

Hackensack, New Jersey
Fire Fighter Fatalities
July 1, 1988

SUMMARY

Five fire fighters from the Hackensack, New Jersey Fire Department were killed while they were engaged in interior fire suppression efforts at an automobile dealership when portions of the building's wood bowstring truss roof suddenly collapsed. The incident occurred on Friday, July 1, 1988, at approximately 3:00 p.m., when the fire department began to receive the first of a series of telephone calls reporting "flames and smoke" coming from the roof of the Hackensack Ford Dealership.

Two engines, a ladder company, and a battalion chief responded to the first alarm assignment. The first arriving fire fighters observed a "heavy smoke condition" at the roof area of the building. Engine company crews investigated the source of the smoke inside the building while the truck company crew assessed conditions on the roof. For the next 20 minutes, the focus of the suppression effort was concentrated on these initial tactics.

During this time, however, little headway appeared to have been made by the initial suppression efforts, and the magnitude of the fire continued to grow. The overall fire ground tactics were shifted to a more "defensive" posture (exterior operation) and the battalion chief gave the order to "back your lines out." However, before suppression crews could exit from the interior, a sudden partial collapse of the truss roof occurred, trapping six fire fighters. An intense fire immediately engulfed the area of the collapse. One trapped fire fighter was able to escape through an opening in the debris. The other five died as a result of the collapse.

This incident and several others before and since, provide important lessons to the fire service regarding the fire ground hazards of wood truss roof assemblies.



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