

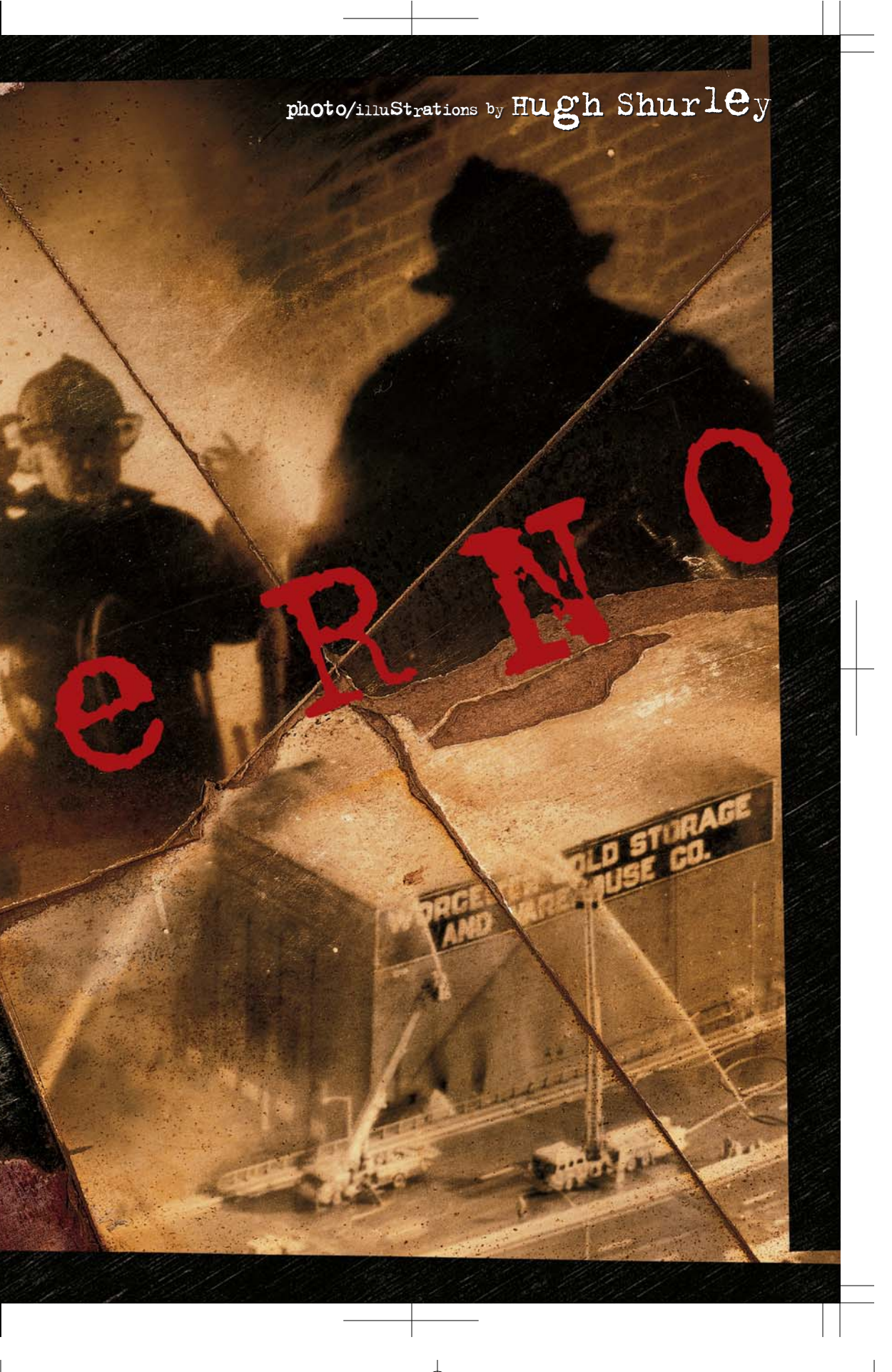
There was **fire**
everywhere they
looked. It was
formidable,
dangerous, but
the kind they fought
several times
each year. Then
something happened,
and **everything**
went **black**. The
Worcester fire,
from the inside out.

by **Geoffrey Douglas**

photo/illustrations by Hugh Shurley

ERMO

Worcester Cold Storage
and Warehouse Co.



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IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON — somewhere around four-thirty —

on December 3, 1999, and it was already more dark outside than light.

On the corner of Franklin and Grafton Streets in downtown Worcester, a block from the I-290 overpass, Bill McNeil of Bill's Place Diner was getting ready for the early-supper crowd. Across the street from him and one flight

up on a mattress in a corner of the second floor of the abandoned Worcester Cold Storage and Warehouse Company, a homeless, pregnant 19-year-old named Julie Ann Barnes, with an intellect that would later be described as "somewhat below average," was crayoning pictures in a coloring book. Next to her on the mattress was Tom Levesque, 37, also homeless, also in the words of an acquaintance, "kind of slow." The two were arguing, Julie Barnes would say later, over sex.

"I lay on the bed and started coloring . . . He started to lay on top of me. I pushed him off."

The warehouse was a behemoth: a great, five-storied, ugly brown box — disused, unlighted, nearly windowless, the length of a football field — that began life, nearly a century ago, as a slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant. Over the years, there were storage rooms added, scores of them, and meat lockers the size of living rooms with ten-inch-thick metal doors. On all five floors it was the same: freezer lockers and storage space surrounding massive, columned open rooms — the old slaughter rooms, in one of which the man and the teenager now shared their mattress — all connected by a single, narrow, wrought-iron staircase with three or four turns to a floor.

Some years ago, to keep in the cold, the owners had added six-inch cork insulation over 18-inch brick walls, then coated it with Sheetrock sprayed with petroleum-based polyurethane foam.

There was a candle next to the mattress, the couple's only source of light. One of the two accidentally knocked it over, into a pile of Julie Barnes's clothes. The clothes caught fire. The two tried to stamp out the flames with their feet.

"But we couldn't. He hit it with a pillow, but the pillow caught on fire."

Probably they panicked. Then, at least briefly, Julie Barnes went searching for her cat and dog. But the warehouse was too massive and mazelike, and she soon gave up the search. The two then left the warehouse together and walked to the Common Outlets Mall, three blocks south, where they went to the Media Play arcade and listened to rock CDs.

6:13 **exa**

"My cat and dog was in there," Julie Barnes, captured by a video camera with Tom Levesque just behind her, would tell a convenience-store clerk the next day. "And all my clothes got burned. I wasn't nowhere around."

AT THE HAIR SALON WHERE SHE WORKS in a town just outside of Worcester, Michelle Lucey was finishing a regular client's color and cut. It was nearly six already, and she was booked until eight. Her two boys, Jerry and John, were at home with a sitter, having supper. By the time she got there, it would be close to nine; their time together ("watching TV, telling stories, catching up") was certain to be brief. Her husband, a fireman, was working nights this week and wouldn't be home until tomorrow morning at eight.

It was a busy life she led: school, soccer, the salon, the housework, getting the kids from here to there. It

helped that her clients, most of them anyway, had been with her awhile and were willing to adjust to her hours, which changed according to her husband's. He worked a crazy schedule that changed from week to week.

"I'd arrange my appointments totally around Jerry's job. If he was working nights one week, I'd work days so someone would always be there for the kids. But it was hard. Sometimes a whole week would go by, we'd hardly see each other at all."

Saturday night was their time. "Date night" she calls it, then adds, "It was special," and smiles widely, without embarrassment, as though the words alone could somehow bring it back.

"We'd always go out, sometimes to J. P. Fisherman's in Leicester, sometimes somewhere else. Have a few drinks, go dancing, maybe with another couple, maybe just us. Whatever. Just be together. The kids, they didn't get it. 'You guys going out *again*?' they'd want to know. And we'd explain it to them, that Saturday

"I woke up for some reason . . . I guess I had to go to the bathroom. And he was just leaving, just heading out the door. I met him there. I kissed him. I said, 'I love you, have a good day.' And that was it. He was gone."

At the Central Street fire station in downtown Worcester, just north of the Centrum, Captain Bob Johnson had been in the kitchen since a few minutes after four. It was nearly six now, and the meal was almost on the table: vegetables, a salad, a big loaf of fresh bread from Girardi's bakery, and 25 pounds of roast beef.

"I came in early to make it," Johnson remembers. "It takes

There Were the **clicks** of cutlery on china, then that **odd semisilence** that seems to **always** drop over the **beginning** of a meal. Then— at **ctly**—came three **short, loud** blasts from a **box** on the **wall** of the station.

nights were Mom and Dad's time to be man and wife."

It had always been this way for them: the hard work, the hectic days, the precious, squeezed-in hours alone. Ever since they met, as 18-year-olds in 1980, at the Big D market on Sunderson Road in Worcester. Jerry worked as a stockboy and Michelle was a cashier. He was driving a 1970 banana-yellow Plymouth Duster he'd bought with his savings from a newspaper route. Five years later, they married. By that time, he was driving a truck for Coca-Cola and she had finished hairdressing school.

"Things were never easy," says Michelle. "But we always found a way to make them work."

This particular Friday, Jerry had left the house before dawn to go to his second part-time job at the Massachusetts Fire Academy in Stow. From there, in the late afternoon, he'd gone directly to the Central Street station, where he was filling in this week for a man who was away.

some time to cook a roast big enough to feed 16 guys."

He is a large man of 53 with thinning gray hair and a direct, no-nonsense way. He was born and raised in Worcester and has been a fireman for 24 years. The cooking, he explains, is just something he enjoys.

"We spend a lot of time together, 14 hours a day some weeks, more time than we spend with our families. So mealtimes, they get to be pretty important. Breakfast, supper, whatever . . . the meals are a pretty big deal."

As he talks, other men wander in and out of the room — to relay messages, ask questions, or

offer suggestions of things that need to be done.

It is a warm afternoon in mid-April, four months since the night of the 25-pound roast; the bays to the street are open, letting in a gentle breeze. In one of them, a man in a T-shirt is mounted on the side of a giant red ladder-truck polishing a length of brass; at a table toward the back, out of the way of the trucks and equipment, three men are sitting with their feet up, sections of the local paper in their laps, talking about the Red Sox, whose season is just two weeks old.

Roughly the same 16 men were here that evening in December. Captain Johnson and John Davies were both on Engine One; Bert Davis and Yogi Connole were on Ladder One; and Lieutenant Dave

old. Bob Johnson was in the kitchen, applying final touches. A second man was setting the table; Paul Brotherton was slicing the roast. The others were scattered: talking, doing odd jobs, reading the paper, finishing a shower, watching the news on TV.

"Jesus Christ, what's with those skinny little slices? Cut us some *meat*, will you?" It was Yogi Connole, pointing in mock derision at Paul Brotherton's half-carved roast.

"What are you, the portion police?" the other man shot back.

The two men continued their banter. The others, one by one, sat down to their plates. The roast began its turn around the table, then the vegetables and bread. Someone was talking about Christmas, and how hard it was to shop for kids; another man said how it just seemed to get more commercial every year. The plates began filling. There were the clicks of cutlery on china, then that odd, brief semisilence that always seems to drop over the beginning of a meal.

Then — at 6:13 P.M. exactly — three short, loud blasts from a box on the wall of the station. Then a longer, louder Klaxon sound, followed by a woman's

On the **roof**, enclosed **inside** a skylight that **formed** the top of an old elevator shaft were embers, **bright red**, and **thick** as **—which** told them, says **Captain Bob** that "something **big** was happening."

Halvorsen worked the Rescue squad. Charley Murphy, Bob McAnn, Bert Davis, Mike Coakley, and Tom Dwyer all worked Group Two out of Central Street that night, plus Jerry Lucey, Michelle's husband, and a firefighter named Paul Brotherton, who cooked omelet-and-potato breakfasts, watched monster movies with subtitles sometimes until three in the morning, and had six sons between the ages of six and 14.

The shift was only minutes

voice: "Box 1438. Reported fire at 266 Franklin."

Bob Johnson and his men were the first to reach the scene, 6:16 is his best guess. The roof was giving off smoke. Beyond that, there wasn't much to see.

"I went in with John Davies, Paul [Brotherton], and Jerry Lucey," says Johnson. "We climbed the stairwell to the roof and checked every floor on the way. We weren't wearing our masks. The air was still clear, there was no smoke, no flames, no need [for masks] at that time."

What they *did* find, says Johnson, on the roof, enclosed inside a skylight that formed the top of an old elevator shaft, were "embers, bright red, and thick as rain," which told them, he says, that "something big was happening" and that it had "a pretty good



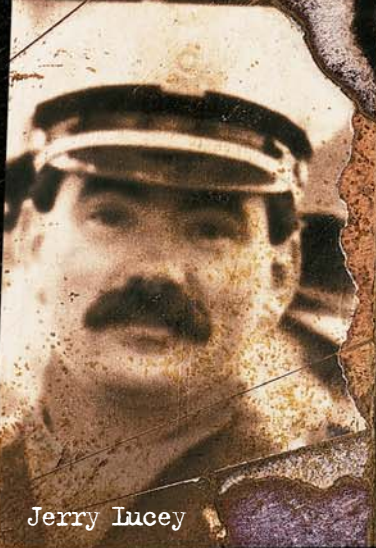
rain
Johnson,



Paul Brotherton



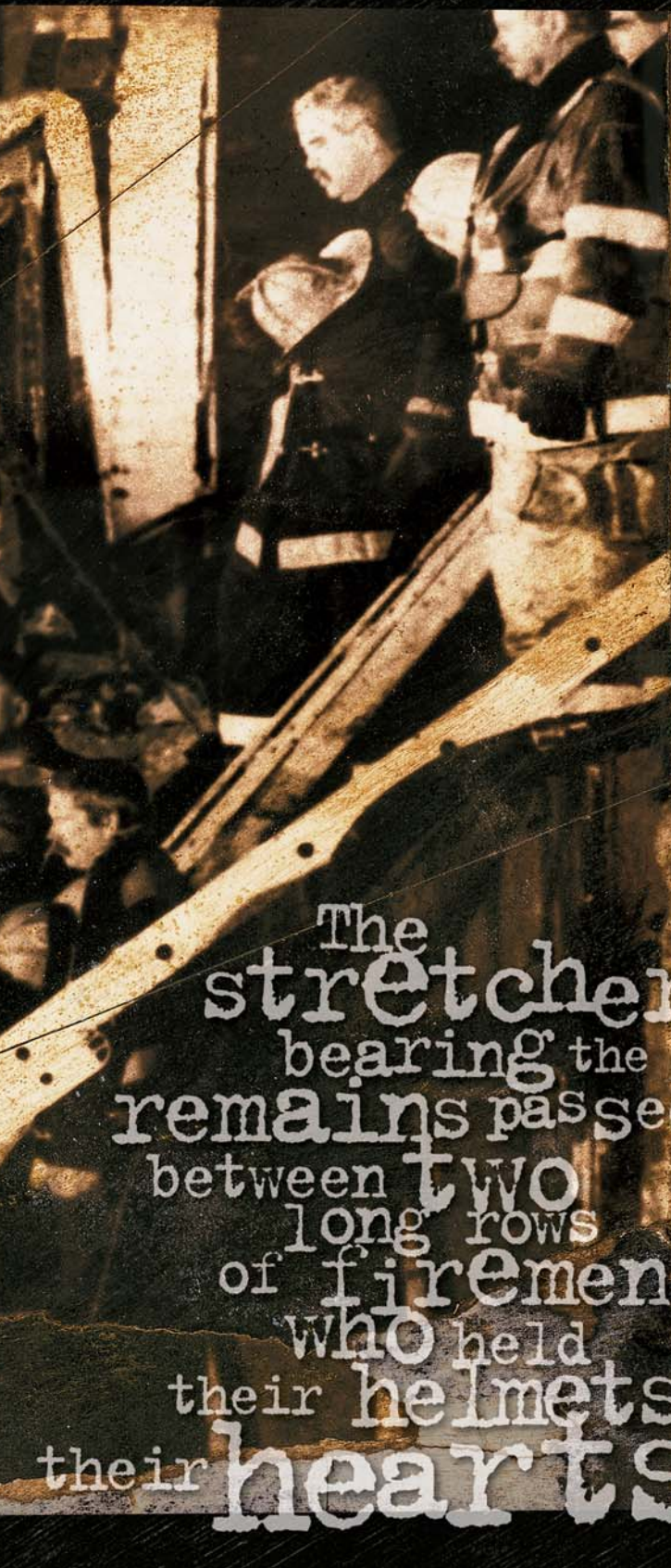
Tom Spencer



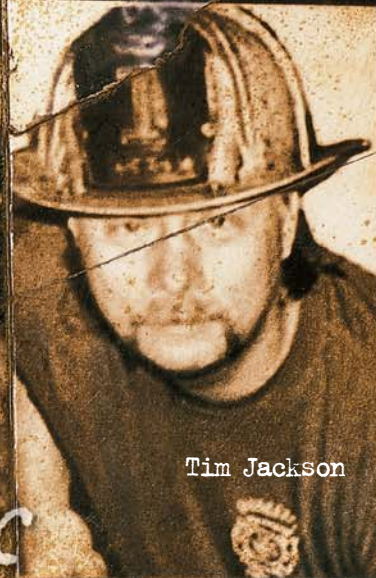
Jerry Lucey



over



Jay Lyons



Tim Jackson



Joe McGuirk

The
stretcher
bearing the
remains passed
between two
long rows
of firemen,
who held
their helmets
their hearts.

head start.” They just didn’t know yet where it was.

Mike McNamee, as district chief for the south half of the city, was the commander in charge of operations that night. Arriving three minutes or so behind Bob Johnson’s Engine One, he and his men found fire on the second floor of the building — on the opposite side of the fire wall from where Johnson’s men had looked — but otherwise his impressions were close to the same.

“There was light smoke on the upper levels, but not so much that we had to wear our masks. We were talking to each other, walking freely, trying to determine how far the fire had gone.”

Sometime around 6:26 P.M. (though Captain Johnson says, “things were crazy; it could have been later than that”), Bill McNeil, the owner of Bill’s Place, the diner across the street, flagged down a policeman to tell him of some homeless people who, he thought, might be living in the warehouse. They came by his diner sometimes, he said, asking for coffee or water; he’d given one of them a job briefly the summer before.

The message went out on the radio. Jerry Lucey and Paul Brotherton, still with Bob Johnson and John Davies on the warehouse’s upper floors, split off to take up the search. (“It was never talked about,” says Johnson today. “The report came in, and they just left. They were working Rescue — saving people was what they did.”) The other two men continued down the stairs.

“We got to the second floor. There was this huge room with big columns, and at the end of it, about 50 feet down, a metal door . . .”

Several other firemen were on the second floor by then. One of them, Yogi Connole, approached the door as Johnson watched.

“He touched it, he maybe pushed it open an inch — and WHOOOM! The flames just grabbed hold of it, just sucked at it, *sucked* at it, like some sort of suction machine, they were wanting that oxygen so bad.”

When firemen talk about fires, it is often as though they are talking about something alive — an animal, even a person — perhaps because nothing inanimate could command as much respect.

“It was starving in there. Starving for air. And that door — Yogi’s holding onto it with everything he’s got, and he’s a pretty big guy, six-foot-two, probably 250 pounds — and those flames, they’re wanting to just suck it right out of his hand.”

They brought up two hose lines, a 1¼-inch and a two-inch, turned on the power, and aimed them at the door. Yogi Connole, still holding on, looked back at the men behind him and screamed, “Put on your masks; it’s gonna get ugly!” then let go of the door and jumped back. Within seconds, remembers Bob Johnson, “there was fire everywhere you looked.”

Still, even at that point, it remained controllable: formidable, always dangerous, but not yet truly fearsome. The sort of thing they trained for, that they saw and fought at least several times a year.

never been anything

Then something happened. More than one thing, probably. Some sort of freakish chemical chain reaction. There are several theories, though no one would claim to know for sure.

What seems most certain is that at some very specific point, the flames reached the polyurethane that coated the old cork insulation — and everything, inside of seconds, went to black.

“It took about four seconds,” Chief McNamee says. “Four seconds. From flame on the lower levels and light smoke on the upper ones, to just black, hot, boiling smoke. Everywhere, all five floors, total blackness. Just like that.”

Then there was the other thing. It happened later, five minutes, ten minutes, there’s no agreement on when. Some say it was a “flashover,” a simultaneous igniting of every combustible thing at once, a single, explosive moment at which the radiant heat in a space or room has pushed all its elements — walls, floor, doors — to the edge of their tolerance, and they all erupt as one. This,

if it happened, would have sounded like a huge, booming shudder of air being released — a sound some men that night claimed to have heard — and would have appeared as a rolling, hungry wall of fire.

“Something catastrophic happened in that building,” says Bob Johnson. “Something *incredible*. Who knows what? And the velocity of it, just the velocity. So intense. I’ll never forget it. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”

Sometime around then, 6:45 P.M. is his best guess, the bell on his air mask sounded: five minutes left in his tank. He turned, made his way downstairs, and was outside switching tanks, chugging water, when he heard the first Mayday come in. It was from Rescue One, Lucey and Brotherton. The caller said that they were lost, that they couldn’t find the exit, but that they thought they were “two floors below the roof.”

IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER SEVEN when Michelle Lucey, still at the salon, got a call from her brother telling her there was a fire in the city. “He didn’t sound especially concerned,” she says. “He said he just wanted me to know. I didn’t think too much of it. Not then.”

She knew the dangers, she says. Her husband had

with his wife, was expected at a Christmas party she and Jerry were planning at J. P. Fisherman’s the following Saturday night. She hadn’t heard from them. She wanted to confirm that they were planning to attend.

“He said, ‘Do you have the TV on?’ I said no, I didn’t, I was still at the salon. There was this really long pause. I said, ‘Mark, what’s happening? What’s going on?’ He said, ‘Michelle, go home, make some calls.’ There was still hair on the floor of the salon. I kept sweeping, I couldn’t help myself. About halfway through, I realized I was crying . . . I knew it was Jerry. I knew right then he was gone.”

AT THE FIRE SCENE, from the moment of the first Mayday, the rules changed. With two men

In the city of Worcester, maybe
in all of New England, there has
like what happened next: For eight
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with shovels and trowels and rakes,
sifted the rubble of the warehouse.

told her the stories: about how fires got started, and how fast they built; how “it gets so hot in there sometimes that the linoleum in somebody’s kitchen will be sticking to your gloves.” Even about the time or two, she says, that “he didn’t think he was going to be coming out.”

But she didn’t worry. She didn’t see the point: “He ate and slept the fire department. It was most of what he thought about, and all he ever wanted to do. It was his friends, his dreams, it was how he spent his time. Was I going to stand in the way of that? Would *you*?”

Michelle’s last client had left half an hour before. She was cleaning up: sweeping, tidying, getting ready to close shop. Shortly before eight-thirty, she phoned a friend of her husband’s — also a fireman — who,

missing, the fire was no longer the focus; it was a rescue operation now. Thirty-five men crawled all five floors of the building on their hands and knees, blind as bats (“The only thing you could see was your finger, if you touched your face mask”), banging axes, beating tools, shining beams, holding onto the ankles of the man just in front. The smoke was dense, black, and boiling (“Like being inside a tornado,” one man said); the flames cracked like gunshots;

there was the sound of wood crashing; the temperature at the ceiling was near 1,000 degrees.

Bob Johnson, on the fourth floor, ran into a column, swiveled, banged into a wall, and was lost ("Now I'm scared. I'm not looking for my friends anymore, I'm thinking I'm gonna die"). Chief McNamee, a floor below him, went through one door, then another, then — "for a terrible long moment" — couldn't find his way back out. Dave Halvorsen, from Central Street, was "hopelessly lost" until he spotted a beam of light. Another man, Mark Fleming, crawling the floor, lost, afraid, and nearly out of air, would tell reporters six days later, "It seems like it's still the same day, the same call." There were some unspeakable terrors endured.

"No one can know what we [went] through except for us," a still-raw Mike McNamee said five days after the fire. "We fight together, we laugh together, we cry together, we eat and sleep together — and

CHIEF MCNAMEE TOLD THE CALLER (he thinks it was Paul Brotherton, though he says he can't be sure) to hit his post alarm, which would have sent out a screeching signal audible to anyone nearby. Seconds later, the chief got a radio call from dispatch saying that they had picked up a signal that there was a firefighter down. The caller had hit the wrong alarm. "Paul — Paul or Jerry, whichever one it was — the carbon monoxide may have gotten to him already by then."

There was one more communication, which the chief will only paraphrase. "He said they were on the floor, buddy-breathing [sharing a single air tank, because the other had run out]. He said to please help them, to please come quickly. He sounded a little frantic. He sounded scared."

Kevin Maloney, another firefighter, is a close friend of Jerry Lucey. He was once a diver for the fire department. And when he thinks of his friend's last moments, this is what he likes to believe they were like:

"Once, on a dive in Lake Quinisigamond, 70 feet down, I ran out of air. I thought it might be the end. It was kind of a peaceful thing, though, coming up — fighting to swim, to stay alive, but at the same time knowing it could be over, saying good-bye to all the people I loved. . . . I think maybe that's how it was for Jerry. I hope so, anyway."

Chief McNamee, from the base of the warehouse stairwell, began dispatching searchers, linked now by rope tethers, to the third, fourth, and fifth floors. Two members of a ladder crew, standing near him,

Jerry Lucey ate and slept at the department. It was most of what he thought about, and all he ever wanted to do. It was his friends, "Was I going to stand in the way of that?" asked his wife. "Would you?"

nobody knows what it's like in a building like that except us."

It was somewhere around seven when the second Mayday came in. "We're lost. We're running out of air. We're near a window." But there were no windows above the first floor.

were on the radio, trying to raise their mates inside.

" 'Ladder 200 to Ladder Two.' 'Ladder 200 to Ladder Two.' 'Ladder 200 to Ladder Two.' Four times I hear this. Each time, there's no answer. And I know I've lost two more."

This time it was Tim Jackson, lover of Korean lilacs and Harley Davidsons, father to three sons; and Tommy Spencer, a liturgical (continued on page 111)



At the
funeral:
Michelle
Lucey holds
Jerry's
blackened
helmet.

his dreams.

INFERNO

(continued from page 58)

minister, soccer coach, and baseball trivia buff, also the father of three. “I gotta call it,” Mike McNamee said then. And he did. Standing in the doorway, his short, compact, 51-year-old body blocking access to the stairwell, he said simply, to all who approached, “No more.”

“What do you mean, ‘No more’?” It was Paul Brosnahan, Tommy Spencer’s friend — shrieking, frenzied, disbelieving — who could have picked up Mike McNamee, if he’d chosen, and moved him aside as easily as a chair.

“I mean, we’ve already lost four. No more.”

No one will say much about what happened then (“Some things are just too private” is what Dave Halvorsen has to say about much that went on that night), but Paul Brosnahan did not challenge the chief. No one else did, either. It’s safe to say that men were screaming, men were crying, that the agony of those moments was as monstrous as the worst you’d imagine it to be. But no one challenged Mike McNamee in the extraordinary decision he made. Four men were lost already to what he would call “the building from hell.” There would be no more.

At somewhere around eight, he sounded the “evacuate” alarm, a long, deep, plaintive wail from the trucks. “I honestly don’t believe so,” he says, when asked if any of the men inside might have still been alive to hear.

With all the men now outside, he ordered a roll call. Jay Lyons and Joe

McGuirk from Engine Three, the first an apprentice bagpiper, the second a father of two, both men in their thirties, failed to answer. So now the number was six.

At that point, says Bob Johnson, “The grief took on physical stuff. It got physical. I can’t even say what I mean.”

MICHELLE LUCEY RETURNED HOME a few minutes before nine. Her mother, sister, and brother, in quick succession, phoned. Six men were missing, no names had been released, there was no reason to suppose that Jerry was one of them. But she knew.

Between ten and eleven her brother arrived. “Just don’t let me see a fire chief’s car pull up here,” she said to him. Minutes later, one did.

The police drove her and her 11-year-old, Jerry, to St. Stephen’s Church on Hamilton Street, two blocks from the fire, where the families were being taken to meet with each other and with counselors, priests, and friends. (The firemen had their own church, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, where they would gather for prayer, aid, and simple grieving for most of the next eight days.) “There was a lot of hugging and crying,” she says. Sometime during the night, some of the wives — but not Michelle — were escorted to the fire scene, a full inferno now with 100-foot flames, where the search for bodies would begin the next day. What she mostly remembers, she says, is “the faces of those men. And their smell, their smoke-smell, like my husband when he sweated. I’ll never forget that smell.”

Around one in the morning, “when I knew there was no hope left,” she took her son and went home.

IN THE CITY OF WORCESTER, maybe in all of New England, there has never been anything like what happened next. For eight days, 400 men, bone-weary, with shovels, trowels, sieves, gloved hands, and garden rakes, sifted the rubble of the mammoth warehouse — bent steel doors, burnt timbers, twisted metal stanchions, an acre-wide field of ruin 40 feet high in spots — for the bodies of their friends. They worked through rain, 50-mile-per-hour winds, and no sleep. For eight days, aided by an

Worcester Fire Photo Credits

Pages 48-49 Source photos: AP/Worcester Telegram & Gazette, Paula Ferazzi Swift (top), AP (bottom). **Page 53** Source photo: AP. **Pages 54-55** Source photos: courtesy Worcester Fire Fighters Local 1009, IAFF (portraits), AP/Worcester Telegram & Gazette (center). **Page 59** Source photo: AP/Worcester Telegram & Gazette.

INFERNO

(continued)

80-foot crane that bit off whole slabs of the warehouse's innards and dropped them at their feet; by police helicopters; and for a while, by a body-sniffing dog; they raked and shoveled and sifted. The Red Cross fed them. There were counselors, masseuses, and cell phones in a tent across the way to ease their aches and terrors and keep them in touch with their wives. If they left at all, it was only for naps, and there were few enough of those. Thirty hours at a stretch was common. Some worked 50.

For the first two days, nothing but clues: an air tank, a belt buckle, a nylon helmet strap, the rumors of a hand. Then, at a little after ten in the morning of the third day, the first body — Tim Jackson's. They brought him out, covered, on a stretcher, from the northeast corner of the warehouse's second floor. Half the men went to attention; the other half saluted. Every helmet came off. The hoses went to a trickle; a giant wrecking ball was lowered instantly to the ground. Many, spontaneously, knelt in prayer.

Over the next six days, one by one — no two were found together — the remaining five bodies came out: Jay Lyons, Joe McGuirk, Tommy Spencer, Jerry Lucey, Paul Brotherton. Each time, the family was summoned from where it waited, in blue tents by nearby railroad tracks, to take part in a spontaneous ceremony over the body's covered remains. Each time but for the last one, when the ceremony was concluded, the body search resumed.

And behind them in the streets were men and women from Worcester and beyond. Hundreds of them, as reverent as worshippers, behind barricades in the darkness and rain, most with black ribbons or buttons pinned to their chests with photos of the dead men; some — the children especially — hugging gifts: the wreaths, poems, photos, stuffed animals, badges, fire hats, tributes ("Firefighters Saved My Baby"), and crayoned prayers ("And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest") they had brought to pile on the huge red fire-engine shrine that, by the third day, was buried already

beneath the crude memorials of a city that seemed desolate in its grief.

Local teachers assigned their students essays on heroism. Impromptu prayer vigils took place almost nightly on Grafton Street. Constance Morrison, the head of the Red Cross for central Massachusetts and a Worcester native, put in 20-hour stints outside the warehouse directing volunteers. "It is my pleasure to do this. This is my city. We have grief in our hearts."

On Thursday, December 9, the six fallen men were honored in the largest single event in the history of the city of Worcester, which was watched by millions of TV viewers nationwide. Fifteen thousand mourners, including the president and vice president of the United States, filled the Centrum, with another 35,000 left to march or gather outside. Thirty thousand firefighters, most in full dress — from Dublin, Ireland; Lexington, Kentucky; Washington, Anchorage, London, Jersey City, Milwaukee, Windsor, Ontario; and Kittery, Maine — marched for an hour through dead-silent streets.

It was a true hero's good-bye. There was a color guard at full attention with chrome-plated fire hooks and gleaming silver axes; and bagpipers, backed by snare drums, in full-kilt tartans playing "Amazing Grace" and "Minstrel Boy." Even, from a church tower three blocks south, a six-foot-six church sexton, Charles Ketter, in full Nigerian funeral robes pulling on the ropes of a 200-pound church bell, which pealed twice every minute for most of the afternoon.

When Bill Clinton and Al Gore arrived together in the Centrum, the crowd was respectful, but not terribly impressed. "They noticed," says one fireman, "but they didn't exactly knock themselves out." When the Brotherton family arrived — Paul's wife, Denise, and their six boys — five thousand people stood up, five thousand people stayed standing, and not one of them sat, until the last of the Brothertons sat down.

The next day, at 6:13 P.M. on December 10, the one-week anniversary, the hoses and wrecking ball went silent, and helmetless firefighters stood at attention at the edge of the warehouse's now-collapsed north wall as bagpipers played "Amazing

Grace” in a pelting, windblown rain.

On Saturday, December 11, at 11:20 P.M., Paul Brotherton’s body, the last of the six, was pulled from what was left of the second level of the warehouse. It had been eight full days and nights. “And now,” as city fire chief Dennis Budd told reporters at the scene, “we’ve brought everybody home.”

About 500 people — firemen, police, relief workers, and civilians — were there when they brought the body out. All stood at attention as the stretcher bearing the remains passed between two long rows of firemen, who held their helmets over their hearts. Then a remarkable thing happened. Some 200 firemen, most in groups of ten or 12, walked slowly to the perimeter of the wreckage, mounted the ladders still perched against it, climbed to the second-floor deck of the building, turned, and saluted the crowd. The warehouse, blackened, half-gone, still smoldering, was lit by searchlights. The crowd on the street, deathly quiet, stood in black.

And then, after it all — after the salutes and the silence, and the days of crying and searching, and the bearing away of the last man — what happened, though strange in the telling, must have seemed the most natural thing in the world. They cheered. The firemen first, beginning with those on the warehouse deck, then the families in their cluster under the ladders, then the crowd.

“It was to say to the building, ‘You did not beat us,’” said Lieutenant Donald Courtney to reporters the next day. “It was to say, ‘Hey guys, it’s over, you are strong.’”

THE AFTERMATH

In Worcester, both the scars and the tributes are deep and likely to be lasting. Julie Barnes and Tom Levesque were arraigned on six counts each of involuntary manslaughter and held on \$1 million cash bail. This amount was later reduced (to \$75,000 for Barnes and \$250,000 for Levesque). Levesque remains in jail, and Barnes resides in the custody of a family in Maine, pending a court date. Both have pleaded not guilty and are being represented by court-appointed attorneys. Both, following independent psychiatric evaluations, were judged competent to stand trial.

The warehouse, by early spring, was

gone without a trace. Razed and flattened, its remains were carried away in trucks. The site is now a football-field-size expanse of new gravel, enclosed behind a fence. “Looking at it now,” says Kevin Maloney, “it’s amazing how small and innocent it seems.”

The firefighters’ union is working to raise \$1 million to fund a memorial — a statue or perhaps a small museum. The location has yet to be determined. “Anywhere but the warehouse site,” Maloney says.

The city of Worcester, in its proposed 2001 fiscal plan, cut six positions from the fire department budget (from 469 to 463). Maloney, in addition to his feelings about the significance of the number six — which he simply calls “ironic” — says he “can’t help but be struck by the incredible discrepancy between the support we’ve had from the people and the priority our city administration apparently attaches to our work.”

The *Worcester Telegram and Gazette* established a fund to benefit the six firefighters’ families. Donations soon exceeded \$6 million.

The healing continues, and it takes many forms. Mike McNamee, the chief who ordered the evacuation of the building when, to his knowledge, there were four men lost inside, calls it “the hardest decision I will make in my lifetime” and admits to “some very bad moments, some dark times” in the aftermath. Still, he says, “Placed in the same situation, equipped with the same knowledge, I’d make the same decision again. I’ve found some peace in knowing that.”

“It’ll be a long, long time before all the wounds heal,” says Bob Johnson, who, five months after the fire — “to get some kind of closure” — was making arrangements to listen to that Friday night’s radio tapes. “I’ve got to do something to put it behind me. I just keep on fighting that fire in my head.”

Paul LaRochelle, Jerry Lucey’s partner and closest friend in the fire department (“There was no greater guy in the world”), is the new owner of Jerry’s prized Harley Davidson, which Michelle gave to him as a final gift from his friend. His first ride was on New Year’s Day; he biked to the



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cemetery to say a prayer at Jerry's grave. "I told him, 'Now we'll always be together,'" he says thickly, through his tears. "'Now I'll always get to ride with you.'"

Michelle is holding up. The key, she says, is "just to stay busy. There's less time to miss him that way." She continues her work at the salon part-time, nearly every day. Several times a week, there are firefighters' functions to attend: city council meetings, meetings on the disposal of hazardous waste (another of her husband's many causes), benefits, memorials, and speaking engagements. There was an appearance in Washington to testify on behalf of firefighting funds and a guest appearance at an April Red Sox game (at which Kevin Maloney sang the National Anthem and Tommy Spencer's son threw out the first ball).

"I speak for him," she says. "I represent him. It's the closest I can get to him being still alive."

Her two sons are coping, each in his way. "John [at eight, her younger one], he's the more expressive, the more out there with his feelings. I can say to him, 'Listen, if you see me crying, you can come and give me a hug.' And he will . . ."

Her 11-year-old, Jerry, she says, is quieter and harder to bring out. "He just watches and listens, and takes things in." Still, for all the sorrows he's witnessed and the vigils he's shared in, and whatever private loss he must feel, there is no shaking one thing: He wants to be a fireman one day.

"I'd be the proudest mother in the world," Michelle Lucey says. □ □

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Find more about this story on Yankee's Web site, including information on the firefighters' memorial and a link to the Worcester Fire Department home page.
www.NewEngland.com/Extras