

HONG KONG

EMERGENCY SERVICES



Proud firemen (from left) Chan Chun-yin, Ng Chi-hung and Chow Wai-hong will receive their bravery awards today. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

LIFESAVING FIRE HEROES RELIEVE PERILOUS RESCUE

The three men battled against choking smoke and dwindling oxygen supplies to save two teenage siblings trapped in a burning building

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Three firefighters who will be awarded top honours today for their bravery have described how they battled flames, smoke and zero visibility to rescue two trapped siblings.

The men were tackling the blaze at the Cheong Fat Industrial Building in Cheung Sha Wan when they heard shouts from one of the subdivided flats.

"I didn't even realise my breathing apparatus was whistling. I just wanted to bring the young man down the stairs and escape. After all, saving lives is my duty," Chow Wai-hong, 45, said.

Chow was retreating with his colleagues – senior fireman Ng Chi-hung, 49, and fireman Chan Chun-yin, 24 – when they heard the cries for help.

The third-alarm fire had started at 11.31pm in an eighth-floor flat of the Cheong Fat Factory Building on July 7. The flat, measuring 15 by 20 metres, was subdivided with wooden planks and was used for storage.

Two teenagers – Pang Ka-man, 14, and Pang Suen-ming, 16 – were trapped in a flat opposite.

The trio from Cheung Sha Wan fire station were the first to be sent into the building. Though the entire floor was engulfed by smoke and they could see nothing, they had managed to locate the siblings by tracing their sounds. It was then 11.52pm and they called for reinforcements.

"We could not leave them behind even though we were withdrawing and would soon run out of oxygen," Chow said.

He and Ng decided to carry out the siblings although it would further drain their oxygen. They also had to attend Chan on the seventh floor as his oxygen ran out.

"I was anxious as I was inhaling smoke. I felt like I was falling asleep," Chan, who is still on probation until the middle of next year, recalled.

"I kept reminding myself not to sleep. Otherwise that was it."

Chan was helped out by two other colleagues from his station.

Ng carried Ka-man two floors down and passed her to two colleagues from Lai Chi Kok station. But when he ran out of oxygen on the third floor he had to think quickly to save himself.

"I slid down the stairs by using the back rack of the breathing apparatus. I had to believe in myself that I could make it," he said.

Meanwhile, Chow, who is 68kg, had carried the semi-unconscious Suen-ming, weighing more than 90kg, down to the fifth floor when he realised he too was out of oxygen and felt unwell.

"I kept waking the boy up and telling him we had to get out," Chow said.

Luckily senior station officer Patrick Ho Dik-hei reached them in time and got them out. After taking a short break, the trio twice went back inside the burning building before calling it a day.

The three lifesavers will receive a Bronze Medal for Bravery at Government House in recognition of their gallantry, while Ho and the two firemen from Lai Chi Kok will receive the Chief Executive's Commendation for exemplary courage.

The fire came two weeks after the deadly inferno at a mini-storage facility in Ngau Tau Kok that killed senior station officer Thomas Cheung and senior fireman Samuel Hui Chi-kit. Ng admitted this played on his mind as all three had battled the Ngau Tau Kok fire.

"When my breathing apparatus whistled, there was a flash when I wondered if I would follow the path of the two fallen colleagues," Ng said.

The trio said the medals belonged to everyone, as team work made the rescue possible.

"We would not have finished the duty if our fellows didn't come and help us in time. We work as a team," Ng continued.

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying will honour 29 firefighters for their bravery. Cheung and Hui were posthumously awarded the Gold Medal for Bravery, the city's highest honour.

POLITICS

First pan-dem bid to oust Legco chief thrown out

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Legislative Council president Andrew Leung Kwan-yuen has escaped the pan-democrats' first attempt to oust him.

This came after the head of the agenda-setting House Committee ruled against the tabling of a vote of no-confidence next Wednesday over how Leung handled the oath-taking of two localists.

Civic Party vice-chairwoman Tanya Chan wanted to table the motion to remove Leung, after he accepted a pro-establishment camp demand and banned Youngspiration's Sixtus Baggio Leung Chung-hang and Yau Wai-ching from retaking their oath last Wednesday.

The pair triggered a political storm after they used insulting language in their original oath-taking on October 12.

"I know that to table any motion next Wednesday, I would have had to make my request by last Tuesday," Chan explained. "But this is a matter of urgency."

Newly elected lawmaker Eddie Chu Hoi-dick agreed. "Leung has lost his credibility as president, and it is a matter of urgency to minimise the harm he is doing by tabling and passing this motion as soon as possible," he said.

However, committee chairwoman Starry Lee Wai-king, who leads the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, the biggest pro-Beijing party in the Legco, disagreed.

"Apart from urgency, I also need to consider if lawmakers who did not attend this meeting have enough time to learn about Chan's motion," Lee said yesterday. "So I decided that the tabling should be discussed again next Friday, this would not affect Chan's rights as lawmaker."

CULTURE

Soprano sings with joy after first for Broadway musical

Just out of college, Viveca Chow will carry the torch for minority performers with top role

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Viveca Chow Hung-ka is the first Hongkonger to land a role in a Broadway musical, but as a fresh face out of college and a minority actress in America, she has met her fair share of naysayers.

Chow is bound by contractual agreements and cannot disclose the name of the show she will star in. What she did reveal though were the rejections she faced before finally fulfilling her dream. A talent agent once told Chow that she would never make it on the New York stage.

In May, the 21-year-old soprano also made it to the final audition callbacks for a leading role in the Broadway national tour of *The King and I*, but she was not selected by the casting team. Three months later she landed her role in another Broadway show.

Only able to say that her spot was "important and demanding", Chow hopes to follow in the footsteps of her hero Jennifer Lim – the first Hongkonger to feature in a Broadway play.

With years of vocal training, Chow has mastered a three-octave vocal range, and has perfect pitch. "Ever since I was 10 and first performed on stage, I have always known that I wanted to be part of theatre," she said.

Chow started out by taking part in monologue recitals in Hong Kong. She then attended the junior music programme at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts before being admitted to Point Park University in Pittsburgh, a leading performing arts college in America.

Although she graduated with honours this past summer, her American journey was not without hardship. She once cried in front of her class after a teacher

yelled at her for struggling with a performance.

Chow recalled: "The teacher said: 'You can't be like that. This is the life of an actress'."

She credited her Hong Kong roots for the work ethic to overcome adversity.

"In order to succeed in this business, you have to work on your craft every day."

Chow's mother, Anna Cheng Yuk-yiu, accompanied her daughter – an only child – every step of the way.

She attended every class her daughter took, be it piano, voice or dancing.

She said all she and her husband ever wanted was for their daughter to "follow her heart".

Viveca Chow said she knew there were more challenges ahead, but she was entering the business at the right time as Broadway was more open now to providing opportunities for minority performers.

She said she was inspired by the recent success of *Hamilton*, a musical that featured a cast comprising minorities.

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