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Maimed fireman tells arson trial of watching 3 buddies burn to death

By Linnet Myers

A firefighter who was burned beyond recognition but managed to survive a deadly arson fire testified Friday that he heard a scream and then watched three fellow firefighters go up in flames as the fire also engulfed him.

Samuel Lasco, 33, whose face is scarred from the burns, recalled that he was sleeping on Feb. 1, 1985, when an early-morning alarm rang, sending his company to the Vicstar Electronics Store, 2847 N. Milwaukee Ave.

Smoke was in the air and "the fire was rolling" when they arrived, he said. "It was an inferno. It was unreal. It was solid flames everywhere."

Lasco, Capt. Daniel Nockels, 56, and firefighters Michael Talley, 25, and Michael Forchione, 29, climbed onto the roof to ventilate the building so that dangerous gases could escape, Lasco said.

"I saw Forchione making his first cut [into the roof]," said Lasco, who had been with Truck No. 58. "A flame shot through the opening. I just heard a scream."

"The captain was a big guy. ... It [the fire] was shooting over his head, and it engulfed firefighter Forchione. At the same time, the captain was in flames. It was like a blow-torch effect. It was shooting out, and I actually seen him disappear before my own eyes. It was unbelievable."

"The captain was in flames. Forchione was gone. I heard the roof cracking. ... I just jumped. ... I was holding on to something. I was burning, my legs were burning."

Lasco said he thought of jumping into the fire and trying to work his way out of it, but "when I looked down, that's when I caught a big fireball into my face. It was an inferno."

He couldn't recall what happened next, saying that he only knew he ended up lying on the roof's edge. "I heard somebody yelling from the snorkel, 'Roll! Roll!' ... I rolled to the next roof. I just did what I was trained: I just kept rolling and rolling."

Snow on the roof put out the

flames and "I heard another fireman say, 'Who are you?' I thought it was strange. I didn't realize my helmet was completely melted to my head. I said, 'Lasco.'"

"He ordered me, 'Lasco, get down the ladder!' When I climbed down, no one wanted to touch me. ... I was in pieces. I had no meat on my legs. ... I couldn't walk; I had no legs."

Paramedics rushed Lasco to St. Elizabeth's Hospital. "My face distorted into a balloon," he said. "My lips were gone. My nose was gone. I had no vision."

At the hospital, doctors took one look at him and "they just said, 'Get out of here. We can't do nothing for him.'"

Lasco said he asked to be taken

to Cook County Hospital's burn unit. On the way there, the paramedic "couldn't even look at me. ... He kept saying, 'What can I do for you?'"

At Cook County Hospital, doctors began to scrub the burnt skin off his body, Lasco said, adding: "I can't describe the pain."

For about a week, "they thought I was in a coma because I couldn't talk. I couldn't move my hands," he said. "They didn't talk to me. It was sort of ... I don't know. I don't know."

He said he learned later that the three men who were on the roof with him had burned to death.

Lasco spent 27 days in the hospital and is still undergoing reconstructive surgery for his face. He

will have to continue with the surgery once a month for at least three years, he said.

Lasco testified at the Cook County Criminal Court trial of Jang Bae, 38, of Streamwood, a businessman charged with the arson and the murders of the three firefighters who died in the blaze.

Bae, one of the owners of the Vicstar, allegedly hired an arsonist to set the fire so that he could collect \$250,000 in insurance money, according to Assistant State's Atty. Jeffrey Warnick and Mark Rakoczy.

Defense lawyer Carl Walsh contends, however, that Bae had no reason to set the fire because his merchandise was worth more than the insurance money.