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Firefighter Was Down, but Not Ready to Give Up

By **PETER APPLEBOME**

The first fall should have been the catastrophe.

Dino Ferraro was at a fire in a largely abandoned clock factory in 1989 when he fell from a fully extended aerial ladder 25 feet to the concrete below, landing on his left shoulder. A different angle, he could have been paralyzed or killed. As it was, small miracle, he hit the ground and bounced up like a rubber ball. He separated the shoulder and was out for two and a half months, but lived to fight fires another day.

But you get to dodge only so many bullets. He didn't dodge any on Sept. 23, 2000, when he came to work a little early and took a call he would have missed had he showed up five minutes later. This time he was on a ladder breaking open second-floor windows at a bedroom fire in a housing project.

The firefighters inside, not seeing him through the smoke, blasted him with a hose shooting out water at 150 pounds per square inch of pressure. He fell only 12 feet, but when a firefighter at the bottom of the ladder tried to break the fall, Mr. Ferraro landed squarely on the heel of his right foot. "When they pulled off the boot, it looked like scrambled eggs," Mr. Ferraro said. He suffered what is called a pilon fracture. It is also known as a hammer

fracture, which tells you all you need to know.

"They looked at the ankle and told me it was all over," Mr. Ferraro, 48, recalled. "They told me before the surgery, they told me after the surgery, they probably told me during the surgery, that I was all done with fighting fires. They said there was just no way."

There were operations, a steel plate and 13 screws in his leg, casts, boots and therapy sessions, all intended to allow him to walk normally, without pain. None were very successful. And when the ankle joint ended up 20 degrees out of alignment, the right leg an inch shorter than the left, that looked like the best that could be done.

But Mr. Ferraro, who at first wanted to become a state trooper but then caught the firehouse bug, wasn't content with limping around, and, stubbornly, he wasn't resigned to being a former firefighter, living on disability payments at the impeccably neat split raised ranch he shares with his wife, Annette. He wanted to walk normally. And he wanted to climb ladders, walk on roofs, smash gashes in burning buildings, fight fires.

So through his wife's contacts as a radiology technician, he began looking for more options. In October 2002 that took him to the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan and Dr. S.

Robert Rozbruch, an orthopedic surgeon and director of the hospital's limb lengthening and deformity service, who decided that Mr. Ferraro's case might not be so hopeless, after all. He could see that in 95 percent of cases it would be a career-ending injury. But between the advances in orthopedics and Mr. Ferraro's dogged insistence on going back to work, he figured it was worth a shot.

So, using an Ilizarov frame, a scaffold around the leg that looks a bit like a medieval torture device, his treatment consisted of two main elements — returning the ankle joint to something near its normal alignment and using the body's ability to grow new bone to lengthen the leg to where it had been before the accident. The frame was put on in February 2003. It was removed that July.

After almost a year of therapy, Mr. Ferraro thought it was time to see how close he was to where he wanted to be. He took out his ladder and climbed to the top of his house with its steep-pitched roof. Then several times a week he clambered over its eaves and ridges, first without his gear, then in his heavy firefighter's outfit.

On June 8, 2005, he was allowed to return to work as a firefighter, and he has been there ever since, back at the New Haven Fire Department's East Battalion, Truck 3 at the

Lombard Street station, where he began work 21 years ago.

This past week all the terrible images came flooding back, of the firefighters rushing into the burning towers, the almost unfathomable dedication, the miracles of bravery, medicine, heart and soul that got people through that week six years ago. Mr. Ferraro marvels and shudders like everyone else about what people did on 9/11. But, though he wouldn't make any comparisons, he is a reminder of how, in far, far smaller ways, those miracles play out in daily life, too.

"It's just something in my blood," he said. "I climb ladders. I walk on roofs. I fight fires. I wasn't really out to prove anything. I just figured I was 41 years old, and that was too young to quit."