

04-24-1978 - Roland "Rusty" Smith Jr and William VanAtta – Flood – Attempted Rescue

Roland "Rusty" Smith Jr and William VanAtta

In Findlay, Ohio, teenagers Michael D. Armstrong and Troy Lee Best drowned while canoeing on the Blanchard River. Two Findlay firefighters, Roland G. Smith Jr. and William C. VanAtta, both veterans of the , died attempting to rescue the boys when a rescue rowboat capsized. A third firefighter survived. [\[415\]](#)[\[416\]](#)

Firefighters' Exercise Recalls 1978 Tragedy

<https://thecourier.com/news/328347/firefighters-exercise-recalls-1978-tragedy/>

Jun 28, 2021 By LOU WILIN louwilin@thecourier.com

When the Findlay Fire Department extended a truck ladder from the south bank of the Blanchard River over the placid waterfalls at Riverside Park Friday morning, it drew onlookers.

Besides helping firefighters gauge how far the ladder could reach if needed for a water rescue, the exercise served spellbound park visitors a notice of how dangerous the waterfalls can be.



A Findlay Fire Department truck extends its ladder out over the Blanchard River from the south side, Friday at Riverside Park. The exercise was done to test how far the department's ladders can reach across the river during a water rescue, recalling efforts to rescue two teenagers from the swollen river in 1978 that saw two firefighters lose their lives. (LOU WILIN / The Courier)

In 1978, with the river swollen, two Findlay teenagers — Michael D. Armstrong and Troy Lee Best — drowned when they tried to shoot across the dam in a canoe, which capsized. Two Findlay firefighters also perished when they tried to rescue them. Those two firefighters — Roland “Rusty” G. Smith Jr. and William C. VanAtta — are memorialized on the north side of the river near the waterfalls.

In that 1978 incident, firefighters attempted a rescue by extending a ladder from the north side, but the ladder did not reach far enough, said firefighter Dave Morse. “We just didn’t have the equipment then,” he said. “So the guys went in and their boat got swamped.”

Three firefighters were in the boat, and one survived.

“James B. Waaland, 46, of 2801 Western Ave., was saved when he clung to a rope connected to the rescue rowboat and was pulled ashore by other firemen at the scene,” The Courier reported on April 25, 1978.

When the river is swollen, water flowing over the dam hits the river bottom then churns back toward the dam, even from 15 to 20 feet away, Morse said. So anyone caught in the “boil” keeps getting swept back toward the dam and then pushed to the river bottom, Morse said.

Accounts in The Courier in April 1978 reported a horrifying scene of firefighters struggling in and above the river and from the banks. An eyewitness said the three firefighters, in their rescue attempt, put their boat in the water about 20 feet below the dam, The Courier reported on April 24, 1978.

“A rope, thrown from the shore, was attached to the boat after it was in the water,” The Courier reported, citing an eyewitness account. “The firemen began rowing toward the dam, but were forced into it when the boat crossed the current.

“Water poured into the front of the boat, partially filling it. The men on shore began pulling the rope, putting the boat in a north-south direction,” The Courier reported.

“The current forced the boat into the dam a second time, filling it completely with water and causing it to flip over.”

One of the boys was pulled into the boat just before it capsized, the eyewitness told The Courier.

“VanAtta let go of the boat to help Smith, who was struggling to swim against the current,” The Courier reported.

With the ladder extended over the waterfalls, rescuers tried to hook VanAtta with a grappling hook and pole hook, an eyewitness told The Courier.

“However, in his haste, VanAtta had failed to fasten the jacket properly. So when the bucket (on the ladder) began to swing him toward the shore, he slipped out of the jacket,” The Courier reported.

The effort to prevent another tragedy continues.

On Friday, firefighters were testing how much reach they would have by extending ladders from both sides of the river simultaneously. Friday was the first time the Fire Department extended a ladder from the south bank.

"We can get in with our boats and do different things, but this would be a quicker response," Morse said. "We have a lot better options now (than in 1978) with ropes and different kinds of harnesses and flotation devices that we can use. But just seeing what kind of reach is the point of what we're doing today."

Findlay Fire Department

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10158415850206925&id=153777616924
May 30 ·

Findlay firefighters Bill VanAtta & Rusty Smith died in the line of duty in 1978, trying to save two children from the Riverside Park dam.

Both men also served their country in the US Army and were Vietnam veterans. VanAtta was a military policeman, and Smith served with the 101st Airborne, receiving a Bronze Star.

Recently the fire department memorial to these two brave men was moved from the south side of the river into Riverside Park.



This Memorial Day we remember their sacrifice, along with all veterans who gave their lives in defense of others.

Fire Heroes

<https://thecourier.com/opinion/couriers-view/2014/01/29/fire-heroes/>

January 29, 2014 By **The Courier**

All first responders assume the risk of the job, even on days when they never leave the station.

Firefighters, police and other emergency workers never know exactly what they'll encounter when they report to duty. When needed, they suit up and go, not dwelling on the hazards that await, but on those who may need their help.

The deaths of two members of the Toledo Fire Department, who perished while fighting a Sunday apartment fire on the city's north side, showed once again that there is no such thing as a routine call

It also showed just how quickly our bravest can be taken away.

Preliminary reports suggest a "rapid deterioration of conditions" inside the two-

story apartment building had overcome Steve Machcinski, 42, and James Dickman, 31, as they searched for tenants inside.

Machcinski had been a firefighter for 16 years. Dickman was in his first year at Toledo, but had previously been with the Perkins Township Fire Department near Sandusky.

Both men are being called heroes, and rightfully so.

Such tragedies don't happen as often as they once did, due to fire prevention efforts and firefighting training. But they still add up. Between 1977 and 2012, 4,410 on-duty firefighters died in the United States. In 2012, three firefighters died in the line of duty in Ohio.

Findlay, too, has felt the pain of losing firefighters. In 1978, Roland "Rusty" Smith Jr. and William VanAtta drowned while trying to save two youths whose canoe had capsized near the dam on the Blanchard River at Riverside Park.

In 1983, Richard Dennis Shively died of smoke inhalation and heart complications after responding to a West Foulke Avenue house fire.

Like Machcinski and Dickman, Smith, VanAtta and Shively should never be forgotten.

First responders deserve our continual gratitude for much the same reason as our military veterans do, because they protect us.

The firefighters' deaths occurred 50 miles away, but hit too close to home. As Lucas County mourns the losses, we should, too. And as we take time to remember the fallen, we should also express appreciation to those who continue to answer our calls.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a corrected version of this editorial.