

## FIREFIGHTER PAT CONNOLLY

Considering the changes a half-century brings about can be a frightening and sobering experience. As I sat opposite the arthritic man in his wheelchair the pain lines were etched permanently around his eyes and mouth. Yet this was a man, a giant of a man, who fifty years before had been, not only a ladderman on the Boston Fire Department, but one of the select few chosen for the "Drill Team" of the department which was comprised of the department's tallest, strongest, and most agile volunteers to perform public displays of aerial ladder exercises, rope sliding and the like for the enjoyment and edification of the general public during Fire Prevention Week and other public assemblies.

Patrick Joseph Connolly insisted, from his earliest years, upon being called "Joe" partly because he had uncles on both his mother and father's side of the family named Patrick but mostly because when he attended school he didn't want to be called "Patsy".

On November 28, 1942 Joe Connolly was the tillerman of Ladder 15, located on Boylston Street across from what is now the Hynes Auditorium and it was there he heard the 3<sup>rd</sup> alarm struck for Box 1521, Church and Winchester Streets. Ladder 15 would normally respond to a 2<sup>nd</sup> alarm from Box 1521 but the 2<sup>nd</sup> alarm had been omitted and the 3<sup>rd</sup> alarm had followed the sounding of the 1<sup>st</sup> alarm by only minutes, indicating to firefighters that an event of serious proportions was happening. As the men of Ladder 15 scrambled aboard their apparatus a police officer, from his radio equipped cruising car, shouted to the responding crew, "It's the Coconut Grove and it's going like hell!" Ladder 15's driver, Gil Jones, swung out onto Boylston Street and the big truck streaked toward the Coconut Grove as Joe, clinging to the tiller wheel controlling the rear of the truck states, "I thought I would fly out of the goddam seat."

He official Fire Department report states Ladder 15 responded to the 3<sup>rd</sup> alarm from Box 1521 at 10:23 P.M., reached the fire scene in less than five minutes and encountered no delay en route. The Ladder Company was under the command of Lt. McGowan who was detailed from Engine 41. His crew consisted of Laddermen McGovern, Murphy, Greggs, Jones and Connolly.)

Immediately upon their arrival the company was ordered by a District Chief to use the battering ram to force entry through a metal clad door into the nightclub. It is believed that this was the door on Piedmont Street at the head of the stairs from the Melody Lounge. "We were the ones that knocked down the door, the metal clad door. Inside there were five goddam locks, every one was different. We worked like a sonof a bitch with the battering ram. We had to split that door in every direction."

Donning an M.S.A. All-Service canister type mask Connolly began the task of removing bodies from the nightclub to the street "body after body". For however long he labored at this gruesome task is unknown, but he ultimately collapsed. When he

regained consciousness he found himself in the back of the Boston Protective Companies wagon, an oxygen mask over his face and a Jesuit priest by his side. As he sat up he was offered a pint of William Penn whiskey and told to “take a slug”. He said, “Lookit, I don’t drink and I never have.” He returned immediately to the interior of the nightclub and continued removing bodies.

The Chief of the Boston Fire Department, Samuel Pope, had arrived on the fire scene and when he saw Connolly, whom he knew personally from Drill Team activities, he directed the Ladderman to follow him into the Melody Lounge where more bodies were still to be removed. “I took the girl off the piano downstairs. Her body disintegrated in my arms. Chief Pope said, ‘I want you to remove some of these tables’ because there were bodies under them. The tables were iron-based and heavy.” Connolly began picking them up and throwing them into a corner so the bodies were accessible for removal. “Throwing the tables and Coca-Cola type chairs across the room I had a big pile.”

The crew of Ladder 15, according to official Fire Department records, labored at the Coconut Grove for five hours and eleven minutes. Without elaboration the Company report states “duty comprised ventilating, axe, rake and overhauling assisted in removing bodies – used gas masks.”

When Ladder 15 returned to their quarters only the driver, Gil Jones, and the tillerman, Joe Connolly were aboard the big truck. The remainder of the crew was in various Boston hospitals.