

6

Hoseman Win Robbins, Engine 21

Engine 21 was a single house with a two-piece engine company. On the striking of the 3rd alarm from Box 1521 Engine 21 responded directly to the fire. Their final approach was by way of Church Street, taking a right turn onto Piedmont. The pump picked up a hydrant on Church Street while the wagon turned the corner onto Piedmont and ran a line directly to the front of the fire building, i.e. the revolving door. It is stated that, at this time, the exit door at the top of the stairs from the Melody Lounge had already been forced open. Also there was no large volume of fire emanating from the revolving door. Engine 21 forwarded their line into the Foyer proper and concentrated to the right hand side, up two steps, into the Caricature Bar area where they aided in the removal of an inordinately large number of badly burned bodies.

It is to be noted that the members of this company witnessed the removal of the body of a fully clad, unburned but dead body of an elegantly clad female who was within the telephone booth with the door completely closed, apparently in the process of initiating a telephone call when the fire erupted. She wore a black fur piece around her shoulders and there was, on the floor of the booth, the coin she was about to insert for the call. It appeared that she had been quickly asphyxiated or had succumbed to a blast of super-heated air.

The preceding is from the tape of Win Robbins.

WIN ROBBINS

On Columbia Road, in the heavily populated Dorchester section of the city, there is a Spanish-styled stucco fire station housing both the hose wagon and pumper comprising Engine Company 21 of the Boston Fire Department.

The on-duty crew of Engine 21 on the night of November 28, 1942 consisted of Captain William J. Nolan, Senior man Napier, together with Hosemen Beecher, Donovan, Dougan and Robbins. When, at 10:20 P.M., the department tapper struck for Box 1521, Church and Winchester streets, the Box location and the time of receipt were properly entered in the Company journal. No further action by Engine 21 was required at that time. Three minutes later the tapper was striking a startling 3rd alarm from Box 1521 galvanizing the firehouse crew into immediate action. As they donned their firefighting gear and started the fire apparatus engines they heard the 4th alarm striking. Their predetermined assignment was now to proceed directly to the fire location. As they rapidly responded across the city they had no concept of the emergency they would encounter : they would be facing the unforgettable fire of their careers !!

Riding the back step of Engine 21 Hose Wagon Hoseman Win Robbins remembers roaring along Tremont street, turning into Church street and rounding the corner onto Piedmont street. The Engine company pumper connected into a hydrant on Church street while the men from the hose wagon, under the orders

of Chief John McDonough, ran a 2 1/2" hose line towards the revolving door at the front of the Coconut Grove nightclub.

"When we first pulled in there was a woman in a red dress, evidently dead, lying in the gutter. There were a lot of dead people, tongues split open. I thought it was a lot of black people, but they were charred. We went in with masks, we had to use masks and, of course, it was knee deep in bodies and they were like jackstraws, arms and legs and hands. We went in through the revolving door with masks on : after it cleared up we took them off, but we worked in and went off to the right up two or three stairs that went up into the Caricature Bar and they were all jammed up in there in panic. And some of the people's heads were right through the first section of the wall, like through the plaster, and the people sitting on the stools at the bar as if they were still drinking there but they were suffocated".