

APPOINTED 11/25/42

JOHN FRANCIS CROWLEY

FIRST NIGHT, FIRST FIRE

Young John Crowley was justifiably excited. This was his first night as a firefighter in the City of Boston. Standing beside the Patrol desk of Engine 9, in the East Boston section of the City, he was learning under the watchful eye of Bobbie Quirk of Ladder 2 how to count the fire department tapper, answer the department phone and the many other requirements of properly attending to the duties of the 'man on patrol'. At 10:20 P.M. Box 1521 sounded on the Tapper and was recorded in the House journal but, since the location of Box 1521 was on the other side of the city, no further action was required from the crew of Engine 9. Within moments however the Tapper chattered out a 3rd alarm and Quirk leaped to his feet saying "What the Hell is going on : they never skip an alarm". Within seconds Engine 9 hose wagon and pumper were out the door heading for the Sumner Tunnel which ran under Boston's Harbor and was the sole connecting link between East Boston and the downtown area of the City. Their assignment was to cover the empty firehouse of Engine 7 which had already responded to Box 1521. Upon arrival they were immediately dispatched directly to the fire location, Church and Winchester streets, for which a 4th alarm had already been transmitted.

As they pulled in to the fire location and reported to the Deputy Chief they were directed to run and operate a hand-line to a door on Shawmut street. As they hurriedly stretched the 2 1/2" hoseline down the narrow street they passed people " who were dead or dazed and delirious on the street and sidewalks ". Upon entering the building they "passed people piled shoulder-high on each side of the doorway. When temporary lighting was restored the inside of the building was a gruesome sight. There were people dead at tables who had died without moving." At this time the fire had been virtually extinguished and Engine 9 crew was directed toward the Piedmont side of the club to aid in body removal. "On the way out I seen so much money of all denominations on the floor. It hit me of how insignificant money was." While removing charred bodies out to waiting ambulances, trucks and taxi cabs he noted " two police cars with ladies pocketbooks completely filling the back seats". Shortly thereafter the crew was ordered up on the "very badly burned stage and told to shovel up burned debris that could contain body parts. I prayed that this did not happen".

In the days that followed as the newspapers stated that the toll of dead might reach 500 "I had to battle within myself as whether to stay on the job. I stayed - for 31 years".