

PEOPLE in the neighborhood said later they heard a roar, felt a rush of air. Suddenly a cloud of black smoke hung in the air where a building once stood.

Wreckers had been dismantling an old building southwest of Chicago's Loop to make room for a new shopping center. Without warning, the floors had collapsed. Of 29 workmen in the building, 15 were injured when the three-story structure came crashing down on them. At least three men were trapped and perhaps still alive, waiting for firemen to dig them out.

My men went to work. I climbed through a narrow passage in the debris and after a 1½-hour struggle uncovered one man. His thighs were crushed under bricks and mortar, and all we could do was ease his pain before he died.

It would be two days before we located the body of the second victim. But the third man, William McCoy, was another story, and an amazing one. We knew he had been working on the first floor and probably was now buried in the basement. But where should we begin digging? And how long did we have?

Crawling under the basement floor, I began shouting through the floor beams, hoping McCoy, if he were alive, would hear. Suddenly my driver, Bill McDonough, nudged me. "I think I hear someone," he said. McDonough was right. A weak voice cried for help somewhere above us in the maze of rubble.

I shined my flashlight upward. "Yell when you see the light!" I shouted. A frightened voice answered—"Oh, Lord, help me! The pain is terrible. I can't take it long!" His words told us about where he was—and that we must hurry.

Pacing off the distance to the nearest wall, we returned to ground level. I paced off the same approximate distance there and told the rescuers: "Dig here. Our man's somewhere below."

BUT "somewhere below" might not be good enough. We had more than a dozen feet of loosely packed brick, board, and concrete to dig through before we could uncover McCoy. The still-standing walls teetered above our heads, threatening to buckle at any moment. We couldn't utilize any heavy equipment that might dislodge them. We had to dig carefully by hand, chipping away like a master cutter at a precious diamond. Failing to dig directly down to McCoy might cost us hours. A matter of minutes in our uncovering him might make the mortal difference.

McCoy probably didn't have much time. A heavy steel I beam lay across his left calf, pin-

THE SOUND THAT CHEATED DEATH



By **ROBERT J. QUINN**

Fire Commissioner of Chicago

as told to Hal Higdon

In the debris of a collapsed building, an injured man is trapped—but where?

A fire fighter finds the answer in a newscaster's hand

ning him. Another steel beam had landed along his right side. It supported a sheet of metal flooring which had protected him from cascading debris. McCoy lay face down, unable to move, completely buried—and with time running out. And we had only a vague idea of where he was.

Then I had an idea. A crowd of several thousand people, including McCoy's wife, had gathered to watch the rescue operation. I noticed newscaster Jim Hurlbut circulating along the fringe of the crowd. Using a battery-powered recorder, he was taping eyewitness accounts.

I went up to Jim and said: "There's a man down there. We can hear his voice faintly, but we can't tell exactly where he's located."

Jim's eyes lighted up. "Maybe we can drop a mike down to him and let him tell us," he said.

The building's wreckage had fallen in a pile like matchsticks spilled from a box. It was jittery as a bowl of gelatin. But enough holes or breathing spaces existed so that small objects could be lowered through the debris with some chance of getting below.

HURLBUT'S recording unit contained a long extension cord. We got down on our bellies above where we thought McCoy was buried and, using this long cord, lowered the business end of the recorder, the microphone, through the debris. We were fishing for a human life. "McCoy, can you see the mike?" I shouted.

"I can't see anything," McCoy's voice echoed dimly through the wreckage. "Won't you people ever get me out of here?"

"We're trying, McCoy. We're trying!"

We hauled the mike back up and lowered it again through the debris in another spot. Then we tried again, straining to hear.

"I see the mike!" McCoy shouted. "It's only three feet in front of my head." His voice came loud and clear. Now we knew where he was!

I stood up and motioned the rescue crew to move over. "We've been digging in the wrong place, boys. He's down here."

Nineteen-and-a-half hours after being buried alive, William McCoy was lifted from the wreckage. His leg, pinned all this time without circulation under a steel beam, had to be amputated below the knee, but he would survive. "I'm a lucky man," McCoy admitted as the ambulance drove him away.

He was lucky, because the place we had found him was maybe a dozen feet away from where we had originally started to dig. Not very far as distances go—perhaps just the distance between life and death.

With more than a dozen feet of loosely packed brick, board, and concrete to move, Commissioner Quinn (in white helmet) and his fire fighters dig for McCoy.

