

Investigators plotted movements of entire neighborhood What led fire marshals to arson suspects?

By ROBERT A. WILLIAMS

Painstaking legwork by an elite Fire Department arson investigation squad apparently was the key that led to the swift arrest of two Dongan Hills youths accused of the Sunday night firebombing a neighborhood building.

The Fire Department's Major Case Squad, a two-year-old unit that usually shuns publicity, worked 35 straight hours on the investigation that resulted in the two arrests a day after the fire.

The arson investigators worked hand in hand with Staten Island detectives to nab the suspects.

Police and fire officials believe the two 17-year-old youths set fire to the two-story brick building at 26 Dumont Ave. The structure, which was to have opened this month as a day center for retarded persons, was heavily damaged by the blaze.

Before the investigation had ended, half of the 10-member Major Case Squad had a hand in the case.

Unlike most arson-related fires, the investigation into the Dumont Ave. blaze began before the fire was quelled because an off-duty fire chief just happened to be listening to his home fire radio.

Deputy Chief Warren Haring, second in command of Island firefighting forces, happened to switch on his fire radio for an unrelated matter at the height of the blaze, which began about 9:30 p.m. Sunday. When Haring heard the address of the building, he

called Island dispatchers and ordered an investigation to begin at once — not the following morning, as would probably be the case.

Within minutes, the Division of Fire Investigation at 110 Church St., Manhattan, alerted Deputy Chief Fire Marshal John Barracato at his Dongan Hills home. Barracato, one of the country's top arson investigators, recalled the address, too. The building at 26 Dumont Ave. was the scene of two previous suspicious fires.

Barracato ordered two fire marshals to report to the Island from Brooklyn. He met them about midnight at the fire site.

The trio inspected the building and agreed without a doubt that arson caused the blaze.

Knowing that the first few hours are crucial in an arson investigation, Barracato instructed the team to do as much as it could through the night. Help would arrive at daybreak, he advised.

It was 7:15 a.m. Monday as Fire Marshal Edward Kneafsey and his partner, Herbert Schiffer, strolled into their Manhattan headquarters. In minutes, they were on their way to 26 Dumont Ave. in what was to become the start of a 35-hour investigative ordeal.

The Major Case Squad is unique because its members are not only arson experts. They must be specialists in other fields such as law, accounting,

real estate or a handful of others.

Kneafsey was chosen for the Staten Island investigation because he's a former police officer with street experience; Schiffer was picked because he's an electronic surveillance specialist. At 7:15 a.m. Monday, no one knew quite what specialties would be used in the hunt for the arsonists.

Squad member Peter Capece was slated to join the team. Capece, a New Dorp resident, knew the Island, whereas Kneafsey and Schiffer were residents of other boroughs. But he was involved with another case and couldn't be spared.

A call for a Staten Island marshal went out. Marshals Al Stewart and William McKenny, working out of the Brooklyn office, were picked. Stewart is a Tottenville resident.

Kneafsey and Schiffer hopped in their car and went to Brooklyn to meet Stewart and McKenny. The four reviewed reports issued by Barracato and talked with the marshals who made the initial inspection.

"We wanted to know as much about the case as possible before we went to Staten Island," Kneafsey explained.

"This way, we wouldn't lose valuable time."

The four investigators then drove to the Island and arrived at the fire site about 8:30 a.m.

Police Detective Gerard Marino had been investigating the cause of the blaze. He met the four marshals and the group compared notes.