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168 RISE IN FIRE RANKS



MIXED EMOTIONS: A solemn Capt. Robert Blume gets a hug from 2-year-old son Brian after the firefighter's promotion to battalion chief yesterday. Reuters

Promotions on Bravest's 'saddest day'

By KIRSTEN DANIS, WILLIAM J. GORTA and BILL HOFFMANN

Devastated but determined to keep going, the Fire Department yesterday promoted 168 firefighters to fill its decimated leadership ranks.

Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen tapped Daniel Nigro as new chief of department, replacing Peter Ganci, who was laid to rest Saturday.

He named Salvatore Cassano his new chief of operations, taking over for Ray Downey, who remains missing, and promoted the Rev. John Delendick to fill the shoes of beloved FDNY Chaplain Mychal Judge, who was also buried Saturday.

The ceremony, outside departmental headquarters at the Metro Tech Center in downtown Brooklyn, was a somber affair as Von Essen, through tears, urged New York's Bravest to press ahead with rescue efforts.

"I need all of you to go out there and to help us do the very best we can to get our guys," he said under crystal-clear skies.

Mayor Giuliani, his voice breaking, told the group:

"I want you to know the prayers of every single New Yorker. I believe every single American, are with you."

Speaking of Von Essen, he told the firefighters: "I don't know if you know how much he loves you, because men are sometimes incapable of expressing that."

Shifts in FDNY brass

Yesterday's top FDNY promotions:
Chief of department: Daniel Nigro.
Chief of operations: Salvatore Cassano.
Deputy chiefs: Steven Kubler, Promise Jensen, Vincent Mandala, Paul Ferro, Charles Kasper (in absentia).
Deputy assistant chiefs: Edward Kalletta, Michael Weinlein.
Chaplain: The Rev. John Delendick.

The 168 included 70 firefighters who got battlefield promotions to lieutenant; four to deputy chief, two to deputy assistant chief, 29 to battalion chief, and 61 to captain.

Five others, who remain missing, were honored with promotions in absentia, including Charles Kasper, second in command in special operations, who was bumped up from battalion chief to deputy chief.

The 54-year-old Staten Island resident is a 28-year veteran. He has a wife, Laureen, three children and one grandson.

"They first said yesterday they weren't going to be able to announce his name because he's not there, but they did it today as a present to us," said Kasper's daughter, Melissa, 31.

"Commissioner Von Essen looked like he was going to cry ... When he said Charlie's name, he had to catch his breath. It was nice for my mom; it was something my dad wanted."

Sen. Charles Schumer told firefighters: "Today marks a turning point in our struggle. We have mourned, and we will continue to mourn.

"But today we show that evil man in the mountains across the world that he cannot stop us."

Many families of New York's Bravest attended the promotions and tried to make the best of what is normally a very joyous event.

As Austin Horan of Engine 60 in South Bronx was made battalion chief, his two kids, Kerilee and Austin Jr., pinned their dad's new brass to his lapel.

"This makes every single man here want to get out and fight to bring back the city, bring back the country," Horan said.

"None of us are going to replace the men who are gone. We are only going to carry on the fight they started."

Steve Mormino, a 15-year vet who had waited for two years to be promoted to lieutenant, put it this way:

"This is the happiest day of my life — and it's the saddest."

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