On August 21, 1988, the weather was warm and sunny. In the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) in the Bronx, routine tasks were being conducted and Multi-Unit Drills were taking place.

At 1748 Jerome Avenue in the Bronx, a single story taxpayer stood at the corner of E. 175 Street. The building was 50 feet x 100 feet. The building contained six stores, four fronting on Jerome Avenue, and two fronting on East 175 Street. In the cellar of this building, there was an illegal social club called “El Hoyo” (aka: “The Cave” or “The Hole”). The only entrance to this illegal club was off of the Jerome Avenue side. There was a stairway approximately 10 feet from the front of the building. The stairway entrance was flush with the floor and the wooden stairway was steep.

Inside the club in the cellar, the ceiling was low (7 feet). There were candles burning in the club. There was a bar towards the front of the occupancy. There was no sprinkler system, automatic alarms or fire extinguishers in the social club. There was no emergency lighting.
There was a confiscated salad oil bottle filled with gasoline that a patron brought to the club a week before. A Bouncer searched a man attempting to enter the club with the container on his person. The Bouncer found the container, and then ejected the patron. The Bouncer kept the container filled with gasoline. It was being stored behind the bar.

At around noon, the club was filled with patrons. There were estimates from the Fire Marshals that there were as many as 150 people in the small club. Loud music was playing. It was a party atmosphere. The salad oil container filled with gasoline was discovered to be knocked over. A barmaid attempted to clean up the spill coming from the container when suddenly, the fluid ignited. The possible ignition source was from one of the candles burning at the bar area. The fire spread quickly and the entire club filled with smoke. The heat and smoke banked down due to the low ceilings.

The area where the fire started was near the stairway, the only exit out of the occupancy. Panic ensued as the patrons flooded the exit. The people charged up the steep wooden stairway until the means of egress was no longer passable. The only exit out was being consumed by fire. Many people were able to escape, some could not. The exiting patrons had to climb through the thermal levels. The heat was unbearable as they came closer to the ceiling level. There were eight trapped people. They were trapped in the El Hoyo Social Club inferno.

Three of the trapped occupants worked their way to the rear of the social club. They were able to breach a wall that lead to the occupancy to the rear of the club, the cellar of Joe’s Auto Repair. On
the floor of the cellar of the auto repair shop were tires, auto parts, and general debris. The three escaping people became overcome with smoke as they attempted to traverse across the cellar floor of Joe’s Auto Repair.

Outside, someone ran to the fire alarm box at the corner of Jerome Avenue and West 175 Street. The Bronx Communications Office received ERS (Emergency Reporting System) Box 2935 at 1237 hours. Engine 42, Engine 75, Ladder 33, Ladder 27 and Battalion 19 were dispatched. Captain Michael Giovinazzo was working overtime in Engine 42 for the day tour. As they approached Jerome Avenue from E. 175 Street, he could see a large cloud of smoke in the sky. At 1240 hours, Engine 42 arrived and transmitted a 10-84 and a 10-75. Engine 46 and Engine 43 were dispatched. The Bronx Fire Dispatchers also sent Rescue 3 and Ladder 59 due to numerous phone calls reporting a fire in a social club. These units were sent before Engine 42 arrived.

Battalion Chief Michael Towey of Battalion 19 arrived at the fire at 1241 hours. He saw: 1) Many civilians in the street in a frenzy attempting to help the Firefighters as they arrived; 2) Smoke and fire coming out of the crack in the sidewalk between the building and the sidewalk; and 3) A heavy fire condition in the stores at ground level that had extended
from the cellar social club occupancy. He called the Bronx Fire Dispatcher and requested ambulances respond for the numerous injured people and the New York Police Department (NYPD) respond for crowd control. At 1244 hours, B.C. Towey transmitted a 2\textsuperscript{nd} alarm.

Capt. Giovinazzo of Engine 42 ordered his Firefighters to stretch a 2 ½ inch hand line to the entrance to the El Hoyo Social Club. Fr. Jim Fearon had the nozzle. He had an arduous task of trying to advance the hose line down the stairway to the social club. Capt. Giovinazzo mistakenly thought the stairs had burned away. Engine 42 lied prone on the floor trying to knock down the fire coming out of the stairway opening.

Ladder 33 arrived as the first due Ladder Company led by Capt. Jimmy Gallagher. Also working in Ladder 33 that day were Fr. John Rafferty, Fr. Joe Maggi, Fr. John Clarke, Fr. Anthony Pascucci, and Fr. James Graney. They saw the fire was extending upward and into three of the four stores on the Jerome Avenue side and into the cockloft. They
commenced forcible entry of roll down gates. They laddered the front of the building and started performing a search of the area above the fire.

Ladder 27 was the second to arrive Ladder Company. Captain Richard Jacquin of Ladder 59 was working overtime in Ladder 27 for the day tour. Also working in Ladder 27 was Fr. Tom Murphy, Fr. John Clavin, Fr. Dennis Fennell, Fr. Joe Kisonas and Fr. Jim Forsyth. Fr. Murphy positioned Ladder 27’s apparatus on the exposure 4 (E. 175 St.) side of the building. He raised the aerial ladder to the roof. Captain Jacquin, Fr. Fennell and Fr. Forsyth went towards the entrance to Joe’s Auto Repair shop. There were several civilians frantically trying to raise the roll down gate of the repair shop. The civilian’s efforts jammed the roll down gate. It
was stuck and it was only raised 2 feet above the floor. Heavy smoke was coming out of the gate.

Captain Jacquin deployed his search rope and he, Fr. Fennell and Fr. Forsyth entered the auto repair shop. The smoke condition was heavy and fire was raging in the cockloft. They made their way toward the rear of the shop. They came upon two large dogs that had succumbed to the smoke. As they made their way deeper into the shop, they found an open stairway. High heat was coming out of the stairway. They descended the stairway, into the rising heat. Half way down the stairway, they found an unconscious man. Captain Jacquin removed him to the outside of the building where he was turned over to EMS personnel that started CPR. Ladder 27’s forcible entry team continued their search for trapped occupants. Captain Jacquin re-entered the cellar where
he found Fr. Dennis Fennell with an unconscious female. He helped Fr. Fennell carry the victim up the stairs and over the obstacles deep in the auto repair shop to the street. Fr. Fennell began resuscitation on the female victim.

While Ladder 27 was making entry into the auto repair shop, Fr. Ed Marcoux of Ladder 59 used the saw with the metal cutting blade to gain better access to the auto repair shop.

Captain Jacquin re-entered the cellar for the third time. When he made it down the scorching cellar stairs, he found Fr. Jim Forsyth with an unconscious male. He was struggling to remove him to safety. Both he and Captain Jacquin were able to remove the unconscious man to the street where resuscitation efforts were started.

Deputy Chief Tom Moran of Division 7 was dispatched on the 10-75. As he was responding, D.C. Moran requested that an additional Battalion Chief be dispatched to act as a Victim Tracking Coordinator.
When he arrived, he was briefed by Battalion Chief Mike Towey of Battalion 19. B.C. Towey was put in charge of the attack on the Jerome Avenue side of the building. Then, at 1249 hours, Deputy Chief Moran transmitted a 3\textsuperscript{rd} Alarm.

Deputy Chief Moran decided to employ an alternative attack point. He ordered Ladder 44 to open a sidewalk cellar gate on the exposure 4 side of the building. The El Hoyo occupancy was one occupancy away from the sidewalk cellar gate entrance. Battalion Chief Bill Peterman of Battalion 17 was ordered to supervise this operation. Ladder 44 was being led by Captain Ed Handibolde. Lieutenant Gary Connelly of Engine 92 ordered his firefighters to advance a hose line into the sidewalk cellar gate. The heat was high enough that Lieutenant Connelly feared flashover in the narrow cellar entrance.
The alternative attack plan that was being conducted by Engine 92 and Ladder 44 was showing progress. Ladder 44 was able to breach a gypsum block wall which led them to the bar area of the El Hoyo social club. Engine 92 was able to extinguish the fire near the front of the cellar occupancy.

Deputy Chief Moran of Division 7 developed a command structure for the fire. He was unable to establish a Command Post for at least 20 minutes into the fire due to the uncontrolled frenzied civilians in the street. He deployed Battalion Chief Towey of Battalion 19 to the front of the building, Battalion Chief Peterman to the operation at the sidewalk cellar gate on exposure 4, Acting Battalion Chief John Ievolo of Battalion 27 was sent to supervise the roof and the rear of the
building, and Battalion Chief Tom Rappe of Battalion 56 was put in charge of coordinating search efforts from the rear of the building.

Unable to advance a hose line into the cellar from the front of the building (Jerome Avenue), Capt. Gallagher of Ladder 33 ordered his members to enter the store over the fire to cut a hole to vent the fire away from the stairway. Fr. John Clarke and Fr. Jack Rafferty of Ladder 33 entered the store above El Hoyo and performed this tactic. Engine 75 moved their back-up hose line into the store to protect these firefighters. Engine 42 was lying on the floor
Engine 92’s hose line was making progress in the cellar. Ladder 33’s forcible entry team made it down the interior stairs and began searching for trapped occupants. Captain Jimmy Gallagher of Ladder 33 found an unconscious male near the bar area. This male was removed up the stairway to the street where CPR was administered. One minute later, another two fire victims were found near the bar area. Another minute passed, and another fire victim was found near the rest rooms. There were now seven victims found and removed from the building. CPR was being administered in the street to these victims.

Deputy Chief Tom Moran of Division 7 was now experiencing the nightmare of every Fire Chief; multiple fire victims in an uncontrolled fire. With the initial reports of between 60 to 200 people trapped, Chief Moran transmitted a 4th Alarm at 1312 hours. One minute later, another fire victim was found by the rear bar. This would be the last fire victim of the El Hoyo Social Club.

EMS personnel informed Deputy Chief Moran that some of the victims that were removed from the cellar inferno had been declared dead. A make-shift morgue was set up at the gas station.

The Rev. Julian Deeken, a Fire Department chaplain, administers last rites to covered bodies at a temporary morgue that was set up at scene of the five alarm fire in the Bronx that erupted in basement of El Hoyo Social Club. (Photo by David Handschuh/NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images)
across the street on E. 175 Street. Six of the eight trapped people would eventually perish.

Operating firefighters were physically and emotionally exhausted. Deputy Chief Moran transmitted a 5th Alarm for relief purposes at 1332 hours. The fire was placed “Probably will Hold” at 1352 hours and declared “Under Control” at 1407 hours.

FDNY Firefighters were pushed to their limits trying to rescue the poor souls that were trapped in this illegal social club. Ladder 33, Ladder 44, and Engine 92 were awarded Unit Citations. Fr. James Forsyth of Ladder 27 was awarded the “Thomas E. Crimmins Medal”, Fr. Dennis Fennell of Ladder 27 was awarded the “Walter Scott Medal” and Captain Richard Jacquin of Ladder 59 was awarded the FDNY’s highest medal, the “James Gordon Bennett Medal.”
Fires in places of public assembly frequently involve a tremendous loss of life. Most recently, on December 2, 2016, the fire in The “Ghost Ship Warehouse” in Oakland California killed 36 people. On November 28, 1942, the fire in the “Coconut Grove” restaurant/night club fire in Boston Massachusetts killed 492 people. On February 20, 2003 in W. Warwick Rhode Island, a fire in the Station night club killed 100 people.

New York City is not immune to such tragedies. In the 1800s, there were 37 major theater fires in New York City. On December 5, 1876, the Brooklyn Theater Fire occurred which killed 295 people and injured hundreds more. On December 18, 1975, the Blue Angel fire happened in Manhattan which killed 7 people. On March 25, 1990, the “Happy Land Social Club Fire” happened in the Bronx which killed 87 people. And, on August 21, 1988, the “El Hoyo” fire happened in the Bronx and it killed 6 people and injured 33 more.
Places of assembly can be theaters, churches, meeting rooms, outdoor stadiums, museums, libraries, restaurants, or night clubs. In New York City, any occupancy that can hold 75 or more people (200 or more for outdoor spaces) is considered a place of public assembly. The seating can be fixed or movable.

The high density of the people in the occupancy is the key problem for life safety in the club. There may be one person for every 5 square feet (We like to have at least 10 square feet per person when evaluating overcrowding conditions.). The high density of the occupants creates problems with fire related human behavior.

![Diagram of Station Night Club, RI](image.png)
When we have a fire tragedy in a place of public assembly, one or more of the fire protection and/or fire prevention plans for the occupancy either breaks down or is non-existent. Consider the following:

1. **EXITS**: Are there an adequate number of exits for the occupancy load? Are the means of egress open? Are the exits adequately marked? Are the exits blocked or masked over with drapes? Are there at least two exits remote from each other? (More exits may be required based on the occupancy.) Do the exit doors open in the direction of exit flow? Do the exit doors have panic hardware?

2. **AUTOMATIC SPRINKLER PROTECTION**: All theaters, churches, museums, meeting halls, restaurants, night clubs (F-1a, F1-b, F-3, and F-4 occupancies) that have live entertainment require an automatic sprinkler system. As a result of the Blue Angel Nightclub fire in Manhattan, Local Law 41 was enacted. Local Law 41 lists the requirements for restaurants and night clubs.
that need sprinkler protection. Any nightclub that has music and dancing requires a sprinkler system unless it has live music that is incidental to the occupancy and no dancing. All of the tragedies mentioned earlier could have been prevented with an operating automatic sprinkler system. See the BISP Manual for all the requirements for sprinkler systems in places of assembly.

3. COMBUSTIBLE MATERIALS: There should be no combustible decorations as part of the occupancy. The Coconut Grove fire had imitation palm trees throughout the occupancy and cloth hung from the ceiling. These decorations greatly contributed to the speed of fire spread.

4. EMERGENCY LIGHTING: All places of public assembly need emergency lighting in the path of egress. Especially in night clubs and theaters, the patrons are in darkness. Considering that most people who are in these occupancies are not familiar with the layout of the occupancy, the emergency lighting may prevent panic and facilitate the movement toward the exits. Illuminated exit signs are also a key component to people moving toward the exits in an emergency.
5. AUTOMATIC FIRE ALARM CONNECTED TO A CENTRAL STATION:
A manual method of transmitting an alarm to the fire department is not reliable. It must be transmitted automatically. There is a tendency for occupancy management to try to fight the fire without calling the fire department. Then, it is too late. In addition, there should be an alarm that sounds within the occupancy itself. Newer alarm systems have a synthesized voice that instructs the patrons what to do.

Thanks go to the following people who contributed to this essay: Deputy Chief Michael Giovinazzo (Ret.), Captain Richard Jacquin (Ret.), Battalion Chief Francis Mannion, Fr. Thomas Murphy (Ret.), Fr. Dennis Fennell (Ret.), Steve Spak, Matthew Daly, Janet Kimmerly (WNYF Magazine), Katy Clements (FDNY Photo Unit), Captain Kevin Diercksen, Leslie Ifill (Fire Records Unit), Deputy Chief Vincent Dunn (Ret.), Fr. Christopher Roberto E48.


Today at Jerome Avenue and 175th Street. Photo courtesy of Steve Spak.