

Flashover, from the inside out

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Camden Fire Department

The city of Camden, New Jersey is a municipality of approximately 100,000 people located in the southern part of New Jersey across the river from Philadelphia. A classic example of one of America's oldest urban municipalities that saw its heyday in the years preceding World War II, its serious demise as a once prominent industrial center occurred throughout the 1960s and '70s when civil disorder and flight of its middle class to suburbia brought urban decay on a frightening scale. Once called the biggest little city in America and noted for producing everything from battleships to fountain pens, Camden was the founding home of such resident industrial giants as RCA, Campbell Soup, Esterbrook Pen, and as many as six active ship-building yards along with hundreds of other industries.

In recent years, the city has been on the brink of a gradual renaissance with increasing levels of new construction and a visible decline in the prior deterioration of its soul. While a vast majority of Camden's populace remain dependent upon a variety of social services to exist, its fire department continues to lead the state of New Jersey and most of the nation in its per capita rate of fire incident.

Sunday, October 21, 1990 was a clear and sunny Indian summer day in the city of Camden.

As a city known for its heavy fire duty, Sunday mornings in the Camden fire department are frequently dedicated to cleaning and restoring tools, apparatus and equipment from what is often the hectic Saturday night before.

The day tour of duty on October 21 started out like any other Sunday around the firehouses of Camden. The platoon working the night before had four working fires; a second alarm, and numerous other services. Sunday morning roll call was followed by the customary maintenance to apparatus and quarters, followed

by an additional one-hour drill on engine and truck operations. After training, all hands turned their attention to the noon meal.

The uneventful routine of this normal Sunday was punctuated by the expected nuisance of the occasional false alarm and several outside rubbish fires. With the meal out of the way and the department's agenda of duties completed for the day, the city's fire control force settled into what they hoped would be the balance of a quiet day. A few minutes past 1400 hours, such hopes were dashed by the occurrence of a routine structural fire that ended in tragedy for three veteran Fire Fighters and shook the psychological well being of the entire department.

At 1406 hours, the fire alarm office received a call reporting "a stove on fire" at 2429 Arnold Street in the Fairview Manor section of south Camden. Engine Company 10 responding first due from their quarters just three blocks away, was assigned for "a defective appliance" and made their 90-second run down Morgan Street to the fire. Upon arrival at the scene, Engine 10 under the

command of Captain Richard Prosser, reported medium smoke showing from the rear of a two-story brick occupied row dwelling. Captain Prosser ordered the box transmitted and directed his company to stretch a 1½ inch line into the fire.

Ladder Company 2 and the Chief of the 3rd Battalion that also share quarters with Engine 10, responded on the box and arrived in a minute. On arrival, Battalion Chief Walter Szatkowski observed heavy smoke on both floors and transmitted a "working fire" signal. At that time Engine 10 had one line in operation on a fully involved single room kitchen at first floor rear. Chief Szatkowski ordered Ladder 2 to ladder the building, vent, and start a primary search of the property. Captain William Young, commanding Ladder Company 2, directed his two-man forcible entry team to raise a portable ladder to the front, search the first floor of the fire building and then evacuate the adjoining property. Captain Young and Fire Fighter Daniel Galasso then headed to the



Galasso and Jackson's running gear after fire.