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Aiding Rest of the City, Too

Fire Dept. still answers the call

By William Murphy
STAFF WRITER

The man who now runs the Fire Department's day-to-day operations looked nervous yesterday as he explained how he would manage a department split between two tough jobs.

One of those jobs is making sure that everything is being done in the search for the more than 300 firefighters missing in the World Trade Center terror attack.

But with alarm bells still ringing for the latest emergencies, Chief of Operations Salvatore Cassano, 56, said he and the other commanders had to draw a fine line between responding to the city's greatest calamity and its daily needs.

"This is a Fire Department that responds to the World Trade Center," said Cassano, who joined the department in 1969. "We also have to be able to provide coverage to the City of New York."

Cassano spoke as he sat in an empty office in fire headquarters at the MetroTech Center in Downtown Brooklyn — a space that looked like an insurance office.

He said one of the biggest shocks in trying to get the department back on its feet was the destruction of so many fire trucks and sedans that were rushed to the scene and demolished in the collapse.

"We had about 30 pieces of apparatus destroyed at the scene," he said. "We don't have 30 spare apparatus."

Downstairs, department workers scanned job applications and began the tedious chore of checking the backgrounds of those on the civil service list for firefighters. The department expects to rush a new class of recruits into the training academy to fill its ranks.

The cubicles and private offices in the department's headquarters were furnished in pale tan, with industrial carpeting and tight office space for the bosses.

But it was far from the average office. Workers could be heard talking in hushed tones about the firefighters who died or were presumed dead.

"Have you heard about Frank?" one woman asked on the telephone.

"I think Tom is missing," a man farther down the hall said.

Scores of retired firefighters have returned to the tight-knit department to help out.

In a room in a far corner of one floor, five superior officers in white shirts sat around a table where they made the grim decision of whether a colleague was officially dead or officially missing.



Retired Battalion Chief Henry McDonald sits in the office of First Deputy Fire Commissioner William Feehan, who was killed in the World Trade Center attack. McDonald is one of many retired firefighters who has returned to help.

"We insist on dignity in this," Battalion Chief Steven O'Donnell said. The family or nearest relative of every deceased member of the department who lives in the five boroughs has been officially notified by a team of firefighters, always led by an officer and always in person.

For those who lived farther away, the department relied on some of its old-timers — chiefs of varying rank who squeezed into their old uniforms and showed up for work.

There was no lack of volunteers.

Former firefighter Jerry Sanford was up from Florida, helping out by fielding media requests, but he could not be reached yesterday. He had been pulled away to help out at the citywide command center.

Frank Martinez, once the department's chief spokesman, was sitting in a cubicle answering the telephone and telling the media that much of what they wanted to know could not be answered right now.

Retired Battalion Chief Henry McDonald of Breezy Point was a bit unsure of what he was doing, but he was helping.

McDonald was sitting in the office of the new first deputy fire commissioner, Michael Regan, who has been appointed to fill the slot left by William Feehan, the first deputy commissioner who died in the attack.

Regan, the department's spokesman before he went to work for City Council Speaker Peter Vallone, is now the second highest-ranking official after Fire Commissioner Tom Von Essen.

Former Deputy Assistant Chief Gus Reinhold saw the Trade Center attack on television, but did not rush back to his old job right away.

"I couldn't do anything. I was paralyzed," Reinhold said yesterday before walking out of his borrowed office in department headquarters.

In the hallway, he fingered the pictures of those who over the years have held the rank of chief of department.

They included Feehan and Peter Ganci, of North Massapequa, who was also killed in the attack. The picture of the new chief of department, Daniel Nigro, had not yet been hung.

For Rescuers, Free Services for the Asking

By Merle English
STAFF WRITER

From plastic surgery to temporary housing to transportation to vacations, individuals and organizations are offering their skills, resources and services free to rescue workers, survivors and others affected by the World Trade Center catastrophe.

People who suffered skin abrasions, cuts and scars from glass and other debris can get corrective surgery from the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery. The society has 2,400 members across the country.

For referrals to board-certified dermatologic surgeons, call the society's Consumer Hotline: 800-441-2727 during business hours or visit its Web site at www.aboutskinsurgery.com.

A Manhattan group called New

Yorkers Help has started a registry for people from out of town who need a place to stay. One of the organizers, Joe Fox, a documentary film producer, said there are people in the city who are willing to open their homes to families. Call 212-721-0039, or go to www.geocities.com/newyorkers-help/NOW.html.

The Taxi and Limousine Commission is setting up temporary taxi stands at Manhattan hospitals and Blood Banks to provide rides within Manhattan on a first-come, first-serve basis. Call 718-267-4567 for details.

Using its ride-matching system, CommuterLink, a nonprofit corporation, is organizing personalized, door-to-door mass transit itineraries and carpool information. Anyone commuting into the five boroughs can

apply online at www.commuter-link.com or call 866-NY-COMMUTE.

A special support and counseling session for city police and firefighters will be held from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday at the Hotel Olcott at 27 W. 72nd St. The Counseling & Critical Incident Debriefing Center and Alita Buzel, a state-certified clinical psychologist, are co-sponsoring the session. Call 212-721-7928.

Firefighters, police officers and EMS workers weary from their toils at Ground Zero are being offered complimentary hotel stays for respite on the Caribbean islands of St. Kitts and Nevis.

The St. Kitts & Nevis Hotel Association and the St. Kitts Ministry of Tourism sent letters to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Fire Commissioner Thomas

Von Essen and Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik inviting all rescue workers. The offer is valid through December 2002.

Rescue workers should contact the St. Kitts Tourism Authority at 800-582-6208, or by e-mail at info@st-kittstourism.kn.

Dr. Gerald Deas, a Whitestone internist, is offering help to people other than health personnel who are involved with the rescue effort at Ground Zero. The shock of seeing a dismembered body can cause nightmares for years, and drug and alcohol abuse, said Deas, who worked with anthropologists and pathologists in the U.S. Army during the Korean War.

Deas can be reached at his office at the State University of New York Health Science Center at Brooklyn, 718-270-4735.

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