

# The Volunteer **FIREFIGHTER**

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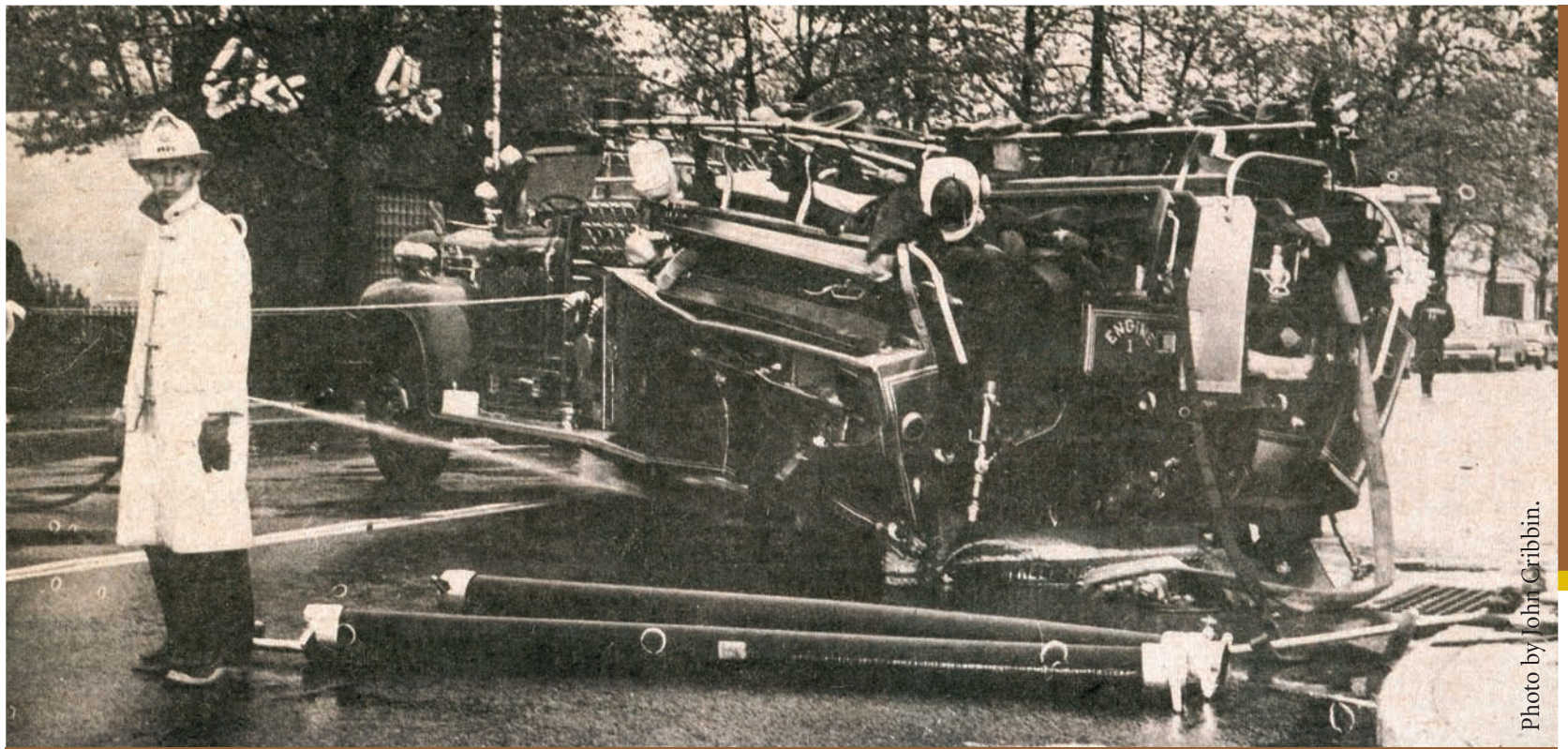


Photo by John Gribbin.

# Remembering A Tragedy 50 Years Ago

By Ex-Capt. Steve Grogan, Lynbrook Fire Department

This past April 30 marked the 50th Anniversary of the tragic crash of two Lynbrook fire trucks in which three volunteers and a school crossing guard died in the line of duty.

On that fateful day in 1963, just after noon and right after a rain storm, the Lynbrook Fire Department on Long Island responded to a reported house fire.

Engine Company No. 1, a 1955 Mack, from the Carpenter Avenue firehouse on the north side of this two-square-mile village, responded with six volunteers and proceeded through the downtown and headed north on Hempstead Avenue to Peninsula Boulevard.

Tally-Ho Engine Company No. 3, a 1962 Mack, from the Horton Avenue firehouse on the west end, also responded with six volunteers and headed east on Merrick Road onto Peninsula.

At the same time, Mrs. Rosalie Roy, a school crossing guard, was crossing children at the busy intersection of Hempstead and Peninsula. Both companies were responding to Earle Avenue, just two blocks beyond the intersection.

Both fire engines with their lights blazing and sirens and horns blowing loudly were driving towards that intersection from different directions. As they approached, Mrs. Roy was walking a 9-year-old student on his way home for lunch across the busy intersection.

That student would tell me years later that he heard the fire trucks coming while Mrs. Roy held his hand while crossing him. He said she pushed him toward the curb before turning around and running back into the intersection. It was reported in the

newspapers that both drivers may have believed the crossing guard was in the intersection to stop vehicular traffic for the benefit of their fire truck.

At approximately 12:08 p.m., the two fire trucks entered the intersection. The drivers could not stop on the rain slicked roadway and they collided with the deafening sound of twisted metal that was louder than the blaring sirens and horns.

Tally-Ho smashed into the rear portion of Engine Company and spun it around in the intersection striking the crossing guard before she had time to run back to the curb. She was hurled to the lawn in front of the apartment building on the northeast corner. She died instantly.



Engine Company then cut the power pole at the corner in half before finally stopping 20 feet north of the intersection. The power transformer on the top of the pole exploded when the truck hit it knocking out all electric power to the area.

When everything came to a stop, the street was littered with firefighters who had been thrown from their trucks.

Nine firefighters were injured. The most seriously was William Koch, 57; Joseph Fischer, 36; and Peter Moody, 20, who were all riding on the back step of Engine Company.

All the injured were taken to Mercy Hospital in neighboring Rockville Centre, where Koch died upon arrival and Moody and Fischer remained in critical condition. Other firefighters injured were treated at the accident scene and sent home.





On April 28, Lynbrook firefighters gathered in reflection on a tragedy that happened 50 years ago. Photos by Brian Grogan.

On May 2, 1963, Moody died from his injuries. Fischer died the following day. Three volunteers and a school crossing guard were killed in the line of duty in one of the village of Lynbrook's worst tragedies since its incorporation in 1911.

In newspaper articles after the accident, the crash was attributed to "the treacherous surface of Peninsula Blvd." It was also reported that the "road surface was slippery with oil and water."

Accounts further said that Engine Company was late getting out of the firehouse due to engine trouble. The papers said, "Otherwise, both trucks would never have been in that intersection." Another newspaper reported that Engine Company had also been stopped at the village's main Five Corners intersection just blocks away by a bus that had blocked that intersection.

Ex-Chief Karl Thuge of Engine Company, and the first assistant chief on the scene that day, recently confirmed that a bus had blocked the intersection blocks away otherwise Engine Company would have normally been well past the intersection where the crash occurred.

Neither of the fire engines was reported to have been speeding and the fire call that the trucks were responding to turned out to be a malfunctioning steam valve on a furnace.

The accident made all the newspapers and TV news programs and many departments near and far offered their assistance and their sincere condolences.

Ninety days of official mourning was declared in the community. Engine Company was lent a rig from the Bay Shore Fire Department, which the village of Lynbrook purchased for \$1 while Tally-Ho was lent a rig from the Elmont Fire Department. Tally-Ho's rig was repaired and put back in service while Engine Company received a new Mack pumper one year later.

Firefighter Koch, an employee of Ruppert's Brewery in Brooklyn, was the secretary of Engine Company, and a member of the VFW after serving with the Navy Seabees in the Pacific during World War II. Koch left behind a wife and a daughter. Firefighter Moody was not married and had only been a volunteer for two years. He was survived by his mother, father, brothers and a sister.

Firefighter Fischer, an oil burner mechanic, was also a veteran who served in World War II as a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne. He left behind his widow.

All three lived on the same block, Marion Street.

Mrs. Rosalie Roy was a married mother of three and had worked as a crossing guard for the village for three years.

The names of the three firefighters are remembered at the Firefighter's Memorial at the corner of Sunrise Highway and Earle Avenue. Each year in October, Lynbrook firefighters remember them and three others who died in the line of duty for this community.

Mrs. Roy is remembered by a stone marker on the lawn of the apartment building where she died.

On Sunday, April 28, 2013, the Lynbrook Fire Department, never forgetting their fellow firefighters, and led by the members of Engine Company, gathered again at the Firefighter's Memorial to honor those that died on April 30, 50 years ago.

"The events of April 30 are an important part of our company and the department's history. The names of William Koch, Peter Moody, and Joseph Fisher, are not just names etched on a memorial stone. The loss of our brothers will never be forgotten and to this day serves as a reminder of all the dangers and perils we face responding to and operating at alarms," said Engine Company Capt. Nicholas Pearsall, whose grandfather, Clint Pearsall, was captain of the company when the accident occurred.

Three floral wreaths were placed at the memorial for each of the three Engine Company members. Tally-Ho also placed a wreath, as did the chiefs of the department, led by Chief Engineer Edward Hynes of Engine Company. After the fire department services the members of Engine Company proceeded to the corner of Hempstead and Peninsula and placed flowers on Mrs. Roy's stone marker.

As Chief Hynes put it, "Heroism came in many forms on that faithful day."

"Lest We Forget."



Steve Grogan is a 45-year member of Tally-Ho Engine Company 3 of the Lynbrook Fire Department. He is an ex-captain and the department's public information officer, writer and spokesman. He has a master's degree from CW Post College and is a Vietnam-era veteran who spent five years on active duty with U.S. Army Intelligence. He is a former Lynbrook Village Trustee and a retired federal agent.