

US: Nine firefighters perish in warehouse fire in Charleston, South Carolina

By Kate Randall
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Charleston, South Carolina is mourning the deaths of nine firefighters who perished battling a blaze that raged through a furniture store and warehouse Monday night. Just before dawn Tuesday, the last of the firefighters' bodies was carried from the wreckage as the ruins of the building continued to smolder.

Excluding the September 11 attack at the World Trade Center, which claimed the lives of 343 firefighters and paramedics, the tragedy at the Sofa Super Store warehouse and showroom was the nation's deadliest episode for firefighters in three decades.

The fallen firefighters ranged in age from 27 to 56, and had 131 years of experience between them. Killed were James "Earl" Drayton, 56, with 32 years; Michael French, 27, on the job only 18 months; 30-year veteran Capt. Bill Hutchinson, 48, who worked off-duty at a barber shop; Brad Baity, 37, a part-time house painter; Capt. Louis Mulkey, 34, also a high school football and basketball coach; Capt. Mike Benke, 49; Mark Kelsey, 40; Brandon Thompson, 37; and Melvin Champaign, 46, who joined the department just three years ago.

News of the fatalities hit the Charleston community hard. With a population of 106,000, the city has 237 surviving firefighters in one of the oldest professional fire departments in the US. Some firefighters wept outside the scene of the blaze; others sat despairing on the bumpers of their fire trucks. A steady stream of area residents drove by, some stopping to leave flowers on the sidewalk near the site of the fire.

The nine men entered the building in an attempt to rescue employees who were inside as the inferno quickly spiraled out of control. They died doing what firefighters do across the country on a daily basis: risking their lives to save those in danger.

One employee trapped inside was able to escape relatively quickly. Another, Jonathan Tyrell, a part-time repairman, tried to leave but could only see smoke. Firefighters punched a hole in the wall of the burning building and pulled him to safety. Some witnesses reported seeing firefighters drag a total of four people from the burning building, covered in black soot.

At first glance, the tragic outcome of Monday night's fire seems to have been unavoidable considering the scope and strength of the blaze. It began about 6:30 p.m. at the Sofa Super Store, a one-story corrugated-metal structure about 5 miles

west of Charleston's historic district.

Witnesses described a scene with plumes of black smoke, flames shooting up more than 30 feet, and overwhelming fumes of burnt plastic. Windows popped out of the warehouse one after the other, shattering below. The front of the store collapsed within an hour of the warehouse catching fire.

Entering the building, firefighters had to make their way through rows of sofas and mattresses stacked five and six high. Charleston fire Capt. Jeff Harrison said that gases inside may have heated the building and its contents so quickly that it burst into flames, a condition known as "flashover."

Furniture warehouses are particularly vulnerable to such high-intensity fires, because polyurethane foam, wood lacquer and other highly flammable materials can reach flashover at relatively low temperatures, sometimes within minutes. The building also had a drop ceiling, trapping oxygen to fuel the blaze.

All of these factors seemed to intersect on Monday night, resulting in a raging fire that claimed nine of those battling to tame it. But as in other such tragic incidents, as information has begun to emerge certain details suggest that the magnitude of the tragedy could have been reduced. And as is so often the case in contemporary America, these factors are connected to money and politics.

The cause of the fire is under investigation, although arson is not suspected in this case. The building, however, did not have a sprinkler system. According to Charleston Fire Chief Rusty Thomas, sprinklers probably would not have put out the fire, but would have at least slowed it.

Despite the lack of fire sprinklers, the building had been up to code when the land it was on was annexed by the city. Michael Parrotta, president of the South Carolina Professional Firefighters Association, told the *New York Times* that the state legislature killed a bill two years ago that would have required older buildings to install sprinkler systems. The only explanation for such a vote is that legislators were pressured by businesses not to enact the regulation.

Parrotta also said that firefighters in South Carolina do not operate under federal recommendations which advise that for every two firefighters involved in rapid-intervention missions, another two should remain outside the burning structure. He

said the state followed a “two-in, one-out” rule as opposed to the “two-in, two-out” guideline.

Under the US federal system, regulations governing fire safety are predominantly the responsibility of state and local authorities, and they can vary widely. This results in an inadequate and underfunded approach to the prevention and fighting of fires, both industrial and residential, and a subsequent increase in unnecessary and preventable fatalities among both firefighters and fire victims.

Abandoned warehouses are prime targets for fires. Just two days after the fatal blaze in Charleston, a fire swept through an abandoned textile warehouse in Philadelphia early Wednesday morning, collapsing the roof and forcing about 100 residents to evacuate nearby homes. Firefighters rescued a man from the second floor of the building and was taken to the hospital. One firefighter was taken to a hospital in stable condition.

Deaths from fires and burns are the fifth most common cause of unintentional injury death in the United States and are the third leading cause of home injury fatalities. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), someone died in a fire about every two hours in the US in 2005. In that same year, fire departments responded to 396,000 home fires in the United States, claiming 3,030 people, excluding firefighters.

Growing poverty and the deteriorating infrastructure in the US—reflected particularly in blighted urban districts and rural areas—compound the dangers. Most at risk are children under the age of four, adults over 65, African Americans and Native Americans, residents of rural areas, and the poor. Fires are often started by candles or space heaters when utilities have been cut off because poor families cannot pay the bills.

House fires engulfing century-old wood-frame homes claiming the lives of parents and young children are a regular feature of local news broadcasts. Most recently, on June 12, a fire killed five children, ages three to seven, in a poverty-stricken neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In one week in May, fatal house fires claimed a total of 16 lives, including 13 children, in three homes in Baltimore, Maryland, and Detroit and Saginaw in Michigan.

Building collapses remain one of the biggest dangers facing firefighters, according to experts. Despite many departments providing firefighters with improved fire-retardant clothing and breathing equipment, a 2002 report by the National Fire Protection Association found that firefighters entering burning buildings are dying at higher rates than ever. While in the 1970s, traumatic deaths inside structures occurred at a rate of 1.8 deaths per 100,000 fires, by the late 1990s the rate had increased to 3 deaths from 100,000 fires.

The study’s authors asked, “Are firefighters putting themselves at greater risk while operating at fires inside structures? Do firefighters think modern protective equipment provides a higher level of protection but do not realize the limitations of that equipment or are ignoring those limitations?”

The answer to the first question seems clearly to be “Yes.” Firefighters are known for their compassion and dedication to saving lives, even when their own are in great danger.

Aside from the catastrophic deaths of firefighters in the 9/11 attack, the most recent multiple-fatality tragedy occurred on December 3, 1999, when six firefighters died in a blaze at the Worcester Cold Storage and Warehouse Co. in Worcester, Massachusetts as they attempted to rescue homeless people from the burning building. The Worcester firefighters plan to send a contingent to a memorial service scheduled to be held for the fallen firefighters in Charleston.

The commemoration for the firefighters will undoubtedly be addressed by politicians who will extol the virtues of the men and praise their service for going the extra mile. At a time of growing popular opposition to government policy, particularly the war in Iraq, Democrats and Republicans alike are quick to exploit such tragedies, celebrating their self-sacrifice and human decency to divert attention from the vast social problems confronting millions of people.

However, while they are called heroes at such ceremonies, these accolades find little expression in the compensation paid to the vast majority of working firefighters in the US. Median hourly earnings for firefighters as of May 2004 stood at just \$18.43 an hour, with the lowest 10 percent earning less than \$9.71 an hour. The highest rate was \$29.21.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the mean hourly wage of firefighters in Charleston is only \$10.83 an hour, with annual earnings of just \$29,837. An estimated 70 percent of firefighters in the US are volunteers or part-time workers, receiving minimal or no pay.

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