

James Gordon Bennett Medal & NYS Honorary Fire Chiefs Association Medal

LIEUTENANT JAMES F. CONGEMA

Battalion 19 (assigned), Ladder Company 41 (detailed)

March 23, 2007, 0138 hours, Box 75-3205, 1717 Unionport Road, Bronx



Appointed to the FDNY on February 8, 1998. Previously assigned to Engine 231 and Ladder 120. Member of the Columbia Association and the Emerald and Holy Name Societies. Holds a BBA degree in accounting from Hofstra University. Cited for bravery on two previous occasions. Resides in Smithtown, Long Island, with his wife, Deanne, and their children, Emily, Ashley and newborn son, Andrew James.

On the fire floor, the success of operations is, to a great extent, determined by the ability of the company Officer to lead and motivate his/her Firefighters. A good Officer leads by example and does not lead from behind. It was just such an Officer who led Ladder 41 in the early-morning hours on March 23, 2007.

At 0138 hours, Ladder 41 responded first-due to Box 3205, a reported fire in a two-story multiple dwelling. Immediately on arrival, a 10-75 was transmitted for a fire on the first floor. Per FDNY's standard operating procedures, an additional engine and truck were called because of the window bars on all the first-floor windows.

Lieutenant James Congema and his forcible entry team--FF Robert Watts with the extinguisher and FF Ronilo Fuentes with the irons--proceeded down the smoke-filled hallway to the fire apartment. Lieutenant Congema ordered his forcible entry team to force the locked door. Entering the apartment, the Officer was confronted with high heat, zero visibility and thick, black, acrid smoke.

A short distance into the apartment, Lieutenant Congema found an unconscious adult. He transmitted a 10-45 for a fire victim with serious injuries. Feeling the heat, but not knowing where the fire was located, Lieutenant Congema scanned the fire apartment and hallway with the thermal imaging camera (TIC). By showing red in the screen of the camera, the TIC indicated high heat pouring from the kitchen. Now knowing exactly where the fire was, Lieutenant Congema dragged the unconscious victim to the apartment door and his forcible entry team carried the person out to the street.

Lieutenant Congema immediately returned to his search. He placed the TIC down when he dragged the first victim out and his search now was done by feel, due to the heavy smoke. He could feel the heat intensifying and there was no hand-line in place. Without hesitation, Lieutenant Congema crawled past the now extending fire and went deeper into the fire apartment. About 10 feet down the interior hall, the Officer found another unconscious adult. The rescuer transmitted a second 10-45 and began removal. He dragged the victim toward the door. His extinguisher Firefighter, FF Robert Watts,

met up with him and removed the second victim to the street.

The fire had extended from the kitchen into the living room and there was still no hose-line in place. If Lieutenant Congema returned to his search, there was the risk that if the fire continued to spread unchecked, his only path of escape would be cut off by fire. Still, Lieutenant Congema pressed on with his search.

The Officer crawled deeper into the apartment and entered a bedroom. He felt his way through the blinding smoke and found a third unconscious victim. He transmitted a third 10-45 and began to drag the victim out. The area was cluttered and removal was difficult and physically draining. FF Fuentes met up with him and removed the victim to the street.

The Lieutenant returned to the bedroom to finish the search. At this point, he was concerned that there was still no water on the fire, the front window bars were still intact and his only escape route could be cut off by the still-unchecked fire. Victim number four was found in that same first bedroom. Lieutenant Congema again transmitted a 10-45 and dragged the victim to the front door. Hearing the transmission of the fourth 10-45, his forcible entry team returned to help with removal.

Physically exhausted and knowing that the apartment could be totally involved in fire at any moment, Lieutenant Congema did not hesitate and again returned to search the last bedroom. Once inside, he found the final victim, a small girl. Knowing that all searches were complete, he transmitted a fifth and final 10-45 and then carried the unconscious girl to the street.

The coordinated and courageous efforts of Ladder 41 in this very difficult rescue operation were recognized with a unit citation. And, Lieutenant Congema's individual actions

exemplify the finest traditions of the New York City Fire Department. Because of this Officer's personal courage and perseverance, four members of the Ramos family, plus a male adult, were spared an unthinkable tragedy. For this reason, Lieutenant James Congema is recognized today with the James Gordon Bennett and New York State Honorary Fire Chiefs Association Medals.--CB



During a press conference, Lieutenant James Congema, with members of Ladder 41, describes the rescue that saved five people in the Bronx.
photo by Newsday