HAPPYLAND— LESSONS OF THE MIND AND THE HEART

BY FRANK J. NASTRO

Editor's note: By now you've heard and read about the circumstances surrounding the Bronx, New York Happyland Social Club fire on March 25, 1990: one demented arsonist, one dollar's worth of gasoline, one after-hours club that had been cited for fire and building code violations, quick knockdown of the heavy fire by firefighting forces who arrived minutes after the first alarm, and then 87 bodies.

Perhaps you were fortunate to have experienced Chief Frank Nastro's moving speech at the April Fire Department Instructor's Conference in the wake of that tragedy; if not, hopefully you read Tom Brennan's Editor's Opinion in our June issue, which reinforced Nastro's vital two-fold message: You're firefighters, yes, but human beings first and foremost; and even in the most tragic and difficult situations a sense of dignity must prevail.

What follows is Chief Nastro's first-person account of what went through his mind and his heart—both as fire chief and human being—during his response to the Happyland tragedy.

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The designation "city-wide command chief" is an extremely responsible position, with the potential for assuming command at a wide variety of incidents. These multifaceted situations impose psychological strains on incident commanders, evoking fear, joy, shock, and depression.

During the morning of March 25, 1990, a fatal fire occurred in a Bronx social club that claimed 87 lives and would prove to be one of the most traumatic and stressful fires that the officers and firefighters of this department have ever encountered.

The initial notification to my office in the command center was for two 10-45 Code 1's at a fire in the Bronx ("10-45" is the signal for seriously injured; "Code 1" denotes fatality"). Department procedures mandated that I respond to the scene and investigate the circumstances surrounding the fatalities. By the time I had dressed and prior to my leaving the command center, we received subsequent notification that the count was now 24—I was stunned. All kinds of scenarios raced through my mind. I immediately began thinking of the problems concerned with victim tracking and the ability to identify the various hospitals that victims would have to be taken to.

As we proceeded up the East River Drive, the aide from Division 7 got on the radio and transmitted a 10-45 count of 50 to the dispatcher. The dispatcher responded and asked what code they were, and the reply was Code 1. When I heard that I nearly fell out of the car. It was impossible to comprehend. The fire problem was minor and limited to an "All hands."

Upon arrival I witnessed the sheet-covered bodies lying on the sidewalk in front of the fire building. It was a horrible sight.

My first action was to locate the incident commander, Kenneth Ceretta from the 7th Division, to set up a plan whereby we would be able to account accurately for the victims. Chief Ceretta informed me that there weren't enough body bags for the victims. This negated my concern that the bodies would be taken from the scene too quickly to conduct adequate tracking procedures. The large number of fatalities also presented the problem of getting enough vehicles to move them to the morgue.

We sectored the fire building for victim tracking. It was a two-story

Photo by David Handschuh.

building and a battalion chief was designated to supervise the operations on each floor. An additional deputy chief was special-called to oversee the entire tracking operation.

Investigative protocol required entry into the premises at this time and, accompanied by Commissioner Carlos Rivera, Chief of Operations William Feehan, and fourth-alarm Chief Anthony DeVita, I entered the structure. We moved through the fire area, bypassing the front stairwell, and ascended the rear stair. The scene was numbing, paralyzing. We stood there, speechless. There were 69 bodies spread about this 24-by-50-foot area. We picked our way across the floor, careful not to step on the victims, working our way toward the front stairwell. They all could have been sleeping—none were burned. The only indication of fire was the darkened skin and clothing where the soot fragments had settled.

Firefighters on the floor stood silent watch. A simple branch sprinkler line traveled from front to rear; four heads had been activated. The sprinklers had no effect on fire extinguishment as they were remote from the fire area. Ventilation was hampered by the sprinklers, and their cooling action banked the smoke down on the second floor.

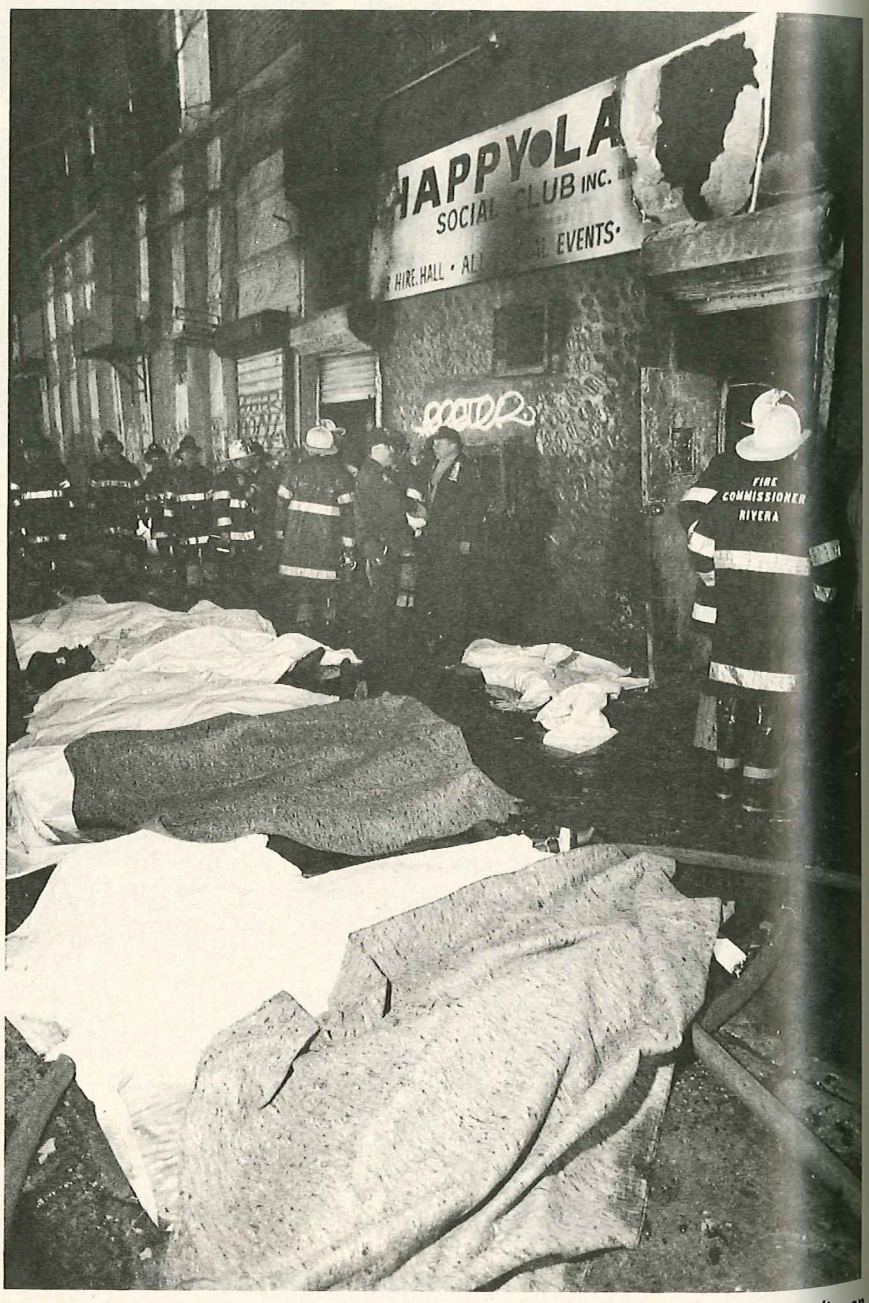
As we were descending the front stairwell I became concerned for the firefighters in the building and ordered them to leave. There were no operational duties to perform at this time, and it would have been unfair to subject them to such a stressful scene needlessly.

When we reached the command post an EMS officer asked for our assistance while personnel examined the bodies for the pronouncement of death. The battalion chief responsible for the second floor accompanied the medical officer. This was the first accurate count on the number of fatalities, and the breakdown was 55 males and 32 females. One of the victims was a 14-year-old boy. The death pronouncements put to rest my concern that there might still be someone alive on the second floor.

We were now at the stage of the operation in which we had to consider a situation that had never before been dealt with in the 125-year history of this department: the removal of 69 fire fatalities from a building. There were three points of concern:

- the firefighters who would carry out the bodies;
- the procedures we would use to remove the victims; and
- the identification and tracking of the fatalities.

Our first consideration was for our firefighters. It would have been unfair to ask the five remaining units at the scene to remove 69 bodies. I could never have subjected our members to such a difficult assignment. We decided to split the operation. Five addi-



Senior officials, out of concern for their firefighters, ordered members who stood watch over bodies on the second floor out of the building since there were no operational duties to perform. (Photo by David Handschuh.)

Incident commanders confer on identification, tracking, and removal procedures. (Photo by Steve Spak.)

tional units were special-called. These units were briefed and made fully aware of the circumstances and extent of this operation. When half of the bodies were removed, the first five units would be relieved and returned to quarters. The special-called units would them complete the operation.

Captain James Rogers of the rescue liaison unit made an excellent suggestion that facilitated removal procedures: At the second-floor level of exposure #4, a wall had been breached by firefighters to allow entry into the upper floor of the fire building; it was both an excellent operational move and a key in victim removal. The victims were placed in body bags (by this time New York Port Authority, which responds to aircraft incidents, had provided us with 60 body bags) and taken through the opening into exposure #4 and then down to the first-floor level, where detectives from missing persons awaited with an instant camera. As firefighters brought down each victim the bag was opened, the victim's face was wiped clean to aid identification, the picture was taken, the body was tagged, and the bag was resealed. Firefighters then took the deceased to the morgue vehicle stationed at the street in front of the fire building.

The department, because of the sensitivity demonstrated by senior officials present, ordered critical incident stress debriefing immediately. Chaplains, medical officers, and the counseling unit responded to the scene. The incident had a tremendous impact on our firefighters and some experienced severe emotional reactions. On March 27, all members who were present at the fire assembled at the fire academy for a counseling session. A recognized authority on emergency worker stress reactions conducted the session.

When I left the scene my thoughts about the department and the operation performed that morning were positive. The officers and firefighters who operated were magnificent. The situation was handled with dignity and compassion, a job well done.

Personally, the incident and emotional stress continued after I arrived home. I usually attend the 12:30 p.m. Sunday Mass with my wife. On this particular day, waiting for 12:30 seemed wrong. After the priest gave his homily, the choir sant the hymn, "Amazing Grace." I began to cry; the tears flowed out like an open faucet. There was no stopping until the music had ended. After it was over I felt a sense of relief.

Nothing will prepare you for the kind of incident I had just witnessed. We must dedicate ourselves to the prevention of similar disasters so that Happyland doesn't happen again. ■

Fire units were special-called so that the bodies could be removed in two shifts, to lessen the burden on firefighters already on the scene. (Photo by David Handschuh.)