locate the fire. There is stock and storage of rubbish in cellars. This contributes to the fuel load. There are usually no fire resistive walls in cellars. It is a wide open area.

If a cellar fire has compromised a gas line or meter, there is a real possibility of an explosion. Do not extinguish the fire coming from the gas leak. Extinguish fire in the vicinity only. Have the gas supply shut-off at the curb valve.

*Water accumulation at cellar fires is a safety issue. If a Firefighter loses consciousness at a cellar fire, he/she would fall into the water and drown.* This scenario played out again at 79 Worth Street on June 5, 1994. See the August 2015 Division & Training and Safety Newsletter.

Ventilation of cellar fires is difficult. If it is a true cellar, there will not be any windows for horizontal ventilation. If the building is equipped with an unenclosed interior stair, the access/egress point will be the natural vent for the fire. Any vent that can be opened at roof level to relieve conditions in the cellar should be conducted.

Do not be led into a false sense of security when a cellar fire has been knocked down. The smoldering fuel is still off-gassing products of combustion. The simple explanation of ventilation is “bad air out, good air in.” Vertical ventilation is only half of the solution. We have to introduce clean air. Do not hesitate to use fans to force fresh air into the cellar. The Positive Pressure Ventilation (PPV) unit is a
good option. When using PPV, we must have an exit point opposite the fan. The use of your Self Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) is a must at cellar fires.

If a cellar fire is raging, the **entire** first floor of the building is in danger. Remember, there are no walls to confine the fire in a limited area in the cellar.

At cellar fires, expect fire to extend via pipe recesses, voids, and shafts to the upper floors. Fire stopping in cellars is limited to non-existent.

If necessary, a hole could be cut in the floor of the first floor, near a large window, to vent the cellar. A hose line should be placed at this location to protect the floor. This will provide a release point for the smoke and heat, hopefully away from the interior stairway.

If a hose line is advanced down an open interior stairway, it is essential that a back-up line be stretched to the cellar door at the stairway door at the first floor level. If “rollover” occurs at this point, the back-up line can protect the egress point for the Firefighters operating in the cellar. If a hose line cannot be advanced down the interior cellar stairs, the first hose line must stay at this point to protect the interior stairs and extinguish fire traveling in voids. The second line can then attempt to advance via an outside cellar entrance.

If necessary, a hole could be cut in the floor of the first floor, near a large window, to vent the cellar. It is an improvised sprinkler system. Cut a hole in the first floor as close as possible over the fire. Advance the cellar pipe or distributor, and position it so that it is at a half way point between the top of the stock cellar. A back-up hose line must be stretched to protect pipe/distributor. Remember, for every 18 degree rise in temperature, the rate of combustion doubles. You will not be able to completely extinguish the fire with this appliance. However, you will stop the “runaway train” that is the expanding fire.
Many times, cellar beams at ceiling level are unprotected. These beams can be destroyed rapidly. If the first floor has a heavy fire loading, collapse can be accelerated. At the “23rd Street Collapse” in 1966, the first floor flooring was “terrazzo” which added to the dead load and it concealed the heat condition from those operating on the first floor.

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