

The New York Times

2 Firefighters Are Dead in Deutsche Bank Fire

By RAY RIVERA

August 18, 2007 8:52 pm

Updated, 11:15 p.m. | Two firefighters are dead from injuries they sustained fighting a fire at the vacant Deutsche Bank building at 130 Liberty Street opposite ground zero today, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg confirmed at a news conference this evening. Mr. Bloomberg said there was “no danger” that the building would collapse and preliminary tests showed no environmental hazards.

He identified one of the dead as Firefighter Joseph Graffagnino, 34, of Brooklyn, who had with the department for eight years. The other firefighter was subsequently identified as Robert Beddia, 53, of Staten Island. Both firefighters were from a fire house — Engine 24, Ladder 5 and Battalion 2 — that lost 11 firefighters on Sept. 11, 2001.

The firefighters, in cardiac arrest, were taken to New York Downtown Hospital, where they were pronounced dead. “Sadly today once again two of New York City’s bravest have made the ultimate sacrifice answering the call of duty,” the mayor said after 9 p.m. at a news conference at the hospital.

Mr. Bloomberg added, “As of now the fire is still not under control. The cause of the fire will be investigated by fire marshals as soon as firefighters have extinguished the remaining pockets of fire.” (The fire was later brought under control.)

The mayor was joined at the news conference by Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta; Louis J. Garcia, the chief fire marshal; Frank P. Cruthers, the first deputy fire commissioner; Dr. David J. Prezant, chief medical officer at the Fire Department; Dr. Lee Winter, chief of anesthesiology at the hospital; Stephen J. Cassidy, president of the Uniformed Firefighters Association; and John McDonnell of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association.

Flames tore through several floors of the building this afternoon and evening, sending potentially toxic plumes of smoke over Lower Manhattan in a scene eerily reminiscent of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack.

The structure is known to contain asbestos and other toxic materials, but the mayor said: “All the preliminary tests say that there is not any environmental danger.”

Mr. Bloomberg also said:

Air quality and the environmental impact, as you might imagine, are a top concern to us and we are monitoring the situation very closely. We are very much aware about the Lower Manhattan community’s concern about the possible environmental effect regarding the demolition of this building.

Right now, our health experts at the Health Department and the Department of Environmental Protection do not see the need for a frozen zone other than in the immediate

area for the purpose of conducting fire and emergency operations but we will continue to monitor air quality as the situation develops. ...

Today's events really are another cruel blow to our city and to the Fire Department and specifically to the house that Engine 24, Ladder 5 and Battalion 2 are in. They are just across the street from the Deutsche Bank building and on Sept. 11, 11 people from this house were killed.

Commissioner Scoppetta said:

This was an especially difficult fire, made especially difficult because that building is under demolition. There was a lot of asbestos abatement going on, being monitored all the time. Civilian employees saw smoke, notified an elevator operator, he discovered fire on the 17th floor, workers all went down with him, and the Fire Department was notified.

We were here in less than three and a half minutes. There were 87 units, 475 firefighters, fight a truly difficult fire, because of the smoke conditions as well as the fire. We had to lift lines from the street, with ropes in order to get it up to the 17th floor, because that building, being under demolition, being in the condition that it is. ...

Terrible event, terrible tragedy — that house being hit again makes it all the more devastating.

In discussing the matter further, Mr. Bloomberg said the two firefighters were “found right away” and pulled out of the fire. “Doctors said the level of carbon monoxide is at such an elevated level that it’s

not surprising that they went into cardiac arrest. It's not always fatal. But clearly at that level I am told it is very dangerous.”

He elaborated on the structural integrity of the skyscraper: “We've had the Buildings Department in there, they've looked at every floor and they are totally satisfied that there is no danger whatsoever. The fire was not that hot. The aluminum decking may melt, but the basic structure of the building, our Buildings Department has said quite explicitly, is secure.”

Bonnie Bellow, a federal spokeswoman for the Environmental Protection Agency, told us:

There are monitors that are in place to monitor any release that could happen as a result of deconstruction of the building. There are four on the 15th floor, four on the ground level, and four on the rooftops of adjacent buildings. At this point, we don't have information because the Fire Department is still on the scene.

On Friday, The Times published an explanatory article and a slide show about the ongoing dismantling of the building. About 14 floors have already been dismantled.

The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, which took ownership of the building in August 2004, has a Web site with extensive resources on the building, including past air monitoring results and the plan for deconstructing the building.

Here are fire scene pictures from the NewYorkology blog.

Sewell Chan contributed reporting.