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A Firefighter's Desperate Last Moments

His partner escaped through a window. He called 'Mayday' on his radio, but help came too late.

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FLOWER HILL
HOSE CO. INC.
IN MEMORY
OF
ROBERT DAYTON
DEPARTED
MEMBER
P.W.F.D.

The Flower Hill Hose Co. in Port Washington, where Robert Dayton, who was killed Saturday, had volunteered for 10 years

Newsday / David L. Polkross

When the Fire Closed In

Victim's air supply was running out

By Adam Z. Horvath

Port Washington firefighter Robert Dayton, who died in a burning building Saturday, was hampered by a half-sized air tank as the smoky fire spread with extraordinary speed, according to an investigation by the Nassau County Fire Marshal's office.

After searching for occupants and finding none, Dayton and his partner, Scott Wood, were forced to scramble through blinding smoke on their hands and knees to find an opening for fresh air when the alarm on Dayton's airpack sounded. Only Wood found an escape route, crashing through a second-floor rear window onto a fire escape while Dayton was trapped by falling debris from the ceiling.

"At that point it came down to survival," said Assistant Fire Marshal Robert Doran. "The two of them became separated. He [Wood] just took a chance and dove out. He had no idea where he was going."

Doran said Dayton, 28, a 10-year volunteer and a New York City firefighter, was wearing an "officer's pack," containing only half the air of a regular 45-minute pack and designed for supervisors such as Dayton to survey a scene quickly without staying long in a building.

"It's just one of the things that worked against him," Doran said. "Thousands of times, it comes out all right [to use such a pack] . . . but when the heavy black smoke came down on them, they became lost. If everything works according to the book and the way normal fires develop, he walks out standing up straight. Unfortunately, because of the material involved in the fire and the construction [of the building], he becomes a victim of circumstance."

Other firefighters, whom Dayton had already alerted by calling "Mayday" into his radio, immediately streamed in through windows, more than a dozen of them suffering smoke injuries themselves in their efforts to find Dayton and drag him out.

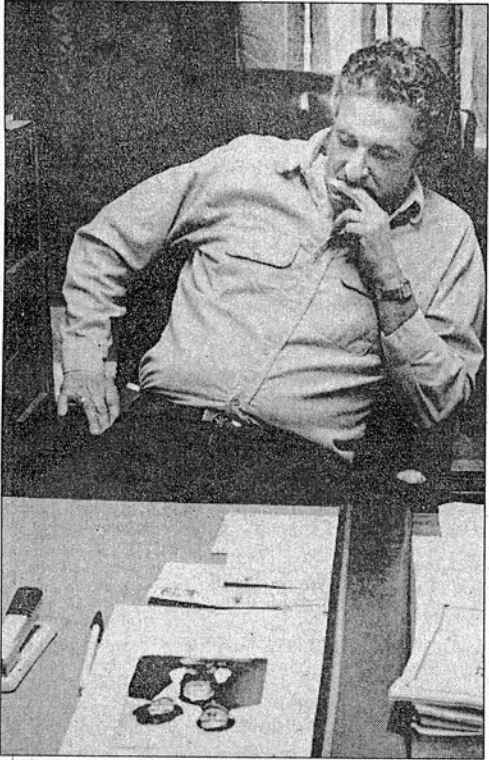
Investigators continued yesterday to label the 7:30 a.m. fire of suspicious origin, but they did not elaborate. They said the fire began in the rear of a first-floor antique shop, where furniture was refinished using flammable liquids and aerosols.

Port Washington Fire Chief Charles Lang showed Dayton's picture and recounted what he knew of Saturday's

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Rear of 165 Main St., Port Washington, where a Saturday morning blaze killed a firefighter and where his colleague managed to flee to safety.



Newsday Photos / David L. Pokress

Chief Lang yesterday with Dayton family picture

Death Toll of LI Firefighters

Over the past 10 years, at least 15 Long Island firefighters have died in the line of duty. Among those who have died:

July 6, 1988: Robert Cushing, 18, Patchogue Fire Department. Died when he fell from a truck during a drill.

June 17, 1986: Stephen T. Wade, 23, Southside Hose Co., Oceanside. Died two weeks after he fell from a ladder during a drill.

Aug. 6, 1985: James Jimenez, 64, Syosset Fire Department. Died in a car accident en route to a call.

July 15, 1984: Kevin Cioffi, 20, Wyandanch Fire Department. Killed when he slipped under a moving truck that was being washed at the station house.

June 26, 1984: John Carlson, 60, Jericho Fire Department. Died when a fire truck collided with a van en route to a call.

March 1, 1980: George Grant, 24, Point Lookout-Lido Fire Department. Died when the roof of a burning house collapsed on him.

Nov. 22, 1979: John Tate, 28; Michael

Moran, 23, Valley Stream Fire Department. Died when the roof caved in while fighting a fire at a synagogue.

Nov. 9, 1979: Robert Wines, 49, Sayville Fire Department. Suffered a heart attack while fighting a shed fire.

Dec. 8, 1978: Frank Caravella, 27, Deer Park Fire Department. Killed in a collision as he was responding to a false alarm.

Oct. 2, 1978: Thomas Kowalksi, 18, Dix Hills Fire Department. Killed in a collision while responding to an alarm.

May 25, 1978: Capt. Joseph Dunn, 28; Robert Hassett, 21, Bethpage Fire Department. Killed as they were fighting a fire at a swimming pool store.

Jan. 17, 1978: Jerry Cotignola, 20, Freeport Fire Department. Died two weeks after being overcome by smoke at a store fire.

Jan. 14, 1978: Alexander Collie, 49, chief of North Lindenhurst Fire Department. Died six days after suffering a heart attack while fighting a fire at a marina.

Victim of Blaze Carried Small Air Tank

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events for one reporter after another in his office yesterday while Dayton's fellow firefighters — still subdued over the loss — hung black bunting and cleaned the station for the viewing held there last night. Additional viewings and an official firefighter's service were planned today. The funeral is tomorrow at the firehouse.

"Something went wrong," Lang said, recounting how standard operating procedures had failed to protect Dayton. "Everyone knows what's going to happen in a fire — except the fire. It was smoky and it was dark."

Dayton's younger brother James, a senior at Brown University, said yesterday that the family has been touched by the support of the community. "Everybody's pulling together" to help, he said. The fire department was asking people to contribute to a trust fund for Dayton's wife, Pamela, and 11-month-old daughter, Kaitlin.

But he added that they still have not been given an authoritative account of his brother's death. "That's what I want," he said. "I want to know exactly how it happened."

Among the things that went wrong, according to Doran, was that the fire was being fueled by flammables in the antique store, making the fire build more quickly than most.

The store's owner, identified by authorities and neighbors as Donna Rice, of an undisclosed address, could not be reached yesterday.

Two fire teams entered the building to check for occupants. One team finished its search and quickly went back down the stairs, but Dayton and Wood took the section directly over the fire, Doran said.

"They were dealing with a lighter smoke initially, but as they progressed in, all of a sudden it just enveloped them," he said. Dayton and Wood managed to search at least two rooms but got lost in the confusing layout of hallways once the black smoke rolled over them, he said. Then Dayton's alarm went off, meaning he had only a few minutes of air left.

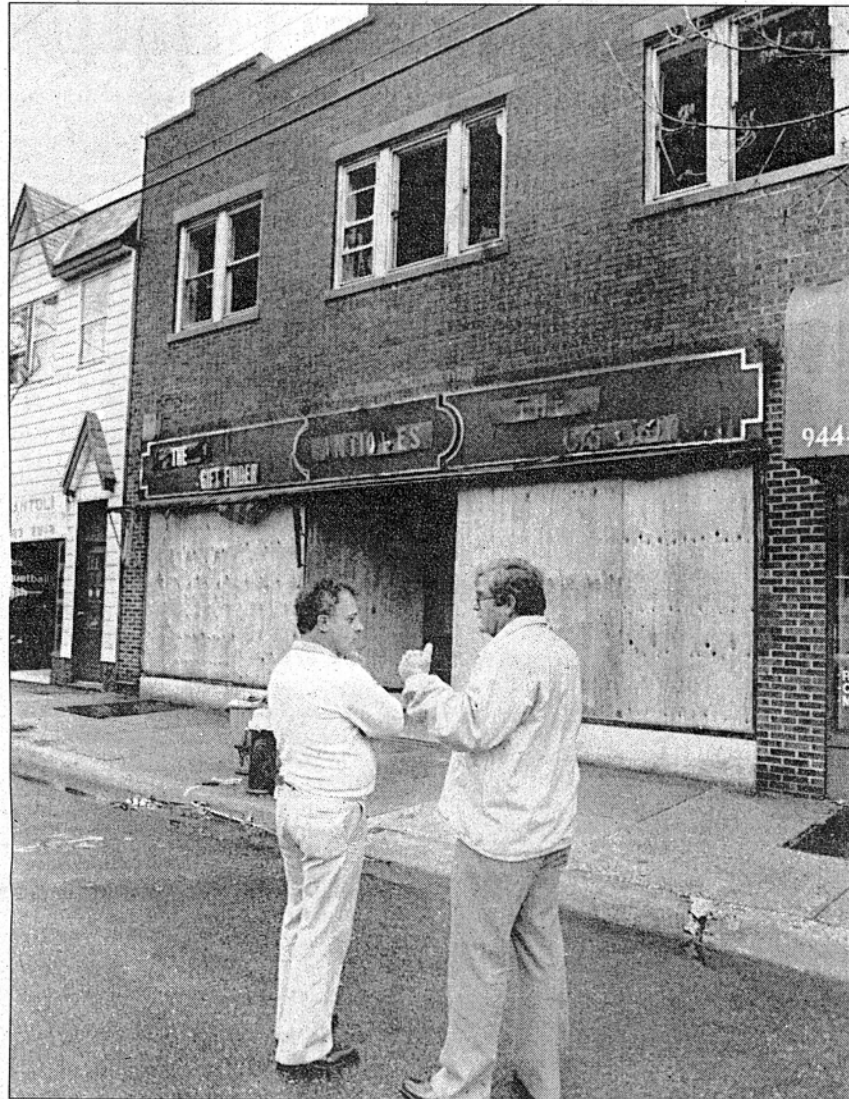
Doran said Dayton and Wood stayed together to search for an exit, but were increasingly hampered by the heat and smoke. Wood's alarm went off shortly after Dayton's, Doran said.

Firefighters were busy doing chores yesterday to keep their minds off what had happened, according to Lang. Firefighters in Elmhurst fire engine company 287 where Dayton worked as a firefighter for three years were doing the same, according to a captain at that station.

But the volunteers in Port Washington's Flower Hill Hose Company No. 1 had plenty of reminders of Dayton, who was due to become captain of the company in January and had served as the department's training officer.

On the front of the station, a department seal that later in the year would say "Season's Greetings" was emblazoned with "In memory of Lt. Robert Dayton, departed member." And inside, Capt. Geoffrey Cole had written a single message with a red marker on the duty board: "We love ya, Bobby."

"It could have been a lot of guys [who wrote it]," Cole said. "It could have been anybody. We were all real good friends."



Newsday / David L. Pokress

Edward Butler, left, and Larry Hatton, of the New York City Fire Department, in front of the building where a firefighter died. Butler is Queens Borough commander, and Hatton, a battalion chief.