

09-28- 1975 Binghamton NY - FD Water Rescue Boat Low Head Dam 3 FF Fatalities

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=888&dat=19750930&id=OXVIAAAAIBA&sjid=W18DAAAIBA&pg=4699,5277755&hl=en>

Elsewhere in the tropics, satellite photos showed the depression in the northwestern Caribbean remains weak and ill-defined, with highest winds 20 to 25 m.p.h. No development of this system is expected today.

Three firemen drown in Binghamton, N.Y.

United Press International

The deaths of three firemen in the rain-swollen Susquehanna River raised to 12 Monday the number of lives claimed by the floods caused by hurricane Eloise.

At Binghamton, N.Y., Fire Chief John Cox, 55, and Fire Capt. Donald McGeever, 53, drowned Monday while trying to recover the body of another fireman in the Susquehanna.

The firemen's boat overturned as they tried to hook a line to Rockbottom Dam in order to search for the body of fireman John Russell, 26. Russell drowned Sunday night while going to the aid of two young men whose rubber raft capsized while they tried to go over the dam.

THE RAINS from the hurricane's backlash were gone Monday but there was a massive cleanup job to be faced, particularly in Pennsylvania where 25,000 persons were forced from their homes and damage was estimated at \$150-million.

The overall flood damage along the Eastern Seaboard following last week's torrents was estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars. President Ford declared a 30-county area of Pennsylvania a major federal disaster area.

Binghamton Tragedy Teaches Lessons Decades Later

<http://wnbf.com/binghamton-tragedy-teaches-lessons-decades-later/>
September 28, 2015 By [Bob Joseph](#)

A television news videotape of the drowning of two [Binghamton firefighters](#) in 1975 continues to be used in training emergency workers.

The 15-minute tape documents the tragic sequence of events at the Rockbottom Dam that resulted in the deaths of city Fire Chief John Cox and Captain Donald McGeever.

The men died on September 29, 1975, the day after firefighter John Russell drowned while trying to rescue two men whose raft had capsized on the flood-swollen river.

The news video was recorded by a WICZ-TV crew that was on the scene as the firefighters went into the Susquehanna in an effort to recover the body of their colleague.



WICZ-TV via Youtube

Emergency services training experts say the drownings demonstrate the extreme danger of ["lowhead" dams](#), like the Rockbottom.

The small dams may appear harmless but they can create treacherous conditions, especially after heavy rain.

Veteran radio and television reporter Bob Huckabone discussed the tragedy on Monday's ***Binghamton Now*** program. He and colleague Nick Horsky were positioned near the river behind the Park Diner.

Huckabone said the news team recorded about 40 minutes of the fire department operations on videotape.

A Binghamton man who called the program recounted his own close call at the Rockbottom Dam in 1985. He said he nearly lost his life 30 years ago this week at the same site where the firefighters had drowned a decade earlier.

Read More: [Binghamton Tragedy Teaches Lessons Decades Later](#) | <http://wnbf.com/binghamton-tragedy-teaches-lessons-decades-later/?trackback=tsmclip>

40 years later, honoring drowned firefighters

<http://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/public-safety/2015/09/29/40-years-later-drowned-firefighters-honored/72989294/>

October 12, 2015 Anthony Borrelli,



(Photo: ANDREW THAYER / Staff Photo)

In September 1975, Michael Durkan was swept into raging waters that claimed the lives of three of his fellow Binghamton firefighters. Forty years later, he still struggles with the memories.

"It's been hard," the now-retired veteran firefighter told nearly 100 people Tuesday during a memorial service on the north shore of the Susquehanna River at Rockbottom Dam in Binghamton. The service honored Fire Chief John Cox, Firefighter John Russell and Capt. Donald McGeever, who [drowned in a rescue and recovery effort that spanned two days in 1975.](#)

Beneath overcast skies and a light rain, Binghamton Fire Chief Daniel Thomas said the department has kept its promise to those lost comrades. "We said that we would never forget, and we haven't," Thomas said. "What started as a rescue ended as a tragedy."



**Current and retired members of the Binghamton Fire Department honored the memory of three firefighters who drowned during a rescue mission at Rockbottom Dam 40 years ago on Tuesday.
Andrew Thayer / Staff Video**

Thomas recounted the grim tale: The river was unusually high on Sept. 28, 1975, following an early fall storm, and the waters swept two rafters over the dam, trapping them in the churning current below.

Durkan and two fellow firefighters tried to rescue the rafters. Their first attempt failed, but on a second try firefighters dragged one man out by using a rescue buoy. When they returned for the second man, the firefighters' boat capsized and they were thrown into the water.

For Durkan, the ordeal remains a string of terrifying memories.

"We could feel [the current] get hold of us and start to pull us in like a magnet," he said Tuesday. "We'd get pulled in, dunked underwater, washed around, and then pulled back in and dunked underwater in I don't know how many cycles."



Retired Binghamton firefighter Michael Durkan speaks to Mary Briggs, the sister of fallen firefighter John Russell, following Tuesday's 40th anniversary memorial ceremony at Rockbottom Dam in Binghamton. (Photo: ANDREW THAYER / Staff Photo)

Durkan, a fellow firefighter finally and the second rafter broke free from the backwash, but firefighter Russell drowned.

The next day, on Sept. 29, 1975, Cox, McGeever and Lt. Robert Dale returned to the river in an attempt to recover Russell's body. As they approached the dam, their boat overturned and the men slipped below the surface.

Another rescue boat carrying Broome County Sheriff's Sgt. Beverly Tripp and Deputy Donald Stark was launched after them, but that also capsized. After a struggle in the raging water, Tripp, Stark and Dale were pulled out to safety — but Cox and McGeever drowned.



Binghamton firefighters stand near the banks of the Susquehanna River before the start of Tuesdays memorial for three firefighters who died at the spot in 1975.

(Photo: ANDREW THAYER / Staff Photo)

The deaths shed light on the need to improve training techniques and equipment in these scenarios in order to avoid putting rescuers in harm's way, Thomas said Tuesday.

In Binghamton, he said, procedure calls for a 5-inch hose to be inflated with compressed air and floated across the river. Another option is a device called a "rescue rocket," he said.

Binghamton Fire Capt. Daniel Vail said waters surrounding the dam, even at lower levels, can be deceptively dangerous. The city bans watercraft for 600 feet above the dam and 20 feet below it.

Toward the end of Tuesday's ceremony, bagpipers played "Amazing Grace" and a bell tolled for the lost firefighters.

For Durkan, even more vivid than the nightmarish memory of nearly drowning that day is what he calls the "overwhelming cheer" from onlookers by the river bank when he was pulled from the water.

Speaking to the crowd in a pride-filled voice Tuesday, Durkan said he went home after the rescue to clean himself up, then returned to his duties later that same night.

Closing his speech, Durkan pointed to the some 20 uniformed firefighters standing at attention to his right and said that's what this job is all about. Follow Anthony Borrelli on Twitter [@PSBABorrelli](#)

Warning: The video below contains graphic content

