NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

DAILY NEWS, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2001

38 firefighters hurt battling blaze & blast

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A fire in the basement of a 50-story office tower at the foot of Manhattan injured 38 firefighters and four construction workers yesterday, authorities said.

Steelworkers were removing an old cooling unit beneath 1 New York Plaza near the Staten Island ferry terminal when the fire broke out at 12:36 p.m.

The workers tried to put out the flames but within 20 minutes an explosion ripped through the subterranean floors.

Carpenters working in a nearby room were briefly trapped as the cinder block walls around them began to crumble and a metal beam collapsed, wedging itself in front of their only exit, they said.

The carpenters heaved against the door until it opened just wide enough for them to squeeze through. As heavy, acrid smoke billowed around them, they ran up three flights of stairs to safety.

"I was actually in shock for the first few seconds," said Colm O'Connor, 37, a Bronx carpenter. "It was wild. I was like, 'What's happening?' It was just all smoke and dust. That was the toughest part, running through the smoke."

Several firefighters had already entered the building when the blast occurred and four were burned seriously, said Firefighter Pat Cleary, a department spokesman. They were taken to the burn unit at Weill-Cornell Medical Center.

An additional 34 firefighters were treated for injuries ranging from broken bones to cuts and bruises, Cleary said. It was unclear what caused the explosion.

Despite the tremendous loss of lives the Fire Department sustained in the World Trade Center collapse a few blocks north, New York's Bravest had no qualms about rushing into another burning high-rise yesterday.

"That's part of what a Fire Department has to do," said First Deputy Assistant Chief Michael Weinlein. "It's part of our job."

With Martin Mbugua

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