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Newsday / Thomas R. Koeniges

Farewell To A Firefighter

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Goodbye to a Comrade

2,500 at fireman's funeral

By Nicholas Goldberg

Lt. Robert H. Dayton, the 28-year-old firefighter who died Saturday as he crawled through the smoke of a burning building, was buried yesterday in the clear, crisp Port Washington air, while thousands of his colleagues lined the streets nearby to say goodbye.

They came by the truckload in their dress uniforms — with ribbons and medals and sashes across their chests — and they stood silently along the boulevard and outside his old firehouse, listening, with their caps held across their hearts. As the sermon began, one Port Washington firefighter in white gloves sat crying on the running board of a brightly polished red fire engine.

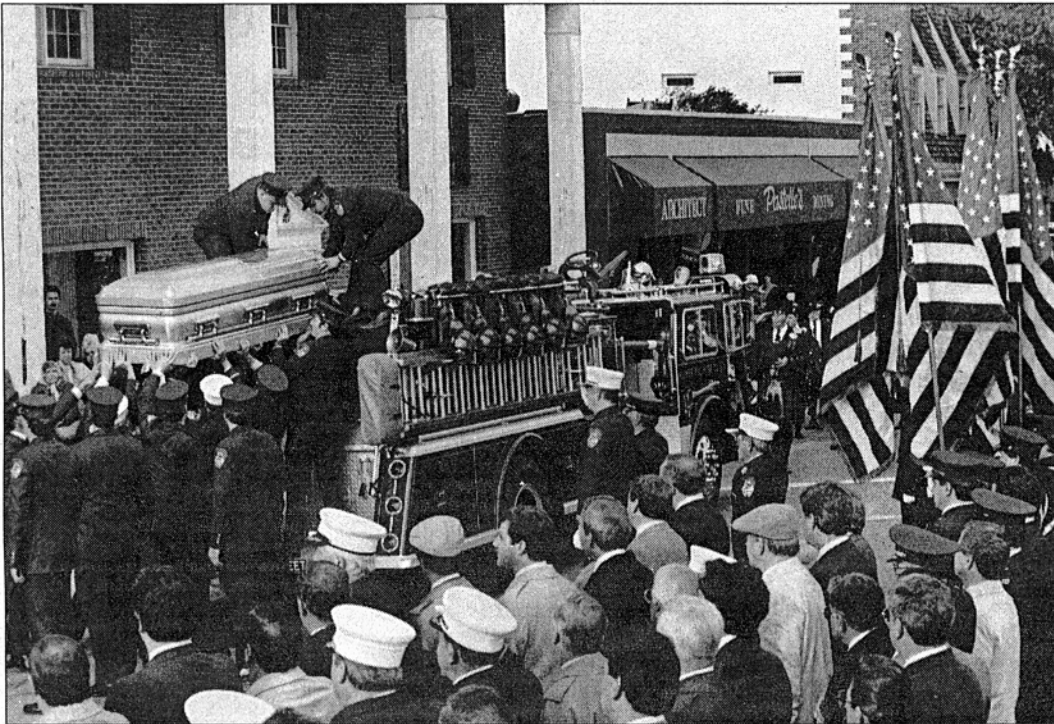
Inside the Flower Hill Hose Company, the Rev. Robert Reed, associate minister of the North Shore Unitarian Universalist Society, described Dayton as a man who wore out the soles of his fire department boots, a man who remodeled his parents' kitchen, and who carved the Thanksgiving turkey at his parents' house just last week. Dayton and his wife, Pamela, met eight years ago at a function at Schreiber High School in Port Washington, Reed said, and Dayton was to have been promoted to captain in January.

"And now, in the last few days, we have stood beside him as he lay in his casket, and we have caressed his familiar features with our eyes until it almost seemed he would rise up to speak to us," Reed said, his voice booming over the loudspeakers to most of the 2,500 people on the street. "... But he will not rise. He is no longer with us here as he was before."

But even as Reed exhorted them to go on with their lives, family members found it was not easy to accept the loss of their son or brother, husband or father — Dayton had an 11-month-old daughter, Kaitlin. They watched his faded boots and his red helmet loaded onto the back step of a fire engine. They heard Taps played as his silver coffin was hoisted up to the truck by seven members of the department. They watched the sobbing wives of the other firefighters walk slowly out of the firehouse holding hands.

And then the family drove slowly up Port Washington Boulevard to Nassau Knolls Cemetery in black limousines, past the saluting firefighters and under the funeral arches of extended fire ladders. They passed the telephone poles, each of which had a simple piece of paper tacked up, saying, "We love you, Bobby."

At the cemetery, Pamela Dayton sat immobile in sunglasses



Newsday / Don Jacobsen

Members of Port Washington Fire Department steady Robert Dayton's casket as it is placed on pumper

A Profound, Clearcut Grief

There is less undertow at a fireman's funeral than a policeman's. There isn't the drum beat for revenge mixed with the profound grief, the way there is sometimes at the funeral of a cop. Politicians are less likely to show up.

Maybe this is due to the nature of firemen's work: There are fewer gray areas in the fire business. No informers or double agents, as in police work. No obvious betrayals. Always the same enemy — the fire: the nemesis, the killer armed and dangerous every time.

The only betrayal is the one the fireman plays on his own survival instinct. Marvel at what they do: They walk into burning buildings.

When every nerve ending in every living creature says run away, the fireman moves in — usually into blackness.

"You feel your way," said the fireman in a bar down the street from the Flower Hill firehouse in Port Washington yesterday, right before the funeral service there for 28-year-old Robert Dayton, the New York City firefighter who died while being a volunteer in his hometown.

"You use your hands and your face: You feel the heat on your face; that tells you where the fire is," said the fireman, whose name was Woody Forsyth. "You use your hands to tell you where to go." After a pause he added, "But really it's all in the heart." He jabbed the chest of the listener. "Right there. That's your guide."

Maybe this is why the fireman's funeral seems to strike the deeper note. The policeman is killed and the public's mourning is



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Signs of mourning on Main Street as casket passes by

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NEWSDAY, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1988

Firefighters Bid Farewell to a Comrade



New York City firefighters give final salute to Dayton outside firehouse

Clearcut Grief For Fire's Victim

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tinged with fear, deep down, for its own safety. The fireman is killed, and we mourn nothing less than the death-defying backbone of the human spirit.

For most of the service, you saw fire trucks laden with flowers and thousands of blue-uniformed firemen with hats pressed to their hearts, but the minister who spoke was out of view, inside the firehouse, along with the coffin of Bobby Dayton, and his family.

"Bobby was a good man," said the disembodied voice of Rev. Robert Reed. People listened from the platform of the Port Washington train station, which is right across the street. Dayton worked at this firehouse when he was off duty from his job as a fireman in Queens.

For 20 minutes, the trains stopped running. They sat in the station, idling and making the sighing noises trains make.

"Our hearts cry out," said Reed. A man dressed in a suit and trench coat, with a newspaper tucked under his arm, stopped hurrying for his train.

"He was born Jan. 7, 1960," said the voice. A woman on the train platform stood with her baby in a carriage, and her shopping in a plastic bag on her arm. "He died too soon. Too soon."

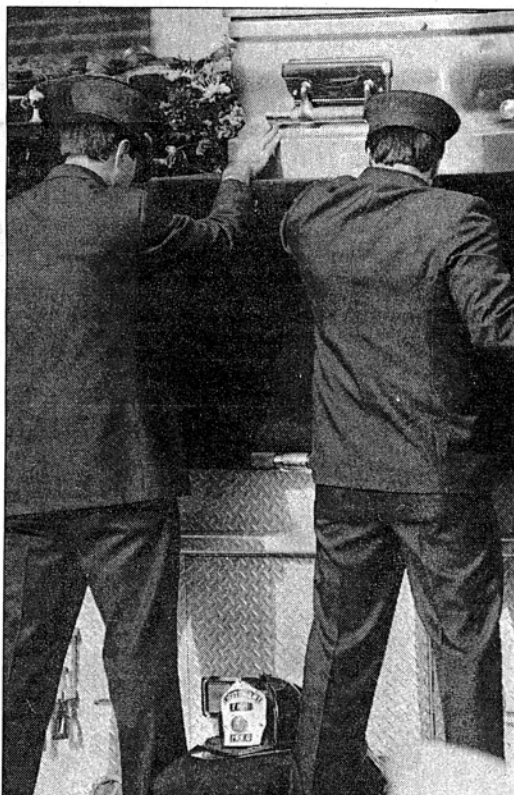
The people on the platform formed a thin, jagged line. One woman, Barbara Miller, said she had just watched a week of John F. Kennedy's death, "and now this." Lawrence Tuck, the treasurer of Baxter Estates, said volunteer fireman take "a tremendous risk for no pay." Frank McLaughlin said, "It's a little hard to talk right now." Amy Bass said somehow "being away from the city, in a nice town," she didn't expect to see this.

Some firemen say that, too. They are battling the drug war, the same as the cops. But not in Port Washington. They talked on the buses the town provided for carrying them to the service from the Bar Beach parking lot. Or in the bars they stopped in before and afterwards. Or waiting for the service in the cold, clear day.

"When the crack dealers burn each other out," said Dominick Michelli, who works in Brooklyn, "we get called in . . . Or when the good neighbors burn out the crack dealers." Lots of fires from that happening in Brooklyn and the Bronx these days. "Or when the ether they use for cooking crack gets out of control," said another fireman.

But fire is the enemy, no matter if its agent is crack in Brooklyn or the furniture in the antique store in Port Washington, where Dayton died last Saturday.

The rules of battle are the same, the risks the same, the field the same field of black and white and no gray. It is a business of rules and procedures that remain in place, usually, until some-



Dayton's firefighter's hat rides on pumper carrying his casket to the cemetery.

body's death makes them change.

When the service was over, the firehouse horn blared once, then again, and then again. "First time in my life I've done this," said George Van Schaik, a retired Nassau County fire marshal who blasted the horn just inside the door of the station house, holding his wrist watch in one hand, to count.

"You're supposed to pull the horn every 30 seconds for 10 minutes," he said. This is the horn for a fallen comrade. "It's in the regulations," he said. When the 10 minutes was up, he was gone, with the others.

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while her relatives tried to protect her from the wind by pulling down her scarf and covering her legs with her coat. But when the prayers began, she dropped her head and wouldn't look up. When she was led to the coffin, she dropped a purple flower and a white flower and turned quickly away.

Dayton's mother was led next, and as she dropped a flower near the coffin, she bent down close and said, "Goodbye, Bobby. I love you, Bobby."

As the other family members said their goodbyes, Taps was played one more time, and the 23rd Psalm was recited. And then the crowd broke up.

On the street, many of the firefighters said they had never met Bobby Dayton — never even heard of him before he died. But some said they *felt* they knew him, because he was a man who, like many of them, always wanted to be a fireman. He became one at 18, as soon as he was eligible, and 10 years later he died in the line of duty.

Dayton was a full-time firefighter: By day, as a professional with a Queens hook and ladder company known as the Elmhurst Eagles; and the rest of the time as a volunteer in Port Washington, the community where he grew up. It was as a volunteer that he died.

"When one of our brothers falls, it kind of hits home to everybody," said Jim Pannone, a 28-year-old volunteer from a New Jersey battalion who drove out yesterday morning to pay tribute to a man he had never met. "It scares you to a point when something like this happens, and it makes you face reality."

Meanwhile, officials said that the cause of the fire that killed Dayton is still under investigation — a fire that officials have labeled suspicious. Nassau Assistant Fire Marshal Robert Doran, who is leading the investigation, said he has still not listened to tapes of communications between firefighters at the scene of the fire. And the Nassau County medical examiner's office said yesterday that it will take a couple of weeks to complete toxicological and microscopic studies that will determine a cause of death for Dayton. Several fire officials have said they believe the cause of his death was smoke inhalation.

After leaving the cemetery, many of the firefighters walked down Main Street, stopping for a moment to look at The Cat Lady, the antique store where the fire that killed Dayton broke out Saturday.

"That's the place," said one New York City firefighter to another, and they took a quick walk past the plywood on the windows, through the charred ruins of roll-top desks, oak dressers and dining-room tables.

"It just makes our men realize what we constantly preach," said Charles Lang, chief of the Port Washington Fire Department. "That this is a very dangerous job, and anything can happen."

Stuart Vincent contributed to this story.