

Inside the Inferno – The Marco Polo Fire One Year Later

Fire Captain: Marco Polo is (inaudible).

Dispatcher: Hey, what's up man?

Fire Captain: Hey, you get the call yet?

Dispatcher: No... not yet.

Fire captain: 2333 Kapiolani... I think.

Dispatcher: 2333?

Fire Captain: Yeah, somebody came by the station and pointed it out. So, some thick black smoke showing from...

Dispatcher: 2333 Kapiolani.

Fire Captain: 2333.... yeah!

Dispatcher: OK... you got it!

Fire Captain: OK... bye!

News Reporter: July 14th, 2017-- that was the first call to 9-1-1 about the Marco Polo fire, and it came from this station here (this fire station, McCully / Moiliili).

In this day of modern technology (where just about everyone seems to have a cell phone), no one had called into 9-1-1 to report the fire.

In fact, someone had actually walked up to the station here, and alerted the captain about the fire.

Dispatcher: Address... 2333 Kapiolani Boulevard... operations B2 Tak3. Building fire...engines 2, 3, 5. Latitude, Battalion 2.

[Sirens blaring]

News Reporter: It's not known how long the fire had been burning before that call had been made.

In the next half hour, we're gonna take a look back at the Marco Polo fire... one of the biggest firefighting endeavors undertaken by the Honolulu Fire Department in modern history.

[Helicopter Noise]

Fire Fighter: It was already growing.

Then, I kind of had this... feeling in my mind like... "Uh oh this is not going to be a good one!"

Fire Captain: Honolulu Fire Department is one of the biggest fire departments in the country.

But, even something like this brought us to our knees.

News Reporter: We'll offer you tips-- in case you find yourself in a high-rise fire.

And, for the first time, we'll hear from the firefighters who battled that blaze.

A blaze some thought they would die in...

Fire Fighter: And, it was so hot, that I felt like my face was burning through my...

Fire Captain: Biggest thing is... we're a unit. Let's all get out together!

Fire Fighter: We all thought we were on fire. I thought I was on fire.

News Reporter: As we take you inside the inferno.

[Ominous Music Playing]

Fire Fighter: I woke up that morning thinking I had 32 shifts left.

I woke up. It was a beautiful day. I'll always remember... I was driving to work. It was a beautiful day.

I had no... no idea what was in store for me and our... crews.

News Reporter: Chief Ken Lee was nearing retirement on July 14, 2017.

[Music Continues]

He was the Honolulu Fire Department's incident commander that day.

One of the last days of his career was about to become the most memorable.

He responded to the call knowing this would be a tough fight.

The S-shaped Marco Polo stood 36 floors.

It was designed to be breezy-- to take advantage of the trade winds.

Louvered privacy doors allowed the breeze to blow in when fire doors were opened.

Interior hallways... it was also designed with no sprinklers.

They weren't mandatory when Marco Polo was built.

All of this made the Marco Polo one of HFD's troubled buildings.

[Music Continues]

As the wind fueled the flames, there was nothing to stop them.

[Sirens Blaring]

Lee rolled up on scene just six minutes after the initial call, but knew instantly they were already behind.

The flames... on a usual high-rise fire, the flames are normally coming out and lapping up.

This one... it looked like a blowtorch-- it was shooting out of it.

The unit... we didn't know what floor it was... didn't know how many floors.

News Reporter: Instincts and training kicked in...

Lee was the point person for the 120 plus firefighters set to go to battle.

Ken Lee: But, as soon as we made entrance on our... on King Street...

[Sirens Blaring]

You could see the smoke coming from the... Marco Polo apartments.

So, we knew already that... you know... this was something big, and we [were] going up...

[Keyboard noise]

Dispatcher: All companies responding to a building fire at Marco Polo Condominiums.

This is fully involved.

[Music Continues]

The unit is fully involved.

Ken Lee: We got there... we already had issues with the elevators.

Their passenger elevators were out.

News Reporter: The elevators were a big problem when the station from Kaimuki arrived.

[Fire fighter gearing up]

They suited up much like this firefighter... except each one also carried an extra oxygen bottle.

And, there was only one way up-- the stairs.

Fire Fighter: Yeah... 24 floors. You've got all of your equipment on.

You know you're gonna be working for a while... so its a matter of... get up there as quick as you can.

But, also, you need some energy to actually work. So...

Fire Fighter #2: Pace yourself.... yeah.

Dispatcher: Command copies... multiple units on fire on the 26th floors.

News Reporter: As firefighters worked their way towards the blaze...

[Music Continues]

They were pushed back at the Ewa stairwell.

Fire Fighter: Trying to gain entry through the Ewa stairwell. Encountering intense heat and smoke.

Fire Captain: This is an outdoor stairwell and there's... you couldn't see (you know)... you really couldn't see this close... you couldn't see your hand in front of her face.

Fire Fighter: The visibility was very poor.

At some points, you couldn't see past (you know) the length of your hand.

And, I remember, at one point, I think I was on my way out after fighting that apartment fire... it had gotten too hot, and we were on our way out.

And, the firefighter that was backing me up (right behind me)... I had turned around to grab him, and to follow him out.

And, I remember at one point... I'm holding on to his shoulder, and I couldn't see him. I could only feel him... you know?

And, that was some scary stuff at that moment.

Dispatcher: We have reports of people sheltering in place with deteriorating conditions in multiple units of the 26th floor.

[Background Noise]

We have to send in more resources with hoses.

Dispatcher: Can I get your phone number please... just to confirm?

News Reporter: Lives on the line... 9-1-1 calls in to fire dispatch answered by Honolulu firefighters like Micah Kominae.

Dispatcher: We had one gentleman (I remember taking that call)... and he had said that smoke was filling his apartment.

Dispatcher: Is smoke inside your unit?

Resident: Yeah... it's coming in.

Dispatcher: Ok... you know what... if you can just keep the door closed...

Put some... block it up with a towel (if you can) or something... just to keep the smoke from coming inside.

Resident: Yeah.

Dispatcher: If you want to go outside on the balcony, and then just close the door.

Dispatcher #2: Command from fire dispatch... you have confirmed patients... correction... occupants on balconies on the 26th floor.

News Reporter: This woman [was] rescued from her 26th floor balcony.

Some people were trapped. Others just needed help getting down-- helped by firefighters who carried them down multiple flights of stairs.

Fire Fighter: Two of us carried one of them down on a towel.

And, we managed to carry them down the seven stories.

And, my two stronger guys on my crew carried the... occupant in a wheelchair.

So, they had to carry the wheelchair along with (you know) the resident in the wheelchair... back down the seven stories down to our safe zone.

News Reporter: Then down to the ground, they were met by emergency medical services crews.

Then came the dispatch calls they dreaded...

[Somber Music Playing]

Fire Fighter: I got a victim in 2615. DOA.

News Reporter: The awful truth... fatalities.

Komenae heard a tragedy play out in real time through a 9-1-1 caller.

Komenae: But, I remember that she was saying... her friend is trapped... he's under the bed.

We were trying to give her instructions to give to him (through another line that she was on with him).

Woman Caller: Can you get to a wet... can you get a wet towel for yourself?

Dispatcher: (Inaudible)

Woman Caller: No... he can't.

Dispatcher: Is he disabled in any way?

Woman Caller: No... he's not disabled.

Dispatcher: Ok... does he have a balcony?

Woman Caller: Britt... do you have a balcony?

Britt: Yes, but I can't get to it.

Woman Caller: Ok... you can't get to it because it's too... too thick? The smoke...

Britt: I'm under the bed...

Woman Caller: You're under the bed? He's under the bed.

He just keeps yelling "help, help", and is under the bed.

[Somber Music Playing]

Fire Fighter: Command from engine seven... secondary search finds two victims in 2613.... 2613.

[Somber Music Continues]

Fire Fighter: They are deceased.

News Reporter: Britt Reller and his mother Jean Dilley died in their apartment.

Joanne Kuata died in hers.

Maryland June van Giessen died three weeks later (due to complications from the fire).

Fire Fighter: It was just hard... because it felt so helpless.

This fire was one of those that you just feel very helpless.

And, you're just sitting at your desk kind of saying prayers in your head... for the people in the building, and also for the... your brothers and sisters on the fire floor.

News Reporter: Coming up next... we'll hear more from the Honolulu firefighters as they take us inside the inferno.

[Somber Music Continues]

[Ominous Music Playing]

[Concrete Breaking]

Dispatcher: Be advised... we have some debris beginning to fall on the makai side of the building.

News Reporter: Danger was mounting at the Marco Polo-- debris now falling to the ground outside forcing firefighters to designate a hazard zone.

Inside the battle raged on... with Honolulu firefighters up against their toughest opponent.

Fire Fighter: I've never been in a fire as Extreme as this... and there was actually that thought that came by... "Ooh... this might be the last ...last fire."

Fire Fighter #2: So, we got to the door... after I knocked it down... I just saw just this wall of orange (just orange and red). It was just amazing... It's kind of beautiful, but kind of terrifying at the same time.

Fire Captain: Command... this is battalion one safety. Just to inform... makai side of building... heavy smoke and flames visible.

Flames lapping up to the upper floors.

Fire Fighter: So, we did our best fighting the fire.

I could feel my face getting hotter... like it was starting to burn up.

So, I got to the point [that] it was unbearable already.

So, I told Eddie... "Let's get out of here!"

News Reporter: Kimo Oliveira's face was blistering from the heat-- that intense heat felt by one firefighter after another.

Fire Fighter: Turned around... it went from one-hundred percent visibility to zero (just like that).

You couldn't see anything... the smoke was billowing out.

You feel like you're on fire. I thought I was gonna die.

I literally was like... "This is it."

Fire Captain: I remember being behind my nozzleman... the firefighter in front of me... and feeling my face was on fire.

And, first thing that went through my mind...

So, we wear these Nomex protective hoods to protect our face.

[Firefighter adjusting Nomex mask]

And, I remember thinking... "Oh no... I forgot my hood."

I was like... "My face is on fire."

And then, I'm... "No, no, no"... I put on my hood.

It was the one time in my career where my life kind of flashed... kind of got scared little bit.

News Reporter: Despite the smoke and flames they fought on, but in at least three instances the heat and thick black smoke separated crews.

Fire Fighter: Mayday, mayday... mayday from staging Ewa. We've got firefighters (inaudible).

[Background Noise]

Dispatcher: Are you declaring an emergency?

Fire Fighter: I called a mayday. I was screaming for... a team or backup to go get my guys.

I thought they were trapped.

Maybe 30 seconds (if that) I see them walking out of the smoke under the stairwell

[Radio Squawks]

Fire Fighter: From Ladder Four, we do not know where firefighter Nate Lee is. Possible mayday in the Diamond Head stairwell.

Fire Captain: But, that was the first time I really... I really felt for a few moments... I might have lost one of my guys.

It was really like someone had kicked me in the stomach.

News Reporter: Each mayday would end with relief-- confirmation for each captain... their men were still alive.

Nate Lee: Evac command... this is firefighter Lee. I'm on the 24th floor near the elevator.

News Reporter: The fire refused to die-- now on the 26th and 27th floors.

Fire Fighter: Stairwell Ewa from 27th up right now is untenable.

Smoke and flames in the stairwell.

News Reporter: Firefighters under captain Randall Lindsay staged on the 24th floor.

This is where they could gather themselves, cool down a bit, get their next assignment.

But, when you're inside the inferno, danger is never far away.

Captain Randall Lindsey: And then, at one point, the floor starts shaking.

And, not this way... how buildings sway... but this way... and we can hear the fire traveling on the upper floors.

We can hear it coming from the other end of the hallway.

And, it's making these loud noises... so... and as its traveling you can hear the glass falling and stuff breaking on the upper floors.

Just... sounds like a big wind tunnel...

[Vocalizing]

And, it's going through the...

[Dramatic Music Continues]

News Reporter: It's at this moment, Lindsay sees something on his men's faces that rarely shows.

Fear... feeling around for their cell phones-- he believes so they can make one final call to their loved ones.

Captain Ramsey: So, I go back up.

Oh... I said... "No... on behalf of a grateful nation... the mayor of the City and County of Honolulu and Fire Chief Nevis, if you die today, we want you to know that we appreciate all you did."

[Dramatic Music Continues]

And, this is a firefighters right... they had to hear that... because we gotta... we got to move past that, and we gotta pick up... we gotta pick up, and keep going.

News Reporter: So, they did. And, just as they were running low on air and water... a welcome sight... federal firefighters.

Fire Fighter: I've never been so happy to see [Federal] fire guys.

And, they were instrumental... because the elevators were not working.

We ran out of water. We ran out of SCBA bottles. And, they... were pumping equipment and supplies for to us.

Fire Fighter: Command, engine 33 had to retreat. Said it's too hot in the hallway. We may have to vent from the opposite stairwell.

Here's what I'm hearing... that there's no point in attacking the fire from that stairwell.

I'm thinking of abandoning that stairwell... making all fire efforts on the other side.

Firefighters would change their strategy and get on the fire floors through the Diamond Head stairwell-- a vertical fight, flames trying to spread upwards, firefighters trying to contain them.

Fire Fighter: We're currently on the 25th floor (I believe) on the makai balconies... shooting three house lines off the balconies trying to cool off hot palling gasses. Not sure how it's working.

News Reporter: It was working-- little by little, hour by hour the tide turned.

Fire Fighter: Cap... we actually knocked down the fire on 26. We're making our way up to 27 now... 27... it looks like we're able to continue forward.

[Radio Beeps]

Command: Operations copy. Keep going!

Fire Fighter: We got hot spots on 26th floor, 27th floor, and 28th floor. But, [the] fire is under control on all three floors.

News Reporter: Seven hours after the fire was first reported...

Fire fighter: Fire dispatch copies command... fire extinguished at 21:15.

News Reporter: 9:15... extinguished and every firefighter accounted for...

[Somber Music Playing]

Captain Pao Ching Wang returned the next day... walking through the blackened hallway units.

Captain Wang: It was scary walking without any threat of danger... because it was completely dark.

And, there was no smoke. Everything was pitch-black.

You could barely see... and you kind of feel it.

You feel it come back... you're like... "Oh, yeah that was... rough."

[Somber Music Playing over the sound of winds]

News Reporter: Even on this day... the trade winds blowing through.

Captain Wang: It was interesting that... how far that first... how far the fire had spread.

News Reporter: Compelling video that shows the destruction. It looks like a war zone. This once was several apartments.

The drywall disintegrated. The metal studs and pipes bent.

And, in that walk through... a lesson that couldn't be clearer.

Captain Wang: And, I remember two apartments... were on fire. And, the one in the middle was pretty clean. And, that was because they had their door closed.

And, that's a big... that's a big issue.

I think...in hindsight if everybody had the door closed... [it] might have been a different story.

News Reporter: Next... the change brought about by the Marco Polo fire-- when Inside the Inferno continues.

[Somber Music Continues]

[Music Continues]

[Upbeat Music Playing]

Nearly a year after the Marco Polo fire, the cause is still undetermined, and the numbers are coming into focus.

Seven alarms, four people dead, more than 107 million dollars in damage.

There's been fallout. HFD had to pay a seven-thousand-dollar fine over asbestos issues.

The Hawaii Firefighters Association filed a complaint.

And, state investigators found the majority of firefighters did not properly bag contaminated equipment and gear at the scene.

Bobby Lee: I was not that surprised about them getting a citation.

We approached them initially with our concerns (shortly after the fire).

And, you know, when they disregarded us... we really had no option other than to... call HIOSH at that point, and let them... see if they can come and address our concerns.

Fire Chief Neves: So, we've made great strides since the Marco Polo [fire] in educating our folks... figuring out engineering... giving them extra protective equipment (where they don't have to use the dirty equipment), and setting up depots where they can go and get new equipment (as needed)

[Applause]

News Reporter: And, there's been legislation.

On May 3rd of this year, in front of the Marco Polo, Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell signed Bill 69-- requiring Oahu high-rises to undergo a life-safety review within three years, and make necessary changes within six.

Chief Neves: Is it easy to get out? Is it easy for the firefighters to get in? If the fires on the floor... can the fire be contained. How about your sprinkler system (if you have them)?

How about your alarm systems... your elevators...

News Reporter: The law also makes sprinklers mandatory, but allows majority owners of condominiums to opt out.

Other new laws provide tax incentives to high-rise owners who choose sprinklers.

Marco Polo owners did choose sprinklers, and after majority vote... the building will be retrofitted.

Fire Chief Manuel Neves is hoping other buildings will follow suit.

Chief Neves: Even the fire sprinkler... just having a fire sprinkler there (without a doubt)-- that would either suppress or extinguish the fire completely.

News Reporter: He says anyone who wants to opt out of installing sprinklers should take heed of the Marco Polo.

Chief Neves: Yeah... you may have the right to choose the risk that you would take on in the place that you live.

But really, you're not only risking yourself but you're also risking your neighbors.

Look at the Marco Polo. The folks that perished, they weren't in the apartment...

They were across the hall. They were down the hall. They were up on another floor.

So, it's your neighbors that are gonna be at risk.

News Reporter: Up next... some final thoughts on HFD's battle "Inside the Inferno."

[Sirens blaring in the distance]

[Ominous Music Playing]

[Rising Music]

The Marco Polo fire was first and foremost a tragedy.

[Door Opening]

Chief Neves credits his firefighters and their training for keeping the death toll from being even higher.

Chief Neves: It's a sad story that Marco Polo... that people had lost their lives and their possessions. But, on the flip side, if you talk about the...

The fire-fighting effort... I think our guys (not think I know)... our guys did a terrific job in overcoming all of the obstacles that were put in front of them.

News Reporter: The department receiving praise from fire departments across the nation.

Fire Chief: Oh, the Honolulu Fire Department did a phenomenal job fighting that fire-- given everything that they were up against (which was rapidly progressive in changing fire conditions on a 26th floor).

The fire actually lapped up to 27 and 28 also...

They did a tremendous job against it really, really really bad conditions.

Fire Fighter: I'm really proud of the guys. I mean you really saw a lot of hard-working, dedicated (you know) firefighters.

[Sirens Blaring]

We're not one to... toot our own horns...

But, I really just was proud (you know)... saw the work. I saw the way guys dug deep.

Fire Fighter #2: If it wasn't for the bravery and... tenaciousness and ingenuity of the firefighters of that day... that firefighter could have... that fire could have went all the way up to the roof.

Fire Fighter #3: I can say it was tough... but man... I'm glad I was there.

I was happy to help.

So proud of my guys. They did great job!

Worked hard... we're safe.

I can say that when we were in the truck leaving... I was happy.

And, I told them I was happy because... we're alive. I remember saying that.

It's a good day... we're alive!

Ken Lee: I want to start by saying you know my condolences go out to the loved ones of the four that perished

I wanted their loved ones to know... that we... we did everything we could to get them out. We knew where they were.

We knew what they were going through, and we gave it all.

We gave everything.... we risked our guys, our girls... our gals.

And, like I said... the mantra that we're willing to risk a lot to save a lot... we risked it all.

News Reporter: One year later, and you can still see the effects of the fire.

And, residents on the fire floors say they've been told it could be yet another year before they're allowed back in their units.

The Marco Polo Fire was an impetus for change-- a change in laws... a change in heart for the resident owners of the Marco Polo who voted to retrofit their building with sprinklers.

And, perhaps a change for the owners of the other 300 buildings that do not have sprinklers in Honolulu.

We'd like to say Mahalo to the Honolulu Fire Department for the firefighters who shared those very personal stories with us, and to the first responders who work to keep us safe.

I'm Paula Akana for Island News. Aloha!

[Music Continues]

[Uplifting Music]