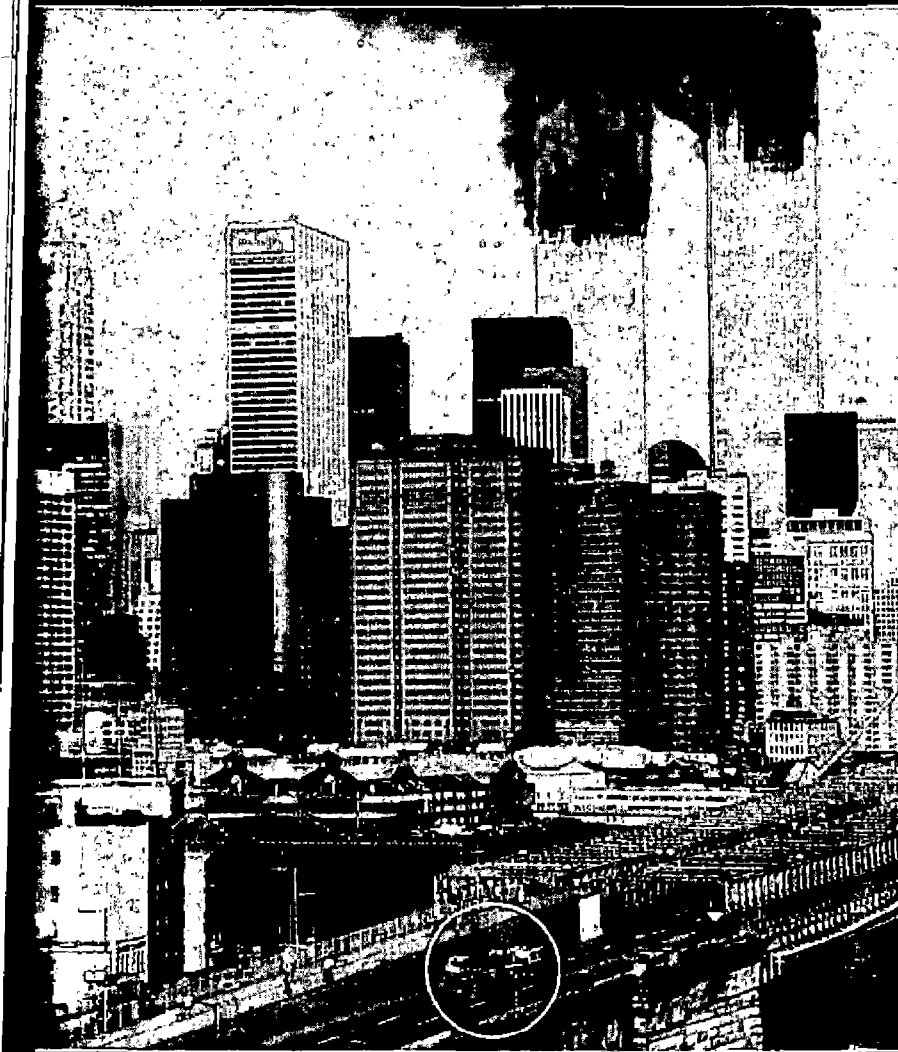


THE DAILY NEWS, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2001

The last run of Ladder 118



AARON McLAMB



FIREFIGHTER
JOSEPH AGNELLO



FIREFIGHTER
VERNON CHERRY



FIREFIGHTER
SCOTT DAVIDSON



LT. ROBERT
REGAN



FIREFIGHTER
LEON SMITH



FIREFIGHTER
PETER VEGA

Ladder Co. 118's truck (circled) crossing the Brooklyn Bridge just after 9 a.m. Sept. 11, bound for the inferno of the World Trade Center with six men aboard. They were all lost.

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'into the gates of hell'



KEN MURRAY/DAILY NEWS

Ladder 118 truck was buried in debris from Trade Center Six who manned the truck that day were killed, including Vernon (Mo) Cherry and Joey (Bells) Agnello. At right, surviving Engine 205/Ladder 118 firefighters pay respects to fallen housemates.

name Joey Bells.

And Vega, 36, the resident politician, many times had dragged fellow firefighters into long, animated debates that raged into the night.

"They were troops on their way to battle," said Ladder 118 Firefighter Mike Bellino. "Now there is a big, empty hole in this house."

As part of the healing process, firefight-

ers have made copies of McLamb's photograph for every member of the company.

When family members of the fallen men stop by, they sip coffee in the kitchen, seated next to a framed copy of Ladder 118's final run.

'Exit out'

"I looked at the picture and I thought, 'Oh, my God. This is Vernon driving to

his 'exit out,'" said Joanne Cherry, Vernon's wife of 31 years. "Maybe this was the way Vernon wanted to leave the world."

"I don't wish that truck turned around," she added. "I know in my heart he would have wanted to go full blast in there. He would have never turned back. His job was saving people. He loved his job."

Donna Regan, who met her husband

when she was 15, is also grateful that he died in the performance of duty. She tells their children — Caitlin, 15, and Brendan, 12 — that the Regans are a lucky family, despite their loss.

"I'm glad the miracle in our lives is that we had him," she said. "My little prayer is that if these guys should be laid to rest, they should all be together, where they answered their last call."

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THE DAILY NEWS, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2001

Ladder 118's final run

Six from firehouse lost in Trade Center disaster

By MICHELE MCPHÉE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

When the bell resonated through the Brooklyn Heights firehouse — in the instant after the second plane crashed into the World Trade Center — the members of Ladder 118 were ready.

Five of their housemates had already responded, aboard Engine 205, within moments of the first plane hitting the north tower.

During the next 14 minutes, the men of Ladder 118 watched the black, acrid smoke billow across the water, waiting for their call to action.

At 9:02 the morning of Sept. 11, with the unthinkable having happened a second time, it was their turn.

Leon (Express) Smith jumped behind the wheel. Lt. Robert (Dizzy Dean) Regan sat in the adjacent officer's seat. Scott (The Dog) Davidson took the position behind the driver. Joey (Bells) Agnello sat behind the boss. Vernon (Mo) Cherry was behind him.

The tiller man, Pete (Big Head) Vega, controlled the rear of the rig, steering out of the firehouse, down Middagh St., then a tight left onto Cadman Plaza, a fast right at Prospect St. and onto the Brooklyn Bridge.

As the truck sped across the span, a man named Aaron McLamb snapped a photograph of the rig from the rooftop of the Jehovah's Witness Watchtower building — six firefighters headed to their deaths.

"I look at this picture, and it makes me think those guys were driving straight into the gates of hell," said the Rev. Michael Carrano, the pastor at Assumption Church, located around the corner from the Engine 205/Ladder 118 firehouse.

"I've learned a lot about these men since Sept. 11," Carrano said. "They must have had hearts of gold that you can't find at the end of any rainbow."

They never hesitated

When they arrived on the scene, the six firefighters from Ladder 118 parked their rig at West and Vesey Sts., then vanished into the thick, cloudy smoke and soot.

"We don't know what tower they were in, or on what floor," said Ladder 118 Firefighter Eddie Greene. "What we do know is that every guy in that truck was going to go in no matter what. If there had been more guys on the rig, there would have been more deaths."

The Ladder 118 truck was recovered within days of the terrorist attack — its

windows broken, its cab filled with twisted steel from the blast.

The vehicle has been restored and put back in service. But its members are still missing.

A grim twist of fate saved the lives of the five firefighters riding on Engine 205.

Aided fallen comrade

They had stopped to help Danny Suhr, a firefighter who was fatally injured after someone fell or jumped from one of the towers and landed on him.

"It's terrible to think about, but this guy [Suhr] getting killed saved all these guys from Engine 205," said Ladder 118 Firefighter Jimmy McAlevy.

With the days turning to weeks, the survivors from the firehouse nicknamed "Fire Under the Bridge" allowed their hope to turn to sad reality, mourning the loss of the six who were aboard Ladder 118, along with

two others from their firehouse — Lt. Robert Wallace and Capt. Martin Egan.

Then McLamb, the man with the camera on the Watchtower roof, appeared at the Middagh St. station with blown-up copies of the photograph he had snapped that terrible morning.

Firefighters studied the picture with a magnifying glass to make sure the truck on the bridge was Ladder 118.

They concluded the evidence was convincing.

The rig's orange stokes basket was upside down, a Ladder 118 trademark. Its saw box juttied out. And the dings and scratches were the same ones firefighters had stared at on the tiller truck — one of six in the FDNY fleet in Brooklyn — for years.

"Oh, my God, we're looking at their last run, literally. That's the first thing I thought when I saw it," said Ladder 118 Firefighter John Sorrentino, who was off from work that day but had rushed to the scene in his car anyway.

"Imagine what was going through their heads, going over the bridge, looking out the window and seeing that," Sorrentino said.

As they wait for any news about their



missing men, the surviving members of Engine 205/Ladder 118 have tried to bring cheer into the house by trading stories about each of their fallen brothers.

A secret recipe

They talk about Cherry, 49, a 28-year FDNY veteran who was the department's official singer. He had a secret lasagna recipe called "Vernon Mo Lasagno" that was the envy of other firehouse cooks.

Smith, 48, the neighborhood mechanic who spent all 19 years of FDNY service at Ladder 118, earned his nickname, Express, by making sure his was the first

truck at every fire.

Regan, 45, a quiet guy with a permanent smile, always looked like "he combed his hair with a shoe;" Scott (The Dog) Davidson, 33, had earned his moniker because he frequently wore everyone else's clothes, reputedly not buying a single pair of boots during his eight years on the job.

Agnello, 35, was known for bragging about his toddler boys — Sal, 3, and Vincent, 1. He had been the target of good-natured ribbing about the way he rang the wrong bells in his first days at the house — hence his nick-

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