



WILLIE ANDERSON DAILY NEWS

Firefighter attacks sixth-floor blaze at Beach 41st St. Houses in Queens as others a floor above assist.

Bravest beat death

BY TONY SCLAFANI, OREN YANIV
and TRACY CONNOR
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

FOR FIVE HARROWING minutes, three Queens firefighters were trapped yesterday in a wind-whipped inferno, with flames and blinding black smoke blocking their escape.

Frantic Mayday calls echoed over the radio as the fire — so hot it melted the brass nozzle of a hose — threatened to race through the hallways of a Rockaways housing project.

As temperatures surged to 1,500 degrees, a dozen firefighters were injured, including two Bravest who suffered burns on their hands and arms.

The stranded men eventually found refuge in an apartment, leaving FDNY brass to shudder about the close call, which came barely a year after the Black Sunday disaster that forced two firefighters to jump to their death in the Bronx.

"It doesn't get much worse than this," Battalion 47 Chief George Healy said, explaining how an open window and door had turned a small electrical blaze into a fireball. "It creates a blowtorch."

Three trapped, finally escape fireball in Qns.

The fire ignited shortly before 2 p.m. in a sixth-floor bedroom of the Beach 41st St. Houses in the Rockaways, one of the windiest areas of the city.

A space heater plugged into a cheap surge protector apparently overloaded, and flames began to engulf the apartment.

The building is fire resistant, with masonry walls and steel doors, so the blaze should have been easily contained — but a fleeing tenant had flung open the windows and door.

Winds gusting at 40 mph fed the flames, and when firefighters from Engines 265 and 264 and Ladders 121 and 134 got to the apartment, they were quickly beaten back.

"It's basically blowing the fire on top of them," an FDNY official said. "It was

a very dangerous condition. Wind was coming in from every direction. It was just whipping around the building."

As the Bravest retreated, three firefighters from Ladder 121 and Engine 264 were trapped at the end of the hall, FDNY Assistant Chief Robert Sweeney said.

A Mayday call went out, and for several minutes the men had nowhere to go in the smoky darkness. Five minutes later, they got a tenant to open an apartment door and slipped inside.

Firefighters outside the building, meanwhile, threw a blanket over the window of the burning apartment, starving the flames. The fire was under control by around 3:30 p.m.

Eight civilians suffered minor injuries, but most residents were grateful to emerge alive.

"I thought — I'm going to be a goner," said Larry Johnson, 18, a sixth-floor tenant who firefighters rescued through a window. "I was screaming for my dear life. . . . It was like hell. . . . I couldn't breathe for a moment. Then I said, 'It can't end like this.' I'm thankful to be alive."

tsclafani@nydailynews.com



WILLIE ANDERSON DAILY NEWS

Firefighters trapped in a two-alarm blaze in Queens last month were saved by the KO Curtain, which was created by Firefighters Tom Oswald (Inset) and Pat Kilduff to make a dangerous job a little bit safer.

A curtain call for Brave idea

EXCLUSIVE
BY TONY SCLAFANI
DAILY NEWS POLICE BUREAU

A HEAT-RESISTANT curtain that helped extinguish a Queens inferno and save three trapped firefighters last month was invented by two of the city's Bravest.

"I'm so proud that we made this thing and it worked," said retired firefighter Tom Oswald, 49, who worked out of Ladder 19 in the Bronx until last year.

"These guys were able to go home that night. That's the most important thing," Oswald said of the Queens firefighters who were trapped by a Jan. 26 blaze, so hot it melted the brass nozzle of an FDNY hose.

Oswald and Queens firefighter Pat Kilduff created the "KO Curtain" to help the city's Bravest fight fires in tall buildings where fierce winds tend to blow through broken windows and fuel the flames.

The blaze last month at the Beach 41st Houses in the Rockaways was the first time the 20-pound prototype was used during a fire.

The curtain is a blend of bulletproof Kevlar and Nomex, a fire-resistant fabric. It has six copper rods sewn inside to weigh it down.

Firefighters draped the 5-by-8-foot curtain across broken windows on the building's sixth floor to stop

strong winds from feeding the inferno. The curtain helped give firefighters from Ladder 121 and Engine 264, who had been trapped at the end of a hall, enough time to dose the blaze and escape the building.

Oswald and Kilduff, who works out of Ladder 134 in the Rockaways, came up with the idea for the curtain in 1989 after a string of high-rise fires in the Bronx.

They spent years brainstorming, sewing together prototypes with help from Oswald's wife and testing the blanket off the former firefighter's roof before recently presenting their creation to FDNY brass.

"Our firefighters have always been innovative and resourceful, especially when it comes to their tools," said FDNY spokesman David Billig.

The curtain is still being evaluated by fire officials. Seven fire companies have been asked to test its effectiveness.

"We're hoping that every truck company in the job will get one of these things," Oswald said. "This is something that's going to save lives, not only firemen but civilians."

tsclafani@nydailynews.com