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Cop Wants Ex-Fire Commissioner's Son Arrested Over Altercation

Internal affairs divisions from Chicago police and fire departments probe alleged altercation during riverfront rescue.

By Robert Herguth/BGA and Fran Spielman/Sun-Times

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Mayor Rahm Emanuel's plan to merge the marine units of the Chicago Police Department and Chicago Fire Department is off to a rocky start.

A Chicago police officer is demanding the arrest of the fire-captain son of a former fire commissioner who allegedly slammed the officer to the ground during a Nov. 1 river rescue, according to a joint investigation by the Chicago Sun-Times and the Better Government Association.

The apparent turf battle did not impede the early-morning rescue of two men who apparently had fallen in to the water near Goose Island. The alleged aggressor was fire Capt. Mark Altman, son of former Chicago Fire Commissioner Edward Altman. The victim was Chicago police Officer Joseph J. Smith.

"He grabbed me and slammed me backwards, and I fell on the ground. He unlawfully put his hands on me. That is a battery. He should be arrested for that," said Smith, who is assigned to the police Marine Unit.

"I was totally shocked by this. My intention was to save two people. That was taken away from me by that particular fireman. I later found out he's a politically connected fireman. That doesn't change the facts. I am a good guy. I just want justice to be done and fairness."

Earlier this week, Altman, a captain assigned to the fire department's Squad One, answered the door at his Northwest Side home and said the Nov. 1 incident — now being investigated by the Internal Affairs Divisions of both departments — "really was" overblown.

He refused to discuss specifics, telling a BGA investigator, "You have to go through the Fire Department."

Fire Department spokesman Larry Langford would confirm only that the incident was the subject of an internal investigation.

Sources familiar with the investigation said Altman was carrying out a battalion chief's order to "get people away" from the riverfront who were "not wearing safety vests" and therefore were "not properly attired for the rescue."

There is no indication that Altman had been drinking, and he has not been tested for either alcohol or drugs, the sources said.

Adding further intrigue to the incident is a Nov. 9 e-mail to Fire Department brass from District Chief Joshua Dennis, executive assistant to current Fire Commissioner Robert Hoff. It states, "Per the Fire Commissioner, no correspondence, documents, interviews or other requests from the inspector general shall be honored unless approved by the Fire



1200 block of West North Avenue.

The Fire Department's Marine Unit was the first to respond. Shortly after that, the Police Department's Marine Unit showed up. That's when an apparently enraged Altman started shouting.

"A fireman was saying, 'Get back. Get back.' I informed him that I was with the CPD Marine Unit, and he told me he didn't care who I was with, using a lot of four-letter words," Smith said. "I just ignored him and bent down to look in the water. I saw two people in the water and another firefighter ready to grab them. [That's when Altman] grabbed me and slammed me back. I fell backwards and fell on the ground. I was in shock. I have no idea where this came from. I've never had any problems with the Fire Department."

Instead of getting into what he called a "confrontation" with Altman, Smith withdrew from the scene, informed his superiors and filed a "simple battery" report, claiming he was slammed to the ground twice, the second time sustaining "minor injuries to the back of his head."

At least six police officers witnessed the incident, which may also have been captured on videotape by a surveillance camera at a nearby Home Depot.

The e-mail directing Fire Department brass to seek approval from Hoff before cooperating with Ferguson follows the fire commissioner's decision to ignore the IG's recommendation to fire all 54 firefighters accused of padding mileage expenses to the tune of \$100,000 in 2009.

Instead, Hoff fired just four of the 54, suspended 43 others for anywhere from 30-to-60 days and allowed six others to retire.

Captain is second son of former fire commissioner to land in hot water

Mark Altman isn't the only son of former Chicago Fire Commissioner Edward Altman Sr. to land in hot water over alleged wrongdoing.

In the late 1990s, Commissioner Altman and his namesake, son Edward Jr., who was then head of the Fire Department's Internal Affairs Division, were forced out in the fallout from a raucous 1990 retirement party captured on videotape at Engine 100, 6843 S. Harper.

The now infamous videotape, played over and over again by local television stations, showed firefighters drinking beer, using racial slurs and mooning the camera.

Altman Jr. "became aware" of the videotape on May 13, 1997, but did not initiate a disciplinary investigation — or even tell his superiors about the videotape — until late November of that year, when he learned that a TV station had a copy, an arbitrator ruled.

As a result, the arbitrator ruled the firing of seven firefighters and suspensions against 21 others were "untimely" because 6.5 months had transpired between the time the department first became aware of the videotape and the day the disciplinary investigation was triggered.

At the time, Altman Jr.'s wife tearfully accused the arbitrator and City Hall of unfairly pinning the entire sordid incident on her husband.

Commissioner. Any contact initiated by the Office of the Inspector General should be directed to the Office of the Fire Commissioner."

A spokesperson for Inspector General Joe Ferguson declined to comment.

Langford said the e-mail had "nothing to do with the Altman affair," adding, "I have no indication that the IG is looking into this at all."

The directive stems from the fact that, "The commissioner just wants everything to go through him. He wants to know what's going on, that's all," Langford said. "It's not a failure to cooperate. It's just a matter of organization."

The incident occurred shortly after 1 a.m. on Nov. 1 after a call of two men in the Chicago River near the

"If all these people are hired back, that means one person has taken the whole rap for this, and that's my husband — just because he's the son of the fire commissioner," Louise Altman, Edward Jr.'s wife, told the Chicago Sun-Times at that time. "I have no words for that. You give 23 years of your life to the city, and this is what you get in return."

Louise Altman said her husband was powerless to initiate an investigation in May 1997 because Capt. Ezra McCann, who later ran and lost an aldermanic race in the South Side's 4th Ward, had refused to surrender a copy of the videotape.

At the time, McCann insisted that he held onto the tape because he had no faith that the firefighters would be punished by a Fire Department that, he contended, condones racism.

"Since I see the way life is, I have no choice but to try and create change through another avenue," he said then.
