



*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts*

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133-1054

**PAM RICHARDSON**  
**REPRESENTATIVE**  
6TH MIDDLESEX DISTRICT

Committees on:  
Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government  
House Committee on Steering, Policy and Scheduling  
House Committee on Post Audit and Oversight

ROOM 448, STATE HOUSE  
TEL. (617) 722-2582  
FAX (617) 722-2879

September 8, 2009

Dear Town Meeting Members

As you are aware, in 1979 Framingham lost a dedicated firefighter, John Costanza, bravely fighting a fire at a residence on Concord Street. John served as a Lieutenant on the Framingham Department, but it had been formally announced that he was to receive a promotion to Captain. Unfortunately the tragedy which took his life occurred before he could officially assume the promotion.

John Costanza's son, whose name is also John Costanza, has asked the town to vote to support language which would posthumously promote Firefighter John Costanza to the rank of Captain in the Framingham Fire Department. The Town of Framingham must formally vote in support of this language prior to any legislative action.

Several family members, including Framingham School Committee member Richard Finlay, still reside in Framingham. A formal recognition of John Costanza's achievement is very important to the family and it would be appreciated. In addition, Mr. Robert McCarthy, President of the Professional Fire Fighters Association of Massachusetts and Mr. Peter Devito, President of the Framingham Firefighters support this posthumous promotion as well.

I appreciate your consideration of this request. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pam Richardson".

Pam Richardson

Cc: Mr. John Costanza, Mr. Richard Finlay, Mr. Robert McCarthy, Mr. Peter Devito

## Honoring Our Past, Embracing Our Future

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### Looking back and Learning

This year will mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a line of duty death of Framingham's own. On March 18, 1979, Fire Lieutenant John Costanza died in the performance of his duties at a structure fire at 337 Concord Street. While there are still a few of us around who remember John and the fire, most of us have no idea who John Costanza was and what happened on that Sunday morning 30 years ago.

John grew up in Saxonville the 7<sup>th</sup> of 9 children born to Sicilian immigrants. He attended Framingham High School and upon graduation, entered the United States Air Force. Soon after his discharge he became an airline mechanic for Trans World Airlines at LaGuardia Airport in New York. At the time, TWA did not have a maintenance facility in Massachusetts and the commute to New York was too much and kept him away from his family. A devoted family man, especially to his mother, he took the fire department entrance exam to be closer. He worked for the Post Office until he was appointed to the department in 1965. John was married to Mary and together they had two children, John and Wendy.

By all accounts he was a worker who needed to be busy. It did not matter what needed to be done at home or at the fire station. No matter what type of call the company was on, he was in the middle of it so it came as no surprise that he would be working at this fire. In 1976, he achieved his first promotion to the rank of Fire Lieutenant.

John was the officer in charge of Engine Company 6 that tour. Framingham was still working the 10's and 14's then and this was to be his last tour as a Fire Lieutenant. He was once again being promoted and was to report for duty the next day as a Fire Captain.

The first alarm assignment to this fire consisted of Engines 5 and 6, Tower 1 and Car 5 (Shift Deputy's designation then) out of Concord Street and Engine 3 out of Hollis Street. The staffing on this day consisted of an officer and three firefighters on Engines 3 and 6, an officer and two firefighters on Engines 5 and two firefighters on the Tower. Framingham did not regularly staff their ladder companies with officers as they do today.

To give you some perspective on the structure and where it was, 337 Concord Street is just a couple of house lots north of the intersection of Everett Avenue and Concord Street. It is next to the structure where we have recently had two working fires in the past 6 months. A newer duplex to the left (bravo side) of 331 Concord Street now occupies the lot where the original structure stood. It was a two and one half story wood, balloon frame constructed house and the inside configuration was very similar to the house next door. The fire was in the void spaces created by this type of construction and very difficult to get at. Heavy fire was showing on the upper floors with thick, brown smoke issuing from everywhere.

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Engine 5 would have been first due and positioned in front of the building. The initial attack line came off them and advanced in. Engine 3 also positioned in front of the building and additional attack lines were advanced. Tower 1 set up in the driveway to the right (delta side).

In those days Engines 4 and 6 were the "Hose Wagons" and their primary function at fires was to supply the first due Engine with water within their respective districts. They also handled all of the medical aid runs in their respective districts. Once a reliable water supply had been established, the crew would report for further assignments. At the time, it was not uncommon for the crew to remain separated until it was time to make up and return to quarters. The hydrant men would be left at the hydrant and the chauffeur would assist the first due chauffeur with the connections. The officer would join the attack in what ever manner seemed most appropriate.

Engine 6 dropped the two back step men at the hydrant on the corner of Pond Street and laid two 2 ½ inch lines into Engine 5. When the two back step men completed making the hydrant, they walked up to Engine 6 now parked at the corner of Everett Avenue and Concord Street to retrieve their air packs and tools. They then made their way to the front porch where they were met by Lieutenant Costanza. He brought them over to Tower 1 and paired them up with the Tower crew. He then returned to the structure alone.

It is unclear exactly how, where and/or why John entered the building, but he remained unaccounted for most of the incident. It is important to note that John's radio was out of service for repairs this day and he was wearing a compact, 15 minute air pack that the officers used known as a "sling pack". The firefighters were outfitted with the 30 minute air packs. As the incident progressed, the supply of air bottles ran out and after some debate, all members were ordered out of the structure.

According to Lieutenant Bob Foley there was no universal evacuation signal in effect at the time so this order was, for the most part, word of mouth. Lieutenant Foley was assigned to Engine 6 as a Firefighter this tour and was only on the job for 7 month when this fire occurred.

"Bottles were being shuttled out to be refilled. Eventually they were unable to fill anymore."<sup>1</sup> "They (the Chief and Deputy Chief) went back and forth about whether we should be inside or out. We were eventually ordered out"<sup>2</sup>

When it was assumed that all members were out of the structure, exterior defensive operations began with hand lines and an aerial master stream from the Tower being put into operation. When the heaviest of the fire was knocked down, crews reentered the structure and began the overhauling process. Still there was no indication that John was missing however at some point it became clear that

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<sup>1</sup> Foley, Robert N. Lieutenant, Framingham Fire Department, Interview.

<sup>2</sup> Foley, Robert N. Lieutenant, Framingham Fire Department, Interview.

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no one had seen him. The Deputy began to transmit over the radio and word quickly spread that they were looking for him. He was found in a third floor front bedroom, under a pile of debris and the door to that bedroom, approximately two hours after the fire began.

While we can not accurately account for what happened, it can be surmised that he became disoriented because the door to the bedroom had closed behind him and with only a handle on the outside provided no landmark. With the limited supply of air he had, it was quickly exhausted when he could not find his way out and he was unable to call for help as his radio was being repaired. His helmet and face piece were located in separate corners of the room indicating that he continued to search for the exit. When the ceiling collapsed, it trapped him behind the door where he was later found however he most likely was overcome by the Carbon Monoxide prior to this event.

Interior companies did make a push into that third floor bedroom early on. While it appears that the ceiling had already come down, the door was forced off the hinges and fell over the debris concealing him from that company.

During the ensuing days, weeks and years many inquiries were made and many decisions were questioned. Today, NIOSH, NFPA and other agencies will formally investigate line of duty deaths; however this did not take place for this incident. It is easy to say that any line of duty death, short of those that occur as a result of unexpected and unpredictable events, is un-necessary and criminal and it is easy today to look at the staffing and the fire ground practices of the time and say this was predictable but it was how business was done then.

The North East has historically been resistant to change and except for the West Coast, (Arizona, California, etc); Formal, Structured Incident Command and Fire Ground Management systems did not exist. Fire ground operations were mostly everyone trying to do the right thing but with no collective incident action plan and fire ground accountability did not exist as we know it today. What would make this tragedy a crime would be that he had died in vain and that nothing was learned from it.

So was his death in vain and did anyone learn from it? One of his colleagues retired Deputy Fire Chief Tom Rinoldo reflects. "Johnny was one of the many brave heroes' of the era who collectively in giving the ultimate sacrifice caused enough of the progressive leaders, those who took the time to look outside of their little worlds, to take action and to begin to make changes".<sup>3</sup>

Positive change did come to Framingham. Advances in equipment and technology increased the personal safety of the firefighters and allowed them to perform more efficiently. Better drafting and enforcement of building construction and fire prevention codes began to increase the level of fire protection within structures.

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<sup>3</sup> Rinoldo, Thomas H., Deputy Chief retired Framingham Fire Department. 1969 – 1993, Interview

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A better understanding of the environment we work in and the strategy and tactics needed to mitigate and manage an incident began to infiltrate the fire service through better training. These changes and improvements were happening nationally and were brought to Framingham by some dedicated individuals who made it their mission to effect change in a culture that resisted it.

But with change come some challenges. The requirement of fire protective systems for the early detection of the products of combustion, while dramatically and rightfully increasing the survivability of occupants, has provided us with earlier notification meaning we are arriving much earlier in the progression of the incident. When in the past we pulled up on fire showing indicating a flashover most likely had occurred, we now in many cases arrive pre-flashover increasing our potential exposure to a more volatile environment. Better personal protective equipment now fully encapsulates our firefighters. While better protecting them from the thermal insult they are exposed to, it allows them to advance further into the structure and potentially closer to that volatile environment if they are not aware of the surrounding conditions and fire behavior.

Building construction codes have produced structures that are more energy efficient and better retain the heat. They also allow for less expensive, light-weight construction materials that are very strong when installed and function as designed, however do not hold up well under fire conditions and fail earlier with more catastrophic results. The composition of the interior furnishings has also added to the challenges. The use of plastics has increased the rate and intensity of what is burning while at the same time sharply increasing the volume, quantity and toxicity of lethal gases present at all fires. This means we are encountering fires that are bigger, faster, hotter and more toxic than ever before.

Currently we are responding to a wider variety of low frequency, high risk incidents than in previous years such as Hazardous Materials and Technical Rescues incidents requiring us to be better educated and adaptable to a broader spectrum of knowledge and skills.

Economic fluctuations putting budgetary strains on cities and towns forced layoffs and reductions while call volumes continue to increase forcing fire departments to do more with less. Framingham was forced to deactivate two engine companies (4 and 6) and a ladder company (Tower 1), privatize the ambulance service and decrease the work force, down from 189 members to the current staffing of 147.

What does all this mean? It means that all of us must be more dedicated to and educated about our profession, not just fires but in everything we are called upon to do. The job performance requirements learned in recruit school are only the beginning, to what must be ongoing effective training and career development. We must eliminate the division between management and labor, prioritize and act upon the issues that really matter. Jointly, we must work with the city and town administrators and educate them that reduction of public safety resources is not responsible. Everyone is keenly aware of the economic issues but the reduction in apparatus, equipment and/or personnel could have tragic results to both firefighter and the public. We are in this together and through effective, cooperative communication and relevant, quality training, the safety issues will pretty much take care of themselves.

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As we reflect back on what has and has not changed within the department and the fire service in general remember this, John Costanza did not die in vain! While it was a very tragic and painful event in the departments' history, it inspired many of his colleagues to really think about this job and the very real dangers they encounter. It inspired them to seek out training and network with other fire service professionals throughout the country to help ensure that everything necessary was being done to provide as safe an environment as possible given the nature of what we do. Although this met with great resistance, even to this day, the message was clear. "We must be proactive".

It should also inspire all current and future members to take their responsibility of being a firefighter, fire officer and chief officer seriously. Personal safety begins with the individual however does not end there. We have a duty to look out for each other and to provide whatever resources are necessary for us to be able to do our job with the goal of going home at the end of each shift to our families the same way we came in. We should not settle for less than that and John's death should be a constant reminder that we can not!



So on March 18, 2009, take a moment to remember John and the sacrifice he made for his family, the citizens of Framingham and for the department. Make sure that on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and beyond, the memory of Lieutenant John Costanza is alive and well and is still inspiring new generations of Framingham Firefighters.

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### Acknowledgments;

John's sister, Carol Hubener and her husband Allen helped provide some insight on John outside the fire department. While we so often concentrate on the "Brotherhood", it sometimes overshadows the real family. The mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives and children we leave behind and it is to them that we are eternally grateful for standing by us. Carol and Allen now reside in Florida.

Fire Lieutenant Robert N. Foley was a "rookie" firefighter in 1979. He was appointed to the department in August of 1978. He was assigned to Engine Company 6 and at the fire that day. His first hand account of the events has helped keep the information accurate. Lieutenant Foley is currently assigned to Ladder Company 3, Group 3. He is an instructor for the Massachusetts Firefighting Academy and provides training for the Recruit Firefighter Training program and the Firefighter Skills program in Rapid Intervention. He is also an Assistant Coordinator for the Flammable Gas Training program. Lieutenant Foley is also an examiner for the Massachusetts Fire Training Council which oversees all firefighter training and firefighter certifications in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Retired Deputy Fire Chief Thomas J. Potenza was a Captain on Engine 1 and off duty at the time of the incident. He reported to the scene and, with several off duty members, stood by and observed the incident as it unfolded. It was his input from this perspective that helped explain the management of the incident as a whole. He was an instructor for the Massachusetts Firefighting Academy and past president of the Massachusetts Institute of Fire Department Instructors. He was also a long time member and instructor for the International Society of Fire Service Instructors. He helped usher in many of the changes that occurred within the Framingham Fire Department. Deputy Potenza retired from the department in 1993.

Retired Deputy Fire Chief Thomas H. Rinoldo was a Lieutenant on Engine 2 and off duty at the time of the incident. At home listening to the scanner, the fire was only blocks from his house and he reported to the scene. He assisted in many outside fire ground tasks including setting up an engine on a hydrant to help provide a more reliable and sufficient water supply. A common task today however rarely if ever performed at the time. He was an instructor at the Massachusetts Firefighting Academy and past president of the Massachusetts Institute of Fire Department Instructors. He was also a long time member and instructor for the International Society of Fire Service Instructors. He was an instructor in the Division of Continuing Education for Quinsigamond Community College and Middlesex Community College teaching "Fire Service Hydraulics" in the Fire Science Degree Program. He was a long time Town Meeting member, serving on the Capital Budget Committee and on the Town Mapping Committee. Shortly after his retirement he was appointed to and served on the Town of Framingham Finance Committee. Along with Deputy Potenza, he helped usher in many of the changes that occurred within the Framingham Fire Department. Deputy Rinoldo retired from the department in 1993.

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The author, Fire Lieutenant Thomas J. Rinoldo was 13 years old at the time of the fire. He is the son of Retired Deputy Fire Chief Thomas H. Rinoldo. Appointed to the department in December of 1993, Lieutenant Rinoldo is currently assigned to Platform Company 1, Group 1. He is an instructor for the Massachusetts Firefighting Academy and provides training for the Recruit Firefighter Training program and is one of the lead instructors and former Assistant Coordinator of the Technical Rescue Training program. He is also an examiner for the Massachusetts Fire Training Council which oversees all firefighter training and firefighter certifications in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Lieutenant Rinoldo is also a member of the International Society of Fire Service Instructors.