



“City Vollies”

Guardians of Gotham for More Than a Century

By Norah Machia

The first firefighters in New York City were all volunteers, and today more than 300 men and women known as the “City Vollies” are continuing that tradition in several neighborhoods throughout the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island.

Firefighters in New York City were allowed to become full-time employees when the first paid fire department was formed in 1865 in the borough of Manhattan. It was initially established as the Metropolitan Fire Department, but several years later it became known as the FDNY (Fire Department of the City of New York).

The FDNY coverage area expanded in 1898 to include all five boroughs of New York City. But the volunteer firefighters in the outer areas never truly went away.

Many established their own fire departments in waterfront communities with very different environmental landscapes from the crowded city streets and skyscrapers of Manhattan.

Currently, there are nine volunteer fire departments in the outer boroughs of New York City, and several also operate ambulance services. The majority have been around for more than 100 years.

“We must be doing something right,” said Chief Daniel Cavanagh of the Gerritsen Beach Volunteer Fire Department & Ambulance Corps., Brooklyn, and president of the Volunteer Firemen’s Association of the City of New York (VFACNY).

While the City of New York has the ultimate responsibility of fire and

emergency medical services coverage in the five boroughs, some of the volunteer fire departments still receive calls for help directly into their fire houses, said Chief Cavanagh.

The highly trained “City Vollies” can handle the majority of those calls on their own, he said. If they determine the FDNY is needed, they will make the 911 call directly, so no time is lost in the emergency response.

When people call 911 within the City of New York, the nearest FDNY firefighters and emergency medical services personnel are dispatched, but the “City Vollies” may also be called upon to provide mutual aid.

In those situations, “The city fire department is coming, but whoever



puts water on the fire, the fire doesn't care, and the community doesn't care," said Chief Cavanagh. "Nobody asks if it's the FDNY or the VOLLIES!"

The "City VOLLIES" respond to fires, floods, and emergency medical calls with a variety of specialized vehicles and equipment specifically purchased for their geographical locations, he added.

These include four-wheel drive vehicles and ATVs to drive over sand and through marshy woodlands, special engines that fit down narrow streets and can be navigated alongside canals, custom brush trucks for wildland fires, and a variety of watercraft for surface rescues.

"The City of New York has the most brush fires in New York state," he said. It's one of the most common calls for the Gerritsen Beach Volunteer Fire Department, which works closely with the National Park Service on fire control.

"In some ways, we're not much different than the upstate volunteer fire departments," said Chief Cavanagh, noting there is a strong sense of comradery among the "City VOLLIES" in the New York City volunteer fire departments. "In certain communities, it's just a rite of passage to join, and to better yourself and help the community," he said. "Our neighborhoods are typically isolated, and we all know each other."



One of the greatest challenges for the "City VOLLIES" is financial support. While many volunteer fire departments in New York state receive some municipal taxpayer dollars for their operations, the New York City volunteer departments receive no government funding because the FDNY is publicly funded to cover the five boroughs.

The volunteers depend on the people they serve for support through annual donations, along with fundraising activities held throughout the year. "We just exist through sheer will and community support," said Chief Cavanagh.

The VFACNY plays an important role in advocating for the needs of the nine volunteer departments. The organization was established in 1884 by volunteer firefighters in Manhattan who had retired after the FDNY was formed. It was inactive for several decades starting in the 1920s, but was later reorganized in 1953.

The organization has helped in securing a permanent funding source for workers' compensation insurance to cover all "City VOLLIES." It also administers FEMA's SAFER grant program that helps fund

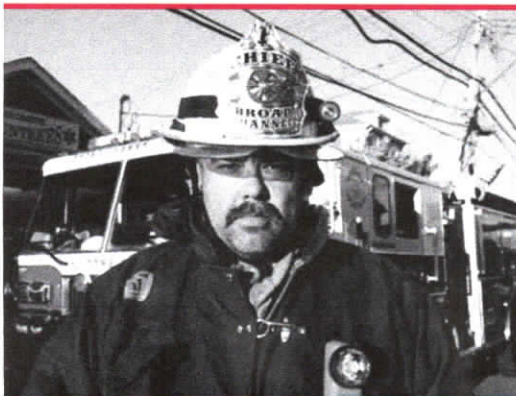
recruitment marketing and retention programs for the volunteer departments.

Recently the VFACNY obtained more than \$1 million in grants for the volunteer departments to support recruitment efforts, training programs, and the recent upgrade of all radio systems. But the volunteer departments "must still rely on the neighborhoods to help keep the lights on," said Chief Cavanagh.

"Each volunteer fire department has working knowledge of its area," said Ed Wilmarth III, a member and former chief of the Broad Channel Volunteer Fire Department & Ambulance Corp., Queens. "They know every nook and cranny, every short cut. Most of them grew up here."

As a result, "many people who live in these areas call the volunteer fire departments directly," he said. "They all have the emergency numbers. They haven't changed in 100 years!"

While the volunteer departments have received strong support from their communities over the years, it's becoming increasingly difficult for many





residents to raise those contributions because of the high inflation driving up costs in the New York City area, said Former Chief Wilmarth.

"People are willing to give their support, but everyone is hurting because inflation is out of control," he said. At the same time, the expense of running these departments has gone up significantly in all areas, including equipment costs, medical supplies, fuel, and insurance.

Although the "City Vollies" face continual financial challenges, they are determined to keep their doors open and carry on the rich tradition of volunteer firefighting in New York City, said Former Chief Wilmarth.

During past natural disasters in the outer boroughs, some neighborhoods were "cut off" due to flooding, and the volunteer departments were among the first to start putting out fires and rescue people caught in the high floodwaters before the water levels receded and the FDNY could arrive.

One of the most well-known examples in recent history was Superstorm Sandy in 2012, which caused rising water from the Atlantic Ocean and Jamaica Bay to inundate the streets of several neighborhoods in Queens, turning them into raging rivers and shifting homes off their foundations.

The "City Vollies" were the first and for a while, the only firefighters and EMS personnel who could respond when the strong hurricane hit, destroying hundreds of homes along the waterfront areas. The FDNY was delayed getting into the neighborhoods because of the high flood levels. The rising sea waters also triggered widespread electrical fires, damaging and destroying more than 150 homes.

The following year members of the Rockaway Point, Roxbury, Point Breeze, Broad Channel, and West Hamilton Beach volunteer fire departments were honored by the New York City Council for their exemplary work during and after Superstorm Sandy.

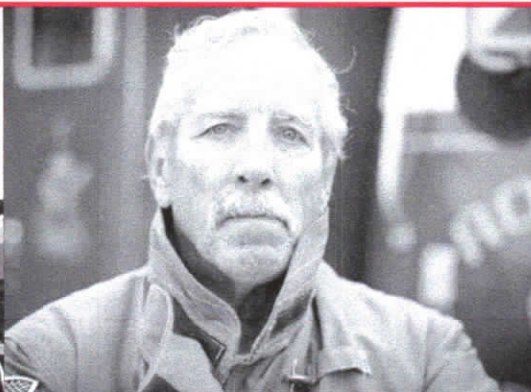
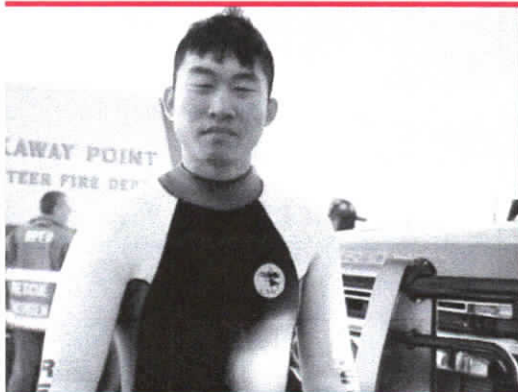
The nine volunteer departments play a vital role in assisting the FDNY, and they work well together in sharing their expertise in responding to a particular situation, said Robert Leonard, an assistant chief of the Syosset Volunteer Fire Department on Long Island who served as a volunteer firefighter, lieutenant, and captain with the West Hamilton Beach Volunteer Fire Department for 13 years.

He still interacts with many of the "City Vollies" who train at the Nassau County Fire Service Academy, where he serves as an instructor.

"It was a tremendous experience and a great opportunity for me that led to my profession," said Assistant Chief Leonard, who specializes in fire services and media communications. "I'm a better firefighter for having been with the West Hamilton Beach Fire Department."

The experience "gave me many opportunities as a volunteer to work side-by-side with the FDNY responding to emergencies," he added. "I'm always proud of the work the city volunteers still do."

The contributions of the New York City volunteer firefighters are vital for public safety, and "It's one of the most worthwhile things you can do with your time. Volunteering is an amazing and rewarding experience," Assistant Chief Leonard added. "I hope all the nine volunteer companies continue to thrive and provide services to their communities."



Nine Volunteer Departments Serve New York City



BROAD CHANNEL VFD & AMBULANCE CORP, QUEENS, was organized in 1905. It serves the island of Broad Channel and the surrounding waters of

Jamaica Bay. Basic Life Support Ambulance/Engine Company/Rescue Squad/Water Rescue Team.



RICHMOND ENGINE CO. 1, STATEN ISLAND, was organized in 1903 and serves the residents of Richmondtown. The Engine Company is an integral part of the Staten Island community.

EDGEWATER PARK VOLUNTEER HOSE CO. 1, BRONX, was organized in 1922. It serves Edgewater Park residents and is the only volunteer department in the Bronx borough. Basic Life Support First Response/Engine Company.



ROCKAWAY POINT VFD & AMBULANCE CORPS, QUEENS, was organized in 1914. It serves the private beachfront communities of Rockaway Point & Breezy Point. BLS EMS/Engine Company/Truck Company/Water Rescue Team.



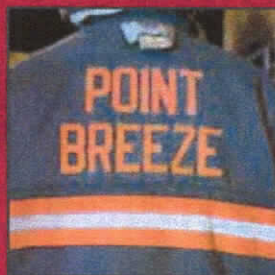
GERRITSEN BEACH VFD & AMBULANCE CORPS, BROOKLYN, was organized in 1922. It serves the Gerritsen Beach community and is the only volunteer department in the

Brooklyn borough. Basic Life Support EMS/Engine Company/Brush Fire Unit.



ROXBURY VFD & AMBULANCE CORPS, QUEENS, was organized in 1910 and provides coverage to the Breezy Point community. BLS EMS/Engine Company.

POINT BREEZE VFD, QUEENS, was organized in 1910 and is part of the Breezy Point Cooperative, a four-square-mile private beachfront community. Engine Company/Rescue Squad/Heavy Rescue/Truck Company/Water Rescue Team/Technical Rescue Team/HazMat Team.



WEST HAMILTON BEACH & AMBULANCE CORP, QUEENS, was organized in 1928 and serves the areas of Howard Beach, Rockwood Park, Hamilton Beach, Jamaica Bay, Ramblersville, Spring Creek, and the Belt Parkway. BLS EMS/Engine Company.



OCEANIC HOOK & LADDER CO. 1, STATEN ISLAND, was organized in 1881 and is considered New York City's oldest volunteer fire department. Operates three vehicles, including brush fire unit.

For more information on the nine volunteer fire departments in New York City, visit vfanyc.org.

