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**BRENDAN  
GLEESON**

February 29, 2004

## Firefighter in Crash Took Cocaine, City Says

By WINNIE HU

A firefighter was under the influence of cocaine when he drove one fire truck into another at a Bronx intersection last week, causing a multivehicle accident that injured at least nine firefighters and two other people, fire officials said yesterday.

The accident prompted Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta to announce yesterday that his department would require random drug testing for its 11,500 uniformed firefighters and fire officials and 3,000 emergency medical service workers.

"Anybody who feels the need to use drugs, or abuse alcohol, this is not the job for them," Commissioner Scoppetta said at a news conference in front of the Fire Department headquarters in downtown Brooklyn.

Commissioner Scoppetta said he was "truly shocked" and "appalled" to learn that Firefighter Thomas Lennon, 41, had tested positive for cocaine during a routine check after the collision of the two fire trucks on the morning of Feb. 21.

"We are all, at the department, outraged that a firefighter who is sworn to protect the public, to protect his colleagues, should be at work under the influence of a controlled substance and at such high levels," the commissioner said.

Mr. Lennon, a seven-year veteran of the department, was a chauffeur -- the department's term for a driver -- for Engine Company 83. He was responding to a building fire when his truck slammed into a truck from Engine Company 60 at Jackson Avenue and 144th Street, fire officials said. The firefighters and bystanders involved in the accident were treated for minor injuries, fire officials said.

Mr. Lennon, who is on paid medical leave, could not be reached yesterday for comment.

Commissioner Scoppetta said the accident was still under investigation. He added that a fire engine would typically travel at a top speed of 35 to 40 miles per hour. "Just keep in mind, this is a 20-ton vehicle hurtling through the streets," he said. "We can't afford to have chauffeurs that are in this condition."

The commissioner said there was no indication that Mr. Lennon had taken drugs at the firehouse. He said that Mr. Lennon would be suspended without pay for 30 days, and that the department could take steps to dismiss him.

The Fire Department has what officials call a "zero-tolerance policy" toward drugs. Under this policy, firefighters with drug or alcohol problems who voluntarily come forward for treatment are not penalized, but those who are caught abusing drugs or alcohol can be dismissed.

Over the last two years, 12 members of the department were dismissed after testing positive for the use of controlled substances, fire officials said. In the past six months, officials said, they have inspected six firehouses across the city. Alcohol was found at one of them, Engine Company 53-Ladder Company 43, on Third Avenue between 101st and 102nd Streets in East Harlem, they said, and two firefighters there tested positive for a controlled substance. A department official said their status was unclear.

Commissioner Scoppetta denied yesterday that the department had a substance abuse problem, saying that the new policy of random drug testing, which would include alcohol, was intended as another step in a deterrence policy. He said that the new policy would be carried out as soon as the department worked out the specific procedures with the firefighters' unions. "We're allowed to do this," he said. "It is simply a requirement of collective bargaining that we negotiate with the union the process by which we will institute the policy, not whether or not we'll institute the policy -- because we will."

The president of the Uniformed Firefighters Association, Steven Cassidy, said in a statement that while the union "does not condone illegal drug use, we are concerned that our firefighters for many reasons are not availing themselves" of counseling services in connection with the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack and the long-range post-traumatic stress behavior predicted by many experts.

He said the union and Commissioner Scoppetta were in negotiations over drug testing procedures more than a year ago. "The department has repeatedly failed to respond to our proposals," the statement said.

The Uniformed Fire Officers Association did not return several messages seeking comment.

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