

The Tenement

By Edward J. Shea

Prologue - *In New York City, tenements are multiple dwellings built before April 12, 1901. Given their height, complexity, wood frame construction with limited fire stopping, vertical shafts, as well as their high fire and occupancy loads, they present serious life threatening conditions.*

Older tenements, of the type presented in this story, may be twenty-five feet wide and up to eighty-five feet deep. Situated one-against-another, they can reach seven stories in height. Between them are narrow light/air shafts. With bathroom and kitchen windows opening into these shafts, it is not unusual for a fire to jump to an adjoining building.

And, if not to an adjoining building, a fire can travel from floor to floor, by means of the same windows or something known as a dumbwaiter shaft. Extending from the cellar to a small bulkhead enclosure on the roof, these dumbwaiter shafts are roughly two feet square. Originally, they contained a mini-elevator of sorts, used to lower rubbish to the building's cellar, where a superintendent removed it to trash cans. Occupant access to the dumbwaiter was provided via a small door mounted on the wall of every apartment's kitchen.

Despite their having long ago fallen into disuse and the existence of a city ordinance requiring the doors be nailed shut, to this day, these shafts are used for just about everything: pantry shelving, as well as a conduit for wiring, plumbing, ventilation ductwork and...the rapid extension of fire.

However, it is the combustible nature of both the building and its contents, combined with the number of people found in these structures, that provides the greatest need for early detection and rapid: response, deployment, search, rescue and extinguishment. If these tasks are not accomplished, people die.

PREFACE

“Deadly Tenement Fire” glared the headline. Berek paused to peer over the paper's top at his wife Julia, sitting opposite him at the kitchen table. Opening to page three, he began to read aloud, “Shortly after 10:00am yesterday, the Fire Department dispatched three hose carrying engines, two hook & ladder companies and a battalion chief as part of the initial assignment for a reported alarm at the intersection of Bedford and Flushing Avenues.” Berek brought his hand to his mouth and unconsciously cleared his throat before continuing. “The officer of the first arriving unit observed a fire at 450 Flushing Avenue and, recognizing that conditions were beyond the capabilities of the resources responding,

directed the Brooklyn dispatcher to send additional units. In that instant, an explosion...” Berek stopped.

An accompanying photo made clear the destruction to the building. Another, the exhausted state of the firemen. Still another, their depression at the loss of life. James Berek, Lieutenant FDNY, closed the paper, laid it front page down on the table and left the kitchen. The eyes of his wife and three children followed him as he did so.

Two days had passed since the fire and still he could not bring himself to speak of it. Moving onto the screened porch of his home, Berek closed the sliding storm door behind him and took one step to the left. There, behind the wall separating himself from the kitchen and the caring eyes of his family, he inhaled thrice deeply in an effort to compose himself. Resolve was no longer sufficient. Emotion ruled. His body shook. He leaned against the wall for support. Then, slowly, racked with convulsive trembling, Berek slid to the floor in a fetal mass and cried.

The Fire Department of New York utilizes an aggressive interior attack. Engine companies locate, confine and extinguish a fire. The hook & ladder—also known as ladder or truck—companies provide required forcible entry, ventilation, search and rescue.

A fire in a single apartment or building can grow to something of enormous proportion. Therefore, the area surrounding a building is thought of in terms of quadrants of *exposure*. The street to the building's front is exposure 1. The building to the left of the fire is exposure 2. Anything to the rear becomes exposure 3, to the right exposure 4.

Aside from the general obligations, personnel have specific responsibilities. Those depend upon the assigned role of the individual: officer, hose carrier, forcible entry, roofman, chauffeur, motor pump operator [MPO] or outside ventilation man [OVM]. This is true for fires in tenements, brownstones, taxpayers, high-rise offices, row frames, private dwellings, even vacant buildings. Rules, procedures, and anticipated practices abound.

However, despite all these organizational controls and a variety of refinements in technology, there is—excepting a few police procedures—nothing in the world more like combat infantry operations and its effects than firefighting.

To the public, the sight of arriving and dispersing firefighting forces at a serious fire appear to be nothing short of chaos. But to those who know better, it is instead something akin to the majesty of a multiple-moving-piece chess game. Disparate functions are implemented at a double or triple-time pace in a great-gridded-three-dimensional combat zone.

Once the chaos inherent in medium to large scale operations manifests itself, however, it is only the efforts of reasonable men to bend rules and procedures, under perilous circumstances and sometimes outrageous cost, that save the day.

Such was the case with Brooklyn box 663 during the early spring of 1967. It started nicely, but....

APARTMENT 3B

Completing his night's work, Hans Ludorf had rushed to his third floor *railroad flat* in a dismal looking five story, brickfaced building in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. It was Saturday morning and realizing that he had much to do that night—he and his fiancée were to visit the church rectory to set the date for their wedding, then attend a dinner celebration—Hans hastily prepared and devoured a breakfast of bacon and eggs. Leaving the dishes, he poured himself a second cup of coffee and moved to the living room. There, he watched a bit of television, finished his coffee along with one last cigarette and went to bed.

But Ludorf had forgotten something, a small and fatal something. He had placed his lit cigarette upon the coffee table's edge before retiring. As he lay in bed, it fell to the floor and rolled beneath the edge of a small pillow leaning against the couch.

It was 0908 hours.

F.D.N.Y. TURNOUT

Two blocks away from Ludorf's apartment, in the quarters of New York City's Hook & Ladder Company 102, the crew of one officer and five firefighters performed their routine morning assignments. All had been on-duty since 0900.

On the apparatus floor, Probationary Fireman Bill Sanchez, with five months on the job, was caring for the fire apparatus and its array of tools. He sharpened axes, refueled the vehicle, checked portable wooden ladders for damage, cleaned and oiled all handtools in preparation for a two hour fire tactics and procedures drill to be held that afternoon. To the rear of the apparatus floor and having his sixth cup of coffee, Fireman Dave Bandel, with seven years in the Department, was seeing to the maintenance of the kitchen and sitting-room area, as well as to luncheon preparations. At 1020 hours, theirs and the efforts of all others in the firehouse ceased.

The bell on the firehouse wall began to clang. Six times it loudly resounded. There was a pause. And, it cranked out another six. Then another pause and a final three.

"Box 663, Flushing and Bedford Avenues," yelled Fireman Bob Walsh, the company's on-duty housewatch and chauffeur. "We're first due truck," he continued, hitting a button switch on the wall adjacent to the desk he'd been sitting at.

The roll-up door to the apparatus floor began to rise and the morning sun burst through. Donning his portable radio and turnout coat, Walsh climbed into the driver's seat of the apparatus cab. His heart fluttered with excitement, much as it had when he responded to his first such alarm over fifteen years ago and every alarm since.

The officer-in-charge, Lieutenant James Berek was busy in the second floor office when the alarm sounded. He found it more expedient to descend a brass pole than to walk the flight of stairs to the apparatus floor. Once down, he walked to the right side of the firetruck cab and his turnout gear, neatly arrayed there by himself when first reporting for duty that morning. Taking off his loosely laced shoes, Berek threw them into a clothing locker not far from where he stood. With his right hand, he crimped the cuffs of his trousers tightly around each ankle, just prior to slipping first one foot and then the other into his boots.

Lifting the Handie-Talkie from atop his gear, the Lieutenant slung the loop of the support strap over his head, resting it upon his left shoulder. The radio lay against his right hip. He turned it on, checked the frequency setting and unconsciously depressed the speaker button of the speaker handset, clipped to the shoulder strap at a point just over his left breast. Next and finally, Lieutenant Berek donned his helmet and fire coat. Ready for response, he opened the door to the truck's cab and climbed into the seat beside Bob Walsh. Both men looked to the rear of the apparatus to ensure the readiness of the tillerman.

Firemen Jim Entin, a twelve-year veteran, and Pat Crowley, with nine years in the Department, had been hauling barrels of coal ashes from the furnace in the cellar to the sidewalk in front of the firehouse when the alarm had sounded. Entin's hulking six-foot-five, two hundred and thirty-three pound frame, followed closely by a wiry and much shorter Crowley, bounded up the cellar stairs. Both donned their fire gear. Crowley proceeded to the street. Entin climbed the side of the truck, strapped his safety belt on and signaled the chauffeur and Lieutenant Berek, by pressing a button on the floor of the tillerman's cab twice with his foot, to indicate he was prepared to control the rear wheels of the vehicle. The chauffeur might be the one controlling the direction and speed of the apparatus but a good tillerman made sure the trailing end of the vehicle cleared obstacles, not otherwise possible.

Hearing the prearranged loud and distinct two ring signal, the Lieutenant turned his gaze to the front. The door to the apparatus floor was opened and locked in position. It would not do, after all, to have the overhanging door slide back down as they drove out of the firehouse.

Firemen Dave Bandel, Pat Crowley and Bill Sanchez positioned themselves in front of quarters, on the sidewalk and in the street, to prevent vehicles and pedestrians from passing in front of the truck as it came out of the firehouse. As it passed them, the firetruck paused for but an instant while

the three waiting men stepped up onto the side mounted diamond-plated running boards, then climbed still further until they stood against the metal housing of the engine compartment. There, throughout their response, they would stand exposed to whatever elements nature and the neighborhood had in store for them. Enclosed cabs were not yet widely used on fire apparatus. The race riots of the late sixties would change that forever.

"All aboard," yelled Bandel.

Acknowledging with a wave of his right hand, the Lieutenant strapped himself into his seat as Bob Walsh turned the apparatus onto Bedford Avenue, its siren wailing.

The amount of time elapsed since their receipt of the signal for box 663: forty-seven seconds.

ONE MAN'S BRAVE EFFORTS

Sitting on his building's stoop, across the street from the apartment of Hans Ludorf, a forty-six year old father of five, Roberto Barrone, was first to observe smoke seeping through cracks in the cement work of the brick fronted building. As fast as was possible for a man that had been crippled since childhood, Barrone ran to the fire alarm box on the corner. Pulling its red lever-handle downward, he then rushed back toward and, without hesitation, into the burning building.

Each floor had two apartments, extending from front-to-rear of the building. Hence the name "railroad flat." Every apartment had two means of egress into the public hall and stairwell, one from the kitchen towards the rear of the building and another from a small livingroom located at the front of the building. Though it was the usual practice for occupants to store belongings against this *front* door, such was not the case with apartment 3B. Ludorf had neither the financial resources or aesthetic interest to accumulate very much of anything. Despite that fact, however, access to his apartment remained by way of the kitchen door, as is common.

Common, except for firemen. They enter anyway they can; through doors; windows, even walls, if necessary to effect a rescue. They will use fire escapes, portable, aerial or tower ladders. But Roberto Barrone had no such training, inclination, equipment or opportunity. His was to be the most direct approach and a dreadful error.

Nearing the third floor, Barrone was confronted with increasingly thicker and more acrid smoke pushing out from under and around the doors to one side of the hallway. Upon reaching the landing, he stood hunched over in an

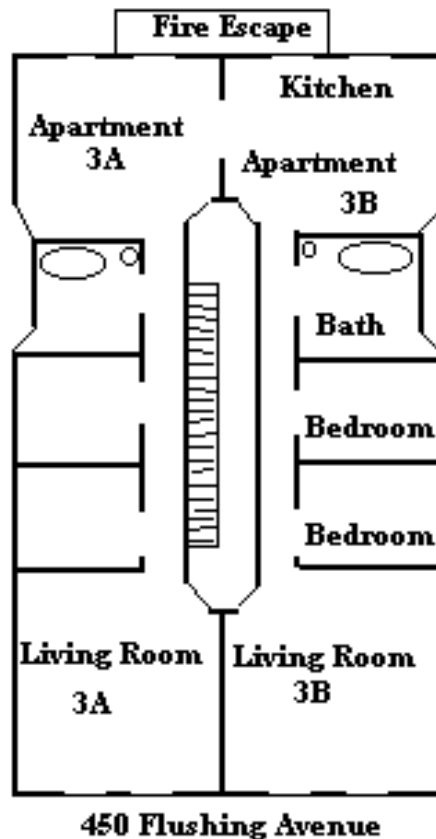
involuntary reaction to the smoke overhead banking down upon him. Seeing four doors and thinking each floor had four and not two apartments, he proceeded toward the door providing the greatest amount of smoke.

Inside Ludorf lay beyond unconsciousness, having long before succumbed to smoke inhalation. The furnishings in the livingroom had burned up within twenty minutes of the fire's start. The flames had then diminished because of insufficient ventilation within the apartment; but the heat remained along with a heavy smoke condition. All that was required to turn the hot carbon particle-and-monoxide filled room into an inferno was oxygen. Roberto Barrone would supply it.

Already filling the landings and stairwells to the roof level, the smoke continued to bank down, becoming ever more dense, hot and biting. It irritated Barrone's throat and eyes. Standing was impossible. Crouching low, his right hand on the banister opposite the wall shared with the fire apartment to steady and guide him, Roberto awkwardly duck-walked toward the smoke shrouded door that had only seconds before been visible. Something fell within the fire apartment, startling him. For a brief second, he inhaled sharply, doubled-over and puked. With his face inches from the floor, what seemed like an eternity passed before he could again breathe without choking on the acrid filth that filled the hallway. By force of will, he compelled himself forward, finally reaching the apartment door. It was hot to the

touch. Taking one last deep breath of air from the floor's surface, he stood straight up into the terrible heat, raised his right leg and kicked at the door. He could feel it give a little. The smoke and heat were becoming unbearable. In one last desperate attempt to force entry to the apartment, he raised his leg and again kicked at the door. Weakened by the heat, it flew from its hinges.

Thereafter, horrible things happened quickly. A voluminous puff of superheated smoke belched from the open doorway. The first hero at box 663 fell to the hallway floor in agony, the heat instantaneously inflicting second and third degree burns on his face and hands. And it continued to destroy him. It seared, blackened, then vaporized his ears, nose, eyelids, lips, and the flesh of his hands. There was a *swoooooshing* sound and the sense of a strong wind coming from somewhere, though Roberto Barrone would have no knowledge of it. He was in massive and terminal shock. The



wind was air rushing up the stairwell and being sucked into the fire apartment. The combustible atmosphere and heat now had the third element necessary for reignition of the fire: oxygen. At first, there was little more than a mere glow in the midst of all the smoke, like that of a dim light in a night's thick fog. But the glow grew larger. And with an explosive roar, the apartment and stairway landing burst into flames. Glass blew from the apartment's windows into the street and rear yard. Temperatures reaching 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit consumed everything.

Roberto Barrone and Hans Ludorf were already dead when the explosion took place, their roles and pain in the tragedy ended.

“THE CAVALRY...”

Ladder 102 did not stop at the alarm box. Seeing the smoking building as the truck came to the intersection of Flushing and Bedford Avenues, Lieutenant Berek ordered Bob Walsh to turn onto Flushing and proceed against traffic. The fire building was little more than fifty feet from the corner. Grabbing the handset of the vehicle's department radio from the dashboard, he depressed the transmission button and called to the Brooklyn Borough dispatcher, “Ladder 102 to Brooklyn.”

“Brooklyn to Ladder 102,” came the response.

“Transmit a second-alarm for box 663; fire is in an occupied five story tenement located at 450 Flushing Avenue,” Berek stated calmly. All units enroute to the alarm were thus made aware that they were responding to a *working* fire.

“10-4 Ladder 102,” acknowledged the dispatcher, adding “be aware that Ladder 119 will be delayed in arrival.” With those few words, the responsibilities for Berek and his men grew immense. Until the arrival of the delayed Ladder 119, or subsequently expected to arrive second-alarm truck companies, Ladder 102 would have to ventilate, search and rescue as needed. With a truck company force of but twenty-five percent of what the two-bagger would ultimately provide and need, *Berek & Company* was going to be stretched precariously thin.

No handline was yet stretched to the fire. In fact, Engine 209 was only then arriving. With smoke coming from around the windows of the third floor, occupants of apartments on that floor and all others above were in serious risk. Of course, if the fire had started elsewhere, like the cellar, and extended upward, showing itself only on the third floor, it was possible that occupants from the first through the fifth floors were in danger. Not until Lieutenant Berek got into the building could he accurately estimate how great the problems were. For sure, there were a lot of apartments to check, while engine companies stretched hoses into the building in their own efforts to confine and *drown* the fire.

As the apparatus came to a halt in front of the fire building, a shower of broken glass from the third floor windows, brought on by the fire's backdraft, fell upon the firemen. One especially large piece narrowly missed Berek's arm as he pushed open the cab door. He looked at it smashing to the running board, then turned toward Bob Walsh and directed him to “Raise the ladder! And, at the first sign of engine company progress, vent the apartments over the fire *or elsewhere as conditions might warrant.*” With this last phrase, Lieutenant Berek was telling Walsh to use his own discretion. With the lives of so many at risk, no water on the fire and limited manpower, procedures were about to be, he thought to himself, “*field condition modified.*”

Stepping down onto the street, the Lieutenant found Dave Bandel, Pat Crowley and Bill Sanchez waiting for him. Jim Entin was coming forward from his tiller position. Ordinarily, all members at this point would, without hesitation or further instruction, proceed to their prescribed tasks. This was not one of those times.

“Ladder 119 is delayed, so we've got a lot more to check than our 1st due assignment,” said Berek. “Pat, get to the roof via the adjoining building, vent the roof bulkheads and rear windows. Bob is putting the aerial up. Jim, as the Outside Ventilation Man [OVM], you'll help him and after taking care of your primary tasks at the rear, both you and Pat search the fourth and fifth floors. Let Bob know what you're doing, so he can ladder and assist if necessary. Dave and Bill, you two will come with me. Lastly, and remember this! There's no water, no *truckie* help. We are it, until the second-alarm trucks get here! Everyone knows his job, be careful, and let's get to them.”

Berek, Bandel and Sanchez dashed into the fire building. Pat Crowley ran to the entrance of exposure four, and took the interior stairs to the roof. To provide the necessary support for the vehicle, during aerial ladder operations, Jim Entin extended and set the tormentors on the working side of the apparatus. Then, taking a six foot hook and Halligan prybar from the tool bed of the truck, he proceeded to the lobby of the fire building.

CONDITIONS WORSEN

The wind, though slight, was enough to cause both the roof of the fire building and that of exposure 4 to be heavily shrouded in thick, black and acrid smoke. After a minute or so of blinding effort, Fireman Pat Crowley emerged windward of the fire building unscathed. His path had not been easy. He had crawled across the roof of exposure 4, over a small parapet, then across the roof of the fire building, over yet another parapet and, finally, onto the roof of exposure 2, the building to the left of the fire building. At each of the parapets, he carefully swept his Halligan tool to the far side to ensure the presence of a roof surface. More than one fire-

fighter had fallen into the sometimes greater than fifty foot deep air shafts common to tenements.

Looking around, he studied the roof layout of exposure 2. It was more than *likely* that it and the fire building's were the same. He looked for the location, size and design of the stairwell and dumbwaiter bulkheads. His intent was to find the same structures on the roof of the fire building and use them to assist in ventilating the building of the fire's toxic and flammable gasses.

Completing his reconnaissance, Crowley took a few deep breaths of fresh air and stepped back into the smoke. His eyes smarted, his nose began to run and each smoke filled breath irritated his throat and lungs. The lack of oxygen was sapping his strength and the Halligan and six-foot hook he carried seemed heavier with each passing second.

The stairwell bulkhead, situated mid-roof, was four feet wide, twelve long and reached eight feet at its greatest height. Its roof sloped downward at close to forty-five degrees toward the building's rear parapet and contained a skylight of wired glass, designed to provide light to a stairwell otherwise not so filled with smoke. Blindly bumping into it, Crowley did a right face and began walking toward the front of the building, while keeping his left shoulder in contact with its smoldering exterior. When the contact was lost, he knew from his study of the adjoining roof's bulkhead that the doorknob would be within an arm's length to his left.

The smoke was becoming thicker and more acrid. Fireman Crowley's eyes were tearing and he began to choke on the soot he was inhaling. As his shoulder lost contact with the bulkhead wall, his body began to revolt from the punishment. His lungs demanded more air and less carbon monoxide, his throat moisture, instead of soot. Dropping to his knees, he bent over and brought his face close to the roof's surface. If there was air to be had, it would be found there, oxygen being heavier than heated smoke. Two inches above the roof, Crowley found the air his body required. Taking three quick gasps, he rose to his feet, felt for the knob of the bulkhead door, found and turned it. Then, keeping the door between himself and the fire, in one muscle jolting motion, he pulled it open and jammed the tip of his Halligan tool into the upper hinged space of the door jamb, pried loose the hinge and spun his body around toward and against the safety of the bulkhead's exterior wall. The door fell nearly to the roof, held only to the jamb by the bottom hinge.

The condition that had existed earlier in Hans Ludorf's apartment, and created by the actions of Roberto Barrone, repeated itself in the stairway leading to the roof. Superheated gas filled the stairway and needed nothing more than a little ventilation to ignite. And that is exactly what happened. When Crowley opened the bulkhead door, the stairways on the fourth and fifth floors leading to the roof erupted. The smoke and heat traveled the path of least resistance, up and out. He further saw to that end by breaking

the skylight on the roof of the stairwell bulkhead, adding yet another opening from which the heat could escape.

Pat could hear the mask-muffled voices of firemen in the stairwell two stories below. Then as quickly as the smoke and flame had come, there emerged a cloud of superheated steam. Advancing toward the opened door to apartment 3B, an engine company had opened its hose nozzle to push back the flames. Within seconds, the steam relieved the fire condition in the stairwell but made it no more tenable. Crowley crawled to a point adjacent to the stairwell opening and sprang to its front. While still on all fours, he swept his arms onto the upper three stairs, searching for victims unfortunate enough to have tried escaping to the roof by way of the interior staircase. Finding none, he rolled out of harm's way and stood off to the windward side of the bulkhead. "*More to do!*" he said aloud.

Upright now, he walked to the air shaft the building shared with exposure 4. Fire had extended to the window frames of the fourth and fifth floors of the fire building and to those of the third, fourth and fifth floors of the building next door. About to notify the Officer-in-Command [OIC], his Handie-Talkie sprang to life and he heard Lieutenant Berek advise Battalion Chief Cordon of the fire's extension and that debris at the base of the shaft was also ablaze. Crowley quickly concluded that Berek had looked into the shaft from an apartment below. He turned and moved across to the shaft shared with exposure 2. Finding nothing unusual, he proceeded to the dumbwaiter shaft bulkhead.

Prying the top off with his hook, dense but relatively cool smoke lifted from the opening. He surmised that the fire had not extended to the shaft.

"*Now for the rear windows and a search,*" he muttered, as his Handie-Talkie again came to life with news that was to dramatically change the course of events that morning.

Lieutenant Berek, Firemen Bandel and Sanchez entered the fire building, made their way to the stairwell between the second and third floors and crouched on the steps, unable to go further. About the same time, Pat Crowley had reached the roof and Bob Walsh was about to raise the aerial ladder. The third floor landing was fully involved. There would be no progress until a handline was available. Retreating to the second floor, the Lieutenant ordered Bandel and Sanchez to ensure that all the tenants were removed from the lower floor apartments. Sanchez went to the first floor. Bandel, taking all of about a minute-and-a-half, popped the doors to the rear hallway entrances giving access to the kitchens of both second floor apartments. He then proceeded to search 2A, while Lieutenant Berek entered the apartment directly below that of the fire and went to an already opened rear window. Peering out, he saw no fire or smoke below him, only Fireman Jim Entin lowering the fire escape's drop ladder to the rear

yard. Above, flames from the third floor apartment filled the fire escape.

Turning his attention to the apartment's interior and using a small prybar, he opened the door to the dumbwaiter shaft. Shining his flashlight first down and then up the shaft, he saw nothing to indicate the presence of fire. Lieutenant Berek then went to the kitchen window overlooking the enclosed air shaft. Both the kitchen and bathroom had such windows. Searching he observed that fire had extended to the frames of windows on the adjoining building and that debris at the shaft's bottom was afire. He notified the Chief, by radio, of his findings and of the apparent need for hoses next door.

Returning then to the hallway, Lieutenant Berek encountered a disheveled looking woman in her forties that grabbed his arm as he approached.

"I was sitting for three children and left them alone while I went to the store," she screamed in panic.

"Where are they?" the Lieutenant asked.

"I live on the fourth floor."

"Where are the three children?" Berek repeated, more loudly this time.

"I was only gone for a few minutes," the woman mumbled almost incoherently. "I never thought this could happen."

Grasping the woman's shoulders and giving them a gentle and prolonged shaking, the exasperated Lieutenant Berek asked again, "The children, where are they?"

"The fifth floor, on the right hand side. I never thought...." she said, her voice trailing weakly. Then, again mumbling to herself, she turned and walked unsteadily down the stairs and out into the street.

Lieutenant Berek had just reached for the handset of his Handie-Talkie when Fireman Bandel came from apartment 2A. "Dave, the fire escape is blocked with fire, use the aerial to join Pat on the roof and search for three children in apartment 5B. Stay close to him. He's got the only radio between you two." Bandel took off and Berek depressed the transmit button of his radio and called to Pat Crowley on the roof, "102 to Roof, K."

Events were changing fast and not going very well.

Fireman Bill Sanchez, returning to the lower floors to vacate the apartments, had met Jim Entin. Each forced the door to one. Sanchez to 1A, which he immediately ran through to ensure no one remained. Entin's interests were different. He went straight for a rear window exiting onto the fire escape. Opening the window, he climbed out to find three people standing there and another two on their way down from

above. He directed them into the first floor kitchen and told them to proceed to the street. As they did so, Sanchez, having finished his examination of 1A, entered 1B and seeing them coming through the window quickly ushered them into the hallway. Checking the rest of the apartment and finding no one, he left the apartment. Assured that the slower moving tenants he'd just pushed from 1B went to the street, Sanchez then returned to the second floor, assisting enroute Engine 209 with their hose stretching efforts. Lieutenant Berek was speaking to Crowley, via radio, as Sanchez arrived.

Fireman Jim Entin, now alone on the fire escape, perfunctorily raised the drop ladder to the escape, released its restraining hook and allowed it to slide toward the ground. He turned then and, as he moved toward the second floor, saw that the fire from the windows of the third floor were blowing across the full width of the fire escape. He would be going nowhere until either the wind shifted or the engine company *darkened* the fire down enough for him to pass to the fourth floor. He was so waiting when Berek's voice erupted from his radio.

Fireman Bob Walsh mounted the turntable, after ensuring the placement and securing of the truck's tormentors, which prevented it from toppling should the ladder be extended far out and away from the vehicle. From the turntable, Walsh controlled the actions of the aerial ladder. Raising it from its bed, he rotated the ladder toward the building while simultaneously extending it toward the third floor windows. As the glass was already gone, he had only to remove the metal child guard gates.

These were mounted in the window's sill and lower frame, to prevent children from falling to the sidewalk below, a not uncommon circumstance before the guards became required. Once removed, firemen could find refuge on a waiting aerial ladder or, as was more often the case, catch a breath of not always fresh air without slamming their helmet covered heads into the metal gratings.

As Walsh completed his efforts, Bandel came running from the entrance of the fire building and climbed to the turntable. Over the din of the vehicle's motor and hydraulic pumps, Lieutenant Berek's voice could be heard coming from the speaker of Walsh's radio and he understood why Bandel had arrived as he had.

"Ladder 102 to Roof and OVM, K."

Crowley responded first, "Roof to 102, K"

Then Entin, "OVM to 102, K"

"There are three unattended children on the top floor, right

side, in line with the fire apartment,” Berek announced with more than a little bit of urgency in his voice.

“102 this is OVM,” responded Entin, “the fire has me unable to get above the third floor landing of the fire escape, K.”

“10-4 your problem OVM,” replied Berek, “Engine about to put water on the fire and should change your situation forthwith. Dave is going via aerial to the roof. He and Pat will search the fifth floor. Acknowledge Roof, K”

“Roof to 102, 10-4, K.”

Berek now called out to Bob Walsh, “Ladder 102 to Alpha, K.”

“Alpha to 102, K.”

“Did you hear all of that Bob,” asked Berek.

“Alpha to 102, 10-4 Lou, 2nd alarm trucks have arrived and being put to work. Jim should have an assist within minutes, K” answered Walsh turning his attention then to raising the ladder to the roof.

“10-4 Alpha, OVM acknowledge Alpha’s last, K” directed Berek.

“10-4 Lou. Will search fourth floor ASAP with assist from 2nd alarm truck. Will maintain radio contact with yourself or Walsh,” responded Entin.

STILL MORE TRAGEDY AND MAYHEM

With the aerial ladder extended several feet above the roof, Walsh then lowered its undercarriage to a point several inches from the front parapet. The weight of a fireman approaching the tip would bring it to rest against it. Fireman Dave Bandel darted up the ladder. With him half-way up, both he and Walsh could see a woman yelling at them from the sidewalk below. The same woman that had reported the children trapped. But neither firemen could understand her. She was trying to tell them that she lived alone on the fourth floor and that it was now empty. Dave continued to climb. Walsh remained at the turntable and, with there being no urgent need for it, prepared to move the aerial ladder to the lower floors, alert to radio traffic and calls for assistance from the search teams.

Bandel stepped from the ladder to the parapet and then down onto a forty-five degree pitched cornice, angling down some eight feet before meeting the roof. Standing then at the base of the slope he walked to the rear of the roof to join Pat Crowley.

With fire still coming from third floor windows and exposing the fire escape, there could be no immediate advance to the fifth floor. But, on the roof, Crowley had decided he

would ventilate the upper floors, so long as his efforts would not create a backdraft.

Removing a fifty-foot length of light rope from his turnout coat pocket, Pat put his six foot hook down on the roof and with his Halligan forcible entry tool in hand walked to and peered over the three foot high rear parapet. Smoke pushed lightly from around the windows, with no evidence of cracks or heat discoloration to the glass. Seeing where he stood in relation to the windows below, Pat then aligned himself directly over those windows closest to exposure 4, stepped back a few feet from the parapet and tied one end of the utility rope securely to the Halligan. Returning to the parapet again, he quickly lowered the tool, so that it hung suspended and centered in front of the fourth floor window he intended to remove. Without releasing his left-handed grip on the rope, he let the free end of the rope drop to the roof between the parapet and himself. Then, removing the slack in the line, he put his left foot on top of it just at the base of the parapet, jamming it in place. Hauling up the rope and near twenty pound Halligan, he flung the tool and attached rope high and back out over the rear yard. When it played out to where Crowley held the rope with his foot, the tool halted abruptly in mid-air and swung in an arc directly at the center rails of the window. Out came not only the panes of glass but the framing. He then quickly hauled the rope up and similarly attacked the fifth floor window. Dark brown filth bellowed from both of the newly vented openings.

At this point, the fire from the third floor windows became first a light brown, then grayish smoke and finally white steam. The engine company advanced rapidly through the apartment, pushing heat and smoke in its path out the window. It was time for Bandel and himself to search for the trapped children. Pulling the rope from the tool and leaving it with his six foot hook on the roof, Crowley joined Bandel, already on the gooseneck ladder and on his way to the fifth floor landing of the fire escape.

Second-alarm ladder company personnel were coming over the building’s front parapet, via the aerial ladder. They would check for further, if any, fire extension into the cockloft.

Others in the second-alarm units proceeded to their assignments as well. Fireman Martin Peyton, the OVM for Ladder 108, had taken the same path as and joined Jim Entin on the second floor fire escape balcony. As the fire darkened down, they advanced to the fourth floor and commenced their search.



Lieutenant Berek and Fireman Sanchez crouched behind the members of Engine 209 on the stairwell, as they waited for water to reach the nozzle of the hoseline. Every few seconds, a flashover occurred on the landing above them, and, as quickly as it erupted, snuffed itself out. The radiant heat was enormous, and felt through helmets and the shoulder fabric of turnout coats.

When the line was *charged*, the engine straightstreamed the ceiling of the third floor hallway. After a few seconds of waiting for things to darken down and the superheated steam to vent, they crawled up the staircase and around the banister toward the apartment's opened door. The engine officer announced finding what he believed to be a body. Berek and Sanchez, crouched as high as they might, moved forward and over firemen to pull what remained of Roberto Barrone from the path of the advancing hoseline.

Kicking open the door to the adjoining apartment, they deposited the charred remains on the livingroom floor. Directing Sanchez to give the apartment a quick once over, Berek radioed Battalion 34 and announced, "10-45, Code 1, removed from third floor hallway to apartment 3A."

While the 34 Battalion Aide acknowledged receipt of his message, he and Sanchez were already returning to the rear of the still advancing engine company, to complete their primary search of the fire apartment. Berek, all the while, kept one ear tuned to his Handie-Talkie for word of progress on the fifth floor search effort.

The engine moved through the apartment, quickly extinguishing fire as they proceeded from the livingroom, then down a hallway towards the kitchen in the far rear. With them already to the second bedroom, Sanchez began to search the livingroom with just a tad of sunlight making its way through the smoke. Lieutenant Berek hung a left, going directly to the first bedroom. Finding what he could not see, but knew to be another victim, he called for Sanchez.

But nothing was to be of any help. Their combined efforts to move Ludorf produced only partial dismemberment. Choking on smoke, Lieutenant Berek coughed throughout his second announced 10-45 (Code 1). As he released the transmit button and heard Battalion's acknowledgment, there came the sound of a thunderous crash, a shaking floor and screams of men trapped.

Debris from a partition wall had fallen onto and covered the advancing engine men. Berek and Sanchez rushed toward them, frantically pulling away the fallen studs, lath and plaster. Free of the debris, the engine prepared to continue with a fog stream advance, when one man complained of burning embers down his collar and moved forward. Visibility remained poor but the smoke was lifting, replaced now by mostly cooling steam. The injured fireman sat at the front of the line, the nozzle man reduced the stream and directed water onto the back of the man's head and down his turnout coat collar. He was ordered to "take up" and get some first aid. He stood and, choosing to ignore the officer's directive, returned to the end of the hoseline, where Berek grabbed his arm and walked him from the apartment and to the safety of the hallway. The sound of boots could be heard trudging up the stairwell and a voice called out, "Ladder 102?"

Berek acknowledged and Lieutenant Bob Farnsworth of Ladder Company 108, the officer-in-command of the first due truck on the second-alarm, told him that he and Ladder 102 were relieved, "Take up. Nice job!" Berek took a moment to tell Farnsworth about the bodies found, where they were now and that a primary search had not yet been completed in the rooms to the rear of the bedrooms. Then, calling out to Bill Sanchez that they were relieved, he turned to the injured engine man still at his side. Smiling, but with part of himself still attuned to radio traffic and the lack of it, he said "Why don't we just get the hell out of here?"

Firemen Crowley and Bandel entered the fifth floor apartment, as Jim Entin and Martin Peyton had the fourth. Not being able to see a thing, Crowley and Bandel started their systematic probe of each room by touch alone. Through the kitchen, then the bathroom, into the first of two bedrooms, on beds, under beds, in closets, under dressers they searched.

Walsh's voice crackled out of Crowley's handset, "102 Alpha to Roof, K"

"102 Roof, K," came Crowley's cough filled response.

"The aerial is at the fifth floor window, K"

"10-4 Alpha."

Dave Bandel had heard the exchange as he continued shuffling about the first bedroom floor on his knees and stood when touching the side rungs of a crib. He slowly and carefully ran his hand back and forth over the entire mattress surface. He could see nothing but suddenly his hand encountered the form of a child.

"I've got one, Pat," yelled Bandel, sweeping the child into his arms and running to the rear window. Almost simultaneous with Dave Bandel's find, Crowley announced he had found the other two. Later he would explain, "They were beneath a bed." Climbing out onto the fire escape, Dave started mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and called back to Crowley, who was by then in the hall passageway and heading for the livingroom. "Are you all right Pat?"

"Yeh," came Crowley's muffled, smoke choking response, "I'm going to the front and the aerial ladder."

With one arm holding the infant, Bandel then carefully climbed down the fire escape to a first floor window, entered and proceeded to the building's lobby.

In the street, Bob Walsh was busy maneuvering the aerial ladder about, after seeing to it that Bandel and two second-alarm truckies got to the roof. Though Pat Crowley had little to no visibility within the apartment and would struggle to reach a window, Walsh knew he'd find comfort in knowing the ladder was within reach. As Bob raised the ladder from the roof and retracted it, a crashing sound came from within the building and a puff of smoke belched from the fire floor windows. It obscured his vision momentarily but he recovered and placed the tip of the ladder just barely into the fifth floor window. He alerted Crowley, by radio, about the presence of the ladder.

Securing all at the turntable, he climbed toward the smoke shrouded opening. Being only two rungs from the window, Fireman Crowley's helmet then shoulders and child filled arms appeared. Upon seeing Walsh, Pat Crowley passed one and then another unconscious child to him. Walsh moved down three rungs and waited for Pat to climb from the window onto the ladder. He blew three quick breaths into the lungs of each of the unconscious children. Below him he saw Dave Bandel coming from the building entrance with a child in his arms. A moment later, Lieutenant Berek appeared with an apparently injured fireman. Then, redirecting his attention to the matter at hand, Walsh returned one of the children to Crowley and, together, both men descended slowly to the turntable, climbing from the apparatus to the street.

Ambulance attendants, anxiously watching the rescue, snatched the children from the arms of the firemen and carried them to a waiting ambulance. Crowley followed them; while Walsh returned his attention to the windows of the fourth floor and began to worry. As he began to reposition the aerial ladder, a fireman appeared at the window bearing a Ladder 108 helmet patch. Martin Peyton tore the mask from his face yelling, "I need help."

Walsh barely remembered putting his foot to the first rung of the ladder when he was at its tip and listening to Peyton explain that he could not find Jim Entin. Bob sprang into the room, now only moderately smoked filled with limited visibility. Depressing the transmit button of his radio, he called for Entin, "102 Alpha to OVM-K," and getting no response, proceeded to search backwards through the apartment. Again he called, "102 Alpha to OVM, K." But, still there came no reply, as he and Peyton finished their poor flashlight, touch-and-feel efforts in the front room and moved to the first bedroom. It was possible that Jim had left through the rear window to the fire escape and that his radio was either out-of-service or shut off. But it was not likely. And Bob knew it.

The apartment was nearly smoke free by this time and they moved more quickly. Walking upright, they swept through the second bedroom, then through the hall passageway toward the bathroom. Reaching its threshold, Bob abruptly turned right and had to grab the doorframe with both hands, as Peyton bumped and nearly drove him into the room. A room which was now less a room than it was an open pit. Below him, in what was the third floor apartment, lay the bathroom facilities of the fourth floor, a nearly unrecognizable red helmet patch bearing the number 102 and the crumpled form of Jim Entin.

"Ah, shit!," exclaimed Walsh, then depressing the Handie-Talkie transmit button he announced "Mayday, member down...."

EPILOGUE

Several months passed before relief could be palpably felt in the quarters of Ladder 102. As stress management and post-traumatic shock weren't yet *invented*, there were no intervention programs to relieve the pain of those operating at the fire. Over the many years to come that Lieutenant Berek, Firemen Robert Walsh, Patrick Crowley, David Bandel and William Sanchez remained with Ladder 102, none would ever again work with one of the others without thinking of Jim Entin and the events of that one disastrous morning in 1967.

Three years later, Hans Ludorf's fiancée married an attorney.

From the Mayor of New York City, Roberto Barrone posthumously received a citation for his noteworthy and brave efforts to save the life of Hans Ludorf. It was ceremoniously

presented to his wife and five children, all of whom were by then living on social security.

Fireman James Entin's family fared little better with four children on social security and a widow with a pension. Five years later, she married a widower police officer with two children.

The three children pulled from the fifth floor apartment were Jacinta, Miguel and Cynthia Juarez ages one-and-a-half, three and four respectively. Jacinta died of smoke inhalation but, after a few touch-and-go days in the hospital, Miguel and Cynthia were released with no further complications.

To the bean counters at Operations, 450 Flushing Avenue became neatly packaged: "Cause: Smoking Carelessness. Losses: (3) Civilians: Two Adults, One Child; Department Personnel: (1) Fireman. Damage to Building: Moderate and insured."

What might be called the equivalent of an *After Action Report*, written by investigating chiefs, concluded that "All hands did an outstanding job of containing a situation that might have resulted in still greater loss of life and property than was the case" and recommended a "Unit Citation for Hook & Ladder Company 102." The citation, to this day, is mounted next to the plaque provided by the Department in honor of James Entin and adorning the wall adjacent to the housewatch desk.

And too, recognition was accorded for individual acts of bravery by department members. Some more poignant but no less important than others. Fireman Pat Crowley received a Class 2 award for his heroic rescue of the two children from the fifth floor apartment. And Fireman Dave Bandel? Well, he received a well deserved "Good job!" and the proverbial pat-on-the-back for his efforts, as it was his *save*, Jacinta Juarez, that died. Understandably, however harrowing the conditions surrounding the rescue attempt, awards are not issued under such circumstances.

Finally, Lieutenant Berek never did get to read that newspaper article. But, however dramatic the accounting may have been, it is likely that the writer's efforts would pale before Berek's own memories.

[This is a work of fiction. The events described are imaginary. The settings and characters are fictitious and not intended to represent real places, individuals or acts.]

Gender specific terms are used, as such was the custom of the time. The female "firefighter" was an unimagined concept.

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