

50th Anniversary
TRU FIT CLOTHING COMPANY FIRE
by Division Chief Donald W. Heinbuch

February 16, 2005 started out as a sunny day with temperatures hovering just above 50 degrees F. Just about noontime a weather front blew in from the west bringing cold rain showers and blustery winds. The Baltimore City Fire Department had planned a ceremony to honor six of its members who were killed at the Tru Fit Clothing Company fire on February 16, 1955. The ceremony was scheduled to begin at 1830 hours and the weather was causing great concern that the ceremony would have to be relocated from the site of the tragic fire in the 500 block of East Baltimore Street to the Baltimore City Fire Museum and quarters of Box 414 six blocks to the north on Gay Street. As a decision was being made, the skies cleared but the cold northwesterly winds remained. The decision was made to proceed with the original plan at the Baltimore Street location.

On February 16, 1955 Box 12 at Baltimore and Frederick Street was sounded at 9:02 pm for a fire at the Tru Fit Clothing Company at 507-509 East Baltimore Street. This location was less than a block away from the quarters of Engine Company 32, Truck Company 1, Hose Company 1, and Deputy Chief 2. Confronted with a very smoky fire in a three story commercial building, additional alarms were sounded quickly. The second was transmitted at 9:06 pm, the third at 9:13 pm, the fourth at 9:33 pm, the fifth at 9:49 pm and the sixth alarm at 10:17 pm. During the years that Baltimore City used a fire alarm system based on bells, street boxes and prescribed responses based on box assignment cards, only six alarms would be listed for each box. If additional alarms were needed the next closest street box would be used and was known as “the adjacent box”.

Shortly before 10:55 pm a collapse of the rear one story section of the building occurred which buried many fire fighters who were involved in the overhaul operation. The Chief of the Fire Department, Michael H. Lotz, who was also injured, ordered three additional alarms from “the adjacent box” which happened to be the “house box” of Truck Company 1 on Gay Street just south of Baltimore Street. This call summoned additional units to assist in the rescue and recovery of those who were buried and trapped in the debris.

This year’s ceremony commenced at 1830 hours with simulated dispatch messages that were broadcast over the department’s 800 megahertz radio system and simulcast through a patch to one of the department’s VHF channels as well. Those in attendance at the ceremony heard the dispatch message through the public address system at the podium. As the names of those who were lost fifty years ago were broadcast a wave of emotion swept through the audience. The surviving family members were especially impacted as were retired members of the department and others who were on the scene of the tragic fire fifty years ago.

Baltimore City’s Fire Chief William J. Goodwin, Jr. offered an inspiring message to everyone, offering assurance that those who were lost will not be forgotten. He unveiled a commemorative plaque that will be placed on the wall of Baltimore’s Central District Police building just opposite the site of the fire. Chief Goodwin presented replicas of the plaque to the presidents of the Fire Officers’ union and the Fire Fighters’ union for display at their respect headquarters which both happen to be former Baltimore City firehouses.

Fire Commissioner Stuart Nathan concluded his remarks from the podium by saying “We must never forget them. We will never forget them”. Several speakers gave personal accounts of their experiences at the scene of the fire. Included was Mr. James Crockett

who is the current president of the Board of Fire Commissioners and one of the first African American members of the Baltimore City Fire Department. He spoke on how all of the city's off duty members reported back to work on that fateful evening and how he and others dug through the rubble to rescue or recover those buried in the collapse. Retired Captain John Harvey described his experiences surrounding the moment of the collapse and his perception of what it was like to remove the dead and injured from the debris.

Staff Chief John R. Frazier Jr. offered his remarks from the perspective of the son of a father who was called in to fight the fire. Chief Frazier Sr. had responded as an acting Battalion Chief. At this year's ceremony Chief Frazier presented bricks that he had recovered from the debris to Chief Goodwin, the presidents of the unions and to the president of Box 414 for their museum.

Surviving members of the fire from the BCFD and others who were on scene provided many stories associated with the events at time of the collapse. Fire fighters sliding down wooden truss ladders, some clinging to parts of the building, descriptions of how it feels to fall several floors, and vivid recollections of the aftermath in terms of facial expressions and statements made by those who "just got out in time" are very representative. One compelling recollection was of Captain Martin C. McMahon, head of the ambulance service, administering morphine to a trapped lieutenant amid the debris and rubble. Captain McMahon who subsequently retired as an acting deputy chief, and who was known as the father of Baltimore's EMS and a pioneer in the integration of what is now known as CPR into the fire and EMS service, unfortunately died the week preceding the ceremony.

At the conclusion of the ceremony on Baltimore Street, many of those in attendance marched behind the Baltimore City Fire Department's Color Guard and the Bagpipe Band from the Baltimore County Fire Department to the Baltimore City Fire Department's Memorial Statue at Gay and Lexington Streets. This short impromptu parade of two blocks filed past apparatus and fire fighters who were positioned along the curbs of Gay Street. Included was a floodlight wagon from the Fire Museum of Maryland that had responded to the fire. A memorial wreath was placed next to the statue by the Baltimore City Fire Department's Emerald Society.

The evening concluded with a reception at quarters of old Engine 6 that is now the quarters of The Box 414 Association. Their museum featured helmets of those lost at Tru Fit and other related memorabilia.

Six members lost at the fire at The Tru Fit Clothing Company fire was the greatest loss sustained in the modern era of The Baltimore City Fire Department. More than twenty were injured and required hospitalization. Thirty five engine companies, ten truck companies, four hose companies one water tower company, seven battalion chiefs, two deputy chiefs and more than twenty other specialized apparatus/vehicles responded. The investigation of the fire has never been officially closed. The file is still open.