

Answering The Call:  
The History Of The  
Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Stephen C. Leeolou  
Flower Hill Hose Company No. 1

conducted in association with the  
Port Washington Public Library Local History Center

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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: This is an interview with Stephen Leeolou. Today is October 13th, 2004. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. My name is Sally Olds. So, can you please say your name?

Stephen C. Leeolou: My name is Stephen C. Leeolou.

Q: And which fire company are you a member of?

SCL: I'm a forty-eight-year member of Flower Hill Hose Company.

Q: What was it like growing up in Port Washington?

SCL: It's kind of unbelievable. You know, Port Washington at that time was a very small, very clannish town. Outsiders were immediately recognized. It was just great. We had a great neighborhood. I lived down off of Valley Road and went to St. Peter's. Had a graduating class of six. Three guys and three girls from the third grade through the eighth grade, which was unheard of (laughs). And it was just a good time. I went to high school here, further schooling, and then, in 1948, my dad opened a bar and restaurant in town, called The Village Tavern. I was supposed to go to college in 1948. I was scheduled to go to Holy Cross, but unfortunately, my father needed my help to run the business, and two years later, the Korean War came along, and I enlisted in the Navy for

four years. Came back, resettled in Port, and basically lived here until, I guess, '58, '59. Had to move to Great Neck to look for an apartment. We had our first child then, and-- two kids we had then, in fact. And we had to go there for economic reasons. Came back in 1969 and have been here ever since.

Q: You said that Port Washington was clannish. In what way?

SCL: In that a lot of families are related. The Smiths and the Joneses and the Carpenters, all of the families. But in Port Washington, if there was a strange person on Main Street, somebody noticed it. You pretty well knew everybody in town, either by name or by sight, and it was a small town.

Q: And what would happen if you saw someone you didn't know?

SCL: Oh, it was just an oddity. "Oh, who's that man? He's new. Who does he belong to? What family?" But, you know, it wasn't class in the fact that in a--not that it was ... separatism or anything like that. It was something different. And that was probably a good thing, because there wasn't much things happening in Port. It was a very quiet town. And it changed drastically after World War II.

Q: And how did it change?

SCL: Influx of more people, and the town built up. People discovered the Long Island Rail Road, and they worked in the City, and it was a mecca. You know, people loved to come here. And it was just a good time. And then, the Fire Department, most of the young guys went in the Fire Department. Not so much as happens today. Now, I have two sons, and neither went in the Fire Department, but of course they were going off to college. And my oldest one went to James Madison in Virginia, graduated, met his wife--future wife--there, and has never come back north again. He's lived in the south his entire life. Where my younger one, Michael, he went to Cortland State University, graduated, had trouble getting a job and ended up working as a director--well, he still is the director of the Port Washington P.A.L. [Police Athletic League] He took over after George Mahoney. But now, he's found himself his niche. He's got a job, and he's doing fine. But I think that was the reason why the younger people--and at that time, it was always guys, now it's co-ed and I think it's great--just didn't do it. They were going off to school, and they had to go wherever their job brought them.

Q: What made you decide to join the Department?

SCL: Well, you know, of course, my father, he was a member before me. And when when he opened the bar and grill, I was tending bar for him, and a lot of our customers were firemen, and it was the talk--you know, a big thing in town. And at that time, there was a waiting list. And I put an application in -- Flower Hill, because my dad was there, of course. But I also liked the Protection Engine Company, because I had made a lot of

friends with the people down there. And I put one there, and whichever one came first, I was going to accept it, and it happened (laughs) to be Flower Hill. But it was--it was an important thing to do when you were young. Just kept you busy and occupied, and, at that particular time in my life, I didn't think I was doing any great community service. It was just a lot of fun, and when you're nineteen years old, you have a different viewpoint. So that's basically why I went in the Fire Department.

Q: What kinds of stories did your father tell you about firefighting?

SCL: Well, see, my father went in late. He went in when he was forty, because he went in during World War II when everybody else was gone in the service. I was too young for that. But what he primarily told me about it was it was a great organization and you couldn't meet any better people. And he thought I would like it, and he was obviously right.

Q: Was the social aspect of belonging to the Fire Department a big plus?

SCL: Oh, yes. Especially with young people. There were parties and clam bakes. But also, the aura of being a firefighter. We called ourselves firemen then. Firemen. But now we're firefighters (laughs). But, you know, that was another thing. That was very much a part of it. You wanted to get involved in—you don't want to think this -- but you're hoping for your first fire, the first time you drove a truck, and all those steps up there.

Q: What do you remember about your first fire?

SCL: Scared. Because, you know, you were trained, but not to the degree they're trained now. We were trained with only what was available at the time. And I think the first fire I went to was the--well, there used to be a hardware store across from the Main Street School, which is now the Landmark. And it caught fire. It was full of paint and God knows what else. And I remember being on the ladder, looking down at this fire. And every time a container or can burst, it just looked like fireworks, with different colors in there. It was magnificent. Frightened, but not afraid, if you know what I mean. You know, we--you were awed by it, but you were--at nineteen, I wasn't afraid of much of anything, really (laughs). I wasn't.

Q: What were your early jobs in the Fire Department?

SCL: As a rookie--and you see, I came in in 1948 and left in 1950 because of the Korean War, so I was a rookie for two years. And a rookie is you're the "go-fer," you do all the work, you get trained on the trucks. But primarily you just did what the officers told you. And then they had prescribed tasks. We used to have a work night every Thursday and every Sunday morning. Of course, the Sunday morning one didn't sit too well with my wife (laughs). But, because we got kids. But it was just an organization to join. I think comparable to people who join the Elks or the Kiwanis or any thing else, they band with

people have similar tastes and, like I said, at age nineteen, I didn't think I was doing anything about community service. I'm sure the older guys knew that, but I didn't. Didn't cross my mind (laughs).

Q: And it was what, then?

SCL: Just fighting fires and hanging out with a bunch of guys that were really good friends, and learning. You know, I had to learn the whole--I mean, the year before I joined, I didn't know what a fire truck looked like, or could care less. But, you know, you had to learn the whole procedure and everything else. And they kind of structure it a little bit. You learn how to take orders from officers, and they kind of gave you a little basic background. I don't think I realized it then, but I realize it now.

Q: Were there specific specialties, you know, that you and the other firefighters ...

SCL: Well, what I was very much interested in--there was a drill team, which was a competitive team that performed these drills throughout the Island. That was a big thing to draw the young people, because it was exciting; it was competitive. It was great. Just come out of high school, you know, you're still in a competitive mode. So ...

Q: What exactly did you do with the drill team?

SCL: Well, we had different positions. Like I ran--there were five events, and I ran every event. Like--I don't know if this is going to make any difference to you, the terminology--but I ran the nozzle and both hose events--A and B. I ran Nozzle and Efficiency. I --threw the ladder and the both ladder, so every event we had, I had a position. And being nineteen years old, I guess youth was served. So that's what we did.

Q: Well, can you describe what it meant to run the nozzle?

SCL: It was a prestigious position in that particular area of what we were doing. And I was very proud of myself for, first and foremost, being able to do it, because you had to jump off a fire truck and put a nozzle on a hose and it was pretty hectic. And the fact that I did it my first year, I was pleased as punch.

Q: So that's what I mean. What exactly did you have to do?

SCL: In what respect?

Q: You had to jump off the fire truck ...

SCL: They had events. Like they would use a slow fire truck. You would go down, three men would get off at the hydrant, connect the hose, and the truck, as it's going down, would be laying the hose out behind it. The two guys up front would get off, break the hose and



put the noz on, and trip a target. So it was all very competitive. And the same thing was done in both A and B ladder. You had two different-speed trucks. You'd go down, all guys would get off the truck in the back, put the ladders out against a tower, and then one man would climb to the top, and that would all be against the clock. It was all timed. And you competed about with most every Nassau County Fire Department and, lots of times, Suffolk County. It was quite an event. It's still going on strong now. Except the trucks have gotten a hundred percent faster. They scare me now. I wouldn't be able to do that.

Q: Do you ever go to the tournaments now?

SCL: once in a while, but not as often as I should, you know, with the grandkids and that stage in my life. And we go away for the winter, so —well, there's no tournaments in the winter. But the grandkids take up a lot of my time, and, of course, I play golf. That's my little hobby now. But I keep in touch, talking to the young kids there and ask them how they're doing, you know, trying to keep my nose in the business a little bit.

Q: Did your competing in the tournaments help you when you were actually going out and fighting a fire?

SCL: Well, not for speed. But it familiarized you with the equipment. Like nozzles and hydrants and couplings on the hose. I think, basically, years ago, that was the whole idea

of the thing to do, and it's gotten more and more competitive over the years. But it taught you, especially a young guy, to turn--you've got to turn the nozzle on this way, or, you know, everything had to be done and that's the way you learned. You could learn it in the firehouse in instruction, but this was more like practical. And it's probably a speeded up rendition of what you would do at a fire by just getting guys off the unit fast. You'd drop a guy off at a hydrant. The truck would go out and lead out the hose, and everybody had a job in between. And this was just a speeded up version of that, I think.

Q: So you say everybody had a job in between.

SCL: Oh, yes.

Q: What was your specific job, usually?

SCL: I was the last guy on the end. When you got off the truck, we picked the nozzle up, and we--the guys behind us were sending us water, and we would trip a target. Now, that same thing happened at a fire. Somebody would be on the nozzle. Somebody would be at the hydrant. And we communicated to get the water where it had to go. -- [SIREN] ...  
There they go now. (laughs)

Q: Did you ever get knocked back by the hose?

SCL: Oh, yeah. Many times. Yeah, especially in Port Washington, because Port Washington has extremely high water pressure. When you take that and put it through a pump, you had to be careful. And we were aware of that. That was the first thing they taught you, that if you're at a fire and you're on the nozzle, you make sure you've got at least a couple of guys behind you, because you just had to protect each other. And most of these racing events, we used to be very, very careful of that, because we used to practice down at Manhasset Isle sometimes, and the water pressure down there was extremely high. So it was dangerous. But, you know, again, nineteen years old, not dangerous; seventy-five, very dangerous (laughs).

Q: What did your mother tell you about her involvement with the Ladies Auxiliary?

SCL: Well, at that particular time, the Ladies Auxiliary, I think it was kind of formed--and I'm not an authority on this--but they were there for if you had big fires and it was cold in the winter, they would be out with coffee and food and stuff. That was probably their job, I thought. But they also had recreation and their own meetings. But my mother liked it, again because she felt she was doing something with a bunch of other people that was to be done. That's the way she was. She was five-foot-zero, a hundred pounds. Second generation Irish from Great Neck, so she was a tough little lady. She was great. And she loved it. And she stayed in it--she loved it. She was a fifty-year member. She lived to be ninety-two, and she was a fifty-year member, plus, in the Auxiliary, I guess.

Q: Well, what was it like for you as a youngster? Your father being called out to fires, your mother being called out to the Ladies Auxiliary?

SCL: Well, I remember some of that happening. But I don't think it particularly bothered me, because I thought this is what they do by being where they are. You know, my father would come home from a fire, and I'd say, "How'd you make out?" And, he'd say, "okay." And my mother--I only remember my mother once, I think, at a big fire--I couldn't even tell you where the fire was. She got home about three o'clock in the morning, and she was very noncommittal. "We had a fire, we took care of everything," and that was that. It's understandable.

Q: And how was it with your own wife and children when you joined the force?

SCL: Well, I don't think my wife worried much, because she knew we would take care of each other. But, you know, it was difficult getting out of bed at night, and especially with young kids. But you did it. I don't do it anymore. I'll go to a fire once in a while during the day if they need somebody, but I'm not what they really call active in firefighting, no. I just can't do it anymore.

Q: When you do go a fire now, what do you do?

SCL: I head for the hydrant. Because that's where I'll stay. I'm not going to go into a building.

I don't think I have the training. I probably could train myself, but I don't think it's necessary. Just, in case of emergency, you do everything you have to do.

Q: What do you do at the hydrant?

SCL: Well, you stand at the hydrant, and then when the officer in charge of the fire needs the water turned on or off, that's what you do. You're there, you know, sometimes they got to shut lines down, other times they've got to fire up those places. So you just sit there with a radio, and you take calls.

Q: What was the latest fire you went to?

SCL: Last big fire? I can hardly remember. Let me think. I don't remember anything big. Well, the most spectacular fire I remember was when the Sands Point Bath Club burned. That was a horrible fire. But that's back in the seventies. I must have gone to some fires since then, but I don't--and a lot of them, you haven't had a lot of real serious--a lot of them are automatic alarms today and inconsequential things. But you've got to go.

Q: Can you tell me what it was like when you were at the Sands Point Bath Club?

SCL: Well, it's funny, because I was working then for the phone company, and I worked down there a lot. I knew the club setup down there as a part of our telephone repair service.

But, I know the fire came in as the Capri Marina, and that was wrong. And I drove to the Capri Marina in my car. At that time, we went to the fires in our car if we could, but, of course, you couldn't do that now with the congestion and parking. And I looked across the bay, and I saw the fire at the Sands Point Bath Club. There was about four of us there. One of the kids was Andy Bellini. I can't think of the others. So we got back in our cars, and we went to the Sands Point Bath Club where a friend of mine who also worked for the phone company was a foreman--Bob Failey. He and I were on nozzles, on hoses, keeping the cabanas cool, because they were right next to the club, and they could have easily caught fire. And the thing I remember most vividly is that I said to Bobby, "You know, Bobby, there's a great big propane tank on the other side of that building, and that's going to pop." And the words no sooner came out of my mouth, and the thing blew. So, thank God, nobody was hurt, but the top of it went out in Manhasset Bay. And that was the most vivid fire I remember. And that place burned so fast, it was hard to believe. Amazing.

Q: How long were you out there?

SCL: A long time -- I can't remember. We were there for hours, I know. Endless hours. In fact, I think I was on--I think I was working. I went there on telephone business? No, I think I was home. No, I was home, because I think it was on a weekend.

Q: How did you know the propane tank was there?

SCL: Having worked there as a telephone guy. You know, I used to go all over the place. They had phones in there. It was right off the kitchen. And lots of times, the kitchen phone was always a problem, because of just where it was. And I knew that tank was there. I don't know why I remembered, but I knew I remembered it. It was a massive thing. And when it blew, it could have been horrible, but nobody got hurt, thank God.

Q: How did the fire in your parents' restaurant affect you?

SCL: Again, that was a Saturday, and I was going to work. It devastated me, because, well, my father and mother had sold it by then. They didn't own it, but they were living above it. They had the apartment there. And my dad had come down just before he sold it, and he was from the old school and I was the oldest son, so he wanted me to have the business. But, I just had tired of the business. I had a philosophy that when you work in the bar and restaurant business, everybody's day off is your busiest day, and the day you're off, everybody's at work. And now I was working for the telephone company, and I was working an eight-to-five job. But I worked a lot of Saturdays for overtime, but that's okay. But I could pick and choose that. So, he came down to the house prior to selling it, and he asked me if I wanted it and I said no. I said, "You and Mom sell it. You guys do what you have to do." Thank God he got a good ten years out of it, and they lived a good life before he passed away. But it was kind of a tough loss, because there was a lot of nostalgia, a lot of family ties there. One of the worst things that happened, from a

practical viewpoint was that they had a local artist here in Port Washington, his name was Bill Galloway. And he was here--I think he's still got some paintings up here. But he had painted like four-by-eight murals of particular places in Port Washington--the high school that used to be, the town dock, the Mill Pond, and they were lost in the fire. They were destroyed. But my sister and I have two of his smaller ones. I have one of the Grist Mill down at Plandome, and she has one of [Railroad Bridge, Manhasset], I think. Or, I should say Johnson's Pond, not Baxter's Pond.

Q: Johnson's Pond?

SCL: Didn't they rename the pond down here, Barbara Johnson's Park?

Q: Oh.

SCL: I still call it Baxter's Pond. And, as far as the effect on my mother and father, they took it in stride. And, in fact, we stored some of their stuff at my house, and two weeks later, we had a fire. And everything my mother and father stored in the basement was destroyed.

Q: In your own house, you had a fire?

SCL: I don't know if this is relevant. But at that time, I was running for Trustee in the Village of Manorhaven, and I wanted another telephone line put in the house. And this is off the



record--(laughs) I could probably have done it myself. But I decided to have it done by the telephone company and make it legal. And they sent a kid to the house, and he inadvertently drilled a hole through the side of the house and set the house on fire. My wife--that was the first day she worked as a switchboard operator for Publishers Clearing House. She worked part-time. And she had just left the two kids--they were about twelve and thirteen--for three hours while she went to work. And in the interim, the house caught fire. But the two kids in there, they had a lot of smarts. They got the dog and the three of them got--two of them got out of the house and went across the street to my neighbor.

Q: How old were they? The children?

SCL: Oh, let's see, it was--I'd say fourteen, fifteen. They were almost in high school. And my neighbor across the street was a city cop, and he always kept his eye on them. And they lost that. So, that was another strange quirk.

Q: Do you remember who the Captain of Flower Hill was when you first joined?

SCL: I think it was Bob Dargan, but I'm not sure.

Q: And do you remember who the Chief of the Department was?

SCL: Probably not. I could probably look it up, but I don't remember off the top of the my head.

Q: How many of the firemen who joined when you joined are still in the Department?

SCL: Let me see. Well, that'd be hard for me to figure, but I see my--they'd all be oldtimers. But I would say anyone with--what do you want--particular names?

Q: If you would, yeah.

SCL: Well, there--you know, there's John Murray. I'm sure you spoke to him.

Q: Yes.

SCL: And there's Harold Poole. He's my brother-in-law. There's Bucky Lewis and Harry Hooper. And there's not too many of us left in Flower Hill. They've either moved out or are deceased. Some of the oldtimers in Atlantics are still there, like--I just saw him last night at the funeral. We just buried one friend of mine--George Mahoney--today, he's being buried. But I would say the ones that are the senior members of the Department that are alive, there's not many more who have more time than I would have had. I would have had fifty-seven years. And I think George just died, he was the senior member of Protection, so he had sixty-seven. So I'd say anybody in that category that are alive here

are probably still active. Most of them are active, you know, to a degree (laughs). How active can you be at that age? But they do.

Q: Can you tell me about the offices that you held in the Department?

SCL: Yeah, the officers were good people. I knew most of these people from the affiliation with my father's bar and restaurant, so I knew who I was going to be dealing with. And I never had any problem with an officer. It wasn't difficult to do as you were told. And I don't say I was happy about it, but you weren't going to squawk about it. I wouldn't anyway.

Q: Were there any orders that you were not happy about?

SCL: No, I don't think so. And like I say, in that category that was only a two-year span, because I came in in '48 and left in '50. Then when I came back after the Korean War, I was no longer a rookie, because my military time counted, so I was on the racing team and various committees and stuff like that. So you were kind of--the five-year mark is where you go, and once you get there, you're kind of away from all the orders and stuff. But, you know, you always —did what you had to do, everybody pitched in. That was the whole key. I mean, at a clean-up or a picnic, an officer wouldn't need anything. And, like I was just saying, we worked hard and did what we had to do to fulfill what we wanted to do.

Q: Well, what about you? Did you serve as an officer ...

SCL: No.

Q: ... yourself?

SCL: I didn't want to be an officer. I wanted to be a fireman. Maybe that was coming out of the Navy, I don't know. But I served ten years on the Board of Directors and stuff like that, but as a line officer, I didn't do anything. I was more in the line of duty, not necessarily running the business.

Q: What kinds of things came up before the Board while you were on it?

SCL: Well, there's always a yearly budget, so we're--oh, just a lot of things. The renovation of the firehouse. We had just done a big renovation at Flower Hill. And again, the Board of Directors was a meeting of the minds. There were no professionals there, I don't think. They were quasi. Everybody knew a little bit about everything, and we all just put our minds together and sat down and hammered everything out that had to be hammered out. It was an interesting thing, seeing how the Fire Department runs on the other side of the spectrum.

Q: Did you run into a lot of red tape?

SCL: No. We usually had professional help when necessary to avoid that. Like attorneys and architects, and things like that. But we basically did everything ourselves. And it was always a--for some reason, through my whole fifty years in the Fire Department, there was always people who were qualified. Not professionally qualified, but qualified enough to do the job, from their own jobs and experience, I guess.

Q: You served as Vice President ...

SCL: Yeah.

Q: ... and then, yeah, and President?

SCL: No, I didn't take President, because-- I don't remember why, but I served--Jimmy Duncan was the President before me. He's the local police commissioner.

Q: So what were your responsibilities as Vice President?

SCL: Like any vice president. With the President not being there, you took over and did everything. I ran a couple of meetings, but that's just following parliamentary procedures. Not very difficult. Easy.

Q: Did you find the job rewarding?

SCL: Oh, yeah. Every job up there's rewarding. If you go up--I think it's true of anything you do. If you do something and you do a good job, then it's got to be rewarding. And I have a philosophy, that's why I got off the Board of Directors nine years ago, because we had bought a summer home in Myrtle Beach, and I was going down there. And I felt that if I couldn't give the company twelve months in the position, I wouldn't do it. That's my own philosophy. But I still stay active. I keep my nose in the business.

Q: Which committees did you serve on?

SCL: Membership. Financial. Tons of them. By-laws, which were horrible.

Q: Why?

SCL: Dry. Very dry (laughs). You know, you change by-laws, you're just changing a "thuh" to a "thee," and it gets very boring. But you've got to do it. The job has to be done, and somebody's got to do it. And that's the whole concept of the Fire Department, I think. There's always somebody who will step into the breach, if necessary. And it always amazed me, because, you know, these guys are family guys, business people, yet they give of themselves, and that's their backbone. I hope it lasts. I just hope.

Q: Hope what lasts?

SCL: The volunteer service.

Q: What do you think?

SCL: Economically, eventually it's going to have to go. You know, it's just not going to work. It's like everything else. Just progress, they call it. (Laughs) Not my idea, but that's what's going to happen. It's going to happen. I don't know if I'll live to see it, but it's a matter of time. A lot of facets, because you can't get people. Cost factors and zoning changes--just a whole bunch of things that--it won't fly in the next twenty years, I don't think. Might be able to--I hope to God I'm wrong, but I don't think so.

Q: Do you remember the *Readers Digest* used to have a feature called "My Most Unforgettable Character"? Were there people in the Fire Department that you might put in that category?

SCL: (Laughs) I guess. I thought that one of the most unforgettable characters was a good friend of mine I went to high school with--Bobby Cocks. He was a great guy. He was just a character. Good fireman. He was the Fire Marshal here for many years. But good softball player. I used to play softball with him. Just a guy that was fun to be around.

He's since passed away, unfortunately. He was a good guy. And I guess there are a lot of them, but why they were characters, I don't know. But there was a lot of them that used to belong to Protection and were baymen. And they could open clams like you'd never see. I mean, they were professionals. And nobody thought anything about that, but these guys could do it, and they were all characters. Smoking a pipe and opening clams, with baseball hats on the back of their head. And they were a good group.

Q: Do you consider yourself a clamdigger?

SCL: Not in the true sense of the word. But I guess I am. I never--I dug clams myself when I was a kid, but not to sell professionally. But I've been on the water all my life. Had a couple or three boats. And I love the Bay, and I love Port Washington. In fact, my wife—the last boat we had, she loved the water. But, going on in life, after a while, you're not using the boat, so it's--you know, we couldn't keep it, so we got rid of it. Yeah, I guess I'm a clamdigger.

Q: What are the biggest changes in the Department, that you've seen over the years that you've been a member?

SCL: Well, I think the biggest thing I've seen in the Department, the number one *ichiban* [“Number One” in Japanese] is the training. The people are trained so much better today than we were. And that's not to say that the people that were training us weren't as good,



but the thing was that there's more facilities. There's fire schools, and there's training centers, and we never had any of that. We trained in a firehouse by our Lieutenant or Engineer showing you what to do around there, but it's just progressed so much further-- the equipment, the trucks today are so far superior. In my wildest dreams forty years ago, I never would have believed this could ever happen, but it was just technology. And the whole department, not the individual company, but the Department as itself now is far more streamlined. But obviously, you've got computers, telephone, da-da-da-da. Just technology, by far. The kids coming in, are they of the same caliber as we were? Yeah, I'd say so. They kind of dance to a different drum a little bit. But we (laughs) get used to that.

Q: In what way?

SCL: Well, you know, kids are kids. Especially when you've got seventeen-year-olds and, you know, they started taking seventeen-year-olds to augment the force. You know, I have seventeen-year-old sons that brought me back, you know (laughs). And a seventeen-year-old kid can be the greatest thing in the world, but he can be, sometimes, the dumbest thing in the world (laughs). But, you know, I just think that the Department is--I think when we were the Fire Department, we were quasi-professional. I think now, they are professionals of the highest degree.

Q: Do you think they are as efficient as a paid fire department?

SCL: Absolutely. Probably more so. Because it's not a job. You know, you can get lost into a profession if it's a job, and you get kind of blasé. I think we're as good as any paid department in the country. Training-wise, equipment-wise. Everything.

Q: How do you think your two years in the Fire Department helped you in your military service, and then how do you think your military service helped you when you came back to the Department?

SCL: Well, the two years in the Department, with the military, it was kind of a push. I don't think it made much difference when I went in the Navy. But I think when I came out, I realized what they were trying to do to me before I went in. In other words, the military had more effect on me early on as a fireman, because it taught me to follow orders. And we had firefighting in the Navy. I mean, you had it all the time, both in boot camp and aboard ship. So I think it really--when I first went in the Navy--and of course, I was nineteen years old. I say that because--well, actually twenty--when you're a kid, nothing frightens you and nothing's impossible. But the way I felt after I came back out that the military--in fact, when I first came out, the Fire Department, the volunteers, had adopted a lot of the firefighting techniques of the Navy, with fog and stuff like that. So I was kind of familiar with it. That's what the Navy and the Fire Department did to me, I think.

Q: Where did you serve?

SCL: I served in the USS Saipan. She was a carrier. I spent a year and a half in Korea and was all over the world with the Navy. The old axiom: "Join the Navy and see the world." Well, it worked with me. We left Virginia in nineteen-fifty---late 1951 and went through the Panama Canal. We went to Hawaii and Japan. Then came back through the Suez Canal, so we circumvented the world. We went right around the world. I mean, I thought it was the luckiest thing in my life, the Navy. I saw more of the world in four years than I could do in a lifetime. Great life.

Q: Do you ever go back to visit places ...

SCL: Oh, I still go. We have reunions every year. And I'm not going this year, but I was there last year. Yeah, we meet up. We have about eighty percent attendance with the people I knew. So we're doing good there. They all are doing well. But they're spread all over the country, too, which is great. Yeah. The Navy was a good experience. That was my college experience -- was the Navy back then. It was great.

Q: So you worked on the by-laws, and the by-laws stipulate some of the characteristics that a firefighter needs to have?

SCL: No, the by-laws are the rules that a company abides by. It has everything in it. What you can do and what you cannot do. I mean, to a thing like how a President can conduct a

meeting, how many points you have to get to maintain your standing in the Fire Department. And it's all written down in black and white. Like any by-law for any organization. And they are the rules. The by-laws--well, see when I left Flower Hill in 1950, then, the other three--two companies here, allowed their members to stay as a member, as long as they resided in Nassau County. Flower Hill's didn't. Flower Hill said that if you leave the fire district, you cannot be maintained as a member. I mean, by-laws are by-laws. You have to abide by them. That's what they were in place then, and that's the way it is.

Q: And the three companies still have separate sets of by-laws?

SCL: Yes. The company has by-laws and the Department has by-laws. So, each company--but they're pretty much the same. There are a few changes, but most of the by-laws are just rules that we live by. And if there's a question and it isn't covered by the by-laws, then you can't do it, whatever it is--financial or whatever. But, you've got to have that in an organization this size.

Q: How much competition is there among the companies?

SCL: Not as much as there used to be. It's more or less pretty stable. There's not much--a little bantering back and forth. But years ago, we had three separate racing teams, so we competed against each other. And they've since combined that into one, which was the

smart thing, and they're called the Road Runners, and they were very, very good.

Q: How about in fighting fires? Is ...

SCL: Oh, no, no.

Q: ... there competition there?

SCL: No. Absolutely not. That's counterproductive. You can get somebody killed. But, you know, softball games and things like that. There was plenty of competition. We used to play each other in softball. It was good. But I have never in my entire life seen competition in a fire. It's a business; you just can't do that.

Q: What was your best day as a firefighter?

SCL: My best day? In what respect?

Q: In terms of the service that you were performing?

SCL: Well, I don't know if it was a good day or a bad day. You know, fires like the Sands Point Bath Club. Then there's the lumberyard. And they were memorable, because you used what you were trained for for a longer period of time. And was one better than

another? I don't think so. You're just doing a job, and you do what you could when you were there. I mean, you just--everybody had something to do, and the net result was the fire was out.

Q: Did you ever rescue anyone?

SCL: No. Close one time. We saw, I think Tommy Murray, Chief of the Department, he rescued--when I was there that night, he went in and got a lady out of Soundview Village. But, no. I never had any part in it. But I know Tommy did.

Q: What do you think makes a good firefighter? What qualities?

SCL: Dedication. Dedication.

Q: Dedication.

SCL: And more dedication. And more. And that's all you really need. You've got to be dedicated to what you're doing, and everything else in between is superficial, I think. You know, you get hung up on not liking an officer or a rule or regulation, but you have to put that behind you. But there's a lot of social life to it. Camaraderie is probably a better word. I mean, you see guys on the street, and you walk in the firehouse, some guys watching television, say "Hello, how are you?" and you walk away, or you sit down

and talk, and it's just camaraderie. It's a place to go where you can sit down--and the topic of discussion isn't always fires, either. It's sports and politics, and everything else. It's just a nice place to be. I go to the firehouse once a day, just to go up and see what's going on, what's on the bulletin board, and what's happening.

Q: And what kinds of things will be on the bulletin board?

SCL: Well, you know, if a truck is out of service. If there's a funeral. But, of course, now we all have pagers, so most of that stuff you can just sit home and read the pager and find the same information. But that's why I go *there*, because I might bump into somebody, or there might be something that has to be done--a truck to move or something, you know. I'm retired. I've been retired nineteen years now.

Q: What did you do for the telephone company?

SCL: Repairman. Lineman. Splicing. The whole gamut. Best job I ever had in my life. At that time, it was a great job.

Q: You say "at that time." You don't think it is anymore?

SCL: Well, I think, again, that it's the times. You know, AT&T--the telephone companies aren't what they used to be. They're all split up and competitive. But that's another thing.

But I liked the job, because it was--you see, when we came out of the Navy, I think, in my generation-- I'll speak for myself--we were looking for security. And that was a secure job. In today's world, there is no security, as far as the kids are concerned. They know that. I have a niece, she makes six figures, and I said to her one day, "Dana, what about your future? What are you going to do about that?" And she told me, "Uncle Steve, the future's right now." And that's the way they think. That's the difference. That's a big difference, in my thinking and yours, I'm sure.

Q: Excuse me. I have to turn the tape over.

SCL: Oh ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: What was your worst day as a firefighter?

SCL: The day Bobby Dayton died. I mean, you know, I never thought I'd see that in the Fire Department. Of course, you know it could happen, but you never believed it would happen. And he died fighting the fire where my father had his restaurant. So I had a little personal attachment there. We were right above our apartment where I lived for five years-- just got caught, you know--and again, I was going to work that day, and I stopped at my father and mother--because my father owned the building, and I stayed there, and Bobby died.



Q: Did you work that fire?

SCL: Yeah. Yeah. I stayed--well, there were a lot of people there. I guess I was out--I don't know what I was doing. I know I brought masks--I brought tanks down--air tanks down from the firehouse. They needed more. It's kind of a blur after that. It was just a--a bad day. You don't like to lose a kid. But I'd just seen him at the movies a couple of weeks ago, before he died.

Q: So that--that was the same building that the restaurant had been in?

SCL: Yes. But it was long after my father and mother were out of there. Yep.

Q: Were you at George Mahoney's funeral last night?

SCL: The wake, I was, yes. The funeral was this morning at eleven o'clock, and I had to be here.

Q: But there was a fire--wasn't there a Fire Department service last night?

SCL: Fire Department and Police Department. He was also a Port Washington policeman--retired policeman from Port. Yeah, it was a great turnout. A lot of people there.

Q: Can you tell me what the service was like?

SCL: Well, Tommy Tobin is our Chaplain. And he's excellent with his eulogies. And he gave a very, very nice eulogy. And the thing, I think, that surprised most of the guys--it surprised me--but I knew George was in the Army during World War II, and I knew he was overseas. And I found out the other day that he had landed on Omaha Beach and was in the Battle of the Bulge. But we found out last night he has three Bronze Stars. And the thing that bothered me, George was a big guy. Did you know George?

Q: I interviewed him.

SCL: He was a monster. And he never got a Purple Heart, so therefore he was never hit. He was--but then he got three Bronze Stars, so he was putting himself in harm's way, but he was very, very fortunate. And it was a good turnout, and the Police Department and the Fire Department had separate eulogies, and they both just kind of depicted George's life. Nice guy, George. Little older than me. So, when I was a kid, he was one of the big guys, you know. Okay, so why don't we wind this up (laughs). I'm getting tired.

Q: (Laughs). Okay, just a little bit more.

SCL: Sure.

Q: Little bit more. You were talking about the humor among the firefighters. Can you think of any particular pranks or in-jokes that --

SCL: Well, I know we used to have a Chief by the name of Jimmy Murray. He was a little guy. He was only about five-six. And we used to come back from this tournament practice. I know he was the one who would always incite a water fight. And we would have some terrible ones up in the firehouse. Things like that, you know. Keep you loose, and, other than that, you know, just the normal, everyday stuff that goes on. People make boners and you laugh and kid about them. But nothing in particular.

Q: Did you have a nickname in the Department?

SCL: Steve. (Laughs) That figures, right? Original.

Q: What surprised you about being in the Department?

SCL: Well, what surprised me was -- people who I had known in high school and, you know, from good athletes to non-athletes. And some of them did well in the Fire Department and some didn't, as far as sports and activities. And I was surprised at the ones that did and the ones that didn't. It was just a--I don't know. Guys I thought that I had played baseball and football with didn't really work out too well, and the ones I thought that would never work out, worked out well. So I guess it's just how people dedicate

themselves. That's a human trait. That was the thing that surprised me. And ...

Q: When you say that they didn't work out well, what does that mean?

SCL: Well, they never got--you know, they never--they didn't do much of anything. A lot of them stayed a couple of years and then left, because they just didn't work out (laughs). I guess they didn't like it, and they felt they weren't doing anything there. But the people I thought that would do well, in my own mind, weren't the ones that did it. So, in fact, like a counteraction. I don't know. Other than that, you've got to just think about, I don't know, what you thought was right at the time, I think. And I just thought to stay.

Q: How do you think that your service in the Fire Department affected your life in general?

SCL: Well, early on, when you were in the Fire Department in Port Washington, it was kind of a prestigious thing, because there was a smaller amount of people in Port Washington. And also, I think it taught me how to be tolerant of others and have others be tolerant of me. I think it taught me that people who are officers are fallible, even though they thought they weren't. But--and I'm sure that same thought was thought about me. And that's okay, because everybody was able to voice what they said without any problems or resentment or anything like that. So I think that's the big thing.

Q: Thank you very much.