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*6-6 B0x 12—Baltimore & Frederick Streets  
February 16, 1955—9:02 PM*



*50th Anniversary  
Of  
Six Line of Duty Deaths  
Tru-Fit Clothing Company Fire  
507-509 E. Baltimore St.  
February 16, 1955*



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*February 16, 2005*



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Governor Theodore McKeldin leading the casket of one of the fallen heroes.

\*Acknowledgement and Expressions of Gratitude for providing photos and archival materials goes to the :

BALTIMORE SUNPAPERS

**BALTIMORE CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT**

**DEPARTMENTAL ORDER NO. 4-05**

Subject: 50th Year Remembrance of Six Line of Duty Deaths  
6-6 Box 12, Tru Fit Clothing Company Fire, 507-509 E.  
Baltimore Street February 16, 1955 – 2102 hours

Information: On the evening of February 16, 1955 six members of our Department were killed in line of duty during fire fighting operations at the Tru Fit Clothing Company fire at 507-509 East Baltimore Street. On the evening of February 16, 2005 at 1830 hours the Department will honor the memory of these fallen members with a commemorative candlelight ceremony at the site of the tragic fire. The tribute will include laying of wreaths at the gravesites and at the memorial statue at Gay and Lexington Streets, the unveiling of a memorial plaque at the site of the fire, and a reception at the Box 414 Museum with a display of memorabilia from the fire.

For purposes of this year's remembrance activities, the members who lost their lives will be assigned as follows:

Battalion Chief Francis P. O'Brien, 4th Battalion / 2nd Battalion  
Fire Fighter Rudolph A. Machovec, Engine 15 / Engine 23  
Fire Fighter Richard F. Melzer, Engine 15 / Truck 2  
Fire Fighter William W. Barnes, Engine 17 / Engine 2  
Fire Fighter Anthony M. Reinsfelder, Truck 16  
Fire Fighter Joseph C. Hanley, Engine 13

The Department will half staff the Fire Department flag during the week of February 13 – 19, 2005.

By Order,  
William J. Goodwin, Jr.,  
Chief of Fire Department

## THE BALTIMORE FIRE DEPARTMENT'S WORST NIGHT

By V.B. Morris

From late 1949 until the end of 1954, thirteen Baltimore City Firemen died in a series of most unfortunate vehicle collisions, heart attacks on the fire ground and a back draft explosion. There was little open discussion but firefighters, buffs and the general public alike hoped for a better record in 1955. It was not to be.

On Tuesday evening, February 16, 1955, I was at home monitoring the Baltimore City Fire Department radio communications frequency. The system was still new and novel. It had become operational in 1953. Earlier the Baltimore Fire Department was provided limited service by the Baltimore Police radio communications system.



At 9:02 p.m. the attention beeps were transmitted and Box 12, Baltimore and Frederick Streets, was announced. I knew Engine 32, Truck 1, Hose 1 and Deputy Chief 2 were responding from their Gay Street station two blocks away. Three additional engines, another truck and a Battalion Chief were responding from more distant stations. Box 12 was located near the eastern end of Baltimore's downtown area in a declining area of mixed retail and commercial occupancies barely within Baltimore's famous or infamous "Block". The "Block" actually several blocks, was an adult entertainment area of striptease bars, burlesque theaters, and cheap movie houses.

In the fifties, Box 12 was sometimes pulled for false alarms by over indulgers and other celebrants visiting the Block. I suspected another false alarm. At 9:06 p.m., the attention beeps were followed by the announcement of the second alarm for Box 12. A second alarm meant they had a real fire. The high value district heavy first alarm response was more than adequate to handle all but major fires. The second alarm essentially doubled the response with three more engines, the rescue company, two more trucks, an additional hose company and another Battalion Chief. Hose Companies were assigned to Box 12 because the area was then served by Baltimore's since abandoned high pressure system. The high pressure system covered all of the area lost in the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 and somewhat more. The 1905 fire extended eastward a few blocks beyond Baltimore and Frederick Streets. All of the buildings in the area had been constructed after the Great Fire.

On hearing the second alarm, I immediately drove to the fire from my home a little more than three miles to the north. By 9:20 p.m. or so, I was on the

sidewalk opposite the Tru-Fit Clothing Company at 507-09 East Baltimore Street, the location of the fire. The third alarm companies were moving in. The third alarm had been struck out at 9:13 summoning four more engine companies. Smoke was heavy close to the building, but no fire was showing from the front. Many 2 ½ inch and 3 inch lines had been run into the front of the building and more were being stretched. I worked my way around the rear of the building. There was more smoke, but no fire. Because of the dense adjoining of commercial buildings, then typical of downtown Baltimore, access was rather limited in the rear.

I met several of my fire buff friends and we discussed the situation. We concluded that there must be heavy fire in the basement and they were having trouble getting to it. We all knew the problems involved in fighting cellar fires in old, large commercial buildings. It looked like it might be a long drawn-out inside attack with the firemen taking quite a beating. The weather was rather mild for mid-February in Baltimore, well above freezing and no threat of rain. We were grateful that bad weather was not adding to the punishment the men trying to reach the fire were enduring.



From outside the building it was difficult to assess progress in fighting the fire. At 9:33 a fourth alarm was transmitted bringing four additional engines and two more trucks. Because so little of the fire-fighting activity was visible, we walked west one block to Gay Street to watch the fourth alarm companies from South Baltimore roll in. Truck 6, a then new 1954 cab-ahead American LaFrance, turned from Pratt Street into Gay and came north three blocks to Baltimore Street, red lights flashing and siren wailing.

The hose companies had been positioned on Baltimore Street in front of the Tru-Fit building so that their monitors could be used on the fire building or adjacent buildings, should that become necessary. Engine companies with monitors had also been moved into position. The monitors were never used.

The fifth alarm was transmitted at 9:49 and the sixth at 10:17. Each of these alarms brought four additional engine companies. Soon, a total of 23 engines, 6 trucks, 2 hose wagons, 1 rescue, 1 water tower and at least six Chief's cars were on the scene. A most impressive assembly of firefighting equipment, but from the exterior, the fire remained remarkably unspectacular. It was apparent that additional alarms were being transmitted to provide more manpower.

By 10:40 the smoke had abated and it looked as though a long overhaul would soon begin but no recall was sent. Some of the buffs left the scene.

Shortly after 10:50 p.m., several firemen came running from the building shouting for ropes and short ladders. It was the only occasion in more than a half century of observing the Baltimore City Fire Department that I ever saw any evidence of their even momentarily having lost their composure. It was little more than a fleeting instant. Quickly composure was regained and a third alarm was struck out for the nearest adjacent box, Box 1222. Box 1222 was the house box for the fire stations on Gay Street.

We learned that a building collapse had occurred completely without warning and with almost no sound. Many men were in the collapse, trapped, injured, and maybe dead. The third alarm on Box 1222 had been transmitted to bring many additional firemen to the scene to perform the excavation and rescue of those in the collapse.

The awful business of waiting for word on who was trapped, injured, or dead began. We learned that Chief of Department Michael Lotz had survived the collapse but others had not. Wisely the firemen withheld details from the buffs and reporters. Later we learned that there were many fatalities. For the rest of that night and for quite a long time, there was no fun in being a fire buff.



We saw that digging out the men trapped would require hours and there was nothing we buffs could do.

We stopped in Truck 16 on the way home. The men with the transfer company were clustered around the watch desk eager for some word. We told them what we knew which was precious little except that there were fatalities and Chief Lotz had survived.

Later, formal announcement was made by the Department that six men had died in the collapse. Fourth Battalion Chief Francis P. O'Brien, Firefighters William W. Barnes (E-17 detailed to E-2); Joseph F. Hanley, E-13 (aide to Chief O'Brien); Anthony N. Reinsfelder, T-16, Rudolph A. Machovec, and Richard F. Melzer, E-15. In addition to Chief Lotz, a total of 18 firefighters were injured.

Chief of the New York City Fire Department Edward Croker said it best a long time ago in 1908. "They know it, every man of them...firefighting is a hazardous occupation, it is dangerous on the face of it, tackling a burning building. The risks are plain...consequently, when a man becomes a fireman, his act of bravery has already been accomplished.

## Gravesites of the Fallen Heroes



Joseph F. Hanley



Rudolph A. Machovec



Francis P. O'Brien



Richard F. Melzer



William W. Barnes



Anthony N. Reinsfelder

## A FIREMAN'S PRAYER

When I am called to duty, God  
Wherever Flames may rage  
Give me the strength to save some life  
Whatever Be its age  
Help me embrace a little child  
Before it is too late  
Or save an older person from  
The horror of that fate  
Enable me to be alert and  
Hear the weakest shout  
And quickly and efficiently  
To put the fire out  
I want to fill my calling and  
To give the best in me  
To guard my every neighbor  
And protect their property  
And if according to your will  
I have to lose my life  
Please bless with your protecting hand  
My children and my wife

- Author Unknown



Martin O'Malley  
Mayor, City of Baltimore



William J. Goodwin, Jr  
Chief of Fire Department