

Man badly injured in fight outside barroom

By CARL CHASE

A Lake Hiawatha man was fighting for his life yesterday, and a Newark firefighter was charged with assault after a late-night barroom fight in West Orange.

Landscaper Archie Piccolo, 32, was unconscious on life support in University Hospital in Newark after an off-duty fireman punched him off a retaining wall outside the Gate House, a nightclub on Prospect Avenue. Police said the punch caused Piccolo to fall and strike his head on pavement.

A West Orange police officer who tried to quell the disturbance arrested fireman Vincent Negri, 27, an Eatontown resident, immediately after the incident at 1:42 a.m. Sunday. A person answering Negri's telephone yesterday said the fireman had no comment.

The victim was in an intensive care unit and had not regained consciousness, hospital spokesman Rogers Ramsey said yesterday.

Municipal Judge Harry Starrett set bail at \$7,500 and someone bailed out the firefighter, West Orange Acting Chief Capt. John Cavanaugh said yesterday.

Negri told police the run-in started when Piccolo thought he was making a pass at his girlfriend.

Security guards took the men outside, where the officer separated them and Negri's friend, Jose Santos. The friends were asked to stand aside until Piccolo and the woman had driven off in his car, Cavanaugh said.

Instead, when Piccolo taunted and yelled at Negri, the fireman ran and punched Piccolo and was arrested, the incident report says.

Santos was also arrested and charged with obstructing the administration of law, for allegedly opening the back door of the squad car where Negri was seated. Santos was later released to his own custody.

They were taking Piccolo to St. Barnabas Medical Center when he said he did not remember the incident and began lapsing in and out of consciousness. At that point, the ambulance went instead to the trauma center at University Hospital in Newark, the report says.

Fistfight that led to death draws plea of not guilty from fireman

By CARL CHASE

A Newark fireman yesterday pleaded not guilty in the death of a Lake Hiawatha man who died from head injuries suffered when the fireman allegedly knocked the man over a wall in West Orange during a fight.

Vincent Negri, 27, was arraigned yesterday in Superior Court in Newark after surrendering to the Essex County Prosecutor's Office accompanied by an attorney, said Ray Weiss, a spokesman for the Prosecutor's Office.

Originally charged with aggravated assault, he is now accused of murder. Landscaper Archie Piccolo, 32, was injured in the brief scuffle outside the Gatehouse, a nightclub on Prospect Avenue.

Superior Court Judge Joseph A. Falcone set bail at \$15,000 bond.

Piccolo never regained consciousness after the Feb. 25 incident, and died at 5:20 p.m. Saturday. He died of complications from the severe head trauma he sustained in the fight, but the exact cause of death will be determined by the Essex County Medical Examiner, Ramsey said.

The men reportedly clashed when Piccolo thought Negri made a pass at Piccolo's girl-

friend, and nightclub bouncers escorted them outside. An off-duty West Orange patrolman who tried to break it up ordered Negri and his friend Jose Santos to stand aside until Piccolo and the woman could drive away, the officer's report states.

Piccolo yelled at Negri, who ran past the patrolman and punched Piccolo, knocking him over a retaining wall where he struck his head on pavement.

Negri was arrested on the spot, and Santos arrested for opening the door of the squad car in which Negri sat handcuffed. Negri was released on \$7,500 bail and Santos to his own custody.

Negri, an Eatontown resident, was suspended last week without pay due to the assault charge. He was unavailable for comment yesterday.

Defense Attorney Anthony Pope called the case self-defense, claiming that witnesses said Piccolo was the aggressor who "threw a punch at my client and Negri threw a punch back to protect himself."

He said Negri, a fireman for six years, was "in a state of depression" over the incident.

FRIDAY, MAY 8, 1998

Man acquitted of murder in self-defense shooting

But jury issues weapons conviction

By Dawn S. Onley

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

An Essex County jury found yesterday that Dwayne Martin shot and killed an Irvington man in self-defense three years ago.

In returning not guilty verdicts to charges of murder, aggravated manslaughter and reckless manslaughter, the jury sided with the claims of Newark defense attorney Anthony Pope that Martin shot Reginald "Andre" Watkins after Watkins and a group of friends first jumped him.

"I was ecstatic and I applaud the jury's courage in finding there was self-defense in this case," Pope said afterwards.

"I think we clearly raised reasonable doubt."

Martin was found guilty of third-degree possession of a weapon.

Martin, who is in his mid-20s, fired at Watkins after an earlier dispute led them outside The Joker's Wild, a pool hall and bar on Grove Street in Irvington.

Martin was jumped by Watkins and two friends on Oct. 29, 1995. Pope argued.

Pope told jurors in Judge Donald Merkelbach's courtroom that his client went to the bar to shoot pool that night but fired the deadly shots when he felt his life was in jeopardy.

The spat apparently started when Martin accidentally stepped on Watkins' toe during a pool game.

Assistant Prosecutor H. Rutherford Livengood presented the state's case.