

# **Buffalo Fire Department Investigative Report**

*Submitted December 2, 2009*

**3<sup>rd</sup> Alarm Fire  
1815 Genesee Street  
August 24, 2009**



***Firefighter Fatalities***

***Lt Charles McCarthy***

***FF Jonathan S Croom***

# Investigation of 3<sup>rd</sup> Alarm Fire

## 1815 Genesee Street, Buffalo NY

**August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

On August 24, 2009, a 45-year-old male Fire Lieutenant (Lt Charles “Chip” McCarthy) and a 34-year-old male Firefighter (FF Jonathan Croom) died at a mixed commercial/residential structure fire ensuant to a first floor partial collapse. The involved building’s design was two story flat roof brick and joist Type III construction. The first floor consisted of a heavily barricaded delicatessen with an adjacent rear apartment (unoccupied). The second floor contained two apartments, of which only the rear unit was occupied. The basement was also heavily fortified, with all basement windows covered over in concrete and steel bars. Of the two entry points to the basement, one was a barred steel door (below grade) and the other was a heavily secured wooden door accessible only through a panel wall in the first floor delicatessen.

At approximately 0351 hours crews were dispatched to a fire with an accompanying report of civilians trapped in the structure. The first arriving engine was met by a resident who directed them to a side door where he stated he heard trapped civilians calling for help. Operations focused on this entry (side #2) which led to basement stairs. A simultaneous primary search was undertaken on the second floor since additional information was obtained suggesting possible trapped person(s) there. Incoming units supplemented operations in these areas since verbal reports from bystanders strongly suggested viable victims. The initial engine on scene and other first arriving units reported fire in the basement, but access was limited with the main entry point through side #2 barred by a metal door set in a masonry wall. A remote entrance to the basement was searched for through the delicatessen store in the front of the building. Once the general location was ascertained a hand line was stretched to that area from a front entry door on side #1 (1/2 corner). Units operating at the alleyway door (side #2) were not able to gain access through the steel basement door (below grade), and after conditions deteriorated they were ordered out of the structure. It was determined by Command that the fire had progressed to the point where companies operating inside the structure were greatly endangered and ordered to evacuate.

At approximately 0422 hours members of Rescue 1 entered the delicatessen to verify all firefighters were evacuated from the first floor. Less than two minutes after their entry the structural members supporting the floor collapsed under and around a set of commercial wall coolers located at the rear of the delicatessen. Rescue 1 Lieutenant (Lt McCarthy), while searching along an established hand line running adjacent to these coolers, fell into the basement as the floor collapsed under him. The other members of Rescue 1 were unaware of the collapse, only reporting that a loud noise was heard. The Lieutenant immediately began issuing calls for help over the radio and to those in proximity. The remaining members of Rescue 1 could not determine the origin of the “mayday” since the lieutenant was now below their grade level. They exited the building from side #1 unaware that their officer was the endangered member.

Command deployed the Firefighter Assist and Search Team (FAST – Ladder 7) to side #2 of the structure where it was thought the “mayday” was emanating. Simultaneous to this FF Croom (Ladder 7), stationed in front of the building with his crew, heard the calls for help and ascertained that the distressed firefighter had entered from side #1. At approximately 0423 hours FF Croom entered the front of the building through the delicatessen door to initiate a rescue of the trapped member. FF Croom did not exit the structure after this point, apparently falling through the first floor into the basement in close proximity to Lt McCarthy.

Command prioritized the identification/rescue of what was believed to be one unknown victim, unaware that a second member had fallen through while undertaking a rescue attempt. At approximately 0431 hours the Rescue Group Chief ordered an “emergency head count” to ascertain which member was missing. At 0432 hours it was reported through the headcount process that Lt McCarthy of Rescue 1 was missing. FF Croom was not reported missing at this point in the operation, as his company officer had responded to Dispatch that they were “OK” at the time. Rescue operations eventually focused on the first floor delicatessen (rear of store) since all members operating at the basement door (side #2) were accounted for with low probability of endangered personnel in that area. Firefighters operating in the storefront reported hearing a pass alarm activated but could not reach its origination due to extreme fire conditions, weakened flooring and continuing collapse. Command determined that it had become unsafe for interior operations and at approximately 0448 hours crews were ordered out of the structure.

Concerns began to arise later on in the operation that FF Croom was no longer accounted for. Multiple attempts to verify his whereabouts were undertaken and he was erroneously reported to be located operating in a remote area. At approximately 0546 it was evident to on scene personnel that FF Croom was missing and his location unknown, but likely somewhere inside the structure. At 0610 hours another head count was undertaken and FF Croom was reported as missing by his company officer.

Over the course of the next three hours a massive effort to reach the collapse area was made. Fire conditions and concern over structural stability hindered attempts to reach the victims. The exterior wall on side #4 was eventually breached to gain access to this section of flooring in the delicatessen. The department collapse team attempted shoring of this wall and the interior floor of the delicatessen. At 0918 hours the Recovery Group Chief reported that members had located the two missing firefighters, reportedly covered with fallen debris and below grade in the aforementioned site. Recovery Group firefighters were able to clear debris and reach Lt McCarthy and FF Croom by 0932 hours. Command arranged for an ambulance to be placed on standby, and from approximately 0940 – 0945 hours both fallen members were removed from the structure and transported to the hospital. Command placed the incident at 1815 Genesee Street under control at 0948 hours.

## **INTRODUCTION**

On August 24, 2009, 45-year-old Lieutenant Charles “Chip” McCarthy and 34-year-old Firefighter Jonathan S. Croom died in an early morning fire after a partial first floor collapse at a mixed occupancy commercial/residential structure. On August 24, 2009 at approximately 0830 hours the Commissioner of the Buffalo Fire Department ordered an investigation begun to determine the facts surrounding the deaths of these two firefighters. An off duty chief officer was brought in to perform an on scene assessment and begin interviewing individuals who were involved with the operation. The incident site was reviewed that morning and a nearby fire station was used as a staging point for members to be interviewed. Statements were obtained from the Incident Commander, Operations Chief, members of the first arriving companies and fellow crew members of Lt McCarthy and Firefighter Croom. First day interviews concluded at approximately 1400 hours.

Information was gathered and reviewed over the ensuing weeks. Radio transmissions from the fire scene, photographs from bystanders, news station video, archived floor plans and evidentiary photographs were compiled and reviewed. Written statements were requested from all responding personnel and cross checked for reliability. Follow up interviews were made with key personnel either to clarify previous statements or obtain additional information. NIOSH Firefighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program also investigated this incident and interviewed many members of the department. These interviews were observed and information recorded. In early September a meeting of the first and second alarm companies was held to review the operation. This meeting was initiated by the Incident Commander and attended by the investigative team.

Initial recounts and follow up statements from responders claimed that both firefighters had fallen into the basement while performing a tandem search for trapped victims. Once the documentary evidence was analyzed it became apparent that eyewitness statements and testimony could not be wholly substantiated by the factual evidence. Minor discrepancies were noted that upon intensive investigation called the given scenario into question. Over the course of several weeks a different set of circumstances was theorized and verified. The following report, therefore, weighted the testimonials according to what could be corroborated with recorded information.

Lt McCarthy’s transmissions, although heard on the fireground, were not recorded through Buffalo Fire Dispatch. It was discovered that Lt McCarthy’s portable radio had been transmitting in “direct” mode for the incident; therefore transmissions were limited in range to the fireground and nearby firehouse receivers. In the following report a small portion of Lt McCarthy’s transmissions are quoted. This excerpt was picked up as a stray signal recorded at a nearby E911 base station. No other radio transmissions from Lt McCarthy were captured. FF Croom did not make any radio transmissions during the operation, and his radio was found to be turned off on channel #1 when it was recovered.

## **Fire Department**

The Buffalo Fire Department is the principal fire and rescue service for the city of Buffalo, NY. It is the largest fire department in Upstate New York. The Fire Department currently consists of one division which is separated into four battalions, and further separated into 4 platoons. Each platoon works 2 day shifts which are from 0800-1700 hrs followed by 2 night shifts which are from 1700-0800 hrs. This career department consists of approximately 675 uniformed firefighters that serve a population of about 290,000 in a geographic area of approximately 42 square miles

The department currently operates 1 Division Chief, 4 Battalion Chiefs, 19 Engine Companies, 9 Ladder Companies, 1 Heavy Rescue, 1 Collapse/Technical Rescue, 1 HazMat/Command Unit and 1 Fireboat. Buffalo on average battles three structure fires a day. Residential structures are typically wooden balloon style framed buildings (Type V) with a relatively high percentage of these abandoned. Typical run statistics show a total of 30,000 incident responses per year.



## **Apparatus and Personnel**

0350 hours dispatch - Initial dispatch included:

- Engine 31 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Engine 22 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Engine 23 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Ladder 14 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Ladder 6 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Ladder 7 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Rescue 1 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 3 firefighters);
- EMS Lieutenant (F20)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Chief (B43) - Initial Incident Commander (IC)
- Division Chief (B56) - Shift Commander; Incident Commander (IC)

0353 hours dispatch – Extra Companies

- Engine 33(Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters)
- Engine 28(Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters)
- Ladder 15 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters)

0414 hours dispatch – Balance of 2<sup>nd</sup> Alarm

- Engine 21 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters)
- Ladder 2 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters).
- Department Safety Chief (B41)
- 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Chief (B44)

Department Notifications

- BFD Commissioner (C1)
- BFD Deputy Commissioner (B51)
- BFD Deputy Commissioner (B53)

0444 hours dispatch - 3<sup>rd</sup> Alarms

- Engine 34 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Engine 35 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Engine 3 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Ladder 4 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- Ladder 5 (Officer, firefighter/driver and 2 firefighters);
- 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion Chief (B46)

Additional units were dispatched; however, only those units directly involved in the operational aspects of the fatal event are discussed in the investigation section of this report.



## Structure

The incident site was a two story, type III, non-fireproof structure, measuring approximately 27-foot wide and 85-feet in length. The structure had a flat roof extending from the front wall approximately 40 feet back. At that juncture the construction changed to a gable type, slate shingled roof rising slightly above the level of the flat roof. The building's front wall was angled in relation to the rest of the walls, keeping side #1 parallel to Genesee Street while sides #2 and #4 ran parallel to nearby Burgard Place:



*Overhead of 1817& 1815 Genesee St.*

The structure was partially attached to an adjacent building located on side #2. The attachment consisted of two second floor walkways that were completely sealed off, blocking access to either structure from its neighbor. The address of the adjacent building was 1817 Genesee, also an ordinary type construction with mixed commercial/residential occupancy:



*Front View of 1817(left) & 1815 (right) Genesee St*

The first floor consisted of a delicatessen that was heavily fortified. Steel mesh overlaid the front display windows (plate glass). Behind the plate glass there was yet another barrier consisting of solid panels. The main entry point, a commercial door located near the 1/2 corner, had a locked steel security gate in place at the time of the incident:



There were no window openings on either the #2 or #4 side of the delicatessen area. An unused steel entry door was located on the #2 side, approximately 40 feet from the front corner, but it too was heavily barred and the interior blocked by a set of floor coolers. Extending past the delicatessen on the first floor was a vacated apartment unit. The entry point for this unit, which led directly to an interior stairway running from basement to second floor, was located approximately 60 feet from the front corner. This doorway became the main entry point for attempting basement access during firefighting operations:



The fire department's Bureau of Fire Investigation determined the origin of the fire to be the basement under the delicatessen. At the time of this report there is no determined cause.

## **Weather**

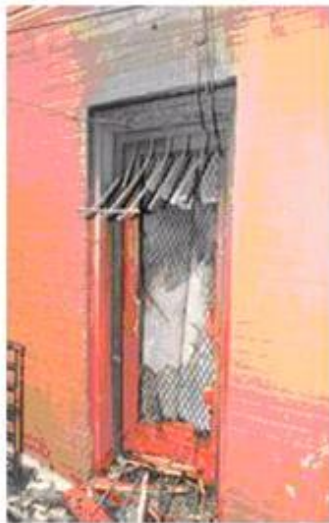
The approximate temperature at the time of the incident was 62 degrees Fahrenheit with an estimated average wind speed of 2 miles per hour from the west with 80% humidity.



**Reference Diagram of 1815 Genesee St**



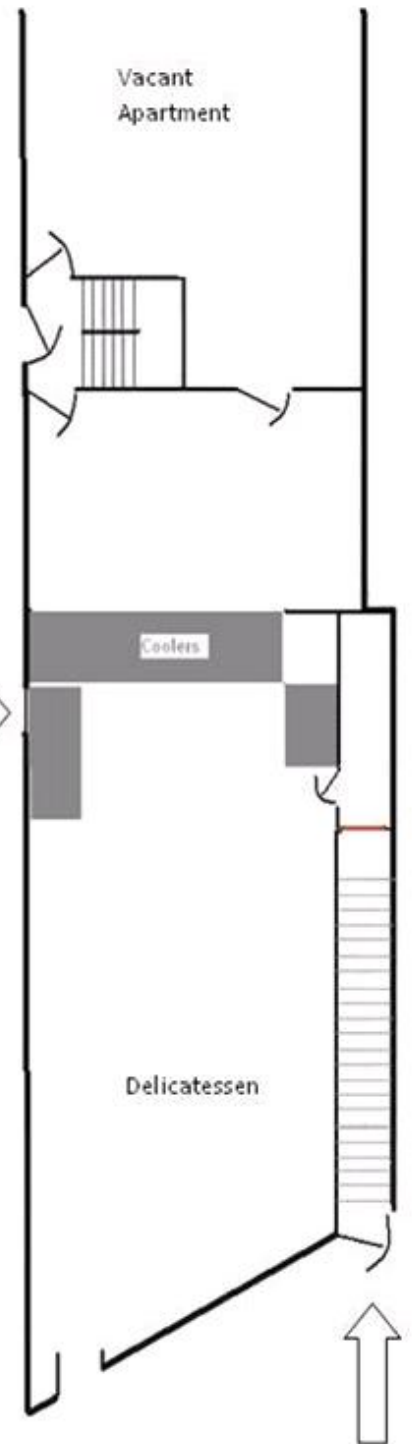
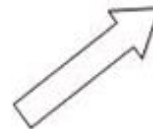
Main entry to  
basement staircase  
on Side #2  
Door 2B



Barricaded door first  
attempted for entry on  
Side #2  
Door 2A



Main entry to Deli  
Side #1  
Door 1A



Entry to stairway leading to 2nd  
floor apartments, Side #1  
Door 1B



## **INVESTIGATION**

**On August 24, 2009 at approximately 0351 hours, Engine 31 (E31), Engine 22 (E22), Engine 23 (E23), Ladder 14 (L14), Ladder 6 (L6), Ladder 7 (L7), Rescue 1 (R1) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Chief (B43) were dispatched to 1815 Genesee St for a structure fire. Lt McCarthy was assigned as officer of Rescue 1 and FF Croom was assigned to Ladder 7. Dispatch informed the responding companies that the structure was reported to be occupied with victims still inside.**

**The following is the sequence of events that occurred that morning:**

**0351.36 hours:** Companies are dispatched to 1815 Genesee St. for an occupied structure on fire with the occupants still inside.

**0352.27 hours:** E31 reports seeing smoke as they leave their quarters.

**0353.01 hours:** E31 arrives on the scene and positions their apparatus past the 1/4 corner of the building. They are met by an unknown male who begins to direct them to the #2 side, stating that he heard people pounding and yelling for help from the basement. E31 stretches a hand line (1 3/4") to that side, led to a heavily barricaded doorway approximately 40 feet from the 1/2 corner (Door 2A). They question the unknown male as to the use of that particular door, trying to ascertain if that was a main entry point. They are assured it was, and immediately start forcing a steel gate covering the door to gain access.

**0353.14 hours:** E31's lieutenant informs dispatch that they have reports from civilians of person(s) trapped, and further relays that the building has steel bars over the doors and windows. With this update two additional engines and one ladder company are added to the call by the responding Battalion Chief.

**0354.04 hours:** Engine 33 (E33), Engine 28 (E28) and Ladder 15 (L15) are dispatched to 1815 Genesee St as extra companies.

**0354.57 hours:** L14 calls B43 to saying there are heavy smoke conditions accompanying a probable basement fire. They use metal saws to start opening the side door but quickly realized it is too heavily fortified to be a main entry, moving operations towards another door approximately 20 feet beyond that point (Door 2B). They are successful in gaining access through this second location, behind which a staircase runs from basement to upper floor. Two members assist E31 in forcing a basement door while the officer and another firefighter search the second floor. They, too, receive information from bystanders telling of trapped victims and initially ladder side #2 but are able to use the interior stairway through the forced door.

**0356.32 hours:** E31 updates the still responding B43, saying that they have a basement fire.

**0356.43 hours:** B43 arrives on location and establishes command. R1 is now on scene and calls the IC to say they are performing a search of the second floor. Three members search the second floor by using the staircase on side #1 (Door 1B). The two remaining firefighters use circular saws to cut the lock off the gate covering the delicatessen entrance (Door 1A).

**0359.02 hours:** Division Chief (B56) reports on location.

**0359.05 hours:** Ladder 7 arrives on scene and assumes the duty of F.A.S.T. FF Jonathan Croom is assigned to this company on an overtime basis for the shift. The other firefighters on Ladder 7 are the permanently assigned members of the on duty platoon.

**0359.33 hours:** E22 calls B43 to inform him that they are laying in a backup line to E31's attack line. They state that E31's line is laid in to the basement (*through the 2B door down the stairs*).

**0400.30 hours:** B43 responds to a radio call from R1. R1's transmission isn't heard on Dispatch recordings but is heard on scene at the time. *It is assumed that Lt McCarthy was transmitting throughout the incident in "direct" mode.*

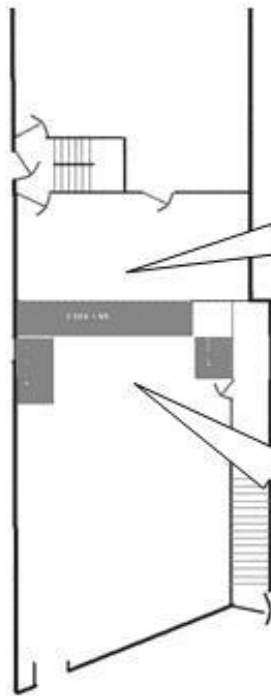


Indicates radio is on Channel 2 (fireground channel) but in "direct" mode. This does not allow transmissions to reach repeaters and limits range to the fireground and nearby station receivers.

**0401.15 hours:** L14 member calls R1 after hearing their location of first floor, saying he doesn't see them on the first floor. It is apparent that R1 members are operating in the delicatessen area while the member of L14 is in the room behind the coolers. The firefighter from L14 is trying to provide ventilation of the first floor by heading to the #1 side of the building. He is unaware that the "wall" he encounters is the rear of the delicatessen coolers. The coolers formed the rear wall of the store by spanning almost its entire width, with framing above that reached the ceiling. *See diagram on page 11.*

**0401.52:** L14 member requests a line for fire coming through the first floor. The fire is in the partitioned area directly behind the coolers at the back of the delicatessen, coming up through the #4 side wall.

Rear view of store wall coolers.



Delicatessen view of rear wall coolers. Note framing above that rose to ceiling, creating a dividing wall between the store and a rear apartment.



**0402.30:** B56 assumes command of 1815 Genesee. IC updates dispatch by saying that one 1 ¾” hand line is laid in and that two others are being deployed.

**0404.36:** B43 informs E31 that he had updated information from a “witness in the building ... possible occupants in the basement”.

**0405.07:** IC calls R1 to inform them “we have a report from civilians that there were people pounding on the door in the basement upon our arrival ... we think the civilians might be in the basement”. R1 acknowledges and says the primary search of the second floor is negative.

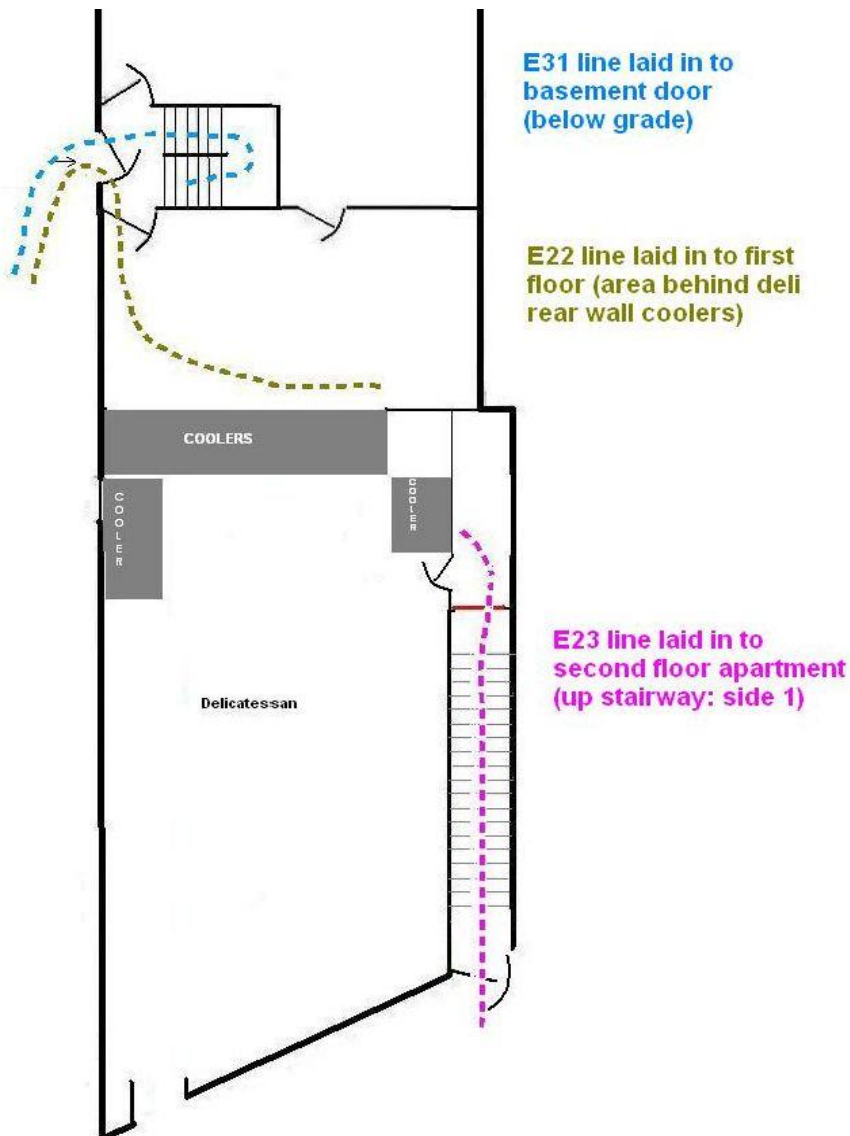


**0406.10:** E22 reports that they are flowing water on the fire on the first floor, side #4.

**0406.32:** IC responds to L6 message concerning probable basement fire; “Yeah, Ok, I think we do have a basement fire. I believe we’ve got 31 down in the basement”.

**0407.05:** IC responds to R1 message (unknown – no recording available). IC states “OK Chip, you said you found the stairs to the basement, they’re where you thought they were in the rear of the first floor”. *It is probable that FF Croom (L7-FAST) was paired with Lt McCarthy at this time, performing an initial reconnaissance of the delicatessen looking for an alternate entry point to the basement.* FF Croom was temporarily reassigned from his company to assist Lt McCarthy in making a two man entry team, as the rest of R1 was committed to other areas.

**0407.54:** E23 responds to IC inquiry saying they are on the second floor. There are currently three hand lines in operation, two through door 2B and one through door 1B. E31 is operating at the bottom of the interior stairs (from door 2B) still trying to gain access through the steel basement door. E22’s line is also laid through door 2B, but remains on the first floor in the room behind the delicatessen coolers. E23 has their line laid to the second floor up the staircase located at door 1B, searching for fire in the upstairs apartment.



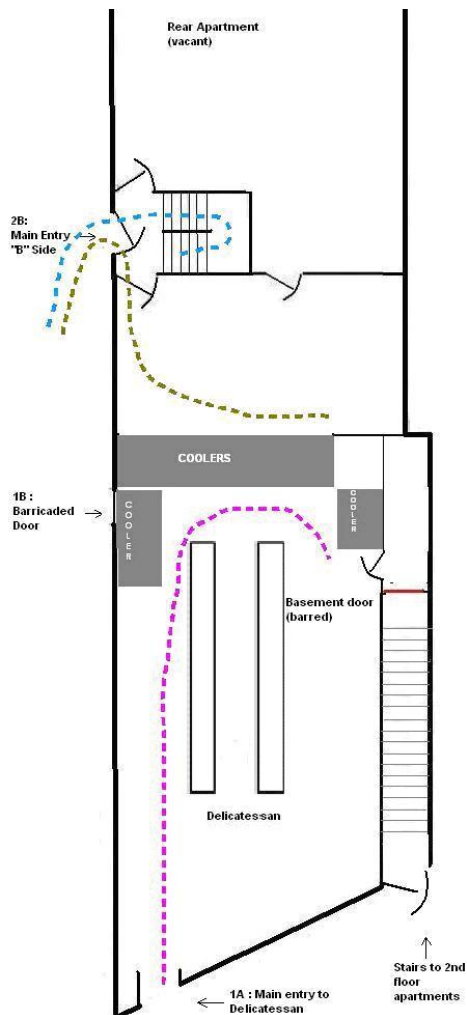


**0408.22 hours:** F72 (Department Chaplin) arrives on scene.

**0409.15 hours:** L14 officer reports primary search of the second floor is negative, and that there is no fire extension to that area.

**0409.35 hours:** E22 calls the IC to say that they can't move forward on the first floor until it is ventilated. *Several members, during interviews, stated that the floor in their operating area behind the wall coolers was "spongy". This critical information was never relayed to the IC.*

**0409.50 hours:** IC acknowledges E22's message and informs them there is a line currently being laid in to the first floor from side #1. This 1 3/4" line is manned by E23 after being redeployed from the second floor. Both Lt McCarthy and FF Croom have exited the building after their reconnaissance. Lt McCarthy is now teamed with the crew of E23, tasked with leading them to the rear 3/4 corner of the delicatessen. They hope to advance down basement stairs assumed to be located behind the newly discovered door. FF Croom is no longer assigned to Lt McCarthy and reattaches to his company. *E23's mission is to advance a handline to the basement from this attack point, providing cover for a rescue attempt. Civilians are still thought to be trapped, as Lt McCarthy reported to IC that during his previous entry he could hear people calling out and banging on pipes. It is likely that Lt McCarthy had mistaken noises firefighters (operating on the back side of the wall coolers) were making as those of trapped civilians. IC later affirmed that Lt McCarthy was adamant he heard people calling out during his earlier reconnaissance.*



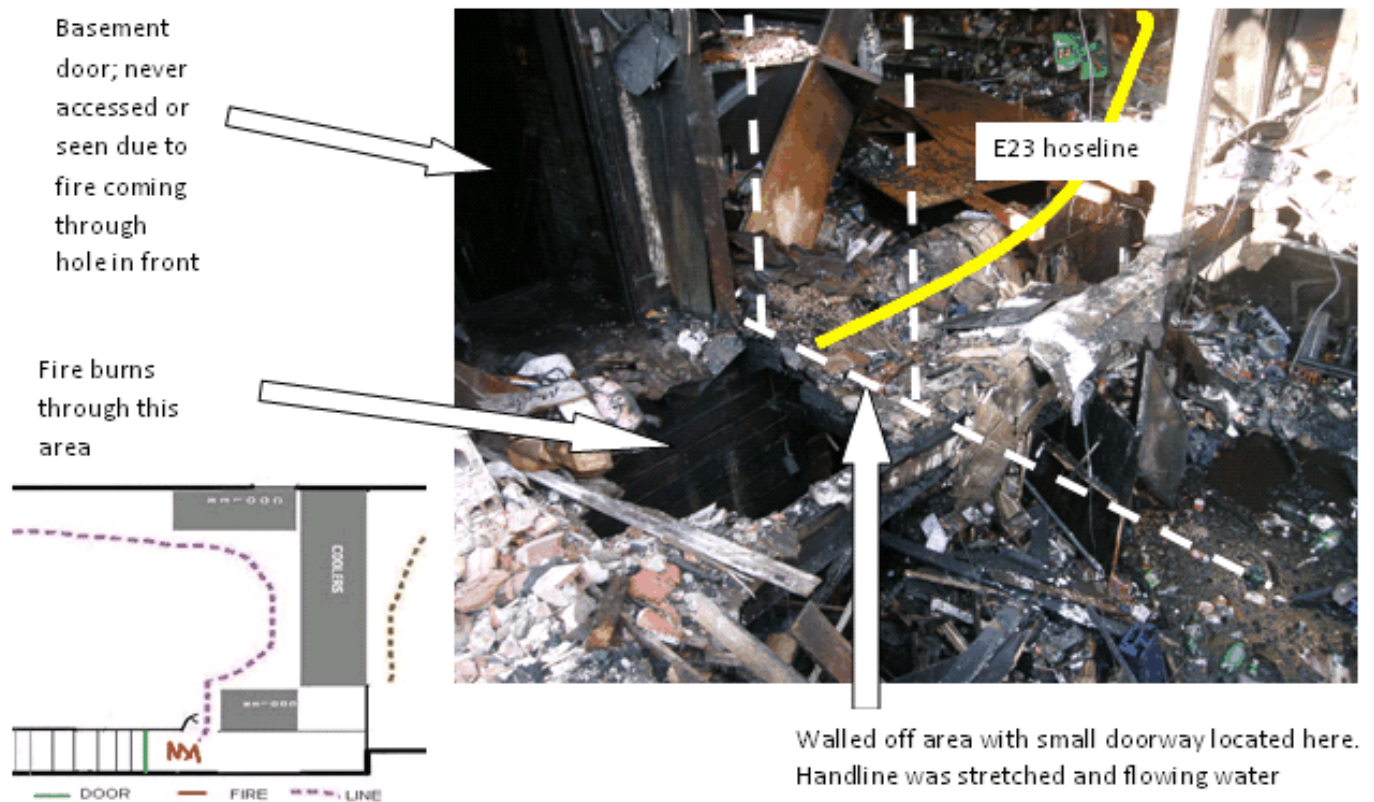
E31 – Line to basement door (below grade); still no success in breaching door

E22 – Line to first floor behind coolers

E23 – Line to first floor delicatessen

**0411.20:** IC updates dispatch that there are three handlines operating and the companies are still making an aggressive interior search since they continue to receive reports of civilians trapped in the basement.

**0412.14:** Lt McCarty updates B43 “We’re putting water on the fire Chief, in the basement – floor’s getting hot, though”. B43 acknowledges by saying “That’s clear; you’ve got water on the fire in the basement, still burning hot”. The line is operating in the 3/4 corner of the delicatessen, through a panel door which leads to the barricaded basement door. This basement door is never located because E23 & Lt McCarthy cannot see past the fire venting through the floor in front of them. *Fire is burning through the floor just on the far side of this panel door. The fire creates a large hole in the floor which is mistaken for burned out basement stairs. Even though water is being applied through this hole it is not reaching the seat of the fire.*



*The message itself may have led to some confusion since the IC understood the report to mean that an advance into the basement is being made. This is not the case. Of the two lines committed to reaching the seat of the basement fire, neither is making any significant progress nor flowing water except on the periphery of the area. The members operating at the bottom steel door aren't able to force it open any significant amount and are only hitting fire issuing from the slightly ajar top. The basement fire is unchecked and crews are not making entry from either position.*

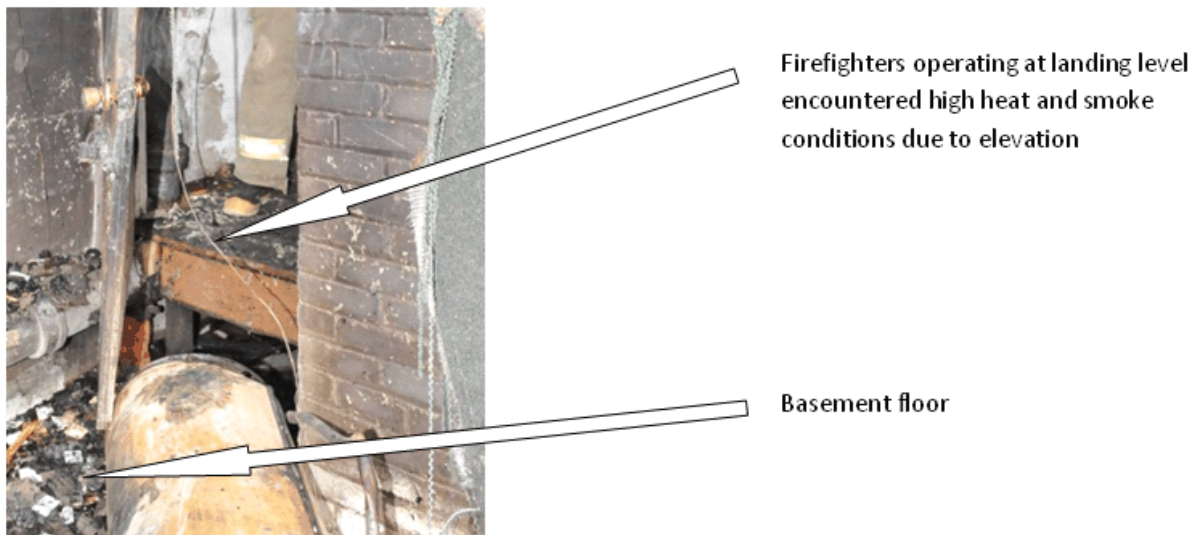
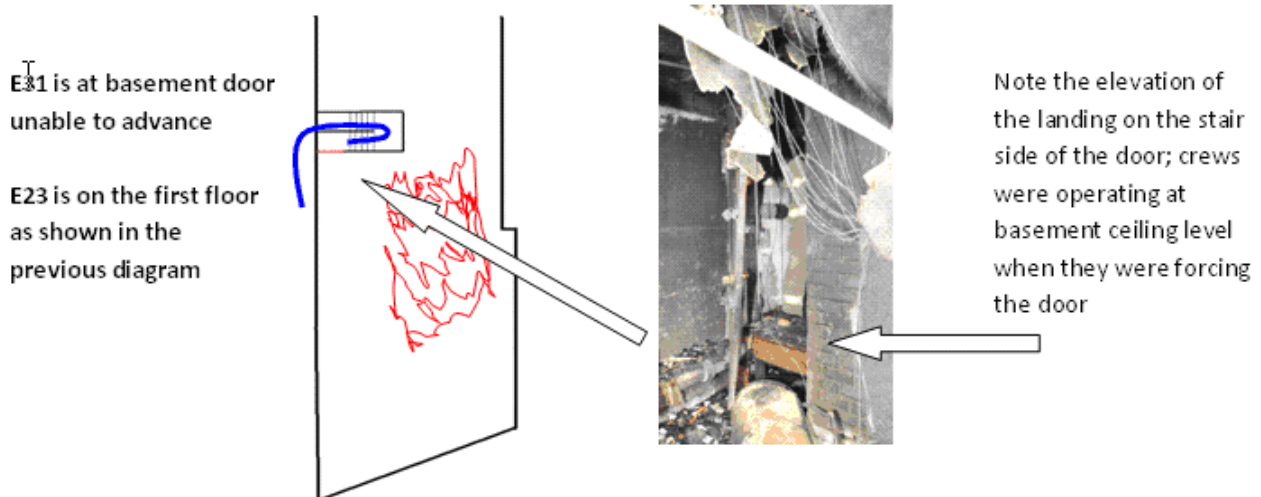
**0413.36 hours:** IC requests the balance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> alarm.

**0414.30 hours:** Engine 21, Ladder 2, Department Safety Chief (B41) and 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Chief (B44) are dispatched to 1815 Genesee St.

**0415.36 hours:** E22 to IC “Yeah Chief, we couldn’t get the door open down in the basement. Everybody’s coming out of the first floor and the basement right now on the #2 side.” All members operating from the 2B entry point withdraw from their interior positions. *L7 is now operating as a four member crew attempting to vent the delicatessen first floor. They are operating inside the structure after entering from the 1A door.*

**0416.56:** IC confers with B43 to order members out of the structure.

**0417.11 hours:** IC to dispatch “We’re pulling our companies out of the first floor ... they are having great difficulty making entry to the basement because of a steel door.”



**0419.04 hours:** L7 Lt meets with IC in front of #1 side reporting that their interior position is “untenable”. All members of L7 (including FF Croom) are now out of the structure and in front of the #1 side. The FAST has its entire crew intact.

**0419.20 hours:** Lt McCarthy updates IC in the front of the building concerning conditions on the first floor delicatessen “... stairs on the side but the floor’s getting hot ... it’s burning good...”

**0420.26 hours:** Lt McCarthy, IC and B43 confer in front of building.

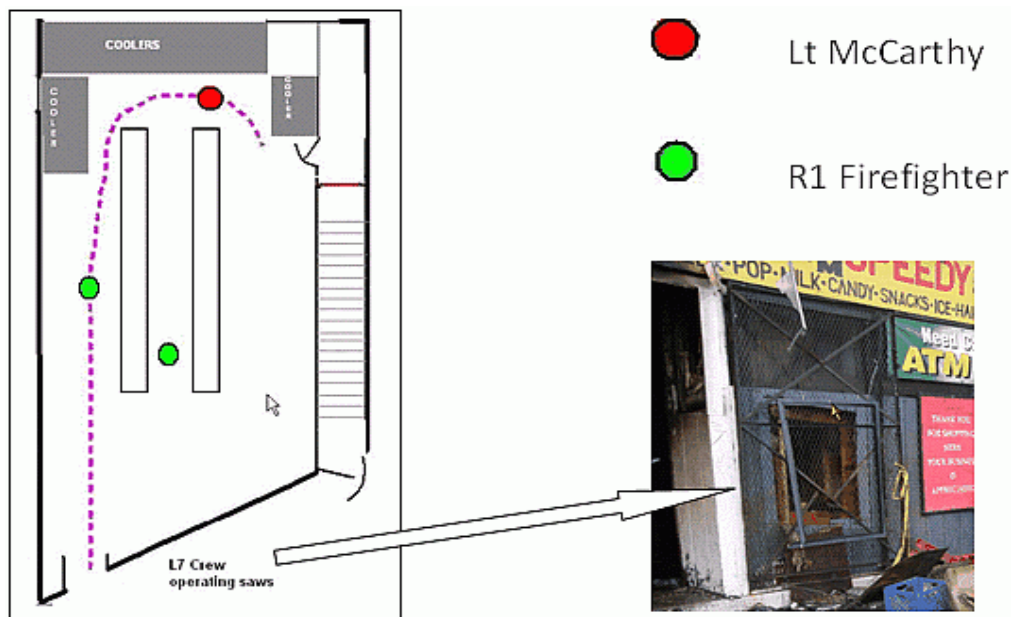
**0420.40 hours:** IC sends E31, E33 and L14 to the basement door on side #2 to try and force entry with a rabbit tool. *This is a final attempt to gain access to the fortified basement. All prior attempts using power saws and hand tools have not been successful.*

**0421.01 hours:** B43 reports to IC that the store owner has given him a key to a lock on the steel door down in the basement. He also informs the IC that “reports of conditions on the first floor ... are beginning to deteriorate”.

**0421.18 hours:** *This is the last documented sighting of Lt McCarthy outside the structure. It appears that Lt McCarthy is walking away from the building. It is speculated that he is searching for the remaining members of his crew. It was also reported by a firefighter from R1 that their crew is now tasked with making sure there were no firefighters remaining in the delicatessen, and as such three members (Lt McCarthy and two firefighters) entered the first floor deli shortly after this time mark.*

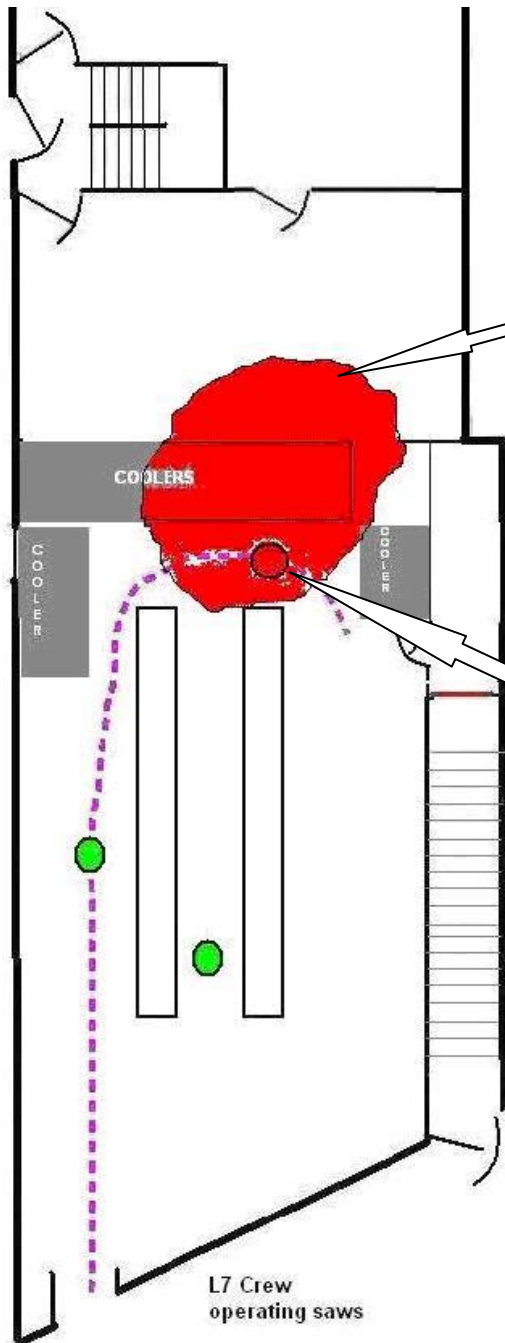
*Lt McCarthy enters the structure from the 1A door before the other firefighters. Those firefighters are TIC equipped and have a delay waiting for the unit to completely power up. Lt McCarthy apparently follows the now abandoned 1 3/4” handline previously stretched into the delicatessen to the rear 3/4 corner of the store. One of the remaining firefighters follows the line well behind Lt McCarthy, unaware of the search pattern the Lt followed. Store shelving that creates aisles block the view of this firefighter as he scans with the TIC and calls out to verify that all other firefighters have exited the delicatessen. The other firefighter searches the middle aisle after crossing the front counter. His view of the rear of the store is also obscured by shelving as he proceeds down the aisle. Extremely dense smoke conditions make visual contact between firefighters impossible.*

*The FAST is operating on the #1 side of the building, trying to cut through steel mesh covering the front windows. FF Croom (assigned to the FAST) is one of two members operating a power saw. The four firefighters alternate the manning of these saws, but the entire crew is intact and accounted for at this time.*





**0422.40 hours (approximate):** The firefighter from R1 who is searching the delicatessen along the #2 side wall (following the handline) reports hearing a “loud slam” followed by objects falling on him- most likely store stock. He heads out of the delicatessen, unaware that Lt McCarthy was near the set of wall coolers along the rear (side #3) store wall. The firefighter searching the middle aisle can now hear calls for help from what he believes is the basement area. Neither firefighter is aware that a catastrophic floor collapse has occurred, bringing down the first floor under and adjacent to the rear wall coolers. Approximately 31 minutes have lapsed since companies were dispatched to this incident. Fire has been burning unchecked in the basement for the duration of fire department operations. It is speculated that the weight of the fully stocked wall coolers greatly hastened the floor collapse in this area, bringing Lt McCarthy down into the basement as it fell in.





**0423.06 hours:** IC “Was that a mayday transmission?” *Lt McCarthy, having fallen into the basement, issues calls for help. His radio transmissions are heard on scene but fail to reach the fire department repeater since his portable radio is on “direct” mode.*

**0423.07 hours:** FAST member FF Jonathan Croom, out front on the #1 side, hears the calls for help and races towards the 1A door. He is pointing towards the front of the structure and begins to don his facepiece. *FF Croom’s portable radio is operating on Channel 1 (possibly turned off) and therefore only hears the calls emanating from inside the delicatessen door, not over his radio as other on-scene firefighters hear. This likely allowed FF Croom to more accurately determine the source of the “mayday”.*



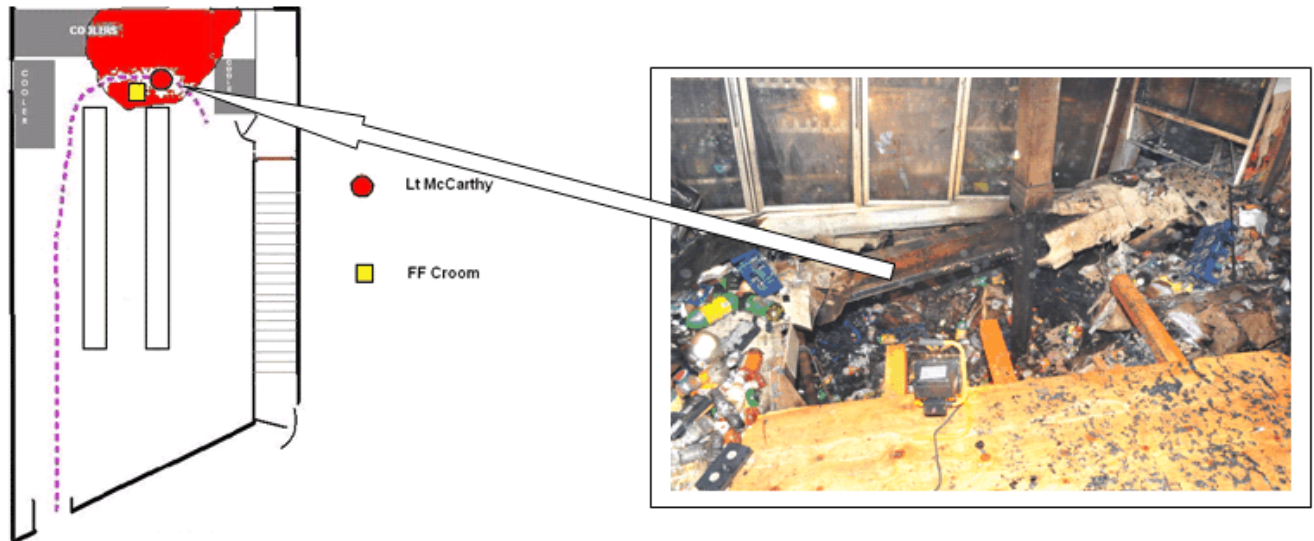
**0423.12 hours:** R1 firefighter located in the delicatessen middle aisle reports to command that he can hear someone yelling in the basement on the #1 side. Command tries to contact the distressed member to ascertain who is calling and what his location is. B43 calls dispatch to see if they know who is calling (no response is given).

**0423.21:** FF Croom begins to enter the delicatessen door but is pushed back by the two exiting members of R1. *FF Croom lets the R1 members pass and begins to enter but realizes he doesn't have a tool in hand. He proceeds to retrieve his multi-tool and returns to the doorway.*

**0423.42:** FF Croom enters the door into the smoke of the delicatessen in an apparent attempt to assist the distressed firefighter (identity still unknown). *FF Croom entered the structure by himself in response to urgent pleas for help. It is unknown if he spoke directly to his officer or any other firefighter before entering the delicatessen. Confusion and mass movement of personnel compromised communication. Therefore, it cannot be determined if FF Croom informed others of his intended actions or not. What is clear is that FF Croom quickly ascertained the general area that Lt McCarthy had been calling from and then selflessly attempted a rescue operation. FF Croom did not exit the structure after this time and his whereabouts became a point of concern later in the incident.*

**0423.47 hours:** IC assigns B43 as Rescue Chief and immediately dispatches the FAST to his command, assigning them to the basement. *Members of L7 (FAST) are unaware that FF Croom is not with them as they move towards the #2 side entrance. There are many firefighters racing to and from the #1 and #2 sides, trying to gather information and regroup to assist in rescue operations. This causes an accountability problem among crews that result in confusion later on in the incident.*

**0423.50 hours (approximate):** FF Croom falls into the collapsed section of flooring in close proximity to Lt McCarthy. Visibility in the delicatessen is greatly obscured due to smoke conditions. The line that FF Croom is following leads directly into the hole and it is assumed he inadvertently fell into the basement while searching for the missing firefighter.



**0424.22 hours:** A PASS alarm is heard sounding from the delicatessen. *It is undetermined if this alarm is coming from Lt McCarthy or FF Croom.*

**0424.34 hours:** IC contacts L14 and asks what is happening in the basement. *He is concerned that the firefighters operating at the basement door were endangered; it is believed that the trapped firefighter had entered the basement from the stairway at the 2B door. Since this entry point was the only known access to the basement the IC sent the Rescue Group to this area to begin rescue operations. It was not evident that a first floor collapse had occurred, and it was not determined who had called the “mayday”. This area became the starting point for reconnaissance and rescue efforts since no known location could be verified.*

**0424.41 hours:** One firefighter from L14 enters the delicatessen door, apparently to assist in rescue operations. He is quickly followed by a firefighter from R1

**0425.21 hours:** B44 arrives on location.

**0425.57 hours:** L2 is ordered to bring their lifeline to the basement and join the Rescue Group at the 2B entry.

**0426.05 hours:** A member of R1 calls for more pressure on the line stretched into the delicatessen. *The firefighter is unaware that a portion of the line has fallen into the basement along with Lt McCarthy and burned through. The line appears limp since water is flowing from the burned end into the basement.*

**0426.58 hours:** IC transmits “Member in the basement this is Command, did you enter the basement from the 2 side or from the front door?” *No response is given. IC is still trying to locate the point of entry the trapped firefighter used.*

**0427.37 hours:** IC orders Rescue Chief to remain on channel 2 to continue with his operations, but places the rest of the operation on channel 3. *This allows the trapped member to use the originally assigned channel in case contact can be made. Fire operations can continue without interfering with any possible rescue transmission. E22, E31, E31, L2 and L14 are assigned to the Rescue Group. IC informs dispatch that all radio traffic except for the rescue effort is moving to channel 3.*

**0428.15 hours:** Radio transmission from a R1 firefighter operating in the delicatessen states that he needs water and additional manpower for continuing search of the area. *Several other firefighters have entered the first floor from the 1A door. The original 1 ¾" handline laid into the rear by E23 has been burned through and is not functional. Members are operating in an extremely hostile environment without protection of a line. Threat of continuing collapse is evident, but a determined effort is made to reach what is believed to be a single trapped member.*

**0428.56 hours:** "43, fire broke through, fire broke through". *This report apparently is coming from a R1 firefighter reporting on conditions in the delicatessen. Heavy fire is venting from the collapsed area, although firefighters still are unaware the floor has failed.*

**0429.30 hours:** Dispatch relays message to IC that "... R1 is needing a line on the first floor, right away"

**0429.45 hours:** R1 member in delicatessen to IC "I can hear a pass alarm going off...hurry up". IC asks if he can hear him in the basement and R1 states "... on the first floor towards the back ... I'm not sure if he's on the first floor or not". IC states "We believe our trapped member is in the basement". *There is still concern over the entry point used by the trapped firefighter. No one on scene has yet reported a collapse of the first floor so resources are split to cover multiple areas. The search continues to focus on the basement entrance on the #2 side.*

**0431.02 hours:** Rescue Group Chief (B43) calls dispatch and orders an "emergency head count". He is still trying to determine who the missing firefighter is.

**0431.15 hours:** Dispatch begins the "emergency head count". The head count is simulcast over all 3 department radio channels (channels 1, 2 & 3). This is the first of multiple head counts carried out over the remainder of the incident.

**0432.00 hours:** Dispatch asks L7 their status. L7 officer responds "Ladder 7 O.K.". *This is the first attempt at verifying the whereabouts of FF Croom that went wrong. An accurate head count was not made, probably due to the confusion that existed along the #2 side since there were many firefighters operating in that location under extreme conditions.*

**0432.11 hours:** R1 member responds to Dispatch's status request; "Missing Lt McCarthy". *This is the first time the missing firefighter has been identified. FF Croom's status has been improperly identified as O.K., therefore the IC is under the mistaken belief that only one member is trapped. As misleading as this information appears it did not hamper the rescue efforts being made since Lt McCarthy and FF Croom were within extremely close proximity to one another. Any success in finding Lt McCarthy would have also revealed FF Croom's location.*

**0434.42 hours:** IC calls Dispatch on channel 1 to inform them that B44 now has the fire operation and will use channel 3, while B43 has the rescue operation and will stay on channel 2.

**0434.45 hours:** R1 firefighter transmits “Dispatch, relay this to 56 (IC); Lt McCarthy last seen going in the #1 side, ten feet down where the hole in the floor is, ten feet down”. *This is the first time a fairly accurate locator has been given concerning Lt McCarthy’s last known position.*

**0435.38 hours:** Dispatch relays message to B43 concerning Lt McCarthy “43, R1 alpha reports that Lt seen on the #1 side ....”

**0436.09 hours:** IC contacts Rescue Chief to inform him “... that member may have dropped into the basement from the first floor through a hole. I’ve got E21 in there right now with a line trying to get to him. They say right now it’s untenable, so what I might need is some of your support help coming up through the front door.” *Rescue operations have shifted from the #2 side to the delicatessen area. There is on scene confirmation that Lt McCarthy was operating in the store and apparently fell into the basement. Additional resources are needed considering the volume of fire and floor instability. No progress is being made with regard to the fire or even access to the basement. A “top down” approach is now considered the best method of reaching the trapped firefighter – Lt McCarthy is still thought to be the only missing member.*

**0443.41 hours:** IC gives dispatch confirmation that a 3<sup>rd</sup> Alarm had been requested. Dispatch strikes the alarm.

**0444.10 hours:** 3<sup>rd</sup> Alarm is dispatched bringing Engine 34, Engine 35, Engine 3, Ladder 4, Ladder 5 and the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion Chief (B46)

**0444.19 hours:** IC requests an update from E28 who, along with E21’s crew, is operating a 2 ½” handline in the delicatessen trying to reach the hole. IC lets E28 know that they should follow the 1 ¾” line, but there could be debris over the hole and there may be a refrigerator near there. *This information was obtained in an earlier attempt by L2 to reach this area. Several members of L2 tried following the burned out 1 ¾” line and discovered the hole with fire coming out. A cooler on the #2 side wall began to fall over onto the firefighters as they advanced, knocking the helmet off of one of the members. His helmet fell into the hole and the officer decided to pull his company out until a line could be obtained.*



Side cooler: falling into hole and knocking over firefighters as they attempted to reach collapse area.

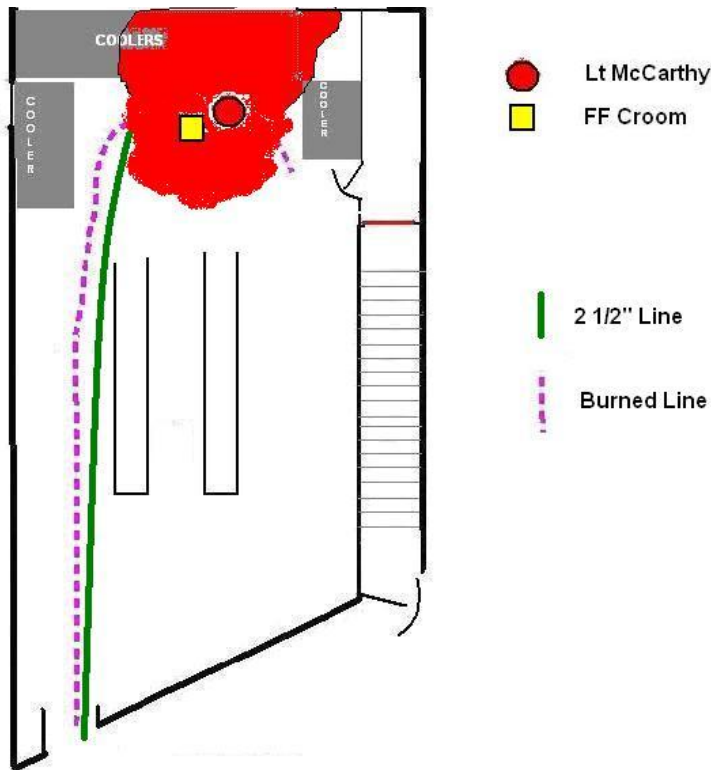
Edge of collapse area



**0445.47 hours:** B43 informs IC that they are still attempting access to the basement from the #2 side, but the temperature signatures show it is “untenable in there”. IC acknowledges and inquires if it is safe for crews to continue operating in the delicatessen above that area. B43 could not make a determination and suggests a TIC be used to help make that decision. *The IC has serious concerns about the safety of the members still operating inside the structure. The viability of the trapped member(s) is questionable due to deteriorating conditions and inability to gain headway on the fire.*

**0446.31 hours:** B43 tells IC that the “best entrance into that basement is through the front door right now ... unable to use the entrance at the side due to the temperature factor...” *Conditions at the basement door on the #2 side have severely worsened, endangering members working there.*

**0447.10 hours:** IC acknowledges B43’s prior message and determines the overall situation to be too dangerous for interior operation. He orders E21 & E28 (who are manning the 2 ½” handline in the store) to back out to the door and evacuate the front. *IC has determined that any further rescue operation will endanger more firefighters. At this point the IC had decided that a rescue is no longer feasible, and that recovery is now the main goal. It is still thought that Lt McCarthy is the only missing member.*



**0447.57 hours:** IC reports that the first floor has “lit up” on the crews, and that a firefighter had fallen through the floor. The firefighter was able to self-extricate and is OK, but withdrawal is necessary. *A firefighter in the center aisle of the delicatessen, in an attempt to reach the collapse area, partially fell through the weakened floor. It has become obvious that the entire first floor is unstable and prone to immediate catastrophic failure. The firefighter was able to stop his complete fall by grabbing on to adjacent shelving as the floor gave out under him. He then backed out of the hole and exited the structure. IC orders all interior personnel to evacuate the building.*



**0449.13 hours:** IC contacts dispatch to order all companies on scene to switch back to channel 2 for the incident. *Rescue operations are no longer feasible. Companies are now committed to stabilizing the situation and attempting recovery under a more controlled environment.*

**0450.35:** IC to dispatch "... a headcount now, a PAR situation". *IC has evacuated the building and wants to make sure all members have complied with the order. He asks for another headcount to verify the location of the crews.*

**0451.30 hours:** Dispatch begins the "emergency head count". L14 officer initially responds as "Missing FF \_\_\_\_\_", but corrects their status by saying that the missing firefighter was changing his tank and is accounted for. L7 officer responds to status check with "Ladder 7 O.K.". This is the second time an inaccurate head count of L7 was given. R1 responds to the same request as "Missing one".

**0457.39 hours:** IC assigns the following: B44 in command of side #1, B43 in command of side #2, B47 (now on scene) in command of side #3 and C1 in command of side #4. Water is flowing into the #1 side at an attempt to control the fire, while crews are trying to gain entry through the foundation wall on the #4 side. *The general location of the collapse is known, but alternate entry methods are utilized. A hole is made through the #4 side wall to access the collapse. The idea is to breach the foundation wall and enter at basement grade, but after an initial attempt concerns arose over the possibility of undermining the wall. A second breach is made in the brickwork at grade level after a better relation from the exterior is determined.*



Attempt to breach foundation wall, abandoned due to stability concerns.



Second hole breached after determining better relative location

Initial breach of foundation and wall

**0504.48 hours:** IC is trying to determine the location and operational mode of the companies when he asks “L7 are you operating on the operations ... or are you still the FAST team?” The officer of L7 replies “We’re part of the operation, Chief”. *There is still no indication that L7 is missing FF Croom.*

**0505.14 hours:** B43 informs IC that fire is venting from the second floor on the #2 side. He states that they are using hand lines to push the fire back, but the upper floor is heavily involved.

**0506.12 hours:** R1 calls IC to request the department Collapse Rig be dispatched to the scene. *The collapse rig is needed to supply materials for reinforcement of the breached #4 side wall, as well as for potential interior recovery efforts.*

**0510.22 hours:** L7 officer broadcasts the following “FF Croom, Croom, your location?” *This is the first indication that FF Croom’s presence is a matter of concern to on scene personnel.*

**0511.11 hours:** L7 officer “FF Croom, Jonathan Croom, acknowledge”

**0511.56 hours:** The following transmission was made on channel 3; “Dispatch to FF Croom of L7, Dispatch to FF Croom of L7”. No reply. *It is likely that Dispatch heard the unsuccessful attempts of L7’s officer to contact FF Croom on channel 2 and tried to assist in reaching him by trying channel 3. It was likely thought that since fire operations had switched channels earlier there was a possibility that FF Croom had not switched back to channel 2.*

**0512.10 hours:** IC announces that L5 is now the FAST.

**0515.32 hours:** L7 officer makes the following transmission; “FF Croom acknowledge your location. Anybody seen Croom?” There was an unidentified respondent to this. The response stated “Right here, I got him here.” *This was also inaccurate, but with reason. Another firefighter on scene working on another crew was thought to be the member sought due to a close similarity in last names. The transmission made by the officer of L7 failed to include a company assignment in this transmission, therefore the respondent wasn’t aware that it was a member of L7 who was missing. There was neither face to face confirmation at this time nor radio request to re-attach the member to L7.*

**0518.30 hours:** Flames begins venting through the roof. The fire is free burning and no progress is being made in reaching the seat of the fire. Conditions are too dangerous to deploy members inside the structure.

**0521.06 hours:** IC directs Dispatch to make an announcement that members are to observe a collapse zone area on the #1 side. *The fire has threatened the stability of the structure and the IC wants all on-scene members to stay away from collapse zones.*

**0521.09 hours:** C1 (Side #4 command) calls dispatch to obtain a heavy equipment “back hoe” to assist in breaching the basement wall. *See picture on previous page.*

**0522.15 hours:** L14, reporting from the bucket of their aerial, reports to IC that they see a hole on the second floor with fire coming through. L14 and L6 have positioned themselves for master stream deployment.

**0524.01 hours:** IC checks with all four sectors to verify that no members are in the structure. Heavy streams are ready to operate and the IC wants to make sure all members are clear before allowing them to open up.

**0525.02 hours:** “Dispatch this is Command .... Try to raise FF Jonathan Croom of L7. Tone him out and ask for him. Jonathan Croom.” *The officer of L7 has gone directly to the IC with concerns over his inability to locate FF Croom. The confusion over the firefighter with the similar last name is now clarified, leaving L7 still in search of FF Croom. There were also inaccurate reports of sightings of FF Croom on the #3 side. The urgency surrounding the rescue attempts for Lt McCarthy and the associated mixing of crews has led to poor accountability.*

**0525.15 hours:** Dispatch replies “56 (Command) they found him about 10 minutes ago. FF Croom, FF Croom from L7 acknowledge with a response. *Tone sounded.* FF Croom, FF Croom from L7 acknowledge with a response.” No response.

**0526.48 hours:** Master streams are deployed. Interior firefighting has ceased.

**0527.03 hours:** Dispatch again tries to raise FF Croom of L7. No response.

**0527.43 hours:** Dispatch emits a tone and again calls for FF Croom. No response and they inform the IC that there has been no contact with FF Croom at this time.

**0537.20 hours:** IC orders master streams shut down. He is trying to send in lines through the front of the building, still attempting to access the initial collapse area.

**0546.10 hours:** Crews are operating interior. Wire cutters are called for. *Crews have accessed the collapse site and are trying to remove debris and entanglement hazards. The area is still extremely unstable and fire continues to run unabated in several areas, threatening to break out and endanger interior operations/firefighters.*

**0546.20 hours:** Dispatch calls the IC and asks if FF Croom has been located. IC responds “Dispatch, negative on FF Croom at this point.” *It has become apparent that FF Croom is also missing and most likely was trapped along with Lt McCarthy.*

**0551.54 hours:** IC states that he has companies in the basement trying to make a recovery.

**0552.39 hours:** Conditions on the second floor are still deteriorating. Crews operating on the first floor/basement collapse continue working, but the IC has told them they are limited in time with orders to withdraw imminent.

**0553.07 hours:** IC orders all crews out of the building fearing further collapse from the upper floors/roof/walls. Master streams are redeployed.

**0610.22 hours:** IC orders an accountability head count through Dispatch. L7 officer responds “One man missing”. R1 responds “One man missing”. *This is the first verification via headcount that both Lt McCarthy of R1 and FF Croom of L7 are missing and presumed trapped. Dispatch reports to the IC that one member of L7 is missing and the officer of R1 is also missing. FF Croom’s status is finalized approximately one hour and forty seven minutes after he enters the delicatessen performing a rescue mission.*

*Up to this point in the incident varied tactics have been undertaken in the rescue and recovery efforts. There had been a major delay in discerning the status of FF Croom but rescue efforts were not compromised. External walls have been breached in an attempt to reach the basement, handlines laid into several areas under extreme conditions, and firefighters have encountered continuing floor collapse during their efforts. Command has tried several approaches to reach the downed firefighters, but uncontrolled fire and structural instability hamper safe operations. Heavy equipment and portable pumps have been requested from another city department.*

**0621.16 hours:** IC states that fire conditions have vastly improved. Master streams have shut down and attempts to reach the basement are being made.

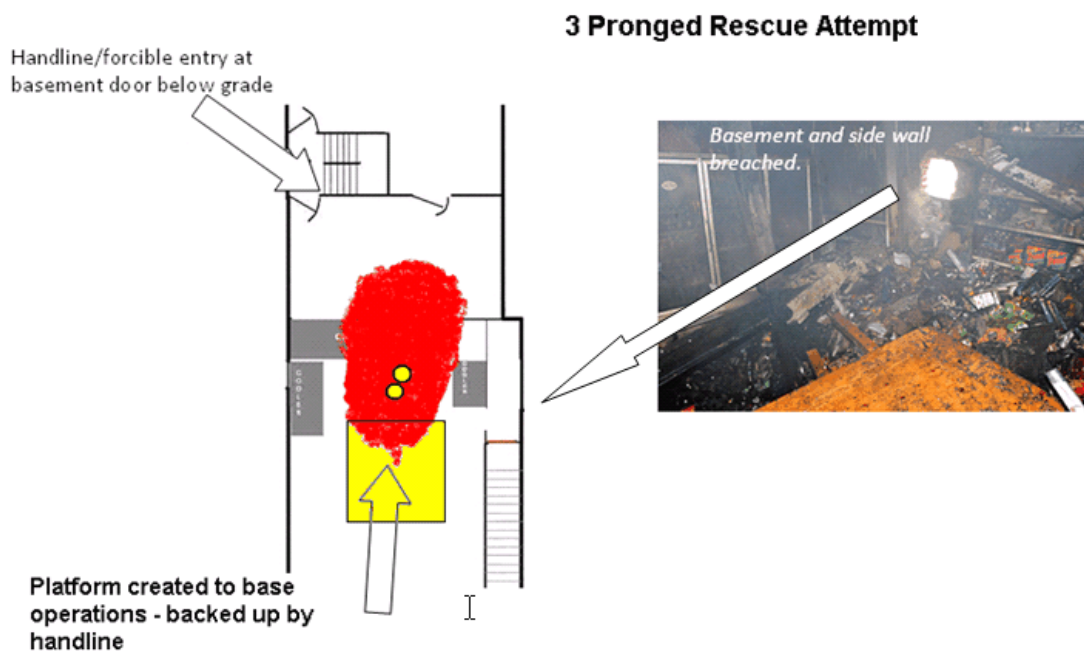
**0622.50 hours:** E3 reports to command that there is “6 feet plus” of water in the basement. They are accessing the area from the #4 side through a breach in the brick wall, looking into the collapse area. It is decided to pump out the basement water with the requested portable pumps prior to entry. Master streams are used in the interim to extinguish remaining fire.

**0656.04 hours:** The portable pumps arrive on scene.

**0707.50 hours:** B47 takes over command of the Recovery Group. Recovery operations are commencing from the #4 side through the exterior wall.

*Recovery operations continue to be hampered by uncontrolled areas of fire which require master stream use. IC has concerns over structural issues and potential danger to recovery personnel. Operations alternate between recovery and extinguishment. There is also a problem with free standing chimneys that pose a hazard. Interior operations must stop and firefighters withdrawn every time a major safety hazard presents itself. Efforts to reach Lt McCarthy and FF Croom are underway at three different locations, all posing serious hazards to personnel.*

**0804.05 hours:** R1 (new crew) reports that they are inside the delicatessen and have found an area secure enough to shore up and use as a base of operations. They request a 1 ¾” handline, and also call for plywood and dimensional lumber to create a platform over the collapse site.



*Over the course of the previous few hours many off duty members have reported to the fire scene to offer assistance. The day crews from the assigned companies have also assembled at the incident, supplementing the firefighters on location. R1 is now staffed by called in firefighters in addition to regular day crew members. Their efforts are focused in on creating a stable work platform inside the delicatessen in which to begin recovery of the missing members. An engine company is located on the #4 side at the breach point nearest the #1 side, ready with portable pumps to draft water out of the basement. The water level in the basement is approximated to be 6' deep, making access unsafe until levels drop.*

**0821.39 hours:** IC orders all members to return to their rigs to standby for an “Accountability assessment”. *There is concern over the number of on and off duty fire personnel on scene. Coordination of members has become problematic due to firefighters self dispatching to offer assistance. IC wants to gain a better understanding of what his resources are, where they are located and ensure the safety of all personnel.*

**0823.59 hours:** Engine 38 begins exterior drafting operations of the basement from the #4 side.

**0825.35 hours:** IC to Dispatch “...would you hit a tone and tell the members operating on Genesee St to go to their rigs, assemble with their company officers so I can do an accountability assessment here”. Dispatch complies with the order.

**0826.50 hours:** IC instructs Dispatch to carry out an accountability assessment; call each company and determine how many members from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon are at the scene. *IC is trying to gather an accurate accounting of all on scene personnel. Due to change of shift and the large number of off duty firefighters self dispatching, accurate accounting of responders has become difficult to accomplish.*

**0847.05 hours:** After making some progress in approaching the collapse site from the #1 and #4 sides, fire conditions on the second floor have once again gained headway. Interior operations are halted and members withdrawn while ladder pipes are used to darken down the fire.

**0856.21 hours:** Ladder pipes are shut down and the IC states that the operations are now in the “... technical rescue operations end of the event”.



Platform fabricated and used as operating base to access downed firefighters in basement.



**0918.46 hours:** B43 to IC "... be advised we have eyes on two, we have eyes on our two". *Interior operations have succeeded in selective debris removal and forming a work platform in the delicatessen. The downed firefighters have been located but gaining clear access has yet to be accomplished. During the past several hours further collapse and unchecked fire have resulted in an unstable area filled with debris from both the delicatessen and upper floors. The collapse site has been partially cleared to the point that recovery members can see the downed firefighters. Better access to their below grade location is still required.*

**0932.31 hours:** B43 to IC "Command we have hands on, I say again we have hands on, two firefighters". Recovery group has accessed Lt McCarthy and FF Croom. The structural stability of the area is extremely poor but operations move towards removal. *Both firefighters have been fully accessed after an attic ladder was used to enter the basement. Remaining obstructions have been cleared and stokes baskets requested.*

*Approximate location of the downed firefighters:*

*35 feet in from the 1/2 corner*

*12 feet in from the #2 side wall*

*5-6 feet below the first floor level*

**0940.00 hours (approximate):** FF Jonathan Croom, Ladder 7, is brought out to a waiting ambulance in an American flag draped stokes basket. All members stand by to honor their fallen brother.

**0943.00 hours (approximate):** Lt Charles "Chip" McCarthy, Rescue 1, is brought out to a waiting ambulance in an American flag draped stokes basket. All members stand by to honor their fallen brother.

Recovery operations are finalized.

**0948.55 hours:** IC places the fire at 1815 Genesee St under control.

*Over the next two days the structure is methodically dismantled by heavy equipment under the watch of Buffalo Fire Marshalls, ATF agents and Buffalo Police. The basement is specifically targeted and thoroughly searched. The insistence by civilians of trapped victims was never resolved during fire operations. The Commissioner of Fire ordered a complete examination of the structure to ascertain if there were victims remaining. After demolition and inspection no persons were found. The insistence of bystanders that people were inside proved unfounded.*

*The cause and origin of the fire is still under investigation. Independent electrical engineering reports did not verify or negate the possibility of overload/failure of circuitry. A final determination has not been issued as of this date.*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]