

# THE MAN BEHIND THE TOOLS

## Captain Robert Farrell, Ladder Co. 31, FDNY

By Donald Colarusso of [www.AllHandsFire.com](http://www.AllHandsFire.com)

Fire Hooks Unlimited is the leading manufacturer of fire hooks, fire tools and fire equipment. The owner, Bob Farrell, has had an historic career with the New York City Fire Department and has been one of the most valuable and influential fire equipment manufacturers for nearly three decades.

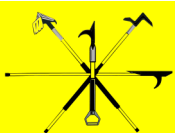
Bob served in the US Navy for 5 years. After receiving an Honorary Discharge, he joined the FDNY as a probie firefighter and was assigned to Ladder Company 4 in Manhattan.

Even during his early years, Bob was innovative as you would agree after heard one of Bob's favorite stories... As a young firefighter in Manhattan's Ladder Company 4, Bob took an FDNY-owned "Halligan Bar" and cut an "A" into the Adz to better attack lock cylinders. Once discovered by an unimpressed boss, the Captain of Ladder 4 directed Bob to immediately replace the Halligan Bar at his own expense. So Bob made the trip into the Bronx, to the home of Chief Hugh Halligan, the inventor of the "Halligan Bar". Bob explained what had happened to Chief Halligan. The Chief went into his closet, pulled a Halligan Bar out, and sold it to Bob for \$36.00. Chief Halligan, seemingly feeling bad for "the new guy", took a few dollars off of the price - \$3 as Bob recalls.



*Bob as the Captain of Ladder 31. This photo appeared in the illustrated book called FIRE! By Steven Scher in 1978*

**Excerpt from "Fire Department of New York – The Bravest 1865-2000" by FF Paul Hashagen**  
– April 13, 1960 – Times Square – An electrical motor caught fire in an old wooden escalator in the subway station at Broadway and 41<sup>st</sup> Street in Midtown-Manhattan. The fire rapidly spread due to the trains moving through the tunnels and the grease, dust and wood. Flames soon roared up the 60-foot-long escalators through various levels of the train station. Arriving firefighters were unable to enter the subway from the street level due to the smoke and heat. Ladder Company 4 was the first due truck and made their way to the upper level of the subway station. Then-Firefighter Bob Farrell of Ladder 4 donned a mask (SCBA) and made his way past the fire. He located and removed three men who had been cut off by the



blaze. For his actions, Bob received the Henry Brookman medal (only 12 medals were awarded each year during this time).

In 1966, Bob was promoted to Lieutenant and assigned to Ladder Company 31 in the Bronx.

**Bob recalls a memorable time as a Lieutenant, being promoted to Captain...** One unusual tenure in Ladder Co. 31, I was assigned as a lieutenant there for several years. When I was promoted to Captain, the Captain's position was open in Ladder 31. Nobody wanted the spot because the Company was so busy. At the time, the "covering time" in the history of Captain was several years. And an officer would never go back to the company and borough where you had worked. Since I knew that nobody would be asked for the Captains spot in Ladder 31, I volunteered and after only 8 days (I believe the shortest covering time in the history of the FDNY for a covering officer or captain) I got assigned.

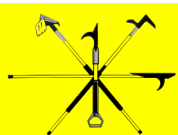
Captain Farrell's tenure at Engine 82 / Ladder 31 was considered the "The War Years" (1960's -1970's) and was arguably the busiest firehouse in the world! The conditions in the Bronx during these times were conditions similar to war zones. Companies would respond to fire after fire, most times non-stop. And Bob was in the thick of the action for many years.

A condition during Bob's service was so severe and incredible that in 1972 a movie documentary called *Man Alive: The Bronx is Burning* was made, in which Bob can be seen. Also in 1972, a book was published called *Report from Engine Co. 82*, a non-fictional account of life in the South Bronx firehouse—the world's busiest—in which Bob served with the author.



*Left to Right:  
Captain Gray (E82), Lieutenant  
Charlie ??? (L42), Chief of Department John T.  
O'Hagen, Lieutenant Louis Andrade (E82), Captain  
Robert Farrell (L31)*

*- Photo provided by Bob Farrell.  
Estimated year 1969*



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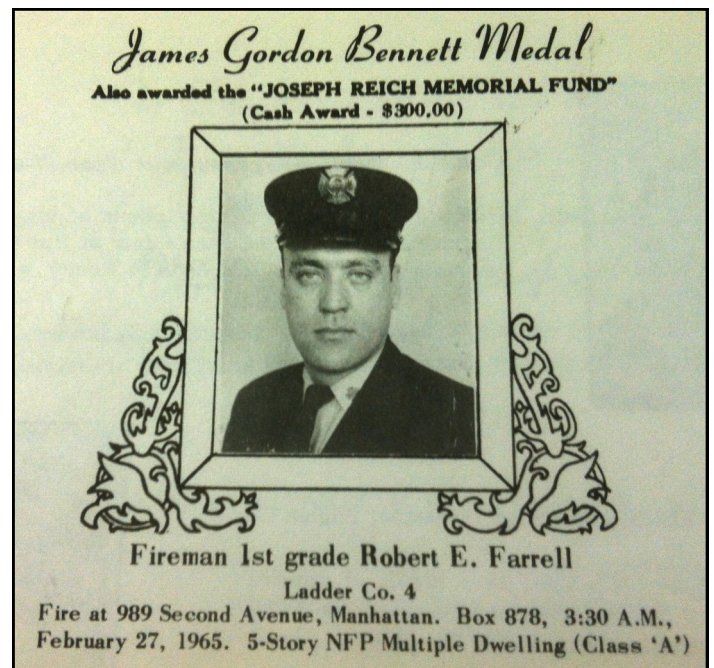
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Bob loved that his Company was #1, and during his time in Ladder 31, they were #1 every year in runs and workers.

Throughout Bob's historic career, he was awarded nineteen decorations and awards for bravery. He received two Class 1 Medals, which is similar to the military's Medal of Honor and one of the highest awards for bravery that is presented by the FDNY. And most notably, on June 6, 1965, Bob was awarded FDNY's highest medal for bravery – the James Gordon Bennett medal.

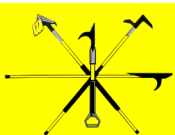
**Fireman 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Robert E. Farrell awarded James Gordon Bennett Medal...** On February 27, 1965 Ladder Company 4 was assigned to Box-878 for a fire at 989 Second Avenue in Manhattan. The building was a 5-story non-fireproof dwelling, class-A. Upon arrival, Ladder 4 was assigned to assist in the search and evacuation of civilians from the fire building. The interior stairs were already compromised by the fire, so the crew from Ladder 4 utilized the stairs of one the exposures to access the roof of the fire building, however, before they could get there the roof had collapsed. The crew of Ladder 4 checked the rear of the fire building to find heavy fire conditions coming from the windows of floors 3, 4 and 5. These conditions eliminated the option for using the rear fire escape.



*Bob Farrell is pictured in the FDNY Medal Day Book.*

During this time, Firefighter Farrell heard a call for help. He discovered a trapped civilian at a fourth floor window, to the left of the fire escape. The crew decided to initiate a rescue using their roof rope. This decision had its share of risks and dangers, being that the rescuer would have to be lowered through and work as heat, smoke and flames continued emitting from the windows.

The plan was to lower the rescuer, swing him to the window where the victim was located and then swing him back to his right in order to reach a fire escape on the adjoining building.



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Firefighter Farrell was lowered into position just opposite to where the victim was. He worked himself to the window where the victim was located. He grabbed the trapped woman, and as he then tried to swing back to the fire escape as planned, he discovered that the woman had become entangled in the venetian blind cords and window drapes. In order to free the woman, Firefighter Farrell was forced to hold her with one arm while dangling on the rope, and clear the entanglement with his other hand.

At enormous risk and with great difficulty, having been suspended pendulum fashion and with having had only one leg to maintain his position at the window, the woman was finally freed. Bob then swung away from the window to the fire escape of the adjoining building where he was grabbed by another firefighter. At that moment, then window where the woman had been trapped erupted into flames.

"This woman is alive today due to Fireman Farrell's efforts. With complete disregard for his own safety, he rapidly and competently performed his duty in the highest traditions of this department", as is printed in the June 6, 1965 printed copy of the FDNY Medal Day Book.

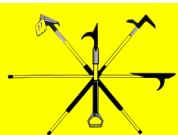
During Bob's time at Engine 82 / Ladder 31, he recalls the 'House' receiving a total of 37 medals. Bob used to arrange for a school bus to transport the members to the ceremony. Bob's daughter would make a "congratulations" sign for the award recipients.



**Tiller to Tower ladder...** In 1973, Ladder 31 was replacing their tractor-drawn tiller truck with a new Tower Ladder with single rear axle. Captain Farrell recalls picking rig #73013 (number sequence assigned by FDNY to each rig) instead of 73031 because it seemingly worked better.

Over the years, Bob has made a lasting impression on many people. He was mentioned in a book written by Peter A. Micheels titled "Braving the Flames". In the book, Micheels, who is an honorary FDNY Fire Marshal and Battalion Chief, explains how Bob was "one of the men who impressed me the most".

He goes on to explain how Bob was "one of the calmest and coolest firefighters I've ever had the





*Lieutenant Robert Farrell in Ladder Company 31, an American LaFrance tractor-drawn tiller, on Home Street and Prospect Avenue in the Bronx. Photo shown courtesy of Richard Rewkowski (FDNY Retired). Estimated year 1970-71*

pleasure of working with". "I always wanted to mold myself in the image of a person like Bob".

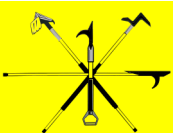
Micheels goes on to explain how Bob didn't take many risks, but when he did they were calculated risks and that Bob always knew what he was doing.

Bob retired after being injured on the job – injuries sustained to his legs during a structural collapse.

Bob was an acting-Battalion Chief at the time he retired. His last assignment was covering the 6th Division in the Bronx.

Bob started Fire Hooks Unlimited in 1980, where it was based in Yonkers, NY.

Fire Hooks Unlimited, through Bob's vision and innovation, has produced the United States



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fire service's standard for fire and rescue tools.

Today, Fire Hooks Unlimited is located in Wall Township.

**Bob recalls proud moments to help his Brothers of the FDNY...** During the days following 9/11, Fire Hooks Unlimited built 3,000 tools for the FDNY in 13 days, with his staff working 24/7. The profits from this feat (hundreds of thousands of dollars) were donated to the widows of 9/11. We did not accept one dime in profit out of this horror. One of my proudest achieved acts --

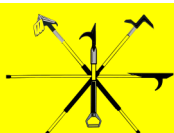


*Bob Farrell, representing his new business Fire Hooks Unlimited, at his first fire service Trade Show at the New York State Chief's Convention at the Concord Hotel in 1980. Photo provided by Bob Farrell*

Throughout his career, Bobs regard for his men's safety carried over into the private sector designing and manufacturing fire hooks and fire tools. For nearly three decades, Bob has set the standard for excellence throughout the US in producing high quality products including the Pro-Bar, NY Roof Hook and Hydra Ram.

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**FIRE HOOKS UNLIMITED** products are standard issue in the largest and busiest fire departments in the United States. For information on any of the Fire Hooks Unlimited products, including the PRO-BAR Halligan, Hydra Ram, REX Tool, NY Roof Hook, Partner Saw and many other products, please visit [www.AllHandsFire.com](http://www.AllHandsFire.com)



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These photos are of the Officers Tool that Captain Farrell carried. The pry bar, which was manufactured in Bridgeport, CT, was modified by Captain Farrell so it could be used to pull lock cylinders.

- Photo by Donald Colarusso



This photo is of Bob Farrell's Lieutenant's helmet when he was assigned to Ladder Company 31 at that rank.

- Photo by Donald Colarusso



This photo is of Bob Farrell's Captain's helmet when he was assigned to Ladder Company 31 at that rank.

- Photo by Donald Colarusso

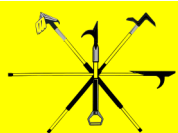


*Photo of Bob Farrell and Donald Colarusso. This photo was taken at Fire Hooks Unlimited in Wall, NJ.*

*I am honored to have had the opportunity to write this story. Over the years I have sat with Bob and have had the privilege hearing so many incredible and fascinating stories.*

*I first met Bob in the late 1990's. I was fire chief in Wall Township, where Bob had moved his business from Yonkers, New York. Since that day, Bob has been a great friend, a teacher and a mentor. He is a man I respect a great deal. Love ya Bob!*

*Don C.*



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