



Daily News Photo

The siege heats up. Photo taken from *Daily News* plane shows police officers covering the bulkhead door (arrow) in case Robles made a dash for the roof. To do this he would have had to shoot his way past firemen and police in the hallway.

## HARLEM INCIDENT

*Firemen are prepared for the unusual and dangerous but there was no evolution for this one.*

**O**N February 18, 1955, August Robles, age 44, suspected triggerman in the gang-style killing of an ex-convict in Brooklyn, escaped twice from detectives. Two days later, the police were advised by informers that Robles was hiding out in a Harlem tenement. At 3:30 P.M. on that day a squad of detectives and patrolmen surrounded the 6-story, new law tenement, at 67 East 112th Street, 100 feet west of Park Avenue. Three of the detectives went to the Robles apartment on the fourth floor rear and started to force the door. A volley of shots through the door wounded two of the men and the siege was on. Police reinforcements were summoned and emergency squads, equipped with tear gas guns, responded.

The first notification to this Department came at 4:10 P.M. when the police notified Dispatcher Julius

Feldman at Manhattan Central Office that they were using tear gas shells in the attempt to capture Robles and that such shells might start a fire. The Dispatcher immediately notified Assistant Chief Richard Burke who ordered the 4th Division to respond to the scene to determine what action would be taken by our Department. Acting Deputy Chief Stephen P. O'Reilly, 4th Division responded and found streets jammed with people and 112th Street blocked with police cars, emergency trucks and ambulances. Gunfire reverberated throughout the shaft and stairway, sounding like cannon fire.

Tenants had been removed from the lower apartments, front and rear, and from the 5th and 6th floors, rear. Some tenants were still in their apartments on the 4th, 5th and 6th floors, front. A woman's screams which were

heard throughout the battle came from the 4th floor rear but it could not be determined whether she was in the Robles' or an adjoining apartment. There was no visible fire at this time.

In order to insure a quick response of our units, the Police cleared the southbound roadway of Park Avenue from 112th to 114th Streets. Chief O'Reilly proceeded to the quarters of Engine 58 and Ladder 26 on 114th Street from where he notified the Dispatcher of the particulars and that he was ordering the above units to the scene. Signal 5-7-1361 was transmitted at 4:20 P.M. Before responding, Acting Lieutenant Isaac Caster in charge of the Engine and Lieutenant Kazimir Nawojchik, with Ladder 26, as well as the members of both units were briefed on the conditions. The Chief and both companies then responded south on Park to 112th



The above picture was taken a few minutes after fire broke out in Robles' apartment and while Robles was still exchanging shots with the police (right). Members of Eng. 58 and L. 26 look up at policeman on third floor reporting that fire had started. Note line ready to go.



Photo by Paul Thayer

Street without warning signals. Acting Battalion Chief Arthur Laufer, 12th Battalion, rolled on the 5-7 signal, having been previously notified by the Dispatcher to approach the scene without warning signals.

### The Fire Starts

Upon arrival, the members of Engine 58 connected to a hydrant on the northwest corner of 112th and Park, and both companies stretched a 2½-inch line to the front of the building. To avoid interference with the police activities, one man was stationed at the nozzle and all other members ordered to stand-by at the pumper. Within a few minutes, fire flashed out the bedroom window of the Robles' apartment. Chief O'Reilly immediately ordered a 7-5-1361 (at 4:35 P.M.) transmitted with orders to the responding units to approach without warning signals. The strategy of the silent approach was that Robles, seeing the apartment ablaze and not hearing any Fire Department assistance coming, might believe that he would burn to death and would prefer giving up. At this point the siege could have been terminated in but a few minutes simply by allowing the fire to consume the entire apartment before starting extinguishing operations. However, the knowledge that at least one woman was trapped in the fire area necessitated immediate fire operations.

The police were then directed to remove the occupants of the 4th, 5th and 6th floors, front, via the front fire escape. The members of Engine 58 immediately stretched a line up the interior stairway to the landing between the 3rd and 4th floors. Fire extended through partly opened door

to the walls, ceiling and adjoining apartment door. Engine 58, under the protection of two police officers equipped with machine guns and bullet-proof vests, operated the stream in the stairway and through the partly opened door to keep the fire from extending up the stairway. Meanwhile,



Photo by Paul Thayer

A. B. C. Arthur Laufer, 12th Batt. (center), and Acting Deputy Chief Stephen P. O'Reilly, 4th Div. (bending forward), hold a conference with police official after having ordered first due units to stretch to front of building. The expressions indicate a tense situation.



Firemen Barbakoff and Roselle of Ladder 26 operate line from window of adjoining building into besieged apartment. Photo right shows truckmen overhauling well charred and bullet marked hall of apartment.



Photos By Paul Thayer

the police covering the apartment from the 5th floor stairway were driven to the roof of the building by the fire and smoke. Though it was not known at this time, the window to the fire escape in the rear of apartment was blocked by an iron gate and that the only means of escape for Robles would have been through the apartment door. In order to share the risk of being first in the line of possible gun fire, Acting Lieutenant Caster manned the nozzle and was relieved alternately by Firemen Michaels, Hojell and Hahl (L. 26). These men were subjected to a heavy feed by the tear gas used by the police. However, the condition improved as the heat of the fire dissipated the gas. The brick wall of the stairway enclosure protected the firemen from bullets fired through the rear windows by police. Bullets fired by both Robles and the police penetrated the kalemein apartment door in which Robles was holed-up, crossed the hall and went through the front apartment door.

#### **Another Line Stretched**

Since it was impossible to extinguish the fire from E. 58's position, Ladder 26 was ordered to stretch a 1½-inch line to the 3rd floor stairway of the adjoining building (No. 65) and to direct their stream across a 10 ft. open shaft, in order to hold the fire in check pending the arrival of addi-

tional units. The fire had already involved the window frame on the 5th floor. Acting Chief Laufer was left in charge of operations in the fire building.

Chief O'Reilly proceeded to No. 65, taking along a police machine gunner to lend protection to the members of L. 26. As besieging police were well hidden, the origin of the fire stream offered the only obvious target to the criminal. Upon the arrival of Engine 53, under the command of Lieutenant William G. Fixley, they were ordered, assisted by members of Engine 91 and Ladder 43, to stretch a 2½-inch line to the 3rd floor apartment of No. 65 and to operate the stream across the shaft into the fire apartment. To operate effectively, their stream was directed from window to window. Since there were five windows of the apartment from which 53 was operating facing the Robles' apartment, little protection remained for the brothers operating that line. The streams directed from the 3rd floor up and into the 4th floor were more effective in checking the fire and also put the criminal in a position where it would be necessary for him to expose himself in order to peg shots down. Later examination disclosed that 2 windows of the apartment above the one from where 53 was operating were shattered by gunfire.

The floor above the fire apartment was heavily charged with fire that

had extended to it and to the ceiling below. Although we could have reached the fire above the Robles' apartment through the roof bulkhead, it was thought that such action might draw Robles' gun fire through the floor. For the same reason, truckmen were not permitted to pull the burning ceiling on the floor below. Engine 53 was ordered to break windows of the 5th floor apartment in order to vent same and wet down the rooms to prevent extension of the fire. However, it was later discovered that this stream extinguished fire that had already extended to the 5th floor through the floor, baseboards and steam pipe recesses. It did not check the fire extending through lath and plaster partitions. At this point Assistant Chief Richard Burke arrived and assumed command.

#### **End of Battle**

Engine 91, assisted by Ladder 43, stretched a line to the 3rd floor of the fire building and prepared to advance to the 5th floor. With the fire knocked down, three detectives equipped with bullet-proof vests, entered the Robles' apartment. Here they found him on the floor in the rear bedroom to which he had been driven by the fire. This room offered the least protection. The criminal was lying on his back, staring upwards, with his right hand under the bed.

Taking no chances with the gunman, Detective Frank Malerba fired a shot into the body. This shot brought an answering barrage from the besieging police. A detective then stepped to the window to signal that it was all over.

### Meritorious Awards

It was not all over for the Fire Department, however. Engine 58 advanced their line into the apartment to extinguish any remaining fire and a fog nozzle was employed to clear out the tear gas. Truckmen forced a bullet-jammed door of the adjoining apartment and there found Mrs. Isabelle Rodriguez who had been trapped in the apartment throughout the battle. They pulled ceilings to check the spread of the fire. Fifteen bullet holes were found in the door of this apartment. A dozen more had passed through the lath and plaster partition between the apartments. Mrs. Rodriguez had sought refuge under the bed in the rear bedroom and was less than 10 feet away from Robles, with only a lath and plaster partition between them. Other truckmen forced doors, vented and searched the 5th and 6th floor apartments. Engine 91 advanced their line to the 5th floor and extinguished fire extending to the 6th



Photo by Helriegel-Heffernan

Commissioner Cavanagh awards Certificates of Merit to each man who worked at the Robles incident. From one minute to the next, the men operating at the fire did not know whether they would become the fugitive's targets. They heard a woman's screams, and fearing she might be endangered by the fire, they advanced despite the hail of bullets.

floor via partitions. At 5:30 the fire was out and companies not needed for overhauling took up.

Commissioner Edward Cavanagh publicly commended all members at the scene. On February 28th, the Com-

missioner convened the Board of Merit and awarded a Service Rating "A" to each man who fought the fire. On March 4th, the Commissioner presented each man with a Certificate of Merit.

concept of fire prevention has been changed and even at this early date officers of experience have stated that the results are without precedent. Encouraged by the record we shall implement our machinery and redouble our efforts.

Decisions on some of the problems will be made shortly, and we may soon feel assured that we have not lagged behind technical and administrative progress in the world about us.

One thing is certain. The life of the fireman will continue to be one of danger, of ever greater responsibility, and of increasing satisfaction to those who choose it as a career.

Our Fire Department will assume a more important perspective in the security and welfare of the community. There will be a closer, more personal bond between the men in the community and the man in the firehouse.

We have reserved for the last few words the vitally important observation that everything depends upon the conscientious and considerate spirit of cooperation between those who are charged with leading, and those who serve so honorably in following.

FIRE COMMISSIONER

## FIRE PREVENTION CAMPAIGN

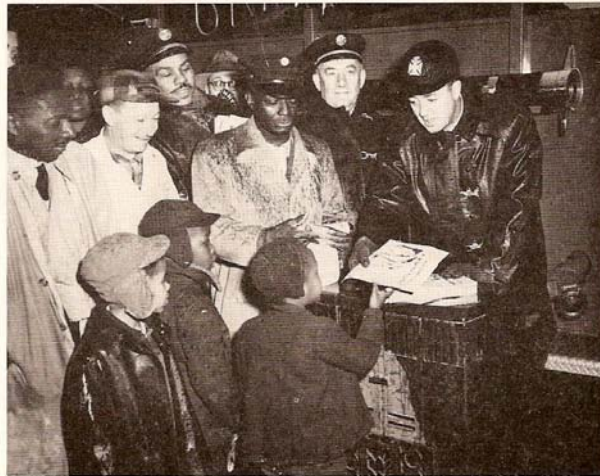


Photo by Helriegel-Heffernan

Stirred by the increased number of fires and fatalities caused by oil heaters early this year, Commissioner Cavanagh instituted an intensive educational program to counteract the hazard. The Commissioner, assisted by Lt. Luther Hooley and Assistant Chief Edward Connors, distributes warning leaflets, printed in Spanish and English, in Harlem.