

Fire on 33d Floor of New Building Kills Two

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

At least two men were killed and 31 others, 24 of them firemen, were injured last night when a stubborn, smoky fire broke out high in one of the city's newest skyscrapers, a 50-story glass and aluminum tower at 1 New York Plaza in lower Manhattan.

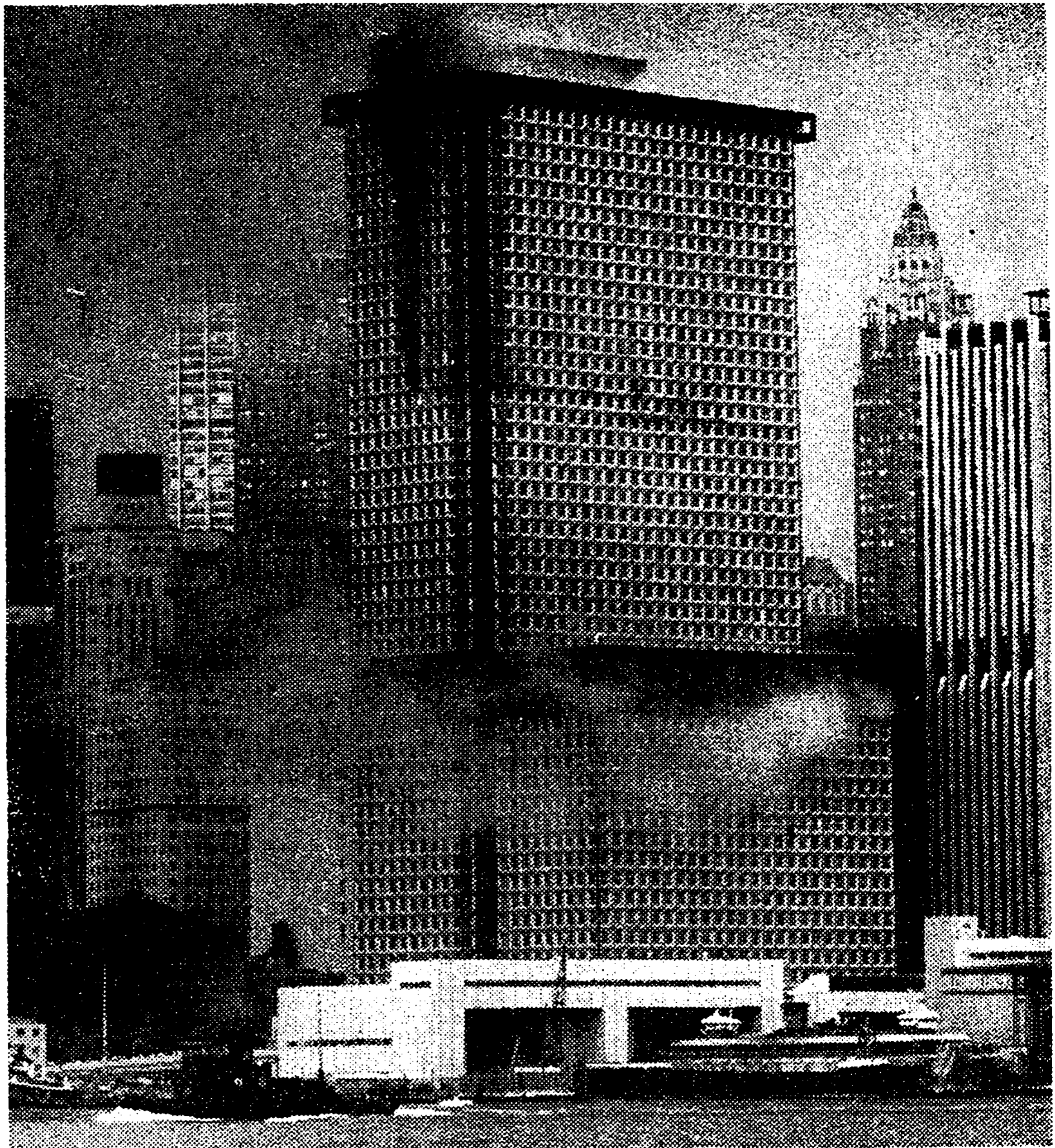
The fire, involving the 32d through 36th floors, trapped some firemen and some occupants of the building in elevators. More than 25 pieces of firefighting equipment, scores of policemen and at least 150 firemen fought a prolonged battle before bringing the blaze under control at 11:55 P.M.

Fire officials said they had not yet determined the cause of the blaze in the building at South and Broad Streets, near the East River, but Fire Commissioner Robert O. Lowery said it was conceivable that it was an electrical fire that spread to office furniture. It was believed to have started about 6 P.M. in a room on the 33d floor that housed elevator motors.

As masked firemen — near exhaustion from the enervating heat and lethal smoke—fought the blaze, fire officials said that they did not believe its origins were suspicious.

The principal occupant of the building is the Chase Manhattan Bank, with offices on 20 of the lower floors. The 33d

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Carl J. Schmitt

View from Governors Island shortly after fire began in upper floor of 1 New York Plaza

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floor tenants were reported to be Bejan & Hengin, Inc.; the Bejan Group, Inc., and Townsend, Greenspan & Co., economic consultants.

At Beekman-Downtown Hospital, where the dead and most of the injured were taken, staff members labored through the night to bring relief to victims, most of them overcome by smoke.

Exhausted, semi-conscious, coughing, retching, red of eye, their faces smudged and dripping with perspiration, the victims were carried into the hospital on stretchers, examined, stripped of clothing and hurried to emergency treatment rooms. Extra supplies of oxygen were taken to the hospital under police escort.

The dead were said to be security officers from the building who had been employed by Cushman & Wakefield, one of the city's leading real estate management concerns. They were tentatively identified as Robert or John Little, 31 years old, who was killed on what was believed to have been his first day on the job; and Salvador Martinez.

Some of the injured were also taken to Beth Israel, Bellevue and Cumberland Hospitals.

Most of the victims were treated and released.

Fire Marshal Vincent Canty said that the dead men were among three people found by Fireman Thomas Weismann and Donald Hansan in an elevator on the 33d floor. They were found on the floor, their shirts pulled over their heads, apparently in an effort to protect their faces from the smoke. The survivor was not immediately identified.

Marshal Canty said that seven firemen had been trapped in an elevator on the fourth floor, but had escaped by breaking through a wall.

Tells of Terror

The terror of being trapped in the burning building was related by Charles Kuhn, a 29-year-old telephone repairman of 115 North Twin Lane, Wantagh, L. I., who said he was at work on the 39th floor when he "began to smell something funny . . . more like chemicals than a fire."

He said, "I walked down to some other guys who were walking and said, 'Gee, I smell something funny.' Then all of a sudden someone came running up and said, 'There's a fire, there's a fire.'"

Mr. Kuhn said he and the other men entered an elevator that stopped several times as it descended, encountering more and more smoke and taking on more passengers. It opened at the 33d floor, he said, intense heat and smoke gushed into the elevator and the doors appeared to jam.

"It was pure black," he said. "It was just like night. It took all the oxygen out of the air. There was nothing to breathe and I felt like dying. I cried, 'Let me die!'"

"Guys were yelling and screaming and in terror and someone yelled, 'Fall to the floor.' We all fell down to catch the last air. Finally we got the jammed doors closed. It must

have been just a matter of minutes, but it seemed like hours. I never thought I'd live."

Later, at Beekman-Downtown Hospital, where he had come to identify the dead men, Gus Ballas Jr., a security guard, told how he had learned about and reported the fire.

He said that Mr. Little had been on the 32d floor and he had been on the 31st when Mr. Little had yelled down a stairwell. "There's a fire up here, on the ceiling of the 32d floor," he quoted Mr. Little as saying.

Mr. Ballas said: "I tried to run up to the 32d floor, but I couldn't get through the smoke. I tried to get to him. Finally I ran down the fire escape to the 22d floor and then I got into the elevator."

He said that he went down to the first floor and reported the fire to the security desk.

Policemen and firemen began converging on the scene. Black smoke, turning to gray, billowed from the 33d floor, and some floated out of an air-conditioning system floors below.

Hundreds of spectators gathered in the street and later a young policeman complained that they were "cluttering up the area and making the rescue attempts very difficult. I never saw anything like it."

Fire Commissioner Robert O. Lowery said that there might have been a delay in turning in the alarm. He said, "This is the inference from the volume of fire the firemen were met with when they first arrived."

When a second alarm was turned in shortly before 6:30 P.M., firemen were instructed to use gas masks to combat a heavy smoke condition. At 7:07 P.M., a third alarm was sounded, and around 9 P.M. more equipment and more men were rushed to the scene.

Police motorcycle units were rushed in to control traffic and to help in the search for possible survivors. Two police helicopters were ordered to fly over the building after reports were received of people taking refuge on the roof.

But the figures seen on the roof were later reported to be elevator maintenance men trying to insure continued operation of elevators, and the helicopters landed at the Wall Street heliport to stand by if needed. They later returned to Floyd Bennett Field.

Shortly before 11 P.M., firemen reported that the fire was apparently reduced to pockets

on the 33d, 34th and 35th floors. On the 50th floor, firemen were beginning a floor-by-floor search for victims.

Mayor Lindsay arrived on the scene at 8:25 P.M. and conferred with John T. O'Hagan, chief of the Fire Department, and Assistant Chief Inspector Frederick Kowsky, commander of the police safety emergency division.

Commissioner Lowery termed the fire conditions "moderate," adding that there "were no observable flames but there was tremendous heat generation. The building holds the heat."

Earlier Fires Reported

There were reports of earlier fires in the building, including one in April.

Victor Marrone, who said he was an officer of the Chase Manhattan Bank, which signed a \$200-million, 30-year lease for 22 floors in the building in 1967, said that all the structural work on the skyscraper had been completed but that much interior work remained to be done on the upper levels.

Ground for the building was broken in 1967. The Chase Manhattan Bank, whose headquarters are in its own 60-story tower half a dozen blocks to the north of yesterday's fire scene, occupies the skyscraper at One New York Plaza from its sub-basements to its 18th floor.

The bank began moving in in January. The rest of the building is partly occupied.

Robert J. Pollock, executive vice president in charge of operations for the bank, said that about 900 to 950 employees were employed on the 4 P.M. to midnight shift at 1 New York Plaza. He said they had been removed from the building.

The police, after a survey, said that the lower 18 floors of the building would be open today.

The skyscraper at 1 New York Plaza was built by Sol G. Atlas and John P. McGrath.

At 11 P.M., with the fire still not under control, about 100 spectators remained at the scene. Shards of glass from shattered windows littered the streets. The Fire Department's superpumper and tower ladders, as well as an American Red Cross mobile canteen, and a Fire Department field communications van were also present.