DIVISION 7

TRAINING
AND
SAFETY
NEWSLETTER
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The
Martin R. Celic
Fire
In the 1970s, the City of New York was in bad fiscal shape. In the era of the “War Years”, the city was experiencing the height of structural fire duty. However, cuts were made everywhere in city government. Firemen were laid off. Fire companies were disbanded and ancillary functions of the fire department were dramatically cut back. The Bureau of Repairs and Transportation were cut back causing issues with repair of fire apparatus. Fire alarm dispatch offices were cutback from 10 dispatchers on duty to 4 for an entire borough. These cut-backs would eventually catch up with the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) and be the catalyst for a disaster.

Martin “Marty” R. Celic was appointed to the FDNY on May 19, 1973. Upon graduation from Proby School, he was assigned to Ladder 15 in the financial district of Lower Manhattan. During the 1970s, Ladder 15 would interchange with Ladder 18 in the Lower East Side. This exposed Marty to firefighting in tenements as compared to high-rise firefighting. He loved it. Firefighters from Ladder 18 noticed his enthusiasm and encouraged him to transfer to the company. However, a curve ball would be thrown his way.

On July 1, 1975, Marty Celic would be laid off along with hundreds of other firefighters. This would interfere with not only Marty’s professional life, but his personal life as well. Marty was engaged to be married to Rachel Morio who was a Nurse. Their wedding plans had to be put on hold. Marty would be re-hired on December 25, 1976. His transfer to Ladder 18 would come through on January 10, 1977. Everyone who spoke about Marty had nothing but good things to say about the quick-witted young man.

JULY 2, 1977

July 2\textsuperscript{nd} was a pleasant summer morning. It was the start of the 4\textsuperscript{th} of July weekend. Marty Celic had just finished his second night tour and was hired to work overtime for the day tour at Engine 15. He left Ladder 18 to report for duty and Engine 15 on Henry Street. Working in Engine 15 for the day tour were Lieutenant Hopkins, the firefighters on the back step were Nixon, Colon and Celic.
Working in Ladder 18 for the day tour were Lieutenant Raymond Bellinger, Firefighter (Fr.) Dave Escher (Chauffeur), Fr. Mike Barone (Outside Vent), Fr. John Henihan (Roof), Fr. Bill “Ringo” Reilly (Irons), and Fr. John Maloney (Can). The members of Ladder 18 were performing normal maintenance tasks and were preparing for what could be a very busy tour.

As the day tour progressed, a 4th alarm was transmitted for Manhattan Box 931, 12th Avenue and West 59th Street. There was a fully involved pier fire on the west side of Manhattan. This was a dramatic fire that created exposure problems from 11th Avenue to 12th Avenue and West 60th Street to West 66th Street. Two fireboats were called and the Super Pumper responded. The fireboats were instructed to report to the fire with their five-inch tips attached to their deck guns.

The Manhattan Fire Communications Office was understaffed. There were only four fire alarm dispatchers. They were becoming overwhelmed by the radio requests and phone alarms coming in from the pier fire on the West side. Numerous fires were being set in the vicinity of the pier fire due to flying brands. In addition to the demanding 4th alarm pier fire, the busy fire traffic in Harlem and the Lower East Side had to be handled.

At around 1500 hours, a 17-year old arsonist named “Nelson Arzon” went about setting a fire in a tenement on East 8th Street. He set the fire on the fifth floor and it extended to the sixth floor. The fire was set in the rear of the building. He would later state that his reason for setting the fire was to “drive winos and junkies from the vacant building.” Arsonist Nelson Arzon lived at 199 East 3rd Street, nowhere near the target of his lethal activities on East 8th Street.
In mid-afternoon, Engine 28 went out of service due to having two flat tires. This put a burden on the surrounding engine companies to cover their area. An Emergency Reporting System (ERS) Box was transmitted and Engine 15 responded to “Alphabet City”, Engine 28’s first due area, to investigate the box alarm. Engine 15 made it to the location of the ERS Box and conducted their investigation. It was a malicious false alarm and they transmitted a 10-92 over the department radio.

While returning from the false alarm, Lieutenant Hopkins saw a large column of smoke coming from the area of East 8th Street and Avenue C. It was 1510 hours. They went to investigate the smoke. They arrived in front of 358 East 8th Street. It was a vacant building and had been identified by the administrative fire company as a hazardous structure and had been marked with
an “X”. Engine 15 saw that there was a fire in the rear on the 5th and 6th floor of the tenement. Lieutenant Hopkins called on the department radio to report to the dispatcher that they had a “Verbal Alarm” for a working fire on 8th Street between Avenue C and Avenue D. He stated “it was a 10-75 at the bare minimum – send help.”. The box was never transmitted and neither was the 10-75.

**Historical Note:** In 1977, FDNY units were equipped with the old Scott 1 self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). The profile of the Scott 1 was large and it was difficult to pass between a fire escape ladder and a building while wearing the SCBA. In 1977, there were no mobile data terminals (MDT) on the fire apparatus. The only method to communicate with the fire alarm dispatchers on the apparatus was the department radio.

Lieutenant Hopkins ordered his firefighters to perform a “fire escape stretch” to the 5th floor. This was a common practice with a known hazardous vacant building due to the interior stairways being compromised. At this time, there was nothing visible in the front of the building. All the fire was in the rear. Once Engine 15 reached the fifth floor on the fire escape with the hose line, they entered the building. They entered through one of the front windows and advanced the
hose line to the rear. Lieutenant Hopkins called his Chauffeur over the handi-talkie to “start water”.

Engine 15 thought that there would be additional fire units responding to box 439, 8th Street and Avenue C, to fill out the assignments. Unbeknownst to them, help was not coming.

While Engine 15 was operating by themselves, the arsonist, Nelson Arzon, snuck back into the fire building and set a fire on the second floor in one of the front apartments, using diesel fuel as the accelerant. This fire development was delayed due to the lower volatility of the diesel fuel. When the fire reached the free-burning stage, it created a tremendous amount of heat and smoke. While performing housewatch duties at the quarters of Engine 17 and Ladder 18, Fr. Dave Escher was listening to the department radio. Engine 17 was out at a rubbish fire. He heard the radio transmissions of Engine 15. He wondered why Ladder 18 and Battalion 4 hadn’t been dispatched to the fire, as they are normally assigned on that box. He called the dispatcher over the department telephone to tell them that Ladder 18 and Battalion 4
were responding to the fire on 8th Street. He alerted the firefighters in the firehouse about the working fire and yelled out “everybody goes”.

As Ladder 18 crossed East Houston Street and passed East 2nd Street, their siren and air horns were blaring. It was the first indication to Engine 28 and Ladder 11 that there was a fire in their first alarm area. Engine 28 was still out of service, but Captain Ronnie Hanson of Ladder 11 had his company turn-out and follow Ladder 18 and Battalion 4. Engine 17, and Engine 5 also responded.

When Ladder 18 arrived at the fire, there was heavy fire showing out of several windows in the rear of the building. The front of the fire building was relatively clear. Fire was extending to the building on the exposure 3 side. Fr. Bill “Ringo” Reilly was sent up the front fire escape to assist Engine 15. Lieutenant Raymond Bellinger and Fr. John Maloney went to exposure 3 to investigate the fire that was extending to the occupied tenement.
Fr. Mike Barone and Fr. John Henihan placed their hand tools and their Partner Saw into the tower ladder bucket. They proceeded to the roof to perform vertical ventilation.

When Fr. Barone and Fr. Henihan arrived at the roof, they began their cutting operation. There was heavy fire coming from the rear windows as they began. When they penetrated the roof deck, fire was showing through their saw cuts. Everywhere they cut with the saw showed there was heavy fire in the cockloft. As they were cutting the roof, conditions in the front of the building were starting to change dramatically.

Arsonist Nelson Arzon’s diabolical second fire started to rage. It created a wall of heavy smoke and tongues of flame in the front of the building. Engine 15’s area of refuge was the front of the building. Now with the second fire growing, that area became extremely dangerous. Lieutenant Hopkins ordered Engine 15 to retreat to the front fire escape. Their position was tenuous. Fr. Dave Escher, the Chauffeur of Ladder 18 repositioned Ladder 18’s tower ladder bucket to provide a rapid escape from the growing inferno. The smoke condition in front of the building obscured Fr. Escher. He could not see the fire escape nor the distressed
firefighters through the thick smoke. Fr. Escher positioned the bucket from listening to the distressed voices coming from the fire escape. Proceeding down the front fire escape was not a viable option due to the poor condition of the fire escape, the size of their SCBAs in negotiating past the fire escape ladders, and the amount of heat and smoke rising from the second fire.

Ladder 11 arrived at the fire. Captain Hanson of Ladder 11 had his Chauffeur raise their aerial ladder to the roof of the fire building. This gave Fr. Barone and Fr. Henihan an escape from the roof of this out-of-control fire.
Battalion 4 arrived at the fire. Working in Battalion 4 was Battalion Chief Carroll and his Aide Bob Pace. After they performed a quick size-up, Battalion Chief Carroll transmitted a 2nd alarm at 1532 hours. He called for a Rescue Company to respond to the fire. He stated: “There is a company trapped on the top floor.”

One by one, the members of Engine 15 entered the tower ladder basket. While they were dismounting the front fire escape and entering the tower ladder basket, they were engulfed in heavy smoke and high heat. The heat was so intense that the members on the front fire escape were screaming in pain and considered jumping. It was finally Fr. Marty Celic’s turn to enter the basket. He set one foot into the basket and the other foot was on a fire escape step. The fire escape step broke loose. The members in the basket were blinded by the smoke. They were yelling for the basket to be moved to get out of the choking, searing atmosphere they were in. Fr. Celic’s balance was compromised further when the valve of his SCBA was hung-up on the fire escape railing. The basket was moved and Fr. Celic lost his balance. He started to fall. Firefighters in the basket grabbed his boots and
tried to hold onto him. He fell out of the boots due to the gravitational forces pulling him down. Fr. Celic fell seventy feet. Firefighters Barone and Henihan watched in horror as they were climbing down Ladder 11’s aerial ladder while they were retreating off the roof. Fr. Celic was gravely injured.

Deputy Chief Smith of the 1st Division arrived at the fire. He radioed the dispatcher. He transmitted the third alarm at 1554 hours and reported that the fire building is fully involved and fire is extending to exposures 3 and 2. He also stated that they have a member severely injured and to send an ambulance. Within a few minutes, Deputy Chief Smith transmitted a full fourth alarm at 1557 hours.

Witnessing the great calamity was dozens of people from the local neighborhood. They gasped in disbelief as they watched Fr. Celic fall.

To further confuse the situation, at the same time as the fire on 8th Street, there was a working fire on Stanton Street in an occupied building. Some companies responding to box 439 came upon the fire at Stanton Street and began to operate there. The dispatchers were not aware of the Stanton Street fire until someone on the scene there transmitted a second alarm for the fire.

An ambulance arrived at the scene because an EMT was transporting an ambulance to Brooklyn from the Bronx. He was a Fire Buff and he saw the smoke from 8th Street and Avenue C. He went to the fire to see what was going on. He was put to work
right away as Firefighters Barone and Henihan tended to Marty Celic. Fr. Celic was removed to Bellevue Hospital.

After Fr. Celic was removed to Bellevue Hospital, Fr. Barone and Henihan entered Ladder 18’s tower ladder bucket. They were operating the large caliber stream on the fire. While they were operating, a “Mayday” came in stating that a firefighter from Engine 5 was trapped on the second floor. Fr. Barrone and Henihan dropped the bucket down to the second floor and removed the distressed member. Fr. Mike Barone rode in the ambulance with the firefighter from Engine 5 to Bellevue Hospital. The fire was placed “Under Control” at 1718 hours.

Fr. Marty Celic was in critical condition. A vigil was maintained at his bedside. Fr. Martin R. Celic succumbed to his injuries on July 10, 1977. His fiancé Rachel Morio was at his side. Marty Celic was 25 years old. May he rest in peace. Never forget!
The arsonist, Nelson Arzon, was indicted for murder. He remained at the scene of the fire to watch his fire, even after Fr. Celic fell. He was allowed to plead guilty to first degree manslaughter. He was released from prison after three years.

While the burned-out building was still standing, firefighters from Ladder 18 attached a white cross to the fire escape balcony where Marty Celic fell from. Nobody in the neighborhood tampered with the cross. Eventually, the building was torn down. Members of Engine 17, Ladder 18, and Battalion 4 were successful in turning the lot into a park. The firefighters from the firehouse on Pitt Street maintain the park. It is called “Firemen’s Garden”.

THOUGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS

While the vacant building problem is less severe than in 1977, we still do have them in NYC. Vacant buildings have no degree of maintenance as required in occupied buildings. They are not heated and are exposed to the freeze-thaw effect. Water and snow penetrate the vacant buildings due to the numerous openings.

There is no degree of confinement in vacant buildings. Fire stopping is deteriorated or non-existent. Fire penetrates into the voids with great ferocity.
The apartment doors in vacant building may or may not be there. This is a further challenge to confining the fire.

Vacant buildings are dangerous structures. They should be identified by marking the building with an “X” to warn operating firefighters. No unit should operate alone in a vacant building fire.

If possible, a tower ladder should be in position in front of the building. The reason is the possibility of the use of the large caliber stream. The use of a deck gun on engine company apparatus should be strongly considered. This must be done before firefighters enter the building. Once firefighters enter the building, it is now an occupied building.

When transmitting additional alarms or other urgent messages, obtain confirmation that the message was received.

A back-up hose line should be stretched and standing fast in front of the building if there is not an assignment for it. This hose line is used to cover any unforeseen situations.
The fire escape stretch is a valuable evolution. At vacant buildings, it allows engine companies to by-pass dangerous stairways. At occupied buildings, any hose line beyond the second hose line should be stretched via the fire escape.

The insidious nature of arsonists can never be underestimated. Arsonists have been known to put balloons filled with gasoline in the ceilings of vacant buildings. The actions of Nelson Arzon at 358 East 8th Street were pure evil. He set the second fire to trap and murder operating firefighters. His use of diesel fuel as his accelerant allowed the firefighters to get into an untenable position.

If trapped in a vacant building fire, transmit a “Mayday” and make your location known. There may not be signs in the hallway indicating what floor you are on. Situational awareness is extremely important.

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Thanks go out to the following people who contributed to this essay: Captain Vincent Romeo (Ret.), Captain Bob Rainey (Ret.), Lieutenant Mike Barone (Ret.), Firefighter Charles Maloney (Ret.), Lieutenant Greg Chero (Ladder 18), Firefighter Mike Grieco (Engine 15), Fire Alarm Dispatcher Herb Eysser (Ret.), Firefighter John Paulson (Engine 75/Mand Library), Randy Barron (FDNY Photo Unit), Deputy Chief Vincent Dunn (Ret.), Lieutenant Chris Roberto (Division 3)