

FATHER'S DAY

On Sunday, June 17, 2001, a fire occurred in a hardware store in the Astoria section of the Borough of Queens, New York. The FDNY was notified and responded with a full first-alarm assignment, including Rescue Co. 4, which was returning from a box in Manhattan. As the first alarm companies went about their assigned tasks, an explosion took place that caused a massive collapse and severe injuries to scores of firefighters. Three firefighters were trapped — two beneath tons of bricks that had once been the exposure two side wall of the fire building and a third who was blown down the interior stairs leading to the cellar. After the explosion, the fire rapidly escalated from a second to a fifth alarm; and eventually some 350 firefighters converged on the scene, including all five rescue companies and seven squad companies. This account represents my recollections of the event, as well as the feelings and emotions I experienced during the operations to locate the trapped firefighters. It is not in any way meant as a critique of the incident or even necessarily represents an accurate description of the events as they unfolded. I have found that by talking about the incident, I can better cope with what happened. Since writing is a passion of mine, I thought that by writing about it and sharing those thoughts with other firefighters, the grief might become somewhat easier to bear.

The investigation into the cause of the fire and explosion is ongoing and new facts come to light each day. A recent theory is that a combination of smoke and flammable vapors/gases escaping from failed containers of paint, lacquer, and propane stored in the cellar triggered what might be described as a “super” backdraft — a

backdraft explosion with enough power to lift a two-story, 30-foot by 60-foot building of ordinary construction off the ground and blow out a side wall causing the collapse of the second floor and roof.

I wasn't scheduled to work until Father's Day night, but because I had to drive some 235 miles to the New York State Fire Academy early the next morning, I switched my night tour with a firefighter who wanted the day off. The morning was bleak and rainy, but sunshine was predicted for later in the day.

We had a covering lieutenant working in place of our regular officer. Like me, he was a native New Yorker who had been a firefighter in Alexandria, Virginia, before being appointed to the FDNY. Our chauffeur was a twenty-year veteran who worked in 43 Truck in Spanish Harlem before coming to Squad 18. The "can" man was out of "one-hundred and eight" truck in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and the forcible-entry or "irons" man was from 12 Truck in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. I was assigned the "hook" and a detailed firefighter from Engine Company 325 in Queens was given the roof position. The nine-hour day tour started out no differently than most — committee work (extra effort was given to the stove and refrigerator since it was Sunday), some ball breaking, and a discussion over what to prepare for lunch.

Kitchen duties were soon interrupted by an alarm, which turned out to be false, followed shortly thereafter by a report of smoke that turned out to be steam. While returning to quarters from the steam leak, we were directed to respond to a store fire on 16th Street near Fifth Avenue. We operated at the small "all hands" fire for about 40 minutes, assisting with forcible entry and performing searches of the store, cellar, and subcellar. After being ordered by the chief to "take up," we left the scene and had traveled no more than a couple of blocks before we came across a woman lying on the sidewalk. We administered first aid and shielded her from the now heavy rain using two borrowed umbrellas. Once she was stabilized, we moved her into the vestibule of a nearby apartment building and awaited EMS. An ambulance soon arrived, and we went back in service.

Since the morning was so hectic, we decided to pick up sandwiches for lunch. The Mets and Yankees were playing later at Shea, and everyone was hoping the rain would soon stop. We finished lunch around 2:00 and settled in to relax a little bit. The quiet didn't last very long. At about 14:50 hours the voice alarm sprang to life and the dispatcher announced a second alarm in Queens for a fire in a two-story "taxpayer." A second alarm is hardly unusual, but within minutes this second alarm escalated to a fifth. We switched our kitchen scanner to the Queens fire frequency and the urgency in the voices of the chief's aides indicated something unusual — something tragic — had happened. With little time to consider the possibilities, the tele-printer in the house watch spit out our response ticket to box 55-7512 — 12-22 Astoria Boulevard between 12 Street and 28 Avenue. It was 15:26 hours, and Squad 18 was on its way to Queens.

Due to our chauffeur's knowledge of the area and relatively light traffic, we made it from lower Manhattan to Astoria in eleven minutes. We parked a block away, collected our firefighting hand tools, and walked up the street toward the fire building. The sight that greeted us could only be described as surreal. Firefighters from Squad 288 and several other companies were sprawled out on the sidewalk with EMS personnel frantically trying to keep up with triage. The exposure-two side of the fire building was ahead of us — the wall blown out into the street with the second floor and roof hanging down in a supported lean-to fashion. Debris littered the street, and smoke poured from every opening in the collapsed building.

I walked up to the command post, and the first person I recognized was a captain who is currently the fire commissioner's executive officer. I asked him, "Ray, what's going on? Do we have members missing?" He nodded yes. I left the command post and walked around the front of Ladder Company 116's apparatus, which was parked on the exposure-two side of the fire building. I couldn't raise my officer by radio, and in the sea of smoke and firefighters, I recognized no one from Squad 18. I noticed many of the firefighters digging through the collapsed brick wall that lay on the sidewalk, so I threw my forcible entry tools into a freezer box lying at the curb and started moving bricks. Seemingly not more than a minute or two had gone by and a firefighter only a few feet from me shouted: "I got one!" About two-dozen firefighters and officers, myself included,

began frantically grasping at bricks and debris. The SCBA on my back was a hindrance and made it difficult to balance on the rubble pile. I was finally able to hand it to the lieutenant working in Hazardous Materials Co. 1, with whom I worked in Squad 18 before he was promoted. They had just concluded an operation nearby and when the alarm for the hardware store came in, they responded and assisted with forcible entry.

Paint cans kept exploding and two members of Squad 18 grabbed a 2½-inch line to drive the fire away from our position. The work was physical and frustrating, and I remember thinking how bad the smoke was, and I wished I could quit digging. I pushed the notion of quitting into my subconscious and kept working. Several minutes went by, and the first firefighter was pulled from the rubble. Dust was caked in his bloodied hair, and I couldn't make out his face.

The second firefighter was discovered next to the first. I recall the veteran lieutenant from Rescue 2 yelling at me, "Andy, you're on his legs!" A firefighter from Rescue 2 was standing on debris above the trapped firefighter's head. We moved and continued to claw at the rubble. It was difficult finding a place to toss the bricks without interfering with some other part of the rescue effort. Tempers grew short. In addition to bricks, the contents of the store were scattered all over. I remember fighting with mop handles and perforated particleboard partitions used to display hardware sundries. A reciprocating saw was brought in to cut away some wood entangling the trapped firefighter's feet. With Herculean effort, the second firefighter was pulled free and dragged onto a backboard. I helped move him onto a stretcher. He was quickly wheeled away by other firefighters and EMS personnel. I soon found out that one of the firefighters was Harry Ford, the senior man in Rescue 4. I learned later that the other firefighter was John Downing from Ladder 163, who was working his last tour before leaving on vacation with his wife and kids to visit relatives in Ireland.

With the two firefighters removed, we were ordered to enter the cellar of exposure 4A and assist as needed. I immediately relieved a firefighter operating a pavement breaker being used to breach the cellar wall. I used the tool for only a short time before we were told to reposition and start another breach closer to the front of the

building. I set up the tool and began to operate, but after only a minute or two trying to penetrate the brick and stone wall, I physically “died.” Holding the tool horizontally, even with help the help of my officer and roof man, was like trying to lift up the back end of car. I just couldn’t do it. A suggestion was made to try and secure the tool with nylon webbing slung over a joist supporting the first floor. My lieutenant told me to go up to the first floor and size up this possibility. I was relieved — I had never felt so exhausted and this assignment gave me a chance to catch my breath.

Once inside the first-floor apartment, I helped move some furniture so Ladder 115’s roof man could cut the floor and expose the joists. After this assignment was completed, I desperately needed some water, so I headed outside and met the forcible-entry firefighter from Squad 18 who was just as tired as I was. At some point I learned that the firefighter trapped in the cellar was Brian Fahey from Rescue 4. I had gotten to know Brian over the past three years, and I was stunned. We soon joined the other members of Squad 18 in a storefront church on the first floor of exposure 4B to rest and regroup. The “can” man let me use his cell phone so I could call my wife. I noticed the sun was shining; it had become a beautiful day.

After this short break, we went back to work. Members of Squad 1 had courageously entered the store cellar through one of the breached openings, but were ordered to withdraw due to heavy fire conditions and three feet of accumulated water. We assisted in breaching the sidewalk in front of the fire building in an effort to reach the cellar. The “can” man, “irons” man, and chauffeur relieved members of Rescue 5, who were using pavement breakers. The roof man and I helped pass chunks of concrete out from the work area in bucket brigade fashion. Simultaneously, attempts were being made to reach the interior stairs to the cellar. At one point, Squad 252 used a 2½-inch handline to push the fire back within the heavily damaged store while Rescue 3 entered the cellar. While this was going on, the “can” firefighter suggested we search what was left of an aisle filled with plumbing supplies in the off chance Brian was still on the first floor. The roof man and I joined him, and while moving shelving and digging through debris, a member of Rescue 3 reported he had located Brian in the cellar. It was approximately 18:00 hours. At about 18:30 hours, his body was removed from the

fire building by the off-duty members of Rescue 4 who had assembled at the scene. Except for the firefighters carrying Brian, everyone removed their helmets as a mark of respect. I had often studied photographs of the 23rd Street collapse, which took the lives of twelve firefighters and officers — five from Engine Company 18 (now Squad 18) in 1966 — but never imagined that I would someday be part of such a grim scene.

By this point, I had no more emotions left. Emptiness is the only way to describe the way I felt. The night tour arrived to relieve us, and they set about the task of finding several tools we had lost during the operation. I finally made it home to eat leftovers at about 10 p.m. I kissed my kids and hugged them and watched the news and cried. I think every New York City firefighter calls home more often now and hugs his kids a little tighter when he gets home safely from work.

Thankfully, the most seriously injured members — Lt. Joe Vosilla from Ladder 116 and Lt. Brendan Manning from Ladder 163 — are doing better. Many other members remain on medical leave, and some have additional surgeries and extensive rehabilitation ahead. In a touch of cruel irony, the firefighter detailed to Squad 18 for the day was assigned to the same firehouse as John Downing and helped free him from the rubble. I recently saw a tape of the ABC News “Nightline” segment that dealt with the fire. Despite being at the scene and watching news footage in the days following the explosion, I was astonished at the devastation. That more members weren’t killed can be attributed only to the grace of God. The two kids who admitted they spilled the gasoline that ran into the cellar and was ignited by a pilot light starting the original fire were not charged.

I know I’ve left out numerous details, but many of these are not important. Since the incident, I’ve often felt a sense of failure that accompanies the sadness. I know it’s quite normal to have doubts in a situation such as this, but that knowledge doesn’t seem to make the doubting and second-guessing any easier to deal with. In closing, I ask that you pray for the widows and especially the eight children left behind. To Brian, Harry, and John — **Rest In Peace Brothers**

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