

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.

Kneafsey set up a plan:

☐ A marshal was dispatched to battalion chief headquarters in Rosebank to get fire reports. Which companies

fought the fire? Were the windows locked? Were the doors locked?

☐ Another marshal checked police records for known arsonists.

☐ A call went out to the Fire Department photo unit. Kneafsey knew that a court presentation should be accompanied with photos, so he instructed the photographers to snap a series of pictures to illustrate his presentation.

☐ Detectives and fire investigators decided to talk with every resident of the area. They selected Dumont and Reid Aves., Old Town Rd. and Oregon St.

"I wanted to meet everybody — the owner, the workmen and the people who lived in the area," Kneafsey recalled. "And I told the team to get everyone. No exceptions."

The canvassing began and continued through the morning and afternoon. Every few hours, the investigators would regroup and compare notes.

"Canvassing and legwork is the big thing," Kneafsey said. "Before long, residents started to open up to us and feed us information. Curiously, the picture that we originally had of neighborhood hostility toward the planned center began to change. No one we talked with seemed to be against the day center. It was a gut feeling, but I believed them," Kneafsey added.

The questioning continued through the afternoon. The men compared notes, then questioned again where uncertainties existed. Before long, bits and pieces of information began to stick out.

A blue car kept popping up. A few people couldn't be accounted for.

"You know, I could pretty much tell you where every person was around the time of the fire," Kneafsey said. "Even if they didn't know where they were."

By late Monday afternoon, facts

began to appear.

Fire reports from firefighters on the scene showed the building was locked tight when they arrived. So marshals reasoned the fire had to have been started from outside.

Knowing a liquid was used and discovering several separate fires, investigators believed a molotov cocktail was tossed at the structure.

By 5 p.m. marshals Stewart and McKenny returned to their Brooklyn headquarters. Kneafsey and Schiffer, with no lunch or supper, were told to continue the investigation.

They met again with Detective Marino and compared notes. One by one, they eliminated motives. They examined and analyzed every piece of in-

formation. Before long, pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place.

For one reason or another, information from and about a neighborhood youngster bothered the men.

"We talked with him a few times and, from what we already knew, we weren't satisfied with his answers," Kneafsey explained.

At midnight Monday, investigators decided to question the youth in the 120th Precinct stationhouse, St. George. With representatives of the district attorney's office on hand, and after more questioning, police booked the youth on suspicion of arson, criminal mischief and possession of a dangerous weapon — specifically, the molotov cocktail.

Based on further information, Kneaf-

sey, Schiffer and Detective Marino drove to Dongan Hills early Tuesday morning and arrested a second youth.

Michael O'Hara of 247 Reid Ave. and Joseph Koeller of 1448 Hylan Blvd., both of whom live within two blocks of the fire building, each face possible prison terms of up to 15 years.

Booking procedure took until 4 a.m. Tuesday.

"You can't eat because you're all hepped up with facts and information in your head," Kneafsey said. "We hadn't eaten in almost 24 hours, so after the booking we decided to get some coffee before we returned to our office to complete the paperwork."

The pair worked until 8 a.m., then went to Kneafsey's Manhattan apart-

ment to shower and shave prior to arraignment of the suspects.

They grabbed a quick breakfast, returned to Staten Island and were on hand in Criminal Court when the youths were arraigned Tuesday morning.

Kneafsey and Schiffer left court, went to their office again and wrapped things up at about 5 p.m. — 35 straight hours after they began.

"I had such a headache when I got home that I took a few aspirins and decided to lie down a while," Kneafsey recalled. "But it was Halloween and I wanted to see my kids dressed up in their costumes, so I asked my wife to wake me up when they got home."

The investigator fell off to sleep and didn't wake up until yesterday morning.

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