

# James Gordon Bennett Medal NYS Honorary Fire Chiefs Association Medal

## LIEUTENANT THOMAS G. WOODS

### LADDER COMPANY 154

October 29, 2012, 2100 hours, Box 55-8300, Belle Harbor, Queens



*Appointed to the FDNY on September 14, 1987. Cousins, FF Mike Moran, is assigned to Ladder 3; Lieutenant John Moran, is assigned to Engine 265; Captain Charles Moran, is retired from Ladder 9; and Battalion Chief John Moran, SOC, was killed during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. Previously assigned to Engines 323 and 310 and Ladder 174. Member of the Emerald and Holy Name Societies. Recipient of a Service Rating A. Attended Empire State College, enrolled in a Labor Studies program. Resides in Belle Harbor, Queens, with his wife, Michele, and their sons, Brendan and Thomas.*

On Monday, October 29, 2012, portions of the Northeastern United States, including the greater New York City area, were struck with Hurricane Sandy. Its storm surge hit the Rockaway Peninsula with tremendous force, flooding streets, cutting power and trapping residents first by flood and later by fire. The family-oriented communities of Belle Harbor sustained high winds, heavy rain and a storm surge, resulting in the Atlantic Ocean meeting Jamaica Bay, with Rockaway enduring the equivalent of three five-alarm fires.

Lieutenant Thomas G Woods, Ladder 154, was off-duty and at home with his family on Beach 130th Street, where conditions drove many to the upper floors of their houses. Lieutenant Woods could see the flames of building fires south and east of his home and the sustained, 80-mph-plus winds from the south drove the fire toward his street. As he smelled structures burning and the burning embers raining on his home, Lieutenant Woods took action.

By the time Lieutenant Woods made it to the first floor, the wind had driven the fire over his home, setting in flames the house directly behind his, on Beach 131st Street. He dressed in a wet suit and went outside to try to extinguish the flames in his neighbor's home with a garden hose. Once outside, he realized his own home was being engulfed by the burning embers from a catastrophic multi-building fire. While Lieutenant Woods was battling the wind and fire impacting his own home, a restaurant nearby began to burn.

Soon, Lieutenant Woods saw his many neighbors, who were unable to navigate the high waters and calling for help. Using a surfboard, he swam over and first assisted a woman and her dog into their kayak, which he then pushed and pulled away from the fire. While still guiding the kayak, he helped another family--two adults and three children--guiding the entire group to the safety of neighbors' homes and out of the fire's path.

As the catastrophic fire burnt through multiple homes on Beach 130th Street, with the houses igniting from the radiant heat and embers that fell like rain, Lieutenant Woods decided to move everyone, including his own family, to safety a few blocks west--choosing his brother's home on Beach 135th Street as refuge.

Lieutenant Woods organized a water-removal rescue of numerous neighbors to Beach 135th Street--a distance of nearly 1000 feet. Their route was obstructed by floating obstacles, surging ocean water,

driving rain, downed trees, downed utility poles and assorted debris that included, in some cases, floating cars and boats. And all the while, the group was exposed to the fires from the burning buildings around them. A journey of six blocks that normally would take minutes, took nearly an hour. Yet, together, this group of family, friends and neighbors finally arrived at Lieutenant Woods' brother's home on Beach 135th Street.

Lieutenant Woods, in keeping his group together, covering this distance, while being exposed to additional heat and smoke, required exceptional skill, courage and determination. After depositing this initial group safely, Lieutenant Woods and his eldest son returned to Beach 130th Street to locate another neighbor. As they paddled back in a two-man kayak, they encountered what would come to be described as a firestorm--16 homes on Beach 130th Street fully involved in fire, including Lieutenant Woods' own home, which was entirely consumed by the conflagration.

At the corner of Beach 130th and Cronston Avenue, Lieutenant Woods spotted a neighbor stranded on the porch of a house, as it began to ignite from the wind-driven fires. The water in the street was six feet deep and moving rapidly. He and his son paddled their kayak to the exposed home, where they found numerous people trying to remove their wheelchair-bound neighbor from the fire-exposed home. The two placed the handicapped neighbor into the kayak, as the home ignited, and began their second journey to Beach 135th Street, with the entire group.

En route, they encountered even more neighbors--an elderly couple stranded on the porch of a home at Beach 132nd Street. This couple lived directly across the street from Lieutenant Woods, but was forced to leave when their own home began to burn. Lieutenant Woods and his group assisted this amazing couple--both in their 80s--through the next three blocks to safety.

The courage, dedication, leadership and self-sacrifice Lieutenant Woods exhibited during the height of Hurricane Sandy's impact are remarkable, rescuing more than 25 neighbors from either a fire building or the fire's path, and removing them to safety. And they have Lieutenant Woods to thank for saving their lives. For all his extraordinary acts of valor, the FDNY presents Lieutenant Thomas G Woods with the James Gordon Bennett Medal and New York State Honorary Fire Chiefs Association Medal.--RRM



Conditions endured by Lieutenant Thomas Woods as he put forth a herculean effort to save more than 25 people during Hurricane Sandy.