

"EYE THAT NEVER CLOSES" GUARDS CITY FROM FIRE

Boston Alarm System Had Severe Test at Recent Blazes in Down Town Section

By WILLIAM A. TIGHE

Fire Commissioner Theodore A. Glynn, while explaining to a number of visitors at Fire Headquarters the other day the work of the department and its various branches, referred to the fire-alarm branch as "The Eye that Never Closes."

How fitting this description is, not one person in 1000 outside of the fire-fighting game know, but to the men whose duty and work is the protecting of the lives of the three-quarters of a-million residents and the billions of dollars' worth of property in Boston, the above title is the best that was ever expressed.

It is really surprising to how few the red box with a red light over it is known to contain a machine that will sound an alarm of fire and call the firemen and their apparatus.

How the machinery in this box can be set to work to sound the alarm is known to about the same percentage of the population as knows how to pilot an airship.

The vast majority of the men and women, if asked how an alarm of fire is sounded, plead ignorance; some of them would say that as far as they knew, opening of the door on a fire-alarm box would allow the apparatus and men to drop out, while others, who have either heard or seen alarms sounded would answer by saying, "I heard a bell ring and the next minute the fire engines came around the corner."

The system of receiving and sending out to every fire station in the Boston Fire Department is for many people intricate and hard to understand, but to the operators who make up the force the sending out of an ordinary alarm of fire is mechanical and quickly done.

Ordinary fires just break up the line, but when a situation arises like that in the downtown section a short time ago, when two big fires within a couple of blocks required extra large forces of fire-fighting machinery, then the name pinned on this staff of operators by Commissioner Glynn is well earned.

Recent Fire

This force is under the command of George L. Fickett, superintendent of fire alarm; Richard Donahue, assistant superintendent, and Peter M. Kendrick, supervising operator. The principal operators are John Galway, Daniel J. Collins and Henry A. Gutermuth, with

William Martin, John H. Finnan and J. Edward Laughlin, as operators.

These officials are assisted by assistant operators, Orlando W. Flynn, Frank A. Bailey, John M. Ahern, William H. Griffin, William H. Sullivan, William J. O'Connell and John Connell.

The crew which "covered itself with glory" on a recent occasion consisted of Gutermuth, Laughlin, Ahern and Griffin. These men, when opportunity knocked, were waiting with open arms and gave it such a welcome that Commissioner Glynn, Chief John O. Taber and Supt George L. Fickett personally commended them for their work.

This watch was doing a "last half," from midnight to 8 o'clock in the morning, when at just 3:56 a m on the morning of Saturday, Nov 17, the opening of No. 2 circuit warned them that an alarm was coming.

This information was contained in the message which the tappers sent out as — — — — —, which to the firemen means box 1291, located at the corner of High and Oliver sts. This box is just across the little park from the station which is the headquarters of Deputy Chief Edward J. Shallow and the crews and apparatus of Engine 2, Ladder 8 and Tower 1.

When the crews from the Fort Hill sq Station pulled onto the street, they saw the flames rolling through the back of a building but a few doors away. Chief Taber responded to the fire on the first alarm and as he "rooled" into the square he took a quick squirt at the burning, building and before he got out of his machine ordered his aid, Jimmy Shea, to strike a second alarm.

"Covering"

The man on patrol at Engine 2, Warren av, sounded the house gongs and lighted the house, and as the men came down yelled "Second from 1291. Engine covers 25, Truck to Ladder 8." This "cover" is the system by which companies are moved from one section of the city to another section, to occupy stations from which the company has responded to a big fire, and to protect the vacant territory.

About 20 minutes later, Chief Taber ordered a third alarm, which was struck at 4:24, which brought the crews of Engine 2, covering in Fort Hill sq; 25, the high pressure company at Mason st; 6, on Leverett st, and 50, Winthrop st, Charlestown, from their beds and started them for fire duty, as well as the crew of Ladder 13, and Deputy Chief Henry A. Fox from Warren av.

Acting District Chief Thomas F. Downey, of the 7th district, with headquarters on Warren av, started for the Mason-st Station to answer other alarms, while the crew of Engine 9 with Capt "Tom" Flynn left East Boston and took a station in the quarters of Engine 4, Bullfinch st, West End, where Chief Murray of Charlestown had already arrived.

With the sounding of the third alarm and the reporting "in quarters" of the covering companies, with the exception

of messages from the fire, such as "increase high pressure to 150 pounds" and "notify the electric light company to keep the street lights on in the fire district," things resumed a normal tone, with the operators discussing the little news they had of the fire.

Caused Confusion

Shortly before 5 o'clock they received the first message that a covering company had started to move back towards their own district. A number of these messages had been received, when at 5:32 the light flashed for a fire burning in the vicinity of Atlantic av and Long Wharf.

With the sounding of this alarm, which acted as a fourth alarm for the department, the box being in the same district as Box 1291, from which the first three had been sounded and the "all-out" not yet struck, started one of the hardest fights that the fire alarm operators have had for many years.

With the striking of this alarm the real ability of the men at the Fire Alarm office was put to the test. This box calls for four engine-companies and one boat, but only two companies responded. A quick look at the big map in the office showed Engine 9 at Bullfinch st and Engine 6 in quarters on Leverett st. For the engines at these stations, the box called for a second alarm response, but operator Gutermuth, in charge, immediately ordered both companies to the fire by telephone.

At 5:40 Deputy Chief Sennott ordered a second alarm. This alarm, in the natural course of events, if all alarms downtown had been struck from Box 1291, would have been a fifth alarm and the covering card provided for the movement of every company in the department, but being from a different box, it seriously complicated matters for the department as a whole.

The companies which had not moved from their own stations on the three alarms for the Fort Hill sq fire did not know what companies had been made up and sent home and for that reason no officer, in charge of a company exactly knew where he was at. The officer in charge of Engine 27, in Charlestown, following the assignment card, would move to this box on a fourth alarm, and without hesitation, he started for the fire.

Used Telephone

Capt "Phil" Tague of Engine 50, in Charlestown, had just returned to quarters from the first fire and was changing the hose on his wagon when the alarm sounded. The alarm was a regular run for him and he also started, leading the parade over the Charlestown Bridge into the city.

The covering of the city now took some clever work on the part of the operators. They ordered Ladder 9, a big new truck which is never to leave Charlestown, according to the running card, to take a station in the quarters of Ladder 1. This was done because it would only be a matter of a few minutes for the truck to return to Charlestown in the event of an alarm from that district.

Chief John O. Taber, who rushed to State st from the Fort Hill sq fire at 5:53, ordered a fourth alarm, which under the natural movement would mean a seventh or general alarm and call for the response of about 30 of the 53 engine companies and nearly 15 of the 30 ladder companies in the department, but the operators again showed their skill by directing by telephone all companies.

For many companies this was the first trip for fire duty in the down town section of the city in more than a quarter of a century, and the appearance of men from Brighton and the far ends of

Roxbury and Dorchester and other outlying sections caused much comment.

Just as the operators started to breathe a sigh of relief at getting a bad situation straightened out, an alarm was sounded for a small fire at the corner of Commercial and Richmond sts. Before any upset could come, Deputy Chief Fox had struck the all out.

Mr Jones' Barn

A few minutes after 7 o'clock a policeman discovered a fire in the building at 13 Province st. Knowing about the other fires which were burning, he feared that another alarm would hinder the Fire Department, so he used the telephone. District Chief Harry Hibbard of South Boston was sent to the building with Engine 13, from Mason st, and Ladder 9, which had returned to the Friend-st station. The fire would ordinarily have required a bell alarm, but by exceptional work he succeeded in stopping it.

Besides the work of figuring out covering assignments, the operators were kept on the jump answering telegraph keys, handling messages like "more pressure," "keep the street lights on," "catch basins overflowing and streets flooded," and others of department business.

The only lucky feature about the fires was the time in the morning when the alarms were sounded. During the day and the early evening the number of telephone calls that would be put into the office would be so large that the men could not do their work.

While the men were forced to do exceptional work as a result of these two fires, all their hours are not spent the same way, as amusing things occur once in a while. Only a couple of nights ago a telephone call was received and the message given the operator was: "Is this the fire barn? Mr Jones' house is on fire."

With the completion of this report the receiver was hung up and the operator used every means of trying to locate the sender of the call, but was unable to do so. It was at last decided that Mr Jones extinguished the fire himself because no report was ever received of it.

Another cause for trouble for the operating force is the failure of people in telephoning in an alarm of fire to state exactly the location. They give the name of the street and the number of the building correctly, but fail to tell in what section of the city the street is. Duplicate names of streets are common in this city and some of the names are hooked onto a dozen different streets.