

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Robert Reese, Jr.
Protection Engine 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

Interview with Robert Reese Jr.
pk

by Margaret Dildilian
October 13, 2004

Q: Today is October the 13th, 2004. This is an interview with Robert Reese. My name is Margaret Dildilian, and I am interviewing at the Port Washington Public Library. ...

Robert Reese Jr.: I might cough a couple of times, but I guess...

Q: That's all right.

RR: ...you'll have to live through that one.

Q: Robert Reese, please pronounced your name.

RR: Robert Reese. Junior, I might add, for the record.

Q: Do you have any type of nickname that could be associated with the Fire Department?

RR: Nah, my name..everybody calls me "Bob." The young kids nowadays call me Mr. Reese, which I don't like. I tell them to call me Bob.

Q: And what company are you in?

RR: Protection Engine Company Number One.

Q: When did your family come to Port? What's your background?

RR: On my mother's side, I'm the seventh generation. It was--I don't know what year, somewhere in the 1700s, early 1700s.

Q: And they've been in Port ever since?

RR: Yes. For a short time, when my mother married my father, he was a sandhog upstate in Medina. And they finished the job up there; we lived up there for a couple of years. I was actually born in Newburgh. But in 1942, we came back to Port Washington, and I've been here ever since.

Q: How old were you when you joined Protection?

RR: I was eighteen. Put my application in in September 1958. I was seventeen. I became eighteen later in the month, and on October 2nd, 1958, I was elected to membership.

Q: And how long have you been a member?

RR: Forty-six years, I guess, just the other day.

Q: Do you have any earliest memories of firefighting?

RR: My grandfather was a member of Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company. He joined in the early 1900s. He was a charter member of Nassau Hose Company, but that only lasted a few years. Money problems, as I understand it, forced them to fold, and they all went back to their respective companies, which, in them days, was Protection and Atlantic's.

Q: Did you ever go firefighting with your grandfather?

RR: No, not that I can remember at any rate, but I do remember the clam bakes down on Tom's Point where the airplanes used to come up and they had a ramp going into the water there. And they made airplanes there during World War II, and we used to go there for picnics. And they'd dig a hole in the dirt and have Indian clam bakes and all kinds of other stuff. That was in the '40s, but I can remember vaguely some of it.

Q: And how many members are now in the Department?

RR: It's hard to say. My company has a roster for a hundred, but we're short some. We just lost seven kids that are actually still members, but they went away to college. But, I would guess--take a guess that three hundred. Between three hundred and three hundred and fifty.

Q: And how many family members of yours are in firefighting?

RR: Just three. Myself. My son Donald is the Captain of Protection Engine Company, and my wife Beverly is the President of Fire Medic Company Number One.

Q: And do all three of you go to the same fires?

RR: Yes. My wife doesn't chase fires too much, unless it's a really--a working fire. And then she'll respond, because they will send multiple ambulances to that. She's also the Department Steward, so she'll make sure that there's food and refreshments for the troops that are there.

Q: How do you feel about your son being Captain of Protection?

RR: Well, sometimes it makes you nervous. But he's very smart. He knows how to fight fires. So--but I keep tabs on him. Mostly, I'm on the outside. I'm operating an engine or--but I'll, you know, ask the guys, "Have you seen my son?" And there's a lot of father-son and brothers in the Fire Department, and I'm sure everybody else goes through the same thing. You know, the fathers that have sons in the Department.

Q: How do you deal with those feelings when you're at the fire?

RR: Well, it makes you very nervous. Like the Bernard Street fire. That thing was totally involved when we got there and my son was inside there with some other fellows trying to get those people out. And the one down on Soundview Lane just recently. That was in the early spring, I guess it was, and he was inside of that and the place started to collapse. But everybody got out. But, you--I found Bob Pape. He's one of the Chaplains. And I asked him to please check, because operating an engine, I can't leave my engine. Guys depend on me to supply them water. But yet I wanted to check on my son, so I asked him to do that. Because I don't want to tie up the radio, you know, with my concerns like that, because it could cost somebody dearly tying up the radio waves. So I have someone check for me. You get nervous on them kind of fires. But you've got to let him do his thing. I did it, you know, since I was a young fellow, and he joined when he was eighteen.

Q: Did you ever imagine yourself in the shoes of your grandfather when you were young?

RR: I guess every kid is fascinated with fire apparatus. And the dogs; they had dogs back when I was a young kid. Flower Hill had "Chief"; Protection had "Smokey." But by the time I got into the firehouse, both dogs were gone. I guess they had passed away, so I don't have any firsthand experience with them. But I do remember them as a kid.

Q: And who influence you the most to join?

RR: Actually, my grandfather belonged to Atlantics, as I stated earlier, but I guess it was the man who lived across the street from me--Len Seifts. He was an officer in Protection. He later went on to become a Chief of the Department. And he lived directly across the street from me, and he sponsored me into Protection Engine Company. So, I guess, you know, watching him go to fires. You know, getting up all hours of the morning and stuff. Him and my dad were very--very good friends, you know, as neighbors, too. So I guess, maybe Len Seifts had the biggest impact on me joining.

Q: In the first days of the Fire Department when you were in the Fire Department, were the men still standing on the back of the fire engines?

RR: Yes. Back in those days, you stood on the tailgate; you rode up in the hose beds. Some of the trucks had running boards on the side. Anywhere you fit a person, that's where we were.

Q: And how did that feel to a young fellow?

RR: Oh, it was exciting. Years ago, we had a lot of brush fires. Nowadays, there's a house every--just about everywhere you could possibly put one, and we rarely have brush fires anymore. But in the spring and fall in the '50s, '60s, even into the '70s, you could make just about all your points on a weekend. Just go up to the firehouse and hang out. We'd run fifteen, sixteen stills [alarms] a day fighting brush fires. Fast as we'd get back to the

firehouse, the kids were lighting them up again. And (laughs) they kept you very busy. If you weren't standing right next to the fire truck on the first engine out of there, you missed it.

Q: Were these children caught on arson?

RR: No. You know, they weren't--it was just kids being kids, I guess. They weren't burning anything of any value. Just the bulrushes down where--oh, for instance, where the senior citizens place is now on Manorhaven Boulevard, opposite Lady of Fatima, all the way down--that was all bulrushes. It actually was such a problem that in the spring, the Fire Department itself would get down there and light them on fire on a weekend. Burn them out, you know, under a controlled circumstances, so that we wouldn't have to be bothered running down there five or six times every weekend. And in Sands Point, of course, you still had all the big estates, and we got a lot of brush fires down in there. A couple of times, there was an abandoned house down there that got lost. There was no access to it anymore. It had all grown over. So, we had a ...the wild fire caught the houses.

Q: Now what was your training like in 1958, compared to now?

RR: Now, we have one of the finest fire academies anywhere in the country--the Nassau County Fire Academy. They can recreate just about any scenario out there. But they had the Academy there in '58. In fact, I gave Frank Pavlak, our company historian, some

cards. It's almost like a business card, that stated that I attended that Fire Academy, and I even went in 1958, 1959, and '60. He has it locked in the safe at this time. He's going to put it on display eventually, soon as he gets more space. And, as I stated, my--I got in the company in October of '58. In November, we had my real first house fire--working house fire. It was on Pepperday Avenue. I'll never forget it.

Q: Tell us about it.

RR: Well, as a young kid not knowing a whole lot, you didn't go in--go in on the initial attack. I stayed outside and observed with one of the older members, and he would explain what was taking place. After the fire was knocked down, Reggie Bedell, who was a Lieutenant at that time, came out and got me and took me inside. And I was able to participate in the overall stages of the fire, now that the immediate danger had been knocked down, and I participated in the overall--we'd pull the walls, put out any hot spots. And then, of course, in December--December 20th, it was; I'll never forget it--1958, was the Plandome Country Club fire. I happened to be sitting in the firehouse when Plandome got the alarm over there, and one of their fireman got hurt trying to rescue a caretaker. I don't recall the man's name, but he only had one leg. He had an artificial leg. And he was in bed, and he couldn't get his leg on in time to get out, and he perished in the fire. But I can't recall what time we went over there, but we were there--it was like fourteen, fifteen hours we fought that fire. It started in the basement. I guess someone put a cigarette down on some paper goods and forgot it. And myself and

Tommy Drumm were went in--the first attack lines--to try to rescue some records that they had in the office. Unbeknownst to us at the time, there was a broken gas main underneath us in the basement, that was feeding the fire. It was so hot that it turned my fingernails yellow, peeled the skin off my ears, and broke the gauge on my MSA. This was pre-Scott Air Pack days. We had a couple, but most of the guys wore MSAs, which is a big filter. It's like a filter on a cigarette. It just filters the smoke. And it turns out we had to abandon. We had to jump out the window to get out of there as the fire broke through the floor. And--then it was a defensive mode where you just surround it and drowned it. It took quite some time to put that fire out. We sunk a pumper in the backyard and was drafting from the pond back there, just water. You know, it made so much mud, Jimmy Chester had to come over there and tow us out. And I got smoked up pretty good, and exhaustion and stuff. I remember my chest felt like there was an elephant standing on it when I got home that night. But I survived and ...

Q: Did you go to the hospital?

RR: No. I--I stayed home and told my dad and mom about it, so they kept an eye on me to see if it was going to get any worse, and I guess they were going to take me to the hospital or Doc Teta, you know, we went to in them days. So there wasn't much hospitals around back then.

Q: There wasn't St. Francis?

RR: Well, St. Francis, yeah. But they had a very small emergency room, which was on the right side all the way in the back about where the parking garage is now.

Q: And what made your fingernails turn yellow?

RR: The heat. The extreme heat. It got so hot in there when we were flowing the water--we had John-Bean high pressure lines. When the water, as soon as it came out, actually turned to steam, it was time to get out. We just made it out before the fire broke through the floor and totally enveloped the room.

Q: Do you remember who the Captain was at the time?

RR: 1958, Arthur Poole was Captain. He wasn't there that day. On the first, initial response, there was five or six of us--myself, Tommy Drumm, Arthur Poole, Bobby Cocks who was Chief Engineer, and Old Man Ed Baker who was, I believe at that time, was the company Secretary. Later on, years later, his son--also named Edward--he joined the Fire Department, too. And I can't remember--Mr. Kelly, Arnold Kelly, I believe, was there also.

Q: What was your specific skill that you had with the Fire Department? Were you on hose? on ladder? a driver?

RR: Well, Protection, of course, is an engine company. We put the water on the fire. But they cross-train you. I didn't necessarily have to ride Protection's equipment. I could ride anybody's equipment. So, if you're going to ride in on Atlantic's truck--they do the roof work; they do the search for any victims that might be there--you can't pull up to the scene of a fire and abandon the chauffeur. If he's looking around for his crew and you run off to your own engine, you can't do that unless you ask permission. And, you know, if he has plenty of help to take care of their end of it, then fine, you can go. But you do truck work if you ride a truck there, for the most part. So, you have to learn all aspects of firefighting. You can't just, you know, be a nozzle man, so to speak, or a back-up man. You have to learn all there is to know about.

Q: Is that true today as well?

RR: Yes, especially today. Yes. We house all the first new apparatus during the daylight hours in Atlantic's, so everyone has to know all there is to know about everything in the Department. We train as a Department. We don't train individually as a company unless you're being taught how to operate a specific piece of apparatus, such as an engine. I teach that myself.

Q: What was the most important thing you think you learned during training when you were that young?

RR: Well, firefighting, you take it very seriously. I mean, there's time to play and have a lot of fun. But firefighting is a dangerous business. You have to take it very seriously and dedicate yourself to learning all there is to know about it. The life you save, as they say, could be your own. So it doesn't pay to fool around.

Q: Are the firefighters trained for hurricanes and earthquakes?

RR: Hurricanes, we used to get them here years ago. I remember Hurricane Carol, I guess, was in '56, I think it was. I was just a teenager, but I remember it, where the street where I live on, the water came up halfway up the street. But mostly they did--what they did, they pumped basements back then, but they don't do that anymore. And you try to situate your equipment so that you can get out. We have an annex down on Channel Drive. You don't want to put anything down there during the hurricane, because Shore Road might be under water and you're not going to go anywhere. And earthquakes, building collapses nowadays, we have special training, but not so much for earthquakes because we just don't get them here. You know, very minor tremors. But I myself am a member of the tactical rescue team where we do close quarters rescue or high--high angle rescue where you might have to rappel down a rope. Today we have sophisticated equipment. And, of course, we can't go spending a million dollars to get everything, so we have some. What we'll do, we'll put out a mutual aid call to New Hyde Park, Bethpage, Syosset, Manhasset, and they'll come in with their equipment, and together we have

everything you need. You know climbing, sound devices; cameras to find victims in building collapses.

Q: What major fires do you recall that really are outstanding?

RR: Well, like I said earlier, my first major fire was the Plandome Country Club. That was the big one, just three or four months after I got in. And, not necessarily in order, but the Bradley's fire. In fact, I rode to that fire with my sponsor Len Seifts. He was the Deputy Chief then. The Lumber Yard fire, I was there as a police officer. I wasn't there as a firefighter. I was working that night. The Shipyard fires. Some of those I made. Some of them I was working as a police officer, so naturally I, you know, can't shun my duties as a police officer and go put on turn-out gear and fight the fire. And the Busby House; I was a police officer that night. One of my friends, it was his assignment down there. I was riding another sector. But he put a ladder up to the bathroom window on the second floor, and he didn't reach down far enough. And as it turns out, that's where those two little kids were, inside the bathroom window. But he didn't know they were there. The smoke was unbelievable and the heat, from what he tells me, and they weren't found in time. And the Sands Point Bath and Tennis Club, as it turns out, I could see that fire from my street, but I had the head off the engine. I was putting new valve cover gaskets on my van, and I had no way to get to the firehouse (laughs), so I just had to watch all the smoke from my house, because I had no way to respond. And the Metropolitan Sand and

Gravel used to be on the hill where the picnic area is now for Hempstead Harbor Park. That was also a nursing home way back when. But that was on election night back in the '60s. Early '60s. And Sergeant Bilyeu called that fire. I remember it was eight-twenty at night. I was working as a police officer at the election polls, and I got done about eleven o'clock that night, turned in all my ballots and stuff to headquarters. Went home, changed clothes, and responded over to the scene, and it was still fully involved about midnight. And there were no hydrants down on West Shore Road in them days. We had a pumper--an old Number Two, it was a '37 American La France--down on the beach, and when the tide went all the way out, we had to shut it down for two hours to wait for the tide to come back in. So, we built twenty campfires around the perimeter to keep warm, because it was a cold night that night. So, I'll never forget that fire. We didn't get done with that till noon-time the next morning. And Manhattan Food Store. I was working eight to four, walking the Main Street beat, when I seen smoke coming out of the grate in the sidewalk. I peered in the window, and I seen fire halfway back on the left side of the store. I ran up to a call box on the Boulevard and Main Street. We didn't have walkie-talkies then. And I called my Lieutenant and reported the fire. I ran back to the store, and now, by the time--the minute or two that it took me to do that, the fire had advanced all the way to the front of the store, so I ran out in the street and I stopped all the traffic and stepped aside. And just as I did, the windows blew out and blew across the street and hit stores on the opposite side of the street. And once again, when I got relieved at the end of my tour, I went home, changed clothes, and fought that fire until

approximately midnight. (Laughs) There's been so many fires, it's hard to get them all off the top of my head, you know. Some more will probably come to me, but ...

Q: What do you love most about being a firefighter?

RR: Well, helping people. And the camaraderie of the guys. It's like a brotherhood and the closeness, yeah, of the guys.

Q: Is there anything you dislike?

RR: Oh, I don't like getting up at two o'clock in the morning anymore, but I still do it. And now that my son's a Captain, I've got to support his efforts. So, I still go. I'm still very active in the Fire Department, even though ... [INTERRUPTION] ... Where did I leave off, do you remember? [coughing]

Q: Did you hold any offices in the Fire Department? I know you're an instructor. What--tell me how you or what ...

RR: Well, years ago, I ran for Fourth Assistant Engineer, which is the bottom of the pole, so to speak, in the line of office. And the fellow I ran against beat me. I ran again the next year against a different fellow, and I lost to him. So, after that, I chose not to run anymore. But later on in the years, I became an instructor on motor pump operations and

driving. As I got more experience, I walk in the firehouse, I don't just sit down and watch TV or fool around. I walk around the engine. I know the engines like the back of my hand. Like you know your own back yard. And so having your son in the Fire Department and very close friends, I don't want to make a mistake that's going to cause them serious bodily harm or even death. So I take this extremely serious, and ...

Q: What do you do with the engine?

RR: I teach people how to drive them and operate them. If you've got to drive a piece of apparatus, whether it's an engine or a truck, you have to know how to operate that piece of apparatus. You have to know where every single piece of equipment is on it. You have to know what it is, what it's used for. So, if a young rookie that's only in the Fire Department a couple of months comes up and asks you for a specific tool--like maybe they'll send him, in an overhaul operation, for a closet hook--he might not even know what that is, but he's coming to you for a closet hook. So you have to know what it is, where it is, and get it for him. You have to change the Scott Bottles. Your men that rode in with you, that they ran out of air, they're going to be coming back to you to have their Scott Packs changed. It's your responsibility to make sure you have a sufficient water supply coming in. Engine operations are very complicated. It involves friction loss, correct nozzle pressure. You have to--it's a whole new ballgame than just firefighting operations to be a motor pump operator.

Q: What's a closet hook?

RR: A closet hook is a very short hook, you know, for pulling walls inside the closet (laughs), I guess.

Q: Is that the same as a pike pole?

RR: It's kind of like a pike pole. Somewhere on the work end of it--and it's just a very short thing, two and a half feet long with a little handle on the end. They call it a closet hook. And pike poles, of course, come anywheres from six to eight feet, they go right on up to sixteen feet long. And the truck companies carry those--those really big ones. But the driving part, I myself, before I was a police officer, worked for Brower's Moving and Storage. Even after I was a police officer, I worked for Brower's and later, White Brothers Transfer, and I worked for Wysong [Building Material]. I drove large vehicles all my life. So I can adapt to getting into a fire engine very easily and driving with no problem. But the average volunteer firefighter, he gets out of a twenty-five hundred pound car and he gets into a forty thousand pound engine or maybe an eighty thousand pound tower ladder, you have to be able to adjust yourself to handle this larger piece of apparatus. So that's what I teach.

Q: How do you teach that? I mean, what--do you have classes?

RR: Yes, I have classes. If somebody wants to become a chauffeur, they have to get the okay from their Captain. You have to have a year and a half--in my company, at any rate; I can't speak for the other two companies. But you have to have a year and a half in Protection to even become a chauffeur. And what the Department did, they sent myself and two others to become level one instructors out at the Nassau Fire Academy. Actually, only two of us went out there--myself and Captain Tom McDonough from Atlantic's. The other instructor is Phil Spinnato, and he's a licensed school teacher, so he didn't need to attend the Level One Instructors' class. It's kind of like "Train the Trainer," they call it. And then once we got those certificates out of the way, we had to go up to Montauk Falls to the New York State Fire Academy.

Q: Where?

RR: Montauk Falls. It's up right nextdoor to that race track up there. I can't think of it. It's a Nascar track just outside of Elmira there. And we had to take courses up there to become E.V.O.C. instructors. E.V.O.C. is an abbreviation for Emergency Vehicle Operation and Control. And actually, the Department paid for it, but they were reimbursed by the insurance companies. The insurance companies sponsored this whole thing. So I have a certificate signed by Governor Pataki stating that I'm a State certified E.V.O.C. instructor.

Q: And how many classes do you teach a week?

RR: Well, it's not so much a week. Sometimes--it depends on how many new people we get in and how fast they want to move up to chauffeur. Mostly, it's a lot of fire medics that are becoming chauffeurs. But ...

Q: What's the difference between a chauffeur and a driver?

RR: Same thing. But I refer to them as chauffeurs. Chauffeur is the driver. So, maybe it's old school talk then (laughs). But, and then, when I teach the E.V.O.C., it's up to the individual company instructor. Like if I teach a fellow from Atlantic's E.V.O.C., it's up to the instructors from Atlantic's to teach him about the operations of the particular piece of apparatus--say, the tower ladder. And it's their responsibility to teach him how to set it up properly where all the equipment is on it and how to use all their equipment. They have a vast array of equipment on there, with forcible entry tools and saws and stuff that we use to respond to auto accidents. The Jaws of Life, as they call it, the Hurst tool, the cutters. There's a vast amount of equipment that they carry. I personally am a chauffeur on just about every piece of equipment in the Fire Department. On Flower Hill's engines, except this brand new one they just got. I haven't been qualified on that yet, but it's just like the brand new one we got, so it's just a matter of time. I know Atlantic's stuff. You have to know where everything is on everybody's equipment, now.

Q: Do you have to know the mechanics of the engine at all?

RR: No, I don't have to be like a mechanic to repair something. The engineering staff generally can fix--quick fix--something. But I can probably quick fix something. But if an engine--something goes on the engine or something, like on a pumper, if something goes wrong with that engine during pump operations, the first thing I do is I'll get on the radio and get my guys out of the building. We'll get another engine set up to maintain the hose lines, so that, you know, the safety of the people inside is paramount. And you get the people, let the engine blow up if it's going to blow up, you know, once the people are out, then you shut it down.

Q: What are the major differences between the engines you have now and what you would have had in '58?

RR: 1958, the first new engine was a F-7 Ford. 1953 Ford. John-Bean high pressure. It was kind of like you see spray trucks use them today to spray trees and stuff. But you took a beating with those, but on a one-room house fire, you were in and out of there real fast. Because you pumped at eight hundred pounds pressure. You put it on a slight fog and you went in and you just blew the fire out. While they were stretching the additional--back in them days it was inch and a half lines; now they're inch and three-quarter--you could be in, have the fire out, and be coming back out the door. We've done it out at the Academy, and the instructors weren't really happy with us, but we proved a point. And that was the first truck I was the driver on was the 1953 Ford F-7 John-Bean High

Pressure. And then the second one was the 1937 American La France, referred to as Old Number Two. It was actually Thirteen. And Cliff Hults was Chief Engineer then. It was his job to require--qualify me. He's deceased now. He's an ex-Captain. But then he was Chief Engineer, and Cliff was a fanatic. I had to go over, take the engine apart, and put it back together again to qualify as an operator, you know, under his tutoring.

Q: What other major changes can you remember?

RR: Well, in the earlier days of my firefighting career, when you got a call to go to someone's house or store, there was an actual reason to be there. Possibly only an overheated outlet or an unattended pot left on a stove. But there was a reason to be there. Nowadays, ninety percent of the calls are recorded alarms. They're all false alarms. Ever once in a while, we do get some working fires. This year alone, since January, my son became Captain. The first couple of months, he was averaging a working house fire a week. These guys were teasing him, you know, that they kept--you know, he kept them too busy. The previous Captain--well, he was an excellent Captain--we only had four fires in the whole two years he was Captain ... [INTERFERENCE] ... here, if we--we had four the first month. But the recorded alarms today, they're a killer. They're a morale killer, also. You go to the same places over and over again for reported alarms that amount to nothing. And the ambulance, of course, back in them days, these three line companies--Protection, Atlantics, Flower Hill--made up the crews to run the ambulance. I took basic and advanced first aid from Eddy Piccardo, and that's all you needed. There

was no cardiac ambulances then. Now, today, we have three cardiac ambulances, and they're running overtime--I don't know, my guess is over two thousand calls a year, and we can't even keep up with that sometimes. Three ambulances aren't enough. They're the major changes. The amount of calls that we get.

Q: Now, you were Steward.

RR: Yes. In 1969 and 1970, Sal Zimbardi became Captain. He appointed me Steward of Protection. I kept it for fourteen years. And I gave it up for a couple of years, and the new fellow didn't work out, so the guys talked me into taking it back again. And I kept it for eight more years. What the Steward does, he's in charge of kind of like entertainment. We do picnics, give them a little something to eat on meeting nights. You organize a fishing trip, or different things, you know. Little things that go on throughout the year that get the guys--bring the guys together, you know, in a fun-type situation.

Q: So you order the food for this?

RR: Yeah. Actually, I get the food from Trunz. When Trunz, before they came to Port Washington, I used to run over to Herricks Road and Hillside Avenue. I guess that's, what, Albertson over there or whatever it is, and get it. Then they moved to Port Washington and made it very convenient. The Trunz family loves the Fire Department,

so they treat the Fire Department very well. They give us everything, just about at cost, so--we'll have a little steak barbecue or picnics once a year.

Q: What are the menus usually?

RR: Generally, I try to vary it. My wife, she's an excellent chef. In fact, that's how I met her; she was a chef in a restaurant. She's..she'd make me some pasta one night. Me personally, I can't cook, you know. I can cook steaks and hamburgers and stuff on a barbecue, but to be in a kitchen cooking, that's not my cup of tea. But I kind of like overseeing things. I have people that were excellent cooks that did the actual cooking. I just was the organizer, so to speak.

Q: So out of all of these levels in the Fire Department, which did you enjoy the most, or do you enjoy the most?

RR: I enjoyed being the Steward. You get outfits to come in from out of town, also. I didn't mention that. But like Eighth Battalion Chiefs, North Shore Fire Council, Southern New York meetings, where fire departments from around the general area will come in and meet--keep up to date on different things. We're always pushing legislation for bigger and better things as far as protecting people. You know, smoke detectors in the homes and sprinkler systems. This is all happening now. But years ago when we had to push for all these things. And, you know, you meet different people. Get invited to everybody else's installation dinner or clam bake (laughs), you know, being a steward, as you invite

their officers and their steward. But the part I enjoy the most nowadays, you know, it's always nice to do a job very well. Put a fire out, save somebody's property and stuff. But, being older now, my son being Captain, he don't let me get inside too much anymore. I enjoy teaching the guys how to do things. Teaching them motor pump operation. Teaching them the proper way to hook up to a hydrant, you know, when they're brand new. That's the first thing you'll learn. Where the equipment is and how to hook up to a hydrant properly. Make a forward layer, or a reverse layer, or a direct hook-up I've got to teach.

Q: Can you describe that briefly?

RR: The forward layer, if the fire is not right at the hydrant, you would wrap the hydrant with the supply line and then pull away and get down to the scene of the fire. You would stop one house short of the scene of the fire or go one house past the scene of the fire. Put the engine, the actual front of the scene of the fire is where the truck company will either put an aerial up or a tower ladder up, if they've got to pick somebody out of a window, or put up a ladder, or a bucket onto the roof to start roof operations to vent the fire. And direct hook-ups, if you are very lucky, the hydrant's right where (laughs), right where you are when you're fighting the fire. A reverse layer is fire to hydrant. The way we would use that--some departments use it for initial firefighting-- we would use it if we've got to go to a master stream. If you've got to put big water out, you want to put the engine right on

the hydrant. That way, there's less friction loss in your supply line, you know. It's right direct, it's only a few feet of hose involved.

Q: When did you join the Police Department?

RR: May 7th, 1962.

Q: And how did you coordinate your police work, which was your day job, with your firefighting?

RR: Well, naturally, if I was working as a police officer, I couldn't chase fires. I mean, I was assigned to a lot of fires, riding the radio car. But, when I'm off duty, I didn't work days, so to speak. I swung the clock. You worked in the night, eight to four, four to twelve. We worked eight hour shifts. Quite different from the way they do things today.

Q: How do they do it today?

RR: Well, today, they work twelve hours on, twelve hours off for two or three days. Then they get three days off. And then they'll work twelve on, twelve off, for two or three more days, with four days off. And it turns out to the same amount of hours; it's just that it's done differently. You get much more time to yourself, so to speak.

Q: Now.

RR: Nowadays, yeah. It seems like a lot of days, more days off, but it's really not when all is said and done.

Q: So when that horn blows, did you respond as a firefighter or a police officer?

RR: Well, once again, it depended if I was officially on duty as a police officer. If I was officially on duty, I could not respond unless I was actually assigned as a police officer. If I was home, of course, I responded as a firefighter. I'm in my own personal time. And, as you mentioned, when the horn blows, that's when we had, in the earlier days, we didn't have all these sophisticated alarming devices that we have today. You went to your firehouse or you went to a call box and you picked up the phone and they told you where the fire was. That's how you did it back then. And myself, as a police officer, some days I worked on the desk. And when you--we used to dispatch the Fire Department, and when you sound an alarm for something, you had to sit right there by the switchboard, and the whole thing, with those hoses there that you plugged into the outlets. And as soon as it'd light up, you'd just pull it, then you'd just keep repeating where the fire is, because that's all that's calling up. You'd get forty, fifty phone calls, and it's all firemen wanting to know where the fire is. So, it was quite hectic there for the first few minutes if you were on desk duty at police headquarters when you turned in a fire alarm.

Q: Did you ever feel like you had a split personality?

RR: Well, no. I've been around police officers all my life. My father was a police officer, and my grandfather was a police commissioner. So I--I knew all there was to--well, not actually be a police officer. I knew everybody on the job. And I had an excellent teacher--my father. He taught me that when you're a cop, you're a cop, you know. If you have to deal with a personal friend, you know, you kind of have some slack that you would cut anybody some slack, but if it's serious, then you've got to do what you've got to do. Because a true friend of yours is not going to take advantage of you as a police officer. If he does try to do that, he's not your friend in the first place. So, it's a little hard choosing. You took the Nassau County Civil Service Test, and you could go anywhere you wanted to in Nassau County. But I chose Port Washington because my dad was here and my grandfather was a commissioner here back in the '30s and '40s. And, in five minutes, you're at work, where if you went to Nassau County, you could wind up in Rockaway somewheres or, you know. So, I chose to go to Port Washington. The money was better then, too. And I stayed twenty-four years. I had a good career there.

Q: Was the training more difficult in the police or the firefighters?

RR: Well, I guess (laughs) depends on your point of view. The training for the police back then was only nine weeks for me. The Academy was actually ten weeks, but the first

week, the fellows that went on to Nassau County Police where that was just--they issued weapons and uniforms and such, and then we got into the actual training. I enjoyed the firearms training very much. Out at the County Range, when I first went on, I was lucky if I could hit the broad side of a barn standing inside. But I did become very proficient with firearms and I solved that as time went on.

Q: Did you ever have to use it?

RR: I've used my weapon, but I've never shot anyone. I had to draw it on robbery suspects and burglars and assault knives. One guy had a knife one time; he wasn't going to put it down, so I drew my weapon. He then put it down. Because I would not have hesitated to shot him. I've got a wife and kids to go home to, you know. I'm not going to get cut fooling around with somebody that's got a lethal weapon in his hands, no. I'm no, you know, Chuck Norris or one of those guys like you see on television. No, it's the real deal out in the street.

Q: Did you ever have fear, either as a policeman or a firefighter?

RR: Well, there's always fear when you've got to go into an establishment that you find a break-in, not knowing whether or not anybody is in there. To do a proper building search, it takes a considerable amount of time. You work with a partner, and it takes considerable training to properly do it where, when you go in, you can actually put the

bad guy, so to speak, at a disadvantage by going in. Nowadays, you know, you just make a phone call and you call the canine cop. Canine comes in and a dog goes through there in five minutes to do what it used to take me two hours to do, because they're sense of smell is so terrific that they can--they can find the bad guy in no time at all. And most of the time, if there is a perpetrator in there and the dog comes in, they're going to give up right away anyway. They don't want to deal with those canines.

Q: Now, what's the different between a fire police and a regular police?

RR: The fire police, for the most part, are made up of a lot of the senior guys in the Fire Department who are not active--actual firefighting anymore. They take charge of traffic control. It relieves the actual, you know, the police from having to do traffic. And they don't have powers of arrest or anything. I don't know. I'm not one, like, I don't want to be misquoted on that. But mostly they control traffic, sort of to free up other firefighters and the Port Washington Police District.

Q: Do the police go to all the firefighter funerals?

RR: Well, they'll provide an escort for us. Yes. And we work very well with the Port Washington Police Department. Nassau County Police Department and Sands Point Police Department. We have three police departments, and our fire jurisdiction, we get along very well with all of them.

Q: How do you deal with the stress in any of these situations. Either the police or the firemen?

RR: Well, I developed a way to kind of mentally block it out. I've seen a lot of death and stuff in my time, and I tried not to let it bother me. Now and then, you get a young kid or something. One who came to mind was a murder victim in the sand pits back in the '70s, I guess it was, down off Channel Drive there. And I was the first officer there. Came upon a--I can picture it to this day, her eyes looking up at me, pleading, you know, "Please stop," or pleading with the person that murdered her. I don't want to get into that, because, you know, that's a lot of bad memories. But I worked that case. My wife didn't see me for three days. So, I can still picture that young lady, you know, to this day.

Q: How do you deal with the family?

RR: You mean, being in the Fire Department? My wife, there's no problem. She served four years as President. She was out as two, and then they got her back again for two more. In January, she'll go out again. That's not a dangerous position, so to speak. I mean, it does have its dangers. Any part of the Fire Department. There's a young lady got killed down on West Shore Road one night responding to an auto accident. And after the accident was over, she was walking back to her car and a drunk driver came along and hit her and killed her. So, you know, anything can be dangerous (laughs) at any given time. But my biggest concern is my son. He's, as I stated earlier, he's the Captain of Protection

Engine Company now. And he's inside, and you get these bad fires. Like one down on Soundview Lane a couple months back there, things started coming down inside. But, he got out in time, and there were no ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: To continue, you were talking about the Bernard Street fire.

RR: Yeah, he was a young officer then. This was several years ago. I was operating an engine on Port Washington Boulevard. I remember, it was wintertime, and it was snowing very hard that night. And he was over there trying to pull people out the window. And three firefighters went in, and he was helping them get out. And, unfortunately, none of the people inside survived the fire. We kept one alive for several hours, but the hospital equipment kept her breathing. Then finally, the family decided to disconnect, and she succumbed a short time after. But there was a young girl killed in that fire, who my wife knew. My wife works for the Port Washington School District down in the Sousa School, and she knew this young lady that perished in that fire. So it was tough on her and all the kids down at the school that knew her. You get situations like that, you know, it puts a lot of stress on people when you lose people and you can't get them out and you can see them. And then they, you know, you just can't get to them in time.

Q: Do you dream about these things later?

RR: No. Well, the murder in the sand pits bothered me for a while. I'm not one to go talking about it to everybody, but I keep things to myself. I deal with it in my own way.

Q: Do you ever go into debriefing? Stress debriefing?

RR: That have it. The Fire Department and the Police Department, they have counselors. Crisis counselors, they call them. They will even bring in professional psychologists and psychiatrists when you get a bad fire. When Bobby Dayton got killed, I was away upstate hunting at the time. But, afterwards, when we got back, the people that were involved in that fire, they had a special session for them. There was a mass group thing where they had professional people come in and dealt with the people's stress and, you know, their feelings, and bring it out in the open and discuss it. I was there, but I was there as Steward of my company. That is, I provided refreshments. You know, coffee, soda, sandwiches and stuff, because it wasn't just a half an hour thing. It was quite lengthy in time. So, then I heard, you know, people discuss what they--what their feelings were on it, which I don't care to get into, you know. I feel it was somewhat private, so to speak.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

RR: I believe I stated earlier that my wife is an excellent cook, and I met her--it used to be the Park Bar and Grill up on Port Boulevard, and then it became Cal's Place. She was the chef there, and I used to work part-time for a fellow named Bobby Jones. He was a

member of Protection Engine Company. He was a licensed plumber, and I worked part-time for him at that time. I met her in 1968, and we got married in 1969. But she worked at this restaurant that we frequented for lunch.

Q: So there's no fire connection?

RR: No. No. She didn't know nothing about the Fire Department or the Police Department till she married me. And, as she got--when we got married, she joined the Ladies Auxiliary of Protection Engine Company, and she went on to become President of that organization. And then in 1979, Fire Medics were formed, and she was--she is a charter member of that organization--the Fire Medic Company. She joined it the first year of its origin. The three line companies, as I stated, ran the ambulance in the early days. I was in the original class at St. Francis Hospital to become an AMT, you know, when we got into the cardiac ambulances. I forgot to mention that earlier, but ...

Q: So, did you handle any ...

RR: I ran the ambulance a lot. There weren't many of us that were AMTs in the Fire Department, so many a time, if I was at the call as a police officer, I would take over the ambulance and respond as the technician on the ambulance, if somebody was in serious trouble.

Q: Now, when did the Ladies Auxiliary stop doing the food preparation? When did the stewards come on?

RR: Well, it kind of phased itself out. Ladies, I remember in earlier fires, the Ladies Auxiliary would come out and bring sandwiches and all kinds of refreshments. They had special pots they'd put soup in, and, you know depending on if it was the wintertime, of course a cup of soup was great. Coffee and hot chocolate, whatever. And it kind of phased out as they got into the department stewards somewhere in the '70s, I guess. And then the Department steward, which I was one, a couple of times, the Steward of my company, and if the Chief of the Department was from my company, you were automatically the Department Steward. But then, when Bill--Billy Zwerlein became Department Chief, I asked him to make my wife the Steward. I had it, and, you know, I asked him to give it to her. And she's been Department Steward ever since. So, you know, still to this day, she is not only President of Fire Medic, but she's the Department Steward. I don't know--don't know how many years it is, so you'll have to ask her when you interview her.

Q: Now, when you're Department Steward, do you now go to the fires when they are late and have food for the men?

RR: Well, my wife takes care of all that. What we do, we have some stuff, like liquid refreshments up at Department headquarters. We'll send some van up there and get

bottled water, Gator Aid. But, as I mentioned earlier, Trunz is very good to us. My wife, she'll call Eddie, and if it's--he'll even go in there, if he's home and get a couple of his people and come in and they'll make a couple hundred sandwiches or whatever we need. Or we'll send somebody to a deli. Harbor Deli treats us very well, and he's open late. He'll put together food for us, or even, worse come to worse, we'll go to Burger King. We'll get food, no matter what we've got to do for it.

Q: So how did you take care of your children when you were both in the fire department?

RR: Well, earlier in our marriage, Beverly was only in the Auxiliary. We were married in '69. Our son Raymond, who now lives in Albany, he was born in '71. Donald was born in '73. And they were, you know, six or eight years old when the Fire Medic were formed, when Beverly joined. And if she had her meetings, doing her thing, then I'd stay home with the kids. Of course, if I'm home with the kids and there's a fire, I can't go, you know, take the kids maybe in the car, you know (laughs).

Q: Have you ever done that?

RR: Yeah. But nowadays, they don't want you chasing fires in your car. You've got to at least stay two blocks away, and you don't want to leave young kids in a car two blocks away, but you can't tie up a fire block, so to speak--a block where the fire is. You've got to get apparatus in there, and you can't be having a bunch of guys come in there in their private vehicles jamming the whole thing up.

Q: Are there more crowds now at the fire that go to fires than there were before?

RR: You mean spectator type crowds?

Q: Spectators that rush to the fire.

RR: Depends on the type of neighborhood you're in. Down in, say, Manorhaven, the houses are very close together, so you'll get spectators. And you've got to be careful, if it's a working fire, we've got to move them back into a safe area, we'll put fire line tape up. And it's the fire police job to keep them back, too. We don't need them getting hurt by, you know, if a length of hose should, say, blow, you know, somebody can get seriously injured or killed even, you know, if the coupling hits you. So you've got to protect, you know, protect everybody involved, not only your own firefighters, but the public. You've got to keep them out of the way ...so they don't hamper firefighting operations.

Q: How was your social life when you were both in the Fire Department?

RR: Oh, great. Well, less personal social life. You know, you're kind of like close friends with your own. Especially when I was a police officer. You're kind of friendly with your own kind, because you don't have a normal job. I mean, you don't associate with somebody who's got a nine-to-five job, because you're working midnight to eight. While he's at work, you're sleeping, and then you're ready to get up and go out when he's

sleeping (laughs), so to speak. And things get a little crazy. So you kind of have to more or less stay with your own kind of people. I mean, of course, I had my friends and ...

Q: Did you socialize more with the police or with the firefighters?

RR: Well, it was kind of fifty-fifty when I was still a police officer. You know, we had our picnics too and stuff. Softball games. I played in the--I played for--softball for the Fire Department five decades. I played in 1959; I played all the '60s, all the '70s, most of the '80s, and I played a few games in the '90s.

Q: So did your team win?

RR: Yeah, we had a heck of a softball team. We used to travel to Pennsylvania just to play softball at a place called Maple Press was down in York, Pennsylvania. It was a business dealings with Frank Pavlak--Black Publishing Company, who--Frank worked for his father-in-law, Mr. Black. And we'd go down there. It'd be kind of like a business deal, and we'd play softball, too. This Maple Press Company had a top team, and they played in the Industrial League throughout the whole country. Even bussed a team in from Utica, New York just to play us. So, that was a young man. He was a millionaire. He had his own softball field in the back of the factory there. And took us all out to dinner at restaurants. Put us up in motels. We played golf at his country club, and, you know, he

treated us royally. We got a big kick out of it. We went down there for several years and played.

Q: What was the atmosphere like then for the games? Did you have many people go with you to watch?

RR: Well, yeah. Back, earlier on, we had a battalion--the Eighth Battalion--was made up of Port Washington, Plandome, Manhasset. Manhasset had two softball teams. Plandome didn't have any. Great Neck Alerts, Great Neck Vigilants, Albertson, East Williston, and Williston Park. That was the Eighth Battalion, and we had, every Sunday you'd play a double-header. If Port Washington was the host, we'd generally play down at the PAL. We'd go back to the firehouse afterwards and cook hamburgers, hot dogs, have a keg of beer. And it was a camaraderie type thing, which it was at the barbecue afterwards. But, during the actual playing of the game, we played very hard, you know. You played to win.

Q: Did you get any trophies?

RR: Oh, yeah, we used to--Port Washington had an excellent team. We won most of the time.

Q: And has that changed now?

RR: Nah. The Battalion kind of folded, I guess, for whatever reason--lack of manpower, lack of interest, or whatever. Maybe they didn't care to compete anymore. But there is a state tournament every year up in Hudson, New York where the Firemen's Home is. We won that six years in a row. And now, these past two years--this past August and the one before that--we won then, too. There was a few years in between that we didn't win. They didn't have that when I played. But sometimes I go up and watch them play, and it's all teams from all over New York State come in and play.

Q: Did you play with your son?

RR: Yeah, I played with him, when I was still playing. I played in the '80s, played in a few games in the '90s. Maybe I should go play a game now that I can play in six decades (laughs). I don't know if my legs could take it anymore.

Q: Let me ask about the parades. How do you feel when you march in a parade, and which group do you march with? The police or the firemen?

RR: Well, the police didn't participate in many parades. Only like Memorial Day. There was no Pride in Port parades, so when I was a police officer. I've been retired since 1986. But I participated in numerous parades with the Fire Department, still do today. When I was younger in the Fire Department, I competed with the Rangers Racing Team. It was Protection Engine Company's own racing team. Nowadays, it's the Roadrunners from all

the companies make it up. And you took great pride with marching bands, and you competed for trophies. And we used to win our share of trophies competing with other departments throughout the Island. The State, if it's a State tournament, you go upstate. Freeport always turned out really big. They turn out a couple hundred people. And Oceanside and Hempstead, so we used to turn out over a hundred people at these parades years ago.

Q: And were you ever in those? What were the uniforms like back then compared to now?

RR: Well, mine nowadays was light-weight, which was like a tropical material. That's what we call it down at the Police Department. The material was tropical. But the first Fire Department uniform I got was--I bought one with the company had a guy dropped out of the company, and I got his, and it was whipcord. And the thing was so heavy. In the summertime, when all these tournaments were and the parades, your legs used to get raw from this material rubbing on them. I had that thing for years, and finally, after about ten years, I got a new one--nice, light-weight one, so it's not bad at all.

Q: What colors were they?

RR: Blue. You wear blue pants, blue jacket, the blue hat, white shirt.

Q: What do the stripes mean on the sleeve, and what do the stars mean?

RR: The stripes they have on them nowadays, it's the status in the Department today. Gee, this is something quite new. I couldn't even tell you what they're about. You'd have to check with one of the Chiefs. But the stars, each star represents five years of service.

Q: What is there about the funerals that are so impressive that the firefighters conduct?

RR: Well, years ago, when I was a young fellow in the Department, you went to all the funerals, if you weren't working, of course. Now, being a cop, sometimes I was working. But, out of respect, you might not have even known the older man, and he might not have been around the firehouse so much, but you went out of respect, because he had his days as an active firefighter. So you went out of respect.

Q: Did you know George Mahoney?

RR: Yes, I knew Sarge Mahoney very, very well. I know him since I was a little kid, because he became a police officer in 1945 when he came home from World War II. My father became a police officer in 1946 when he came home from the War. I've known him ever since 1946. In fact, I have photographs home of helping him build the PAL, when he took over the PAL. We re-did it all, because the police had moved up--up to Port Washington Boulevard where they are now. And he--Sarge got them to donate the building to the PAL, and he made the ball field and all that. But I've known him since I

was a little kid in 1946. He was a great guy. I'd love to have what he spent out of his own pocket on the kids down there and stuff, so--buying them this and that.

Q: Are the red and white pom-poms in the wreaths that the Fire Department has at a funeral reflective of the uniform colors that were in the past--red and white?

RR: I don't know why they choose those. I know if for instance--Sarge's funeral, who was just buried today--Falconer's makes them all the same, just put a ribbon on them says Flower Hill Hose Company or Protection Engine Company, and so on. The Department, the Exempt Association. Where they got those colors from, I don't know. Protection always had blue. I was on the committee for the hundredth anniversary in '92, and I have a replica of the original uniform. White pants. There was a blue, choker type collar. You didn't wear a tie then. And Atlantics, of course, had the white pants with the red and white shirt, with the hook and ladder crosses on it. But everybody's uniform, now everything is blue. So I don't know where those flowers, you know, where they get those colors from, though.

Q: Let me ask you what you feel about the women firefighters. Do you feel they carry their weight?

RR: The ones I know do. We have a few in the Fire Department. Sharry, Janet Kimmerly who is Protection's secretary now. She's not so active anymore fighting fire, but she did her thing. We have a young lady who transferred down from Barnard, which is outside

of Rochester. She's an excellent firefighter. She was already experienced, has all her certificates from the Firefighting Academies and everything. I don't know if I mentioned her name--Krystal. She's very good. So she was already trained when she came to us. We just had to teach her where things were on our apparatus and stuff, and probably very shortly I'll be training her as a chauffeur, because she was a chauffeur upstate where she was a member. She's already qualified in E.V.O.C. She had that course upstate already. So, it's nice, you know, to get somebody that moves in and then transfers over to your department already trained. You just have to teach them a few basics of how you operate that might be quite different than how they operate up there.

Q: What are the negative things about having women in the Department?

RR: Well, might be some things negative for the women. Not only as far as guys' language goes sometimes, you know. It's not always ...

Q: Do you have tough language?

RR: I don't have any--yeah, oh, you get guys talking back and forth, and, you know, every now and then a swear word will come out. But, they're great. They don't pay any mind to it. It's nothing directed at them personally, so they just kind of let it go.

Q: Are the women evaluated more leniently than a man when it comes to ...

RR: No, when they go to the Fire Academy, they got to drag dummies same as we do. You know, we don't, you know, give them a hundred pound dummy. They've got the same hundred and fifty pound dummy we've got to drag out. And she does it. Well, actually, you know, both these girls do it. But, I understand we're losing Sharry. I think she's moving out to the West somewhere. She belongs to Flower Hill. I understand she's moving out West somewhere.

Q: So how many women are now in the Department?

RR: Well, you have Janet, Krystal, and Sharry, who is going to be leaving. And then we have a young lady named Samantha. She's going to be joining Protection Engine Company next month. She was in the Explorer program. I don't even remember her last name to tell you, but she's a young girl.

Q: Is the Explorer program working in getting recruits?

RR: Yeah. We have quite a few. Especially after 9/11, we got a bit rush of people wanting to join the Fire Department. They seen what the Fire Department does, and so they wanted to become part of it.

Q: How did 9/11 affect you personally, or with the Department?

RR: Oh, I lost some friends down there. I never got down there on the pile. My son was down there, but he spent several days down there, but he don't talk about it. So, I don't ask him about it. He did what he had to do. I don't want to remind him of bad memories. So, if you ask him about it, the only thing he'll tell you is it's not like you've seen on television, and that's all you'll get out of him, you know, so. None of the guys will really talk about it. I personally didn't get down there. I had signed up a couple of times, but it got cancelled. I was stationed at other places on standby, you know, for firefighting duties elsewhere. I never got down to the Trade Center.

Q: Have the attitudes or techniques changes in the Fire Department since 9/11 in any way?

RR: Well, they're always looking for better techniques of doing things, and they're always coming up with better things. In fact, we just bought a new engine and we equipped it with a thermal image camera. You can find people through walls and under things and stuff. Attitudes?

Q: How does that work?

RR: It's--to tell you the truth, I'm just learning to use it myself. It's a brand new piece of apparatus. We've only had it like two weeks. Infrared. It seeks heat, and it can pick up heat whether it's an overheated outlet, you know, maybe somebody's detector went off

and we can't see anything visually, but this will show you heat. It tells you what the temperature is where the heat is coming from. It tells you what the temperature of the room is. It's amazing how this thing works. I'm still learning it myself. It's quite a sophisticated piece of equipment from the original thermal image cameras that they only showed just white. These will show you, as things get hotter, yellow, then red, you know, if things are really hot. It'll even tell you to get out if it's getting too hot.

Q: Has anything unusual ever happened while you were in the Fire Department?

RR: Well, I'm not quite sure it's anything unusual.

Q: Anything humorous? Anything ...

RR: Well, there's always guys playing jokes on one another, you know.

Q: What are the pranks like?

RR: Somebody will, say, goof and do something that you might consider stupid or dumb, you know, and then the guys will rag him about it for a couple of weeks. But somebody else will do something else, so then they will get on his case. So, it might be just some stupid act, like we check--on Thursday nights, it's work night. We've got to check all the equipment. You check the pumps, make everything is working. All the outlets are

working. And the latest thing that happened, one of the engineers was pump testing one of the engines, and he thought he was opening a gate to a closed line. It had a cap on it. And he turned the wrong valve and he opened up the deck turret pipe and shot the water right across the truck into the Engineer's room, filled up his tool chest, and (laughs) we had quite a mess there. So we razzed him about that for a while. That was quite funny. I mean, it could have not been funny, had somebody got hit with that water. They would have got seriously hurt. This big ball of water coming out of there. But, as it turns out, it was funny, you know. We had a big mess to clean up, but everybody pitched in and helped out.

Q: Going back to changes between 1958 and now, can you remember anything unusually outstanding in terms of uniforms, clothing?

RR: Well, the actual gear that you wore in firefighting has advanced immensely. Everyone has their own personal bunker gear now, which will protect you up to three thousand degrees, if you're caught in a flashover, for a few seconds. Give you time to get out. But when I first got in, all the gear was on the apparatus, on racks. Boots were turned upside down. Coats and a helmet. And you were lucky if you could get something that fit. I remember, I have a large head, and I used to hide a helmet somewhere in the firehouse. There was only one in the company that fit me, and I used to--used to hide it somewhere so I could grab that helmet, so at least that fit. Because if you bent over to do something, chances are it might fall off if it was too small. And the coats didn't matter too much.

You could live with that. But what was uncomfortable, if you got a pair of boots that were too tight, or too big, it made it uncomfortable, not to mention maybe a little bit dangerous, if they were too big for you and you were slopping around in them things. And sometimes you'd come home with sores on your feet. You always had to remember to wear socks. You know, guys would run out, maybe not wear socks. And if you got in any kind of fire where you were there for a few hours, you would have some mighty aching feet, with blisters and what-not, when you got done. And the gloves, we wore just rubber gloves and raincoats basically when I first got in. The equipment has advanced immensely now, and firefighting gear that you personally wear. Nomex hoods, there wasn't even any such thing back then. There's no part of your skin that should be exposed today. Nothing whatsoever. When you go inside to fight a fire.

Q: What else is new besides the Nomex hood on the gear that you wear?

RR: Well, the helmets haven't changed immensely. They're plastic now. They were leather when I first got in.

Q: How many pounds did the helmet weigh, if it was leather?

RR: Oh, they were heavy. Five, six pounds, I guess, I'd guess. And the coats were light. They were kind of like--like a rubber raincoat, like a police officer would wear. It kept you dry from water. It didn't really protect you from the heat. And the boots, the hip

boots, you'd pull them up. They were falling down, and you pulled them up. If you kneeled down on a hot spot, you could get burnt right through your rubber boot. You know, they weren't very good as far as protecting you from heat. They just kept you dry from the water.

Q: Any mishaps from those?

RR: Yeah, you could get burned--I got radiant heat burn one time in an old shed fire. I got a little too close before we got water on the fire, and I got my forehead burnt because we didn't have Nomex hoods in them days. In fact, if it was an exterior attack. We didn't even have masks on. But today, when you put your hood on and you pull it back--pull it down over your head. Then you tip it back, put your coat on. Then, when you put your mask on, the hood comes up over your mask, and your face is entirely protected. Your ears, everything. There's no part of human skin that's exposed to anything. So it gives you quite--quite advanced protection from what we had originally.

Q: Do you feel that the community in Port Washington appreciates the Fire Department?

RR: Yes. For the most part, I do. I know one woman a few years ago made a comment, all we are is a country club, you know. And I say, you know, come down to the country club one night when we've got a working fire and we'll take you inside. And, of course, you can't do that, for insurance purposes and stuff. But then you'll see what it's really

like. You can choke on some smoke and get dirty, you know. But, the people, for the most part, yeah, they support the Fire Department immensely.

Q: How are you recruiting now your younger folks?

RR: I'm not personally involved into it. I mean, you know, the Captain, every now and then, will ask the membership, "Hey, go out and ask your neighbor there, you know, if he wants to join." But the Fire Marshal, he does most of the recruiting. And then, through the schools, you know, he gives lectures at all these schools. They got a--even got a trailer now that acts both as a training center, recruitment thing, and a command center. They can make it just about anything they want. I had an engine on display at the block party last week, up there at the railroad station, and we had the trailer up there and the Fire Marshal was showing videos. He makes it a smokehouse. Shows you how to get out of smoke. And it's like a training thing for kids. And then, he gets involved into the Explorers, and when you're an Explorer, you get to visit each of the firehouses, and maybe when you first get involved, you don't know which one you want to join, so you can see what each one's about. Even though we're individual companies, we operate as one at the scene of a fire. We're one Department. And maybe you've got a friend that belongs to Flower Hill, so you might want to go there, or your neighbor or something, or one of the other companies. It's up to you. Or maybe you want to get involved in firefighting, you might want to go into the Medic company.

Q: How do you feel about the quality of the young people coming in?

RR: They're very nice, for the most part. We got that big run of young folks in there right after 9/11. We only had a couple of guys that, I guess, just wanted to join to join. They didn't make--make it up to par, so to speak. So we had to drop them from the rolls. But, for the most part, we got some excellent young people in there. They're very interested. They take it very serious. They've got to go out to the big academy. One of the requirements before you--you're on probation. Before you can get off probation, you have to become an interior firefighter. You have to go through certain phases of training. You have to complete it all.

Q: Has any recruit ever been dismissed for misconduct of any kind?

RR: There was a fairly young guy one time. He--I guess he had something to drink somewhere and he got in a fight. It didn't happen at the firehouse. It was outside the firehouse. And he beat some guy up. I think he got in trouble with the police for it. So that's an automatic suspension. With the seriousness of it, we just told him, you know, avoid the trouble. Just resign. You know, we let him resign.

Q: Does the younger generation mingle with the older generation?

RR: Well, it's hard for me to say, because I'm an instructor. I deal with a more (laughs) the young kids, the in between guys, and even the older guys like me, will come around, you

know. But, being a volunteer firefighter, you might not do something that very often, like driving the apparatus to a scene. I do it a lot. I live near the firehouse and I'm at the firehouse a lot, so I might be the first chauffeur in the firehouse to get the apparatus out. But a guy that lives a little further away, he might not get to drive it that much. So he'll-- might not be on top of things as much as he should be. So he'll come to me and say, "How does this go again?" and "How does this work?" "What do you do in this situation?" "What do you do in that situation?" And I try to tell him, you know, do it like I used to do. When you're in the firehouse, instead of sitting down on your butt watching television or reading a magazine, walk around the apparatus. What's this lever do? and what's that lever do? Where is this? You know, open up the compartment. What's everything in this compartment? What is it? On my work nights, they have a checklist. I've got to check every single piece of equipment on that engine. So, that's how we also teach the new people coming in, and go around with a fellow that knows what it is, where it is. As he checks it all off, you can learn what it is, where it is, and what it's used for.

Q: In the classroom, do they have to diagram the vehicle and ...

RR: No. First thing I teach when I teach for Protection Engine Company is friction loss.

Q: What is that?

RR: Friction loss is the loss of the water travelling through a given amount of hose. Friction loss is turbulence. There's a few factors that make up friction loss: the length of the hose, the diameter of the hose, and the gallons per minute you're trying to force through that hose. These things make up friction loss. Sometimes elevation. If you're in an apartment house, you're up on the third or fourth floor, you've got to add five pounds a floor because of the height, you know. You get friction loss there. And different nozzles. If you have a fog nozzle, that requires a hundred pounds at the tip. That means at the nozzle, they need a hundred pounds of pressure at the tip. A smooth bore. needs fifty. That's only half. So, you don't want to make a mistake and give a guy with a smooth one, nozzle, a hundred pounds at the tip, because you're going to hurt him. He's not going to be able to handle it. And then, master streams--the fogs are a hundred. The smooth-bore master streams are eighty pounds. You have to know how much hose is involved to give them the proper, you know, pressure at the tip. Plus, for each diameter hose, there's a different friction loss. The bigger the hose, the less friction loss.

Q: Do they learn this in the classroom or hands-on?

RR: Oh, I teach them this in the classroom. We let them handle hose to see what it feels like, you know, actually hose handling. While I'm training someone to pump an engine, I might have yourself and two or three other young people actually handling the hose that I'm pumping into, while I'm teaching another person the actual pump operations. The big-bore hose--the four-inch hose we carry--that's a supply line. That's all it's used for. I

supply the engine with it from a hydrant or I'll supply a tower ladder or an aerial ladder or a deck gun with it. Your attack lines--the bigger ones are the two-and-a-halves. Then there's the inch-and-three-quarter. Those are the booster lines. We really don't use those for firefighting other than a little brush fire somewhere, you know. Little grass fire somewhere. So ...

Q: Do you think that the changes in building in Port, where now they're having multilevel buildings, is a problem for the Fire Department?

RR: Yeah, the buildings they're building today, mostly truss roofs, are extremely dangerous.

Q: What's a truss roof?

RR: That's where you've got these massive spans, like at Stop and Shop down there that just opened up. They got these massive spans. They've got--not the real beams, so to speak, you know, and the frames going--the rafters going up on the roof. It's just one huge span. Instead of being every sixteen inches apart, they could be eight feet apart--any support trusses going across that's holding the roof up. And if one lets go, the whole thing's coming down. It's like a hip roof. If you're familiar with what a hip roof is. It's like a four-sided roof that comes up; it all meets up the top. Well, if one of those four rails burns through, the whole roof is going to come down. Where a normal house, if a beam or two burns through, it's no big deal. You know, the roof'll stay up.

Q: Did the Fire Department okay that building before it was ...

RR: Well, they're strong to hold weight. But when the weight is compromised by fire, even if it's made out of metal, if the fire is hot, steel--steel beams, I-beams, huge I-beams, we've seen the..you've seen the pictures of the Trade Center. Put these steel beams in it, they bend like pretzels under the extreme heat, and that's what these truss roofs they're building, they'll collapse.

Q: So, should the Fire Department then not okay these buildings?

RR: Well, we fight for what we can, you know. They got to stay up to code on these detectors now and sprinklers. That's the law. But we try to make sure that they use the very best things available. And, in Port Washington, we--we stay on top of all new construction. We have diagrams of the buildings. What kind of material it's made out of and does it have a parapet. Everything that's involved in new construction. I don't mean if somebody's building a single-family house on an empty lot somewhere, but, you know, any kind of commercial buildings going up, we stay right on top. We have what we call pre-planning. We have photographs of it; we have what it is. And we, at our meetings, we keep the membership up to date on what's going on with these buildings.

Q: Going back to your firefighting for a moment, what was your worst day as a firefighter?

RR: Well, two ways to look at that. Emotionally or physically?

Q: Well, both.

RR: Well, emotionally, I wasn't even at the fire, but a friend of mine, Bobby Dayton, was killed, just after Thanksgiving several years ago. I attended his funeral. Of course, I lost friends on 9/11.

Q: Were they firefighters?

RR: Yeah. Police officers, too. Some of them are Brian Fahey. A lot of people forget the Father's Day fire at Queens Hardware Store. I knew Brian Fahey. Not well, but I knew him when he was an instructor at the Nassau County Fire Academy. And he was killed at the Queens Hardware Store on Father's Day. Ward Fahey and ... [Donny] ... had tee shirts made up, and I still wear his shirt in the summertime, so that people don't forget this. That was in, I think it was June. I forget the exact date. Father's Day. And then, nine--you know, September, the Trade Center, so everybody forgets about the Father's Day fire, so to speak. Not everybody forgets, but the general public, just about everybody forgot. And then, you know, the big fires, you know, when you're there fourteen, fifteen hours and it gets physically demanding. Especially now (laughs) that I'm getting older. You know, I'm sixty-four years old, so it's a little harder for me.

Q: If you had to do it all over again, would you do it?

RR: Oh, sure, yeah. No question about it. I love the Fire Department. Loved being a police officer, you know, helping people.

Q: What does fire really mean to you, after you became a firefighter and before you were a firefighter.

RR: Oh, a fire is a beautiful thing if it's under control--a controlled element. You know, you sit home with the wife, you know, maybe glass of wine or something, watch TV, you've got the fireplace going. But fire out of control is deadly. Fire is a living, breathing thing. It doesn't want to be put out. If I was to turn a fire hose on you, you're going to run. You're going to try to get out of the way. Fire does the same thing. When you go into a house fire, people don't realize, when you attack and make an interior attack on a house fire, you don't go from where the fire started at point A and try to hit it. Then you've got chase it through the whole house, or like some departments maybe that ain't trained so well will poke a nozzle in a window and try to put the fire out that way. That's the worst thing you're going to do. You're going to blow the fire through the whole house. You've got to go ahead of the fire and force it back to where it came from. You've got to knock it down that way. That way you can save as much of the house or store--whatever it might be--as possible. Of course, if it's out of control, then you've got to--you know, you've got to look out for yourself, too. You've just got to go into a defensive mode and

just surround and drown, and you write it off--that particular building. And you protect the house next door or the store next door, you know, the surrounding areas.

Q: Now that you're an instructor, do you still go to the fires when the horn blows?

RR: Oh sure, yeah. I drive most of the time now, or a while back. Most of the fires I drive, but a while back the Chinese restaurant up on Main Street, that I wasn't driving that night, and I got inside there with a hook after the initial fire was knocked down I was doing overhaul. My son found out I was in there, and he come in there and chased me out. He said, "Give the hook to the young guy." ... [??] ... Well, I told him where to go, but, you know, he's the Captain, so (laughs). You know, I like to have a little fun, too, get inside still, you know. And ...

Q: What is there ...

RR: ... he worries about me, I guess, also, like I worry about him, you know.

Q: What's the thrill about that danger to you?

RR: Some guys like us just like to walk the fine edge, you know, a little element of danger. Some guys go mountain climbing. Some guys hand glide or will parachute out of planes, you know. There's thrill to a lot of things. I chose firefighting. It's not so much the

thrill, but it's like helping people, you know. There's nothing like doing something really well and it works out well. Nothing like a happy ending where you helped somebody. Maybe you save a life or pull somebody out of a building, or somebody's having a heart attack, and they're in a coma And then you bring them back. There's nothing like that.

Q: What would you like future generations to really remember about this fire company?

RR: Try to keep the guys that really stand out alive, so to speak, you know. Like some Sarge Mahoney, the guy was like a legend in the Police Department. And in World War II. He was fireman. Then he went away to war. He was in some major battles. Then, he come back. He was very active in the Fire Department. He came to all the meetings, even recently until he fell and broke his hip a short time ago. You know, just keep the word going, so to speak, you know. There's guys that you--probably died fifty, sixty years ago, you hear stories that are handed down, that you never really knew the guy, but the stories and the reputation carries on.

Q: Do you think that this project will help keep the legends alive?

RR: Yeah, I hope so. I think--my wife tells me, you know, we're the best firemen. People ask you who's the best fireman you ever seen, well I tell them Bobby Cocks, you know, he was Chief Engineer in my company when I got in. The guy knew no fear going into fires. And he had a way about him, even though he was an officer. He didn't like order

you to do something: "Give me this," "Give me that," or something. He had a way about him where you were glad to do something for him. You'd want to go do it before he even asked you to do it, just the way--the personality the guy had. He knew how to handle people. That's very important, knowing how to handle people. See, we're volunteers, you know. It's not some drill sergeant in the Army telling you, well, you've got to do exactly what he tells you or else, you know. These people are volunteers. So you've got to, you know, realize that. These people do things for you accordingly.

Q: As an instructor, do you teach interpersonal relations? How to handle people?

RR: I don't teach it. They got, at the Fire Academy, they have what they call officers' training. My son had to go for those courses and stuff. And you start off low in the ranks, you know, as an Assistant Engineer, and you work your way up, and he went all the way up the ladder. And you have to take courses on being an officer, and, of course, a vast knowledge of firefighting, recognizing different things, you know, size up a situation. You've got to learn how to size up something. People ask you, "Well, when do you size up a fire?" You size up a fire as soon as you get the alarm. The fire call comes on the air and says "You've got a house fire at such-and-such." So, you try to picture in your mind, well, what road is this, and maybe it's a store. You know the store. What's the exposure, and where are things. Start sizing up immediately, as soon as the alarm comes in. You don't wait till you get there. You know, your mind starts working on

what's going on, what's up there, what's involved up there in the surrounding areas, everything.

Q: Who's Chief of Protection now?

RR: Johnny Walters. He's not Chief of the Protection. He's the Chief from Protection. He's second Deputy. Come March, Chris Bollerman will step down. Glen Pedersen who's from Flower Hill. He's First Deputy right now. He'll move up to Chief. Johnny Walters will move up to first Deputy Chief. And Atlantics, where Chris Bollerman is from, will put up candidates from their company to be elected Second Deputy Chief, and they'll start the cycle over.

Q: How has the voting changed from when you went in as to now?

RR: Well, the company--individual company, when the Department Chief steps down after his two-year term as Department Chief, the individual company will put up candidates, and the whole Department votes on them. That hasn't changed. It's just now we started counting a few hundred ballots. They get a voting machine now, the kind that you use on election night to vote for governor or whoever, we get one of those. [END OF TAPE] ...