

Carpet Store Fire Investigation
Branford, Connecticut
November 28, 1996

SUMMARY

At approximately 4:30 p.m. on Thursday, November 28, 1996, a fire occurred in a Branford, Connecticut carpet store and warehouse. The fire started in the store's office area, damaged the ceiling assembly and ignited the building's wood roof trusses. Seven fire fighters were making the initial attack when the roof collapsed. Five of seven fighters were able to find their way out of the building. The sixth fire fighter was unconscious and had to be rescued, and the seventh died before he could escape.



The building was 60 ft (18.3 m) wide and 120 ft (36.5 m) long. It had wood-frame exterior bearing walls in one section and masonry block exterior bearing walls in all other areas. Lightweight wood trusses carried the store's roof over a clear span of 60 ft (18.3 m). The building did not have any fire detection or suppression systems.

The Branford fire fighters responded to a report of smoke coming from the roof of a carpet store and found light smoke showing near the roof eaves at the front of the building, upon arrival. On the basis of the observed conditions, the fire officers believed that the fire was located somewhere in the showroom area. Six fire fighters advanced two hoselines to the front of the building. Another Branford fire fighter entered the building without the knowledge of the incident commander and the officer in charge of interior operations bringing the total number of fire fighters in the building to seven.

The fire fighters found fire in a corner of a showroom and attempted to extinguish that fire. At approximately the same time, the incident commander who was outside of the building and the interior officer realized that there was fire above the fire fighters. The interior officer ordered every one out of the building and the incident commander radioed the interior crews also ordering them out. Before the fire fighters could leave the building, the roof collapsed. This was approximately 17 minutes after the fire fighters arrived on the scene.

Four fire fighters escaped out of the front of the building, and the officer and two fire fighters were trapped toward the center of the building. These fire fighters freed themselves from the debris and began spraying the burning rubble with a hoseline. The officer then told the two fire fighters that they would have to move to the rear of the building where two overhead doors were located. The officer and one fire fighter began moving toward the rear of the building and became separated from the other fire fighter.

Before reaching the door, the fire fighter who was with the officer ran out of air and collapsed. Unable to help the fire fighter, the officer continued on, found a door and left the building. Once outside, the officer could not get assistance from other fire fighters, so he reentered the building. The fire officer found the collapsed fire fighter even though the fire fighter had not turned on his PASS (Personal Alert Safety System) device. The officer dragged the fire fighter out of the building.

Once the incident commander learned that six fire fighters had escaped, he believed that everyone was out because he was not aware that a seventh fire fighter had entered the building. After a brief discussion of the events that had occurred, and the officers determined that one fire fighter had in fact, not escaped. The missing fire fighter was found approximately 20 ft (6 m) from the position where he was last seen by the officer. The cause of the fire fighter's death was listed as smoke inhalation.

On the basis of its investigation and analysis, the NFPA determined that the following factors contributed to the loss of the Branford fire fighter:

- Fire officers and fire fighters unaware that the roof of the Branford carpet store was constructed with lightweight wood trusses
- The ineffective use of an incident management system and no formal fire fighter accountability system
- The absence of a Rapid Intervention Crew (RIC)
- The lack of automatic sprinkler protection



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