

A VERY CLOSE CALL

Lancer's Restaurant at 7707 Carnegie had been a Cleveland institution since its opening in 1960, serving as an informal gathering spot for entertainers, athletes, business owners, and regular working-class people, as well as the unofficial headquarters for black political life in the city. "The Lancer" and the Fire Department also had a history. The four-story motel that still stands north of the restaurant site had been the scene of numerous fires, the most notable of which occurred in 1986. Today, when a fireman who was on the job in the '80s mentions that he was at "the Lancer Fire," there's no confusion about which one he means.

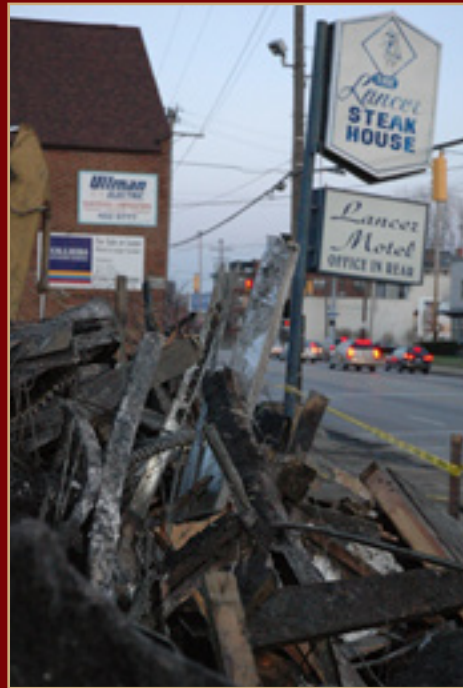
By my fourth year on the job, I was becoming comfortable with the routine at Station 17 on the corner of 66th and Chester, my last stop. On a Monday afternoon in March, we were landscaping the grounds when one of the guys noticed smoke coming from the east. A few minutes later, at 1430, the red phone rang and we were on our way. Our usual boss, Captain Pete Longo, was acting Battalion Chief that day, and FGF Ron Booms, a twenty-year veteran, was his driver. With the pumper out of service, Lt. Mark Holian of Engine 17 was filling in as Ladder boss, with FGF Pat Logan driving, and FGF Brian Nickels and myself on the back step. None of them had much more time on the job than I did.

We covered the eleven blocks in no time, and with fire blowing out of the third-floor motel window, Capt. Longo directed L-17 to the fourth floor for search and rescue. Pat Logan stayed behind to raise the aerial ladder to the roof, expecting to get the order to ventilate, while Lt. Holian, Brian Nickels, and I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor and began knocking on doors. We discovered a few residents who didn't even know the building was on fire and told them to leave immediately. With the evacuation complete, we found ourselves at the end of the hallway above the fire room, where we met FGF Joe Filicko from Rescue Squad 1 who had come up to assist. Engine 10 brought a hose line to the fourth floor at about the same time, but with no sign of fire, it really wasn't needed. The air was clear and we didn't even have our face masks on, but for reasons I don't understand to this day, I decided to break a large window in the nearby corner room just in case. It was on the same side of the building and almost directly above the fire room, where we all assumed the fire was being extinguished.

We stood and discussed our next assignment when suddenly thick smoke started building. Within seconds of masking up and without warning, the entire fourth floor hallway lit up. FLASHOVER! Fire was everywhere. With visibility down to zero, we bumped into each other like billiard balls on a pool table as we tried to escape the heat.

The Ladder 17 crew ducked into the room where I had broken the window and began hollering for help while Lt. Holian radioed B1, smoke and fire pushing in at the edges of the door we had closed behind us.

Unfortunately, because Joe Filicko had not been with us when I broke the window, he didn't know to follow us into the corner room. Instead, his training kicked in and he followed the hose line out of the building as we were taught at the Fire Academy. But what should have been a lifeline took him straight back through the fire. He eventually found his way into an empty room and opened a window, hollering for help as firefighters quickly raised a ground ladder to rescue him. But the ladder didn't quite reach his window. With his hands badly burned, he was forced to hang drop from the sill to the top rung. Squad One immediately rushed him to the Metro General Burn Unit.



While the rest of his crew was inside, driver Pat Logan had been having his own problems above us. Ladder 17 was one of the busiest fire companies in a city that was using fire as a tool for urban renewal, so a day without a fire was the exception, and going to the roof was second nature. But when he raised the aerial alone and climbed to the roof without a spotter, he found that he had left himself a healthy three-to-four-foot gap down to a roof whose soundness he could only guess at. He tossed the K-12 onto the roof and launched himself from the top rung, dropping through thin air. Even with only four years on the job, risks like that had become pretty routine.

When he started the saw and cut into the asphalt and decking, thick smoke quickly brought visibility on the rooftop to zero. Acting Chief Longo saw his predicament and tried to contact him to come down, but with the K-12 running, he never heard his radio. Reacting quickly, the chief's driver, Ron Booms, repositioned the aerial ladder, climbed up and got Pat's attention.

As they came down the ladder, Booms and Logan passed the three of us hollering for help from the fourth-floor window, but with no one at the controls, there was no way to reach us. With our best chance at rescue coming up short, I pulled my mask off to holler for help, knocking my helmet off as well, and watched as it made the long drop and smashed to the ground. I knew I'd be following it if things didn't change in a hurry. You know what they say about your whole life passing before you just before you die. Well, there is some truth to that. I

remember thinking that I had just made a will but hadn't signed it yet and wondered if that would be a problem for my children.

Back on the ground, Logan quickly took control of the aerial and attempted to move it to our window but found live wires in the way. Ron Booms advised him to forget the wires and go to the window anyway. Fortunately, the ladder was just able to reach the base of our window while sitting on top of the wires without breaking them. We tumbled down it as fast as we could.

Before we were even down the ladder, the room that we had left behind was totally engulfed, with fire blowing out its window. Our lives were saved with no time to spare. I asked for a charged hose line and was able to hit the fire from halfway up the ladder, pouring water into the room we had just escaped from. Kind of a sweet revenge, if only for a few minutes. Because of the seriousness of Joe Filicko's burns, Squad Three insisted on checking us out too. We turned our hose line over to another crew and came down. It took sixty firefighters another two hours to control the fire, but all of the residents escaped unharmed.

Most of those injured at the fire were back to work before long. Squad 3 transported me to the Metro Burn Unit, where I was treated for first degree burns to my ears, probably from losing my helmet. My lungs were also filled with smoke residue from being trapped in the room, and I was kept for two days until they were clear.



Joe Filicko was not as lucky. He suffered serious burns to his forehead, neck, ears, hands, and feet. After thirteen years as a fireman, he would never work on a line company again. He spent the rest of his career at the Alarm Office and retired in 2010 after thirty-seven years on the job.

As for The Lancer, it was rebuilt without the top floor, the hidden void between the drop ceiling and the actual ceiling above it, where the fire had been hiding and expanding all the while we were certain it was below us, now gone for good. It still stands today, three stories high and derelict, behind the empty lot where the restaurant was.

The news footage from the fire was used as a training video for years afterward. It probably scared the hell out of the new cadets. I know it did me. But I was able to use what I learned from that fire for many years to come, especially once I became an officer. For one thing, I always opened the ceilings when checking a room for fire extension. And I always made sure that I knew where the closest exit route was for fear of being trapped again. I also appreciated how important it was for everyone to be cross-trained. If chief's driver Ron Booms hadn't known how to take over the controls of Ladder 17, neither Pat Logan nor the three of us would have been rescued in time. And I must confess that after the Lancer Hotel I was always extra-cautious fighting high rise fires. Even if it was only four stories high, that was high enough to strike fear into my heart.

Lt. Pete Jedick, Ladder 17, retired