



REMEMBERING OUR FALLEN FIRE FIGHTERS

by Scott Mellott, Retired

You know as well as I do that things happen for a reason. I have been struggling with the article I was writing for the September issue of this publication. Those that know me know that when it comes to writing words to go underneath the title on the top of this page, that does not happen often. As you know, for the most part of my years doing this column, I have been dedicating the September article to 911. This month will be a minor exception.

I just received an email sent by my friend and fellow writer, Chief Billy Goldfeder, via his email Secret List which pretty much tells the whole story about a FDNY tragic loss of two of their fire fighters. I am printing the whole email as is so here goes and yes Billy always starts out his emails with Hey .

Hey....

Below is the funeral and memorial information for Lt. Howard Carpluk as well as Prob. Fire Fighter Michael Reilly. Additionally, below is an excellent article by Michael Daly from the NY Daily News. Sometimes...actually many times, the media doesn't "get it" as far as the job done by Fire Fighters. Sometimes they don't even want to try and get it. A recent article in Philadelphia Magazine (that I will be sending you soon with a few comments) calls for the "firing of the firemen"...it's 2006 and our Country has never needed more staffing than now and yet the ridiculous budget battles, layoffs and cutbacks affecting Fire Fighters continue. Homeland what? First Responder who? Incredible. What do these clowns think IS "Homeland Security" and "First Responders"..?

Anyway...take a few minutes to please read Daly's outstanding piece as well as the funeral details below.

Last plea: "Save the New Guy" (Sunday's Fire In The Bronx)

The rescuers breached the wall of the cellar behind the burning building, and a firefighter was tunneling into the debris when he felt a tug on his pant leg.

By several accounts, the firefighter had worked his way into a small void and had been trying to wiggle past a huge storage cabinet. He eased around and saw that the tug had come from one of his trapped comrades. "I'm here," the trapped firefighter mumbled.

The firefighter asked his trapped comrade's name and company. The trapped man was clearly in great physical distress, but he managed to say he was Lt. Howard Carpluk and he was working that day with Engine 75.

Then, his words labored, his life being squeezed out of him, Carpluk spoke not of himself but of the young comrade who was foremost in his mind. "My nozzle man's under me."

He was telling his rescuers to save his probie, probationary Firefighter Michael Reilly, who had entered FDNY Academy only four months ago. Carpluk was the consummate fire officer, and he had been right beside Reilly as they advanced on the fire in the 99-cent store on Walton Ave., the new man on the nozzle, the officer guiding and watching over him.

"The probie is supposed to be on the nozzle because he has to learn," a firefighter said later. "The officer has to be right next to him, encouraging him. If you were a new kid on the job, you wanted

Howie right next to you. Howie was The Guy."

But as the late, great Fire Chief Ray Downey always used to say, the unexpected can prove the mortal enemy of even the best firefighter. The floor suddenly shifted to the left and to the right and collapsed before there was time to react.

In a terrible instant, Carpluk suddenly found himself pinned atop the probie he had been watching over. His comrades now did everything they could to save them both.

Fire companies have their rivalries, but in moments such as this they work as one magnificent team. Rescuers were already busy freeing three other trapped firefighters from a section of the store that had been stocked with detergents and beauty products that combined with the hose water. The slippery film made it hellishly difficult to pull away that debris. "You couldn't grip anything," a firefighter later said.

Carpluk and Reilly had apparently been in the grocery aisle, so there was no bedeviling soap. But they were more seriously pinned than the others, and there was no room to use tools bigger than a battery-powered saw. Most of the work had to be done by hand.

At one point the fire above them began to flare, but an engine company stood ready to douse the flames as the rescue effort continued. The rescuers had managed to get an air mask on Carpluk, but he began to fade. He had ceased talking when his comrades were finally able to free him. Reilly was indeed under him and was beyond saving. He had served as a Marine in Iraq and had survived that, only to die at a fire in a 99-cent store in the Bronx.

But in their very effort to save him and his officer, the firefighters had demonstrated just how right Reilly had been to dream of serving with the FDNY. Our firefighters are in truth a family, and the grief that was in the faces of the survivors yesterday was born of love.

At midday, firefighters hung black and purple bunting outside the quarters of Engine 75, Ladder 33. The firehouse was dedicated in 2000, and Fire Chaplain Mychal Judge gave the blessing. Judge had counseled enough members of the department to know they are as human as anybody else. "Ah, but then the alarm comes in," Judge said. "And then comes the grace."

Judge meant the sanctifying grace that comes when firefighters rush into the most mortal danger on behalf of strangers. He demonstrated his own grace 14 months later, when he perished at the World Trade Center.

For a time after 9/11, firefighters were honored as the heroes they do indeed become when the alarm sounds. A few of them proved to have distinctly human failings, and we overlooked Judge's teaching that their very humanness only makes their grace more remarkable.

The firefighters had never put themselves on pedestals. They put themselves on fire rigs, and one carried Carpluk and Reilly to a fire on Walton Ave. on Sunday. They advanced toward the flames on the chance that somebody needed saving.

In one bit of good fortune, a sudden, not entirely explicable foreboding prompted an officer to order 10 firefighters off the roof three minutes before the collapse. The lucky ones immediately joined the effort to save their trapped brothers.

Yesterday, rescuers who had taken more than enough smoke and battering to have called in sick were back on duty, ready to respond to the next alarm. Investigators were theorizing the collapse at the 99-cent store might have been due to shoddy reconstruction after a fire there in 2000, shortly before Judge blessed that new firehouse.

But whatever the truth of the fire, we approach the fifth anniversary of 9/11 with incontrovertible proof that the spirit of the FDNY is as strong as ever. We need only consider the officer whose dying thought was of a probie who perished living a dream in perfect grace.