

Life Nets

Source: Archives

Life nets have always been visually interesting pieces of firefighting equipment. Too large to hide, the sometimes were carried in the open on ladder trucks. It's not known exactly when Portland Fire began using Life Nets, and it isn't known how often they were deployed. Most stories associated with them come from firefighters, who during training, had to jump into them as part of their probationary training exercises. This practice ended in 1984. The advent of aerial ladders and modern building codes have rendered them a thing of the past.

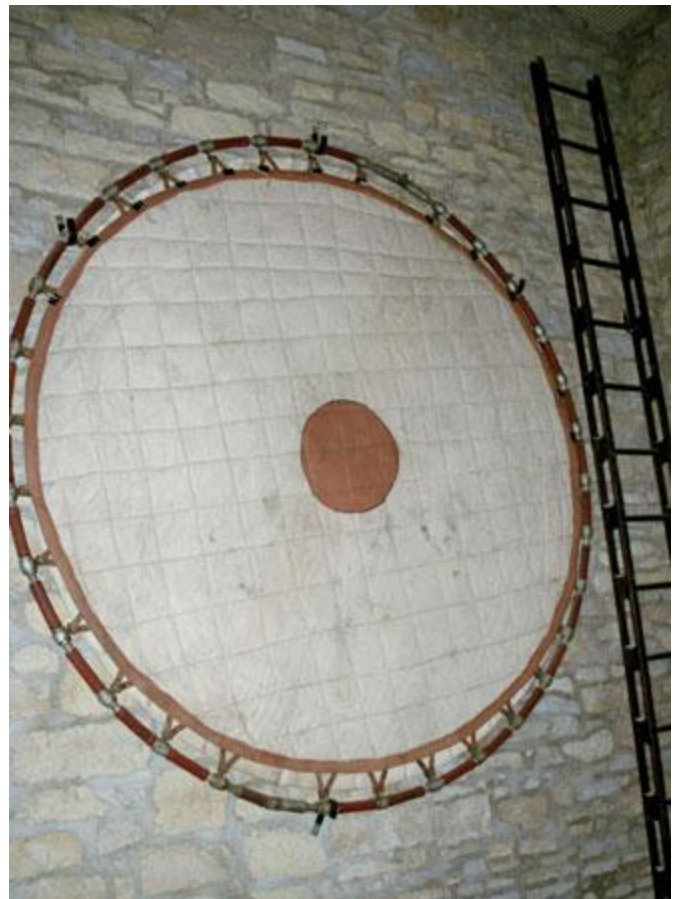
The "Red Book" training manual described the Life Net this way:

The Life Net is a device used for rescuing persons from upper floors or roofs when all other means are impossible. It should be used only in extreme emergencies. The net consists of a ring made of metal piping about ten feet in diameter. The landing mat consists of a heavy canvas or nylon webbing and is usually covered by a quilted pad. The landing mat is attached to the ring by approximately thirty coil springs. The springs are attached to the mat by leather straps riveted to the mat and to the frame by steel rods running through the center of the springs. When in operation, the net is held open by sleeves that lock the hinged joint. It is folded to a quarter circle when carried on the apparatus.

Other sources discuss the deployment of a Life Net suggesting they be opened well away from the building so the potential jumper did not leap before the Life Net was ready to use. It was said it should be carried on edge to avoid appearing as a target and lowered flat when all firefighters holding it were ready to put it to use.

It was suggested that 10-12 firefighters hold the Life Net. They should be spread equally around the Life Net, grasping it with palms up, holding the ring about shoulder height. Knees must be well back from the ring itself as the impact can cause the ring to drop a couple feet.

Once in place, the catch can be made. On impact, all firefighters would absorb the impact of the jumper by allowing the ring to drop down. This is where an errant leg under the ring could easily be broken if hit by the ring.



If one can envision all that is necessary to safely and effectively deploy such a device, all while trying to provide instruction to someone so desperate for their life that they would consider jumping from a fourth or fifth floor of a building, it is easy to see how the chance of catching the jumper would be difficult at best. A slight miscalculation might find the jumper landing on several firefighters or even into the middle of the street.

An online article from FirefighterNation.com described Life Nets this way:

The good thing, judging from old press accounts, was that a lot of times life nets worked. The bad thing was that seemingly just about as often, they didn't—deaths and injuries were common.

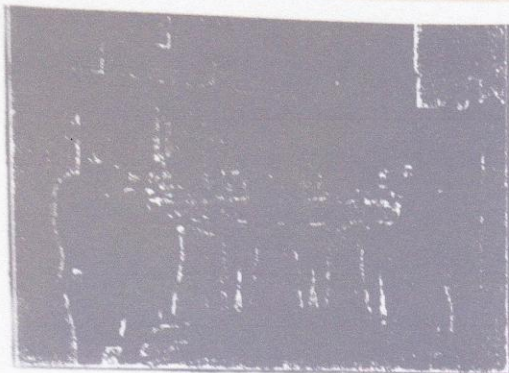
The practical limit was believed to be six stories; New York City firefighters in 1900 routinely jumped into a net from that height during their training. Surviving a leap from a taller building wasn't out of the question. In a 1930 Chicago fire, three people jumped eight stories into a net: Two suffered minor injuries, and one bounced out and fractured her skull. One daredevil L.A. firefighter tested a life net from ten stories and landed without a scratch.

But that was rare. In the infamous Triangle garment factory fire of 1911, flames raced through the top three floors of a ten-story building in lower Manhattan. Scores of panicked workers, mostly young women, leaped from the windows. Some plummeted to the sidewalk even before firefighters arrived and set up their nets. Two women who had jumped together ripped through one net, followed close after by a third. Another woman landed in a net but died of internal injuries later. Deliverymen stretched out a tarp hoping to save some of the leapers; the first hurtling body ripped it from their grasp. With corpses literally piling up at the foot of the building, nets were soon abandoned as futile. In all, 146 people died.

Jumping from lower heights wasn't much safer. Leapers sometimes struck something on the way down, landed on a fireman or missed entirely. Things could go wrong even if you were on target. In 1910, four women made the mistake of clinging to one another as they jumped from a burning four-story factory in Newark, New Jersey. They tore through the net and were killed.



There is one success story that was uncovered that apparently happened in Portland. While the details of the rescue were not found, the man who was rescued, a Mr. D/L Capps, wrote a letter of appreciation to the TF Browder & Co., the manufacturer of the "Browder Life Saving Nets." The response is in the two letters below, dated April 16, 1906 and July 24, 1906. In it, the Browder Company thanks Mr. Capps for the fine endorsement and offers to send him a \$5 to purchase cigars.



AFTER A FIVE STORY JUMP.

Mr. D. L. Capps,

Portland, Oregon.

Dear Sir:

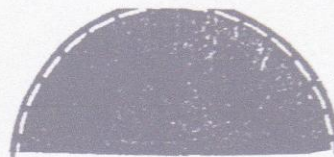
I have a clipping from one of your papers, The Portland Oregonian, which contains your picture and a history of your daring leap for the life net. We regret very much that you were injured in any way at all, but are truly glad that your life was saved. We would like to get a statement from you, as good as you feel that you can give us, stating that you owe your life to the Browder Machine; and describing your experience about as it is in the paper, but if you feel like leaving out about the fractured ribs all right. Put it just to suit yourself and it would be perfectly satisfactory to us. We also want to get the cut from ywhich your picture was made and insert your picture above your statement and use them in our phamplets and circulars if you have no objections.

Trusting that you have fully recovered and hoping to hear from you at an early date, and thanking you in advance we are

Very truly,

The Browder Co.

THE HIGHEST OF THE HANGERS AND BUSTLES TAKES THE JET off the person jumping and the people holding the Escape. There is no rebound, the hangers counter-acting the same. If these nets were used by hotels, factories, workshops, and fire departments, there would be no reason for the loss of human life by fire. The Escape is held shoulder high and at half arms length, keeping the elbow from touching the body. It is held by ten to twelve men. Made with hinges and automatic locks.



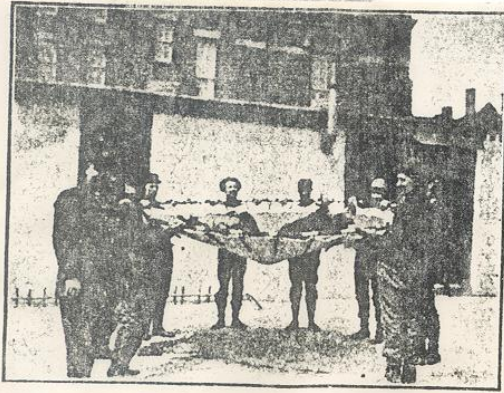
THE NET CLOSED.

WRITE FOR PRICES.
The
T. F. Browder & Co.

Manufacturers of The

Browder Life Saving Nets.

Greenfield, Ohio. 4/16/06.



AFTER A FIVE STORY JUMP.

Mr. D/L. Cappa,
Portland, Oregon:
Dear Sir:

We have the pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of your very good and kind letter; and thank you very much for the same. It gives me great pleasure to know that I have been the means of saving your life by my invention. I hope you will never be forced to make such a fearful leap again. It is very nice in you to praise the machine that saved your life, and by so doing you may help to save other lives, as we expect to put your recommendation you sign in our circulars with your picture above it. After send us your picture we will get a cut made of it and then send you some of the circulars with your picture on them. ~~we~~

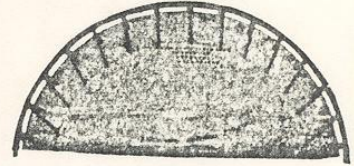
We feel like setting up the cigars to a man who made such a fearful leap and gives the machine the praise you do. Inclosed please find express order for five dollars. Smoke a few on us, and send us your photo.

Now if you can conscientiously sign the recommendation we send you and return we shall thank you very much.

Write it off in your own hand writing and return it to us at once as we are in a hurry to get out our circulars. Hoping that you will attend to this, and thanking you in advance, we are,

BROWDER & ORY,
SUCCESSORS TO

The only perfect Life Saving Canvas or Net in the World.
The motion of the hangers and springs takes the jar off the person jumping and the people holding the Escape. There is no rebound, the hangers counter-acting the same. If these nets were used by hotels, factories, workshops, and fire departments, there would be no reason for the loss of human life by fire. The Escape is held shoulder high and at half arms length, keeping the elbow from touching the body. It is held by ten to twelve men. Made with hinges and automatic locks.



WRITE FOR PRICE **BROWDER & ORY,**
SUCCESSORS TO
T. F. Browder & Co.

Manufacturers of The

Browder Life Saving Nets.

Greenfield, Ohio. 7/24;06.

yours very truly,

Browder & Ory

