

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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MULTISTORY STRUCTURE EXPLOSION

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NATURAL GAS PIPELINE LEAK

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Docket No.: DCA-14-MP-002

MAY 12, 2014

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HARLEM, NEW YORK

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Interview of: DONALD MAYERHOFER

Office of Emergency Management
 165 Cadman Plaza
 Brooklyn, New York

Tuesday,
 September 30, 2014

The above-captioned matter convened, pursuant to notice.

BEFORE: RAVI CHHATRE
 Investigator-in-Charge

APPEARANCES:

RAVI CHHATRE, Investigator-in-Charge
National Transportation Safety Board
Washington, D.C.

KALU KELLY EMEABA, Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

FRANK McCARTON, Deputy Commissioner
Office of Emergency Management
New York, New York
(Party Representative)

LEON HEYWARD, Deputy Commissioner
New York City Department of Transportation

LEONARD SINGH, Chief Engineer
Gas Distribution Services
Con Edison
(Party Representative)

CHRIS STOLICKY, Utility Supervisor (Safety)
New York State Department of Public Service
(Party Representative)

SONJA ORGIAS, Assistant Counsel
New York City Fire Department
Bureau of Legal Affairs
(Representative on behalf of Mr. Mayerhofer)

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I N T E R V I E W

MR. CHHATRE: On the record. Good afternoon, today is Tuesday, September 30, 2014. We are currently in New York City's Office of Emergency Management facility located 165 Cadman Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. We are meeting regarding the investigation of natural gas distribution pipeline leak and multistory structures explosion that occurred on May 12, 2014 in Harlem, New York.

My name is Ravi Chhatre I'm with National Transportation Safety Board, located in Washington, D.C., and I'm investigator in charge of this accident. The NTSB investigation number for the accident is DCA-14-MP-002.

I'd like to start by notifying everyone present in this room that we are recording this interview and we may transcribe it at a later date. Transcripts will be provided directly to the interviewee for review and identifying any typographical errors. The transcripts may be posted in NTSB's public docket.

Also I'd like to inform Mr. Mayerhofer that you are permitted to have one other person present with you during the interview. This is a person of your choice: your supervisor, friend, family member, or, if you choose, no one at all.

Please state for the record your full name, spelling of your name, organization you work for, your title, business contact information such as mailing address, e-mail, business phone, and whom you have chosen to be present with you during your interview.

MR. MAYERHOFER: My name is Donald Mayerhofer, D-o-n-a-

1 l-d, M-a-y-e-r-h-o-f-e-r, firefighter for the New York City Fire
2 Department. I'm assigned to Ladder Company 26 in Harlem. I live
3 -- reside in [REDACTED].

4 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Use your work address.

5 MR. MAYERHOFER: Oh, okay.

6 MR. CHHATRE: We'll redact it. We just want -- nothing
7 personal, all business.

8 MR. MAYERHOFER: Okay, [REDACTED], Brooklyn, New
9 York. And I've chosen to represent with me, lawyer from the fire
10 department, Sanja Orgias.

11 MR. CHHATRE: Now I'd like to go around the room and
12 have each person introduce themselves. Please state your name,
13 spelling of your name, your title and the organization that you
14 represent, and your business contact information. Starting from
15 my left.

16 MR. HAYWARD: Leon Heyward, H-e-y-w-a-r-d, Deputy
17 Commissioner, New York City Department of Transportation. Phone
18 number [REDACTED]. E-mail address [REDACTED].

19 MR. STOLICKY: Christopher Stolicky, S-t-o-l-i-c-k-y,
20 I'm the Utility Supervisor (Safety) for the New York State
21 Department of Public Service, and the New York State party rep in
22 this investigation. E-mail address is
23 [REDACTED].

24 MR. MCCARTON: My name's Frank McCarton, Deputy
25 Commissioner in the Office of Emergency Management here at OEM. I

1 am the New York City party rep on the investigation. It's

2 [REDACTED].

3 MR. EMEABA: Kalu Kelly Emeaba, K-a-l-u, K-e-l-l-y, E-m-
4 e-a-b-a, NTSB investigator. E-mail address is

5 [REDACTED].

6 MS. ORGIAS: Sanja Orgias, Assistant Counsel for the New
7 York City Fire Department in the Bureau of Legal Affairs, 9 Metro
8 Tech Center, Brooklyn, New York 11201. [REDACTED] is my office
9 telephone number. My e-mail address is [REDACTED].

10 MR. SINGH: Leonard Singh, L-e-o-n-a-r-d, S-i-n-g-h,
11 Chief Engineer Gas Operations, Con Edison; NTSB party rep on this
12 case. [REDACTED].

13 MR. CHHATRE: Thank you very much.

14 INTERVIEW OF DONALD MAYERHOFER

15 BY MR. CHHATRE:

16 Q. Mr. Mayerhofer, if you would kindly tell us your
17 background, a little bit, how long you have been with the fire
18 department, any training you have taken.

19 A. I was assigned to the New York City Fire Department on
20 December 5, 2004, which is coming up on 10 years. I was a member
21 of Engine 58 for 5 years, and on December 5, 2009, I transferred
22 to Ladder Company 26, which is in the same firehouse, and I've
23 been there my whole career.

24 Q. Now, can you walk us through on the day of the accident,
25 what you did, what your work shift was like, how you heard about

1 the accident, what did you do?

2 A. Right from the get-go, pretty much?

3 Q. Yes, please. We were not there so we want to get every
4 piece of information you may have.

5 A. We were -- as far as I remember, I was in the middle of
6 a 24-hour shift. So it was in the morning kind of -- I remember
7 sitting in the kitchen and hearing a rather large explosion. At
8 the time I just remember seeing Jim McNamara (ph.), who is the
9 Ladder 26 chauffeur on the apparatus floor stop, we kind of locked
10 eyes, and as we ran out on to the apparatus floor I saw my boss
11 Lieutenant Ed Poli running outside as well as a few other people.
12 We went outside the front door of the firehouse, and right away we
13 saw a few of the local citizens waving us over and pointing, at
14 that point, which would have been about northeast of the
15 firehouse, a few blocks away. And you could see just smoke coming
16 from the air.

17 So at the time we knew had something major, didn't know
18 what it was. They were pointing us in the direction of the
19 railroad, the train station -- I wouldn't say train station -- the
20 tracks, which are aboveground. So first thought was possible gas
21 explosion or a possible train collision.

22 At that moment Lieutenant Poli ordered everyone onto the
23 rig, and he called the dispatcher from the rig as we started
24 pulling around the corner. We made a left onto 112, made a left
25 onto Park Avenue off of 112, and at that moment Lieutenant Poli

1 transmitted the 1060, which is a major emergency, which is
2 something you don't hear every day. So we knew going into it 4
3 blocks away that is obviously not an ordinary call. Upon arrival
4 -- we made a left right onto 116th under the overpass, and from
5 the moment you pulled up you could see, you know, the building
6 collapsed with flames, what looked like, in my estimation, going
7 up four, even five stories high. It was just a gigantic rubble,
8 people running, chaos, to say the least.

9 So at that moment I was assigned the outside vent man
10 position, that tour. We got off the rig, and because it was not a
11 -- a 1060 had been transmitted and it was not standard tenement
12 fire, we operated together initially. So what we did was -- I
13 mean, there was -- we could barely access the street which was on
14 -- I'm sorry, we could barely access Park Avenue, between 116 and
15 117. So we were parked more on 116. We made our way into the
16 building, directly to the exposure 2 side that was attached.

17 Upon entering that building there was heavy -- the first
18 thing we noticed was heavy cracks along the wall, which is a clear
19 indication that this is an unstable building. Lieutenant Poli at
20 that point said we're going to do -- he ordered us to do rapid
21 searches, in and out. A rapid search, meaning break the door in,
22 get in, move on to the next apartment. The building been defined
23 as unstable at that moment. So we teamed up. I teamed up with
24 Brian Murphy. We forced the door on the first floor, got in
25 there. The apartment was completely blown out, all the windows,

1 and we just quickly went through the apartment to make sure there
2 was no victims in there. We made our way up to the second and
3 third floor, where we teamed up with Lieutenant Poli, Firefighter
4 Mike Mider (ph.), and Firefighter John Kazilus (ph.), who were
5 also forcing doors on those floors. There was one apartment on
6 each floor. I believe it was four, it might have been five
7 stories high.

8 After we went through each apartment, again every
9 apartment we went through was completely destroyed, but we just
10 did as quick and thorough a search as possible to make sure there
11 were no live victims in there. We then proceeded to come back
12 outside, and at that point the engine had set up water, they were
13 starting to water on the fire, the flames were still pretty high,
14 and it became a search point.

15 So being that I was in the outside vent position, I
16 informed my officer Lieutenant Poli that myself and the roof man
17 Mike Mider were going to attempt to get to the rear. We then ran
18 around to 117th Street and entered through the building on 117th
19 Street, went through the lobby and into the rear courtyard of the
20 address of the building that had exploded.

21 At this point it just what appeared to be -- I mean, I'd
22 say it looked like a war scene for lack of better words. But
23 rubble everywhere, it looked like two stories high, pockets of
24 fire, smoke. And it was so, kind of, crazy back there that when
25 you were looking at one side of the building, I didn't realize

1 right away that part of the building in the rear was still
2 standing that in the front had fallen down, so it was a shell.
3 And you almost didn't know which one you were looking at. I
4 noticed at that point that my chauffeur Jim McNamara was on the
5 roof of a taxpayer which was on 116th Street. We were told from a
6 chief, I believe, that was on -- came through an open door, again,
7 on 116th Street, to back out because, again, the building that we
8 had searched with the heavy cracks, I'm still surprised had not
9 fallen.

10 At that point as we were making our way into the rubble,
11 see if we can move anything, see if we can see any victims, we
12 noticed a man coming out onto the first floor, or second floor
13 fire escape on the free side. Shocked to be honest, we hopped
14 over the fence, climbed over the rubble. He kind of jumped down.
15 He was in -- you could tell he was in shock. He said he'd been in
16 there trying to search his way. We kind of helped guide him over
17 the fence. Proceeded to walk him outside, and that's when Mike
18 Mider took him over -- transmitted the 1045 code, and Mike Mider
19 took him over to an ambulance.

20 Went back into the rear at that point, and again it was
21 just what seemed to be about two or three stories of rubble with
22 just pockets of fire, tons of smoke, and we're making our way into
23 just trying to do a search mode. And at that point there were
24 companies coming in together, like rescue and squad. I remember
25 seeing Ladder 40 coming the rear. And a situation like this you

1 kind of switch away from operating individually because you're
2 going to operate now with a unit. And I remember I think it was
3 at point when the chief, who was in a building on the 116th side
4 without a window, gave explicit directions to get out of that
5 area, fear of the other building coming down.

6 At that point I made my way outside through the
7 courtyard 116th street or 117th street, back in front of the
8 building on Park Avenue. Informed my boss Lieutenant Poli of the
9 1045, the victim who was able to be helped out, walk to ambulance.
10 And then I teamed up with again Mike Mider and the rest of my
11 crew, and we worked directly in front of the building just trying
12 to dig out anything we could, help the engine get water on the
13 fire. We teamed up with Rescue 1 at that point and spent -- I
14 mean, a good portion of time just digging looking for any victims.
15 And most of that was done -- I mean, we were, I would say,
16 probably 15, 20 feet aboveground on top of the rubble trying to
17 get, you know, what seemed like trying to find a needle in a
18 haystack to be honest.

19 Q. Now just for the record, spell the name of Lieutenant,
20 is it Poli?

21 A. Lieutenant Ed, Edward Poli, P-o-l-i.

22 Q. So on the map here if you can just show me, you said,
23 which way you came, where you were going to park and --

24 A. We made a left on -- to park here.

25 Q. My understanding 58 was parked right, and they came

1 before you, right?

2 A. Yes. The engine always pulls out ahead of the truck
3 because they need to take the hydrant. Ladder 26, this is -- you
4 make the left off here, and you go under the overpass. Once you
5 get to this point, we couldn't make the right because there was so
6 much rubble. So 58 took the engine -- and I know when I got out
7 of the rig, Jimmy McNamara pulled up right behind engine 58 facing
8 this way. We got out of the rig, proceeded into -- I guess it's
9 this building, I guess it would be.

10 Q. Right. This is the building with cracks.

11 A. What's that? Yes.

12 Q. This building with cracks.

13 A. 1642. Now it's common practice for a chauffeur to move
14 the rig. Now Ladder 26 was not there when I -- after when I came
15 out to the front the second time Ladder 14 had backed up into
16 there, because they're a tower ladder. And they have the access
17 to put the bucket up in the air, and put water on it so that's --
18 we were initially right behind 58, but again, where Jimmy moved it
19 after that I'm not sure.

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. I think he actually probably moved it out of the way
22 down the block.

23 Q. Okay, and how long did you stay that day, at the scene?

24 A. I would probably think 5 hours, maybe.

25 Q. Five?

1 A. Approximately. Six hours.

2 Q. Yeah, yeah.

3 A. It was a long time.

4 Q. And your shift, you said 24-hour shift starts at what
5 time and finishes at what time?

6 A. We have day shifts and night shifts, so we work -- the
7 night shift goes from 6 at night to 9 in the morning, and the day
8 shift goes from 9 in the morning to 6 at night.

9 Q. So night shift is 6 p.m. to 9 a.m.?

10 A. 9:00 a.m., yeah. As far as I remember, and I would have
11 to go back on record, I'm pretty sure I had worked the night
12 before.

13 Q. Okay. And then continued on to the morning shift?

14 A. Continued on to, yeah. But sometimes you only come in
15 for a day and sometimes you only work the night, but --

16 Q. And you said you left the accident at around what time?

17 A. What was the --

18 Q. On that day when you went home, or went back to office?
19 When did you leave the accident scene?

20 A. To go back to the firehouse? Approximately 3:00.

21 Q. Okay. While you were there, did you hear or see any
22 secondary explosion on the street, that people were reporting?

23 A. No.

24 Q. Okay, so it was after you left probably?

25 A. Yeah, I mean, I didn't -- you know, I didn't hear

1 anything, but it was as chaotic of a scene as, you know --

2 Q. So you spent most of your time on the back side or on
3 the front side?

4 A. I would say most of my time on the front side. I went
5 through this building right here, and there's a courtyard that
6 goes -- this is a whole courtyard. And this is where the victim
7 came out. So we had -- after initially checking this building, we
8 teamed up, we went around here, we did a quick search over here.
9 We found the victim coming out. We helped him move out. I went
10 back into that area, and that's when I was ordered out. And that
11 was it for the majority of the next two hours. I was probably in
12 the front searching.

13 Q. Front, okay. Did you see any water on the street upon
14 your arrival?

15 A. Water?

16 Q. On Park Avenue?

17 A. Not that I recall.

18 Q. Okay. And how high did you say the rubble was on the
19 Park Avenue?

20 A. I know we were above a car at point and we didn't
21 realize it.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. So, I know --

24 Q. So at least above a car level.

25 A. Which you know was shocking, because the car was in --

1 it wasn't parked, it was actually on Park Avenue, the road. So
2 when we finally realized, it was a frantic search to get in,
3 assuming it was -- and there was no victims in there.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. So I don't know if that car had gotten blown into that
6 direction or what, but -- so, I mean, I would say the rubble at
7 least 10, 15 feet high.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. But again, right in front of the building on the
10 sidewalk side it was obviously higher, but it was --

11 Q. Significantly higher.

12 A. -- significantly higher.

13 MR. CHHATRE: That's all I have, thank you, so much.
14 Kelly?

15 BY MR. EMEABA:

16 Q. Kelly, speaking. Are you the driver or one of the
17 occupant of the Ladder 26?

18 A. I do not drive.

19 Q. You don't drive?

20 A. No.

21 Q. Okay. So what position were you working from on the
22 (indiscernible)?

23 A. What position was I assigned?

24 Q. Yes.

25 A. The outside vent man position.

1 Q. What do you do?

2 A. The outside vent man will team up with either the first
3 two roof men, or the second two outside vent. And you're going to
4 work opposite, generally opposite the fire. You're going to work
5 independently outside. Whereas if the fire is the -- showing, for
6 example, in the third floor window in the front, you want to get
7 to the rear. You want to try to get up to the rear fire escape
8 coming opposite to a search for victims that may be behind the
9 fire. So your job is to vent any windows in the rear, with
10 permission from the boss, which would help facilitate the
11 advancement of the engine line.

12 Q. So based on that position, did you ever have to work in
13 the front of this (indiscernible)?

14 A. Did I have to what?

15 Q. Work in front of the 1644, 1646?

16 A. In this situation I had a 1060. It was a different
17 scenario, because generally you're going to go -- I'm going to
18 where the opposite -- go where the fire is, or to the part of the
19 building to the rear. In this case there was no building, so the
20 immediate life threat as we were told was the adjoining building.

21 Q. Which one is that?

22 A. Which would be 1642.

23 Q. So you worked from 1642?

24 A. Our initial thing was, because with the buildings gone
25 on the ground, exploded, fire blowing four stories high, and the

1 building next to it which was deemed unstable, so we went into
2 search as a team for victims in that building. That was the
3 initial plan.

4 Q. Okay. So you did have opportunity go into 1642?

5 A. That's what we initially did, yes.

6 Q. You went in there, okay. So were you there two times or
7 just once; did you climb into 1642 twice or just once?

8 A. We did the initial search in 1642, we checked every
9 floor, as a unit. I mean, I was teamed up I think that point -- I
10 remember Brian Murphy initially. There were units in 1642 after
11 the fact, but when we went in there initially, again we were the
12 first units on scene, the building that we were searching was
13 attached to the building that just exploded and there were
14 significant cracks in the walls. So we had strict orders to get
15 in and do a rapid search in and out, for fear that this building
16 could collapse as well.

17 Q. Did you find anybody?

18 A. I did not find anyone.

19 Q. Okay. In front of 1642 are there any physical evidence
20 you see in terms roads, or road way cracks or road way opening,
21 anything like that?

22 A. No, I mean it was absolute ton of rubble.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. I mean it was just smoke, a lot smoke, a lot fire, a lot
25 of rubble. And again for lack of better words it looked like a

1 war scene when you pulled up.

2 Q. So after the effort to rescue people, if there was
3 anybody inside the house, what did you do next?

4 A. After we went in and out of 1642, that's when I informed
5 my officer that I was going to make an attempt to get to the rear,
6 which I didn't know if I'd be able to do. And that's when I
7 teamed up with Mike Mider. We went around 117, we went through
8 the courtyard, and went into the rear. There was fence there, so
9 we kind of had to -- half broken, climb over the fence. And the
10 initial thought was -- I mean it was almost where do you start,
11 because you're just looking at rubble that's two, three times over
12 your head with fire, pockets of fire everywhere, smoke everywhere.
13 And at that point is when we noticed the civilian climbing out of
14 the rear fire escape on the second floor.

15 Q. Okay. So for the entire time you walked from the back
16 afterward?

17 A. No, as I just stated we went back there -- after we went
18 back there we helped a civilian out to the ambulance. I then went
19 back to the rear, and it was at that point that one of the
20 battalion chiefs that had arrived was in I would say this
21 building, 9193, East 116th in a rear window on the fourth floor,
22 yelling down to specifically to get out of that area for fear of
23 a further collapse.

24 So although I went to the rear to help a civilian out, I
25 went back to the rear to see if I could do any other searches, and

1 I was only back there for maybe two minutes before I was ordered
2 out.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. And from that point I went to the front of the building,
5 I teamed up with my officer, and the rest of my -- the members of
6 Ladder 26, and we worked right off the front of the building,
7 searching digging.

8 Q. Okay. So were you there when they did the clearing of
9 the road of the debris?

10 A. Clearing of the road?

11 Q. Yes.

12 A. No.

13 Q. You were not there?

14 A. No.

15 Q. What time did you leave the site?

16 A. I mean, again, it's hard to say because I didn't have a
17 watch on and I didn't have a phone on and it was a long day, but I
18 would approximate 3:00.

19 Q. So you completely left the site at 3:00?

20 A. I would say that would be. I mean, it could have been
21 2, it could have been 4, it could have been 1:30. I mean, I just
22 -- it was a long day, so I couldn't tell you. I would say
23 approximately 3:00.

24 Q. Okay. Did you observe a bulldozer or a big backhoe
25 doing some clearing or digging in any form?

1 A. Yeah, I mean when we were relieved of the -- when we
2 were relieved of -- we had been working off the front pile for a
3 while. After, you know, probably an hour and a half when chief
4 ordered us out, put another unit in to give us relief. And that
5 point we stepped, and we were in like a standby mode, like many
6 firemen would be. And I do remember at some point seeing --
7 having to clear out of the way because they were -- I don't know
8 what type of equipment it was, I don't remember anything too
9 large, but they were trying to clear debris on Park Avenue.
10 Because, again, the big obstacle any worker was dealing with that
11 day was just all the debris that was on Park Avenue that you
12 couldn't get through.

13 Q. Okay. So did you hear or were you present when the
14 first or the second explosion or third one, happened?

15 A. I do not recall any second or third explosion.

16 Q. No explosion from the rubble, or from a hole that is
17 close to the area, 1642, that you can remember?

18 A. No.

19 MR. EMEABA: Thank you.

20 MR. CHHATRE: Chris?

21 BY MR. STOLICKY:

22 Q. Okay, this is Chris Stolicky. Quick question for the
23 record, what is a taxpayer?

24 A. Taxpayer, would be like a storefront, a storefront?

25 Q. Okay, a commercial building?

1 A. A commercial property, yes. I think, I believe it might
2 have been a laundromat. I could be wrong, but it was a two-story
3 taxpayer on the 116th side, which would be a commercial property.

4 Q. Okay, I'm not sure if anyone has asked yet, but while
5 you were working around the buildings, and I guess the whole site,
6 do you recall smelling gas at all? I know there's a lot of heavy
7 smoke.

8 A. Yeah, you know what, to be honest, I do not. And I
9 remember talking about it with guys after, and I don't remember
10 smelling any gas. To the point when we were on our way there, I
11 mean, sitting across from me, I remember, you know -- you thought
12 it was -- you thought it was a gas explosion, a train collision,
13 which to be honest that was my first thought, or as someone just
14 possible terrorist threat. But even when I got there, realizing
15 it wasn't a train collision, right away you just assumed it was a
16 gas explosion, but I did not smell any gas.

17 MR. STOLICKY: That's all I have.

18 MR. CHHATRE: Okay, Frank?

19 MR. MCCARTON: I'm good, Ravi.

20 MR. CHHATRE: Lenny?

21 MR. SINGH: I'm fine, thank you.

22 MR. CHHATRE: Any follow-ups? If not, thank you so much
23 for coming. I appreciate your time, and if you remember something
24 that you want to convey it to us through Frank you can always
25 reach us. So this is not the end of the communication.

1 Off the record, thank you.

2 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: MULTISTORY STRUCTURE EXPLOSION
 NATURAL GAS PIPELINE LEAK
 MAY 12, 2014
 HARLEM, NEW YORK
 Interview of Donald Mayerhofer

DOCKET NUMBER: DCA-14-MP-002

PLACE: Brooklyn, New York

DATE: September 30, 2014

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.

Keith J. Maurer
Transcriber