

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Ex-Chief Walter L. Trapp
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 Walter L. Trapp, Jr.
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by Margaret Dildilian
June 4, 2004

Q: Today is June 4th, 2004. We are at the Port Washington Public Library. My name is Margaret Dildilian, and I am interviewing Walter L. Trapp, Jr., from the Port Washington Fire Department.

Walter, where were you born? Are you a native of Port?

Walter L. Trapp: No, I was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1951.

Q: And you came to Port ...

WLT: In 1957.

Q: Your relatives have been in the Fire Department in Maryland, I believe. And I was just wondering whether they had any influence on you as a child, when you came here to join the Fire Department.

WLT: It was always in my blood. My grandfather on my mother's side was a founding member of the Jacksonville Volunteer Fire Department in Baltimore, Maryland. Every time I would go to visit him, we'd always go and visit the firehouse and hang out there with them. It was just part of my life when I went to visit him. My father was a fireman way before I was even born, also in Maryland. His brother was a member of the same Fire Department in Baltimore, Maryland. My cousin who's two years older than me was very

active in the volunteer Fire Department. Again, when we went to visit him in Maryland, I'd always hang around with him in the Fire Department.

Q: So, you really had it in your blood.

WLT: In my blood, yes.

Q: Why did your family move to Port?

WLT: Okay, my father worked for Black and Decker Tools. And I was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1951. He was transferred to Detroit, Michigan from '52 to '55, then to Chicago, Illinois from '55 to '57, and then he was transferred to New York in 1957 ...

Q: With the same company?

WLT: ... with the same company. He just kept moving around, and this is where I've stayed.

Q: So you had your elementary schooling in Maryland?

WLT: No. '57, I started kindergarten ...

Q: Oh, '57, right.

WLT: ... in Port Washington. I went to the John Daly Elementary School, and then the Sousa Junior High, Paul D. Schreiber, Nassau Community, and New York Tech.

Q: So, when did you join the Fire Department?

WLT: In 971.

Q: And how old were you then?

WLT: Twenty-one.

Q: And you did your rookie training for how many years?

WLT: Two years. Well, actually, at that time, it was three years when I joined. It's since been lowered to two years.

Q: Why is that?

WLT: To make it more appealing for members to join.

Q: Is it that rigorous, for the initial rookie training?

WLT: It's not-- not that it's rigorous. It's that it's time-consuming, and it's become a sign of the times. A lot of other changes have been made in my thirty-five years. But in order to be a volunteer in this town, which has become a very expensive place to live, a lot of people have to work more hours, part-time jobs, spend more time commuting to the City. So, to find the time to fulfill the rookie training that was there, we reduced it to make it more workable there.

Q: So tell me how-- you were a rookie for two years, and then what-- what are the steps until you became Chief?

WLT: Actually, with six months to go in my rookie year, I became fourth assistant engineer of Protection Engine Company. Then the next year I was third assistant. Second assistant, first assistant, chief engineer. Then Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant, then Captain. And then in 1981, I finished my term as Captain.

Q: And it was your goal to be Chief?

WLT: It always way, yes.

Q: And how different is it from the ranks to being Chief?

WLT: It's a total different experience. It's a hundred percent more responsibility.

Q: How do you cope with the stress?

WLT: You just do it on a day-to-day basis. You got to make time to do it. It's a full-time job that you're not paid for.

Q: And why was it so important for you to do? For you to become Chief?

WLT: Well, it's one of the goals that I set in my life. Everybody has a goal that they want to do something in life. And mine was to become Chief of the Fire Department.

Q: Can you explain, Walter, what your responsibilities were as a Chief and what kind of training you received in order to do a good job?

WLT: Well, to become Chief of the Port Washington Fire Department, there's a long list of criteria or qualifications that you have to meet. The first one would be ten years in the Port-- member of the Fire Department for ten years. Be an ex-Captain of one of the companies. Taking arson recognition courses. Having certifications ...

Q: What's the arson-- what is the arson recognition courses? What are they?

WLT: It's a course that's taught by the Nassau County Fire Marshall's office, so that when you arrive at the scene of a fire, you know what to look for to see whether it was a suspicious fire or just a food on the stove type of fire that you know was not maliciously set, and you need to know that knowledge.

Q: And how long a training is that for the arson?

WLT: It was about a ten hour course.

Q: And have you experienced arson in your ...

WLT: Oh, yes, many times.

Q: And how do you deal with it? You call the Fire Marshall?

WLT: Well, your first obligation of the job is to extinguish the fire. You extinguish the fire to a point of where it's not burning anymore and then stop operations, call Nassau County Fire Marshall's Office, and let him come in and do the investigation. After he's said, "Okay, I've got all the information I need," then you go on with your overhauling. In other words, shoveling all the debris out of the house, wetting it down again so it doesn't re-ignite.

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Q: Have you been caught in any backfires?

WLT: Back-- you mean with a back draft?

Q: Yes, back draft.

WLT: Yes.

Q: Can you-- can you tell us how that feels or what it's like?

WLT: Well, I wasn't actually in the building. I was standing right outside of the building.

Q: And which building ...

WLT: It was 6 Kirkwood Road in Manorhaven. Now, about seven years ago. The Iannelli family. Unfortunately, one of the residents lost his life in the fire.

Q: And you discovered the body or ...

WLT: No, I was not the first one there, but helped pull him out of the basement.

Q: And this was a suspicious fire?

WLT: No, that was not suspicious.

Q: Okay.

WLT: But, again, you'd have to call when there's a death involved or had serious injuries, the Fire Marshall has to investigate anyhow. But it wasn't suspicious. We knew the reason.

Q: What were some of the major advances in the Department that you did while being Chief?

WLT: Well, we established a pre-planning program, which is still ongoing right now. Each year, we choose thirty to fifty major buildings in town and come in and have a professional map them out, locate the gas meters, the electric meters, any specific things that would cause us a problem. The Library is one of them that we've had done.

Q: What did you have done here?

WLT: It's pre-planned.

Q: Meaning?

WLT: That we have a book on the-- on all major buildings that tells us, if there's a fire, like in this library, we'd know where the elevator shut-off was. We'd know where the gas and electric shut-offs were. What type of roof it had, because certain types of roof you can't send firefighters on to fight. General information that makes putting out a fire a lot easier.

Q: Now, when there's major renovations, as there was for this library, do you have an input as to how those renovations are made for fire safety?

WLT: Okay, the Port Washington Fire Department does not have a say in that. The Nassau County Fire Marshall's Office has a say in that.

Q: And how closely do you work with them?

WLT: In so far as building a building like this, we have nothing to do with it. In other words, when the building is being built or renovated, you get permits, and they notify the Fire Marshall's Office, and they come by periodically to make sure that-- and before you can get a C.O. [Certificate of Occupancy] to come back in the building, they have to sign off on everything that everything meets the regulations and standards, according to what type of building it is.

Q: Now, how-- how did you interact with other fire departments in neighboring cities? How

do you interact ...

WLT: Well ...

Q: ... with them, as Chief? Do you meet with other Chiefs?

WLT: Yes, I do. We do. There's many organizations that exist. Nassau County has seventy-one volunteer fire departments in it. And that's broken down into nine battalions with subdivisions. Port Washington is in the Eighth Battalion, which consists of Manhasset, Plandome, East Williston, Williston Park, Albertson, and Great Neck has two fire departments-- Great Neck Alerts and Great Neck Vigilance. And that's your close ...

Q: What do you mean by "alerts" and "vigilance"?

WLT: That's their names.

Q: Oh.

WLT: The Great Neck Vigilance Fire Department and the Great Neck ...

Q: I see.

WLT: ... Alert Fire Department. One actually serves Great Neck proper, and one serves the Kings Point area. But they both use the name Great Neck.

Q: Are they all volunteer?

WLT: All volunteer. There's-- all seventy-one departments on Long Island around here.

There's a few that have some paid personnel to supplement it, but they're still classified a volunteer fire department. Getting back to what I was saying, is that once a month you meet with the Chiefs in your battalion and discuss issues that are jointly needed to talk about with everybody in your area.

Q: You developed the Eighth Battalion?

WLT: No. I can go into that or go into it later.

Q: No, I was wondering if you actually developed the Eighth Battalion.

WLT: The Eighth Battalion has been around for fifty, sixty years. I don't know exactly how long, but quite a long period of time.

Q: And what other major programs have you ...

WLT: Okay, we-- during my term of office, we hired the first paid people for the Port Washington Fire Department.

Q: And who are they?

WLT: Okay, they're not firefighters. We started with one person, a business manager. Quote, secretary type of person, who ...

Q: A male or female?

WLT: Female. I mean, that's what we chose. It wasn't the job. She pays all the bills, opens the mail, answers the phone, handles all the insurance claims, fills out all the paperwork for people that get hurt, fills out all the forms and paperwork needed for us to submit to the individual villages for tax money.

Q: And who did that before you hired someone?

WLT: Volunteer people. And it was just getting-- the requirements by OSHA and the government and stuff became so great that no volunteer person had the time to do it. After having that person for a year, we hired another part-time person twenty hours a week to assist in doing the actually just data entry and also involved in all these jobs and all the paperwork that we have to submit to the government. For every fire we have a

form that has to be filled out and mailed into the government.

Q: And why do they need to have that form?

WLT: They compile statistics. This is how you get recalls on like a dishwasher that was-- if they see, you know, there's a problem with your dishwasher or your dryer or something like that, we fill out this information and send it back to the Fire Marshall's Office. And they get to see that twenty Sony TVs or whatever caught on fire, then they start investigating something like that.

Q: So then they go to the manufacturer.

WLT: Yes. It's a long process, but that's the start of recalls and stuff.

Q: As Chief, what was-- what are you most proud of?

WLT: This is a very simple thing, but in my term as Chief, we went to every fire that we went to and came back with all the same members. Nobody got seriously hurt. We lost no lives.

Q: I believe you were Chief during the 9/11 ...

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WLT: That was a very big ...

Q: ... so that was a very traumatic time. What-- well, how did you cope with that?

WLT: Actually, I had to be the bad guy.

Q: Meaning?

WLT: Meaning that everybody wanted to go into the City and help. And my obligation was to protect this town. And so I had to randomly choose people on a, like a ten person detail to go into the City when they required help. I had to tell people that if they went on their own, they weren't covered by insurance if they got hurt. At that time, I had control of my manpower. And ...

Q: And how many did go?

WLT: Over the course of a couple of weeks, I probably sent seventy-five or eighty men into the City.

Q: Were they all volunteers?

WLT: They were all volunteer.

Q: So that if they had become injured ...

WLT: Well, they were covered by insurance, but I-- it's very complicated in the procedure, but if I order them into the City, they're covered. If they decide to go on their own, they're not covered. And it's all documented that the New York City requested help, and if they request the help and I sent it, then they're covered. But if they freelanced on their own, they weren't covered.

Q: Did you know of any that freelanced?

WLT: Quite a few.

Q: And did you reprimand them?

WLT: I just had to keep issuing orders not to go. And if they went, they went. And luckily, nobody got hurt, nothing happened. But I had to take that stand that "You're not allowed to go on your own." And if you did ...

Q: Were there hard feelings from the rank and file?

WLT: There was quite a few, yes.

Q: And how'd you feel about that, since you were ...

WLT: I just-- I just dealt with it and knowing that everybody was very emotionally high, it was a very close-knit, among firemen, it's a brotherly type of thing. Quite a few members of the Port Washington Fire Department are New York City paid firemen, New York City paid police officers, New York City EMS workers. So they had a lot of friends that they wanted to go in and help. But trying to keep the cool head that I had to protect this town and I had to protect my members if they got hurt. I had to make that stand.

Q: And you feel pretty good about how it went for you as far as ...

WLT: Yes. I have no-- they knew there was a lot of changes in procedures for security.

Q: What were the changes?

WLT: Oh, making sure that when you went to a fire, somebody remained with the apparatus all the time so somebody wouldn't steal something. Adding a lot of breathing equipment, because right after 9/11 there was a lot of scares on anthrax and things of that nature. And ...

Q: Were you ever called out for any?

WLT: Quite a few times.

Q: For anthrax?

WLT: Most of them turned out to-- I mean, all of them turned out to be false alarms of people playing pranks with sugar or salt or that type of thing. But ...

Q: And what gear would they wear when they went out for these anthrax threats.

WLT: Well ...

Q: For the threats. What was the gear they wore? Same as ...

WLT: If they went-- if it were a threat, we would go there and make sure that it wasn't harming anybody, and then we would just stand back and rope off the area and call the County Hazardous Material Team. We wouldn't touch it. We had equipment, if there was a major disaster where we had to start treating people. If people's lives were hurt or stuff like that. But it never came to that. We never-- the volunteers never went in and tested to see if it was actually anthrax.

Q: Would you be Chief again for your department? Your company?

WLT: I would be. The way that the system works, when my term was up, there was three people that wanted the job, and I felt that it was only fair to let them go through the procedure. I mean, only one of them won the election. So, and it's only every six years that you get a turn to run for Chief. So, actually the Chief that served before me, Geoffrey P. Cole, did it twice. I'm sure you'll interview him later on.

Q: Why would he-- why would he want to do it twice, and others not?

WLT: Well, when, after his first six years are up, there was nobody qualified to run, run for the office.

Q: And what is the qualification? You would think that if they'd been there for that long that they would be qualified.

WLT: Well, ten years in the department as Chief. Then you-- you know, now you have to want to do it and make a commitment for six years. The commitment on my part was twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year for six years. In other words, that came basically first in everything. I mean, if I was eating dinner, I'd drop my food. I mean ...

Q: Yes, tell us about what would happen if you were ...

WLT: You know, I'd just get up and go. I mean, I'd leave my wife and family at home and go to the fire. I mean, I still do that now, but now-- it's not as urgent that I be there. You're-- when you're Chief, you get-- your phone rings constantly with questions and problems.

Q: What are some of the problems the Chief has to deal with in the rank and file? I mean, are there quarrels? Are there resentments? Are there, aside from the actual job ...

WLT: Well, there's always problems with people that have done something against the rules.

Q: For instance, what? What kind of rule would they break?

WLT: Using equipment for a non-firematic purpose. There's a lot that I really can't go into that were dealt with on a day-to-day basis that it's really only the Chief needs to know what's going on. I mean ...

Q: It's too personal?

WLT: Too personal. Everybody has problems, and you find out about them. Their medical reasons and stuff that people don't want you to know about, and you have to make a decision how you're going to deal with that individual. A lot of problems we experienced-- I can go on and on-- was that after 9/11, we had a big in-surge of members

joining the Fire Department. A lot of them were kids still in high school, their senior year of high school. I got a lot of complaints from the parents that they were cutting classes to go to the firehouse. So I had to put a rule in to the effect that they weren't allowed to go to fires during school hours and stuff like that, because they were-- some were failing out of school. It was a decision I had to make, because their education comes first. I mean, the Fire Department's not going to put them through college or get them a job.

Q: So what was your job, while you were Chief, your normal job?

WLT: I work for Delux Taxi in Port Washington.

Q: So you could really make your own hours?

WLT: Oh, no. I had certain hours. I dealt with a lot of the operations on the phone, where I could do that. I could sit at my desk and do that.

Q: Were you dispatcher or were you ...

WLT: Dispatch sometimes, yes. But still, I tried to work it out.

Q: So it was a job that you could really work things out.

WLT: Well, I couldn't leave to go to a fire. But you have Assistant Chiefs and stuff like that.

And actually being Chief of the Fire Department, fighting the fire part of it is a small part of it.

Q: You have all the other ancillary ...

WLT: Yes.

Q: ... problems.

WLT: Every problem. I mean, problems like the firehouse right over here on South Washington has an air horn. People constantly ...

Q: Protection?

WLT: Yes, Protection. That's right. That's my home company. People constantly complaining that the horn wakes up the kids at night time and ...

Q: You ring that horn at certain hours for-- just to test it.

WLT: At noon and-- at noon and six o'clock at night.

Q: Right. But that isn't-- that doesn't bother anybody at that hour, does it?

WLT: Not normally.

Q: But you do get complaints?

WLT: Quite a few.

Q: And how do you deal with those complaints?

WLT: Very tactfully. Well, my answer basically is that the Fire Department's been here for a hundred years. The horns have been here for close to a hundred years. You moved into town knowing that they were there. And this is where I really stop it is that individuals' homeowner fire insurance on the homes is based on a rating that your fire department has.

Q: And do we have a good rating?

WLT: We have the best rating there is that we can get. It's on a 1-10 basis.

Q: And what is ours?

WLT: Ours is 8. And, being a volunteer organization, you can't go higher than 8.

Q: Professionals can go only to 10?

WLT: Yes, there're certain requirements that we can't meet, being volunteers, to take you up to the next notch.

Q: Does New York City have that kind of rating?

WLT: I don't-- I don't know what they have. New York City's a whole entity in itself that has their own rules.

Q: And ...

WLT: So, anyway ...

Q: Yes.

WLT: ... getting back to that is that one of the requirements to get you up to that high rating is that you have two distinctly different means of alerting your members when there's a fire.

Q: Which is ...

WLT: One would be the horn system, and the other is pagers.

Q: And those you got only recently, right?

WLT: No, we've had them for twenty-some-odd years.

Q: Well, that's fairly recent. You've been here a hundred years.

WLT: Yes, right. Right, but that's the technology has just come out in the last twenty years. I mean, we're pretty much, we have every new item that comes out to better protect our community.

Q: And the pager saves you from having to do what?

WLT: Well, the pager basically tells you where the call is, so that if, when you hear the horns, you don't know where the fire is. You just go to the firehouse. But it might be your neighbor next door whose house is on fire. You might be able to run over and pull them out of the building. Or, in the EMS part of the operation, if somebody's having a heart attack, you know where it is, you can maybe go to the house and start CPR or something of that nature and cut down the time factor greatly.

Q: Have you yourself worked on anybody for heart attacks or CPRs or ...

WLT: Quite a few times.

Q: And how does it feel to save a life?

WLT: Well, it's very rewarding. I mean, and that's the whole reason why I wanted to be Chief. I wanted to help people. I wanted to save their lives. Save-- you know, help them in emergency situations.

Q: And when you do that, how does the public thank you? Do they-- people that you've helped, do they ever call you and say thank you?

WLT: A very small percentage of the time. Every now and then, we get a letter-- you know, thank you letter or something of that nature. But most people just sort of take it as that that's my job. I'm supposed to do it.

Q: They don't realize you are volunteer.

WLT: They don't realize that you're volunteer.

Q: What do you think the future of Port Washington is in terms of volunteer firefighters?

WLT: Not good.

Q: And there's nothing you can do about that?

WLT: There's nothing that I can do about that. I probably voice my opinion on situations, and unfortunately people with money don't want to hear that. With the addition of the Harbor Links Development on Roslyn-North Shore Road, the new development on Harbor Road across from the sewer district, the new development that's going in at the old Thypin Steel property in Manhasset Isle ...

Q: Which steel?

WLT: Thypin Steel. It's in Manhasset Isle. All these new major developments, and they're very expensive, high-end building. I mean, for somebody to live in this town, young people that want to fight the fires, they can't afford to. So they have to leave. They're being placed out of the town.

Q: So how can the town remedy that?

WLT: They've tried many ways of offering a retirement plan. Offering breaks on your tax. But

still, it's not-- it doesn't nowhere come close to ...

Q: Is it-- is it because it's such a hazardous job that ...

WLT: Got nothing to do with hazardous job. It has to do with having the time to volunteer.

Q: That's the most critical element is the time.

WLT: Yes.

Q: Not necessarily the fact that you would be risking your life.

WLT: Not necessarily.

Q: What makes you risk your life as a firefighter? What is it inside of you that goes in these burning buildings and doing these things? These rescues?

WLT: It's a hard thing to explain. It's like why did all the New York City firefighters rush into the World Trade Center. I mean, you want to help other people. And I don't know how you get that feeling. It's just I've always had it.

Q: Do you think-- does it have anything to do with any either ethnic or religious

background?

WLT: None whatsoever. I don't think it has anything to do with any of anything other than just wanting to do it. It's like I mean compare it to why do people like to play golf? Why do people like to go camping? I mean, to me, I hate the sport of golf. I wouldn't want to go camping.

Q: But you would run into a fire if a ...

WLT: I'd run into a fire, yes.

Q: ... building was on fire. Is that something that has to be instilled in you as a child because you come from that type of family?

WLT: I don't think so. I mean, it helps. But it's not a requirement or ...

Q: What has been the toughest, your toughest day, you know, in the Fire Department, that you can remember?

WLT: The toughest day would have to be back about twenty years ago when Bobby Dayton, a member of Flower Hill, got killed up here on Main Street at the Cat Lady in a fire.

Q: What's the Cat Lady?

WLT: It was an antique store on Main Street, right up at like around 160 Main Street or so.

Q: You were called out to a fire there?

WLT: Yes.

Q: And what happened?

WLT: It was a pretty major fire. And he was in the building trying to look for people who were supposedly trapped in the building, and he fell through the floor and succumbed to the situation.

Q: Was he also-- had been a New York City ...

WLT: He was also a New York City fireman, yes. So he wasn't somebody that wasn't ...

Q: Trained.

WLT: ... trained. He was very well trained.

Q: That was your toughest day?

WLT: I think so.

Q: You were a rookie then?

WLT: No.

Q: What were some of the other major fires that you had fought in?

WLT: Okay, we go to the lumber yard in Port Washington. This is now where Storage Plus is on South Bayles and Haven Avenue. The Riviera Restaurant.

Q: What happened at the Riviera Restaurant?

WLT: Just burned to the ground one night. Many, many boatyard fires. The Sands Point Nursing Home fire. Those are the really big ones. I mean, there's many, many house fires and stuff, but they're not of major ...

Q: They weren't major fires.

WLT: Not major fires. You know, just the bigger the object that's burning, the bigger the fire.

So how big can a house be -- how many hazards do you have to deal with and so on.

Q: Let's turn now to the women in the Fire Department. They came in approximately, what? twenty years ago?

WLT: About twenty years ago.

Q: How did the men deal with that? Were they resentful?

WLT: A lot of them were.

Q: And how did they cope with that?

WLT: They didn't cope with it very well. They ignored them, and they were ...

Q: They felt that their privacy was taken away?

WLT: Yes, the privacy. I mean, there's a-- and I'll use the term "old-timers" or whatever-- don't like change. And this was a change. But I'll tell you a little story ...

Q: Yes, tell me.

WLT: When I joined the Fire Department in 1971, I had to wait for eighteen months to join the Fire Department. The rolls were full. At that time, you got put on a waiting list. Each company could only have a hundred members. Just by charters and stuff like that. So that you put your name on a waiting list, and then, you know, if somebody died or resigned, that's how you got in the Fire Department. And it took me eighteen months to join the Fire Department. Now, each company's down to about seventy members, so it's ... now they can come up once the paperwork is done and stuff like that. So, it was presented to them by the Captains and Chiefs at that time that we have to-- I mean, you have to accept this. It's going to be-- it's you need people and these people want to volunteer. And the old-timers don't go to fires anymore, but still they have a say-so, and it was, you know, had to be.

Q: You mean the women had to be ...

WLT: Yes, you had to accept them. I mean, you had to-- you couldn't say, "No, you can't be a firefighter because you're a woman, or ..."

Q: And how many did join, or were there ...

WLT: Actual firefighters in the last twenty years, probably half a dozen, eight. Not that many that've even wanted to join.

Q: And the ones that did join, did they carry their weight? Were they good firefighters, or were they mediocre?

WLT: None of them were exceptional. But ...

Q: Why do you think that was?

WLT: I don't know. I mean, out of all the members, there's a lot of male members that are equal to them that are not exceptional. I mean, none of them tried to go up the ranks to Captain, Lieutenant, Chief-- that type of thing. Never-- it probably has a lot to do with, you know, most of them would be raisin a family and stuff like that and don't have the time to do what's required to ...

Q: If you have children, how do you leave them at home?

WLT: Yes, right. That type of-- you know. But, you know, at night time, if your husband's not a firefighter, then you would-- it's-- I don't know each situation. But none of them had chosen to go advance to any really rank, you know, high rank.

Q: Is that because do you think they felt the resentment, or because that they just were not willing or ...

WLT: Not willing, I think. There's one young lady now that's at the bottom rung of the advancement, who took the step. But that's, you know, we'll see how long that ...

Q: That lasts?

WLT: ... she's single, right? I mean, she's single. And if she gets married, things usually seem to change.

Q: What about-- how did they feel about Black male members who joined? Or did they? Were there any?

WLT: There are quite a few now. I mean, again, all this happened at the same time that female members started to join.

Q: And what year was that? The '70s or '80s?

WLT: '80s.

Q: '80s.

WLT: Maybe even goes with ethnic backgrounds and stuff like that, too. It was, it all started changing in the '80s. And now it's not-- I mean, the younger crowd, so to speak, sees the

light and has taken over, and it's not as much of a-- you're accepted more now.

Q: Than before.

WLT: Than before.

Q: I understand that your wife is in the Medics.

WLT: Yes.

Q: You really are from a firefighting family.

WLT: Yes.

Q: Now the Fire Medics Company #1 ...

WLT: Right.

Q: ... are they mostly women?

WLT: They're about fifty-fifty.

Q: And are they a paid group?

WLT: No, all volunteer.

Q: All volunteer. And what type of training do they get? Has your wife had compared to you?

WLT: Well, we are totally two different trainings. When I was a younger firefighter, I had all the-- I was qualified as an EMT, which is one level of medical technician. When I decided to start moving up the ranks to Captain and so on and set my sights on being Chief, I didn't have the time to continue the schooling to be an EMT and as well as go to all the schools that I needed to go to.

Q: EMT is the Emergency ...

WLT: The Medical Technician.

Q: ... Medical Technician, okay.

WLT: In fact, I was one of the first twenty-five EMTs in the Port Washington Fire Department. The first class of EMTs in the Port Washington Fire Department.

Q: And you wanted to do that.

WLT: Yes. I mean, I still would. Again, it's a time factor. I-- you know, I've got a job, I've got a wife, I've got two kids. I had to make a decision which way I wanted to go.

Q: And you went to ...

WLT: To be on the track to be Chief.

Q: Rather than ...

WLT: EMT.

Q: Yes. Is the EMT training longer?

WLT: Not that it's long-- the firefighting classes, there's many, many of them that are ten weeks, twenty weeks, so on and so forth. EMT is almost an eight month course, and you have to renew your license every three years.

Q: And how do they renew their licenses?

WLT: They have to take tests and go back for schooling, updating your schooling and stuff like

that.

Q: So you must have a lot of firefighting talk at home, because if your wife's at Fire Medics, and you're a Chief, or were, an ex-Chief, you must have a lot to talk about.

WLT: Well, let's see how I can phrase all this for you. I met my wife, I'm-- and let's back-track a little bit more.

Q: Yes, let's back-track. How did you meet her?

WLT: In-- I got-- I was very-- I'm divorced and remarried. And when I started to run for Chief, you go around campaigning to all the firehouses and let people know who you are and so on and so forth. And at that time, she had just joined the Fire Medic Company, and I met her and we just hit it off and took off from there. So that she-- it was very easy for me being Chief for six years and ...

Q: Because she was very understanding.

WLT: Very understanding of the time that it required, and she understood it, and we've made it our whole life. She-- we've-- she knows all the wives and kids of all the Chiefs in Manhasset and Roslyn and Great Neck. And it's extended our whole-- we go away to conventions and stuff together and go out to dinner and ...

Q: So does she-- she comes home and tells you all the medical (laughs), the medical experiences that she has. Has she given-- has she helped give birth to anyone?

WLT: She hasn't.

Q: No, but you have?

WLT: Three times.

Q: Really. Tell us about that. You don't feel-- I mean, you must-- it must be wonderful to bring life into the world.

WLT: It's actually, it's-- to me, it was more terrifying to deliver a baby than it was to deal with somebody with a heart attack or something like that. Because you're just not equipped if the baby comes out breech or something like that. Or the umbilical cord's-- if the baby's normal, it's not a problem at all. But when complications arise, you're not equipped. And it's a new life that you-- it's in your hands. And ...

Q: And what happened on the three that you ...

WLT: They're all normal.

Q: You were lucky that they were normal.

WLT: Normal, yes.

Q: And did these people send you a thank you note (laughs)?

WLT: Not really. One lady I've seen in town. I mean, this was twenty years ago. So, at that time, I'd see her every now and then in town and she would thank me, but I would say for the number of things that I've done firefighting and EMS-wise, the thanks are a very small percentage.

Q: That's very interesting. Your wife has not delivered in the Medic?

WLT: No.

Q: What types of things do they have? Accidents and ...

WLT: They go to auto accidents ...

Q: ... so that there's quite a lot of trauma there.

WLT: Trauma. A lot of people with reactions to medicines. Diabetics. A lot of-- fifty percent of the calls are heart-related. Heart attacks. Strokes. Seizures. A good percentage are from people that have major lacerations. Bleeding. You know, profound bleeding type of thing.

Q: Do you ever predict that a woman will be Chief someday?

WLT: It's not a question of predicting.

Q: You don't feel that they have the real desire to be Chief?

WLT: Well, somebody will someday. I mean, again, I don't think in this town they will. And all my negatives are because of the economy of this town. And the time that's required to do the job, most women opt to go to raising their family. I mean, we get, even those young members, you get quite a few that join, and about maybe one out of twenty-five stay past two years. They go away to college or whatever and just never come back.

Q: When people in your company go and volunteer for the military, they never really leave the company.

WLT: No, they're, they're just granted a leave of absence.

Q: So that they come back immediately.

WLT: Immediately, yes.

Q: And how many of those do you have?

WLT: Oh, right now, in a time of, quote, "war," there's only, I think, three members.

Q: They're all in Iraq?

WLT: Yes.

Q: And do you know who they are?

WLT: I do. But I can't recall the names right now.

Q: Did you ever think you were going to die in any of the missions that you were on when you went to the firefight?

WLT: Well, you-- I mean, you actually ...

Q: What goes through your head when you're going to a fire? I mean, do you think you're

going to survive?

WLT: Well, you always think of taking care of yourself first. And each fire is a different thought. I mean, let me go back to 1971, when I joined the Fire Department, we went to 300 calls a year. Out of that 300 ...

Q: That's one a day, almost one a day.

WLT: The story gets better, so don't, don't ...

Q: (Laughs).

WLT: Out of that 300 calls, you saw a fire at 250, whether it be a car fire, a brush fire, a dumpster fire, a stove fire, or something of that nature. In 2003, we went to almost twenty-two hundred calls!

Q: That's amazing.

WLT: We saw a fire at only about fifty.

Q: And what were these other calls?

WLT: Well, we now we-- again, everybody's fire alarms seem to malfunction in the house. ...

CO ... alarm systems that malfunction in the house. A great many more auto accidents.

The traffic is just so bad in this town, so we respond to all the auto accidents.

Q: So how does that translate into the cost to the Fire Department to go to these non-fire calls?

WLT: In dollars and cents, it doesn't cost too much, more than having-- if you need to have the same equipment ready for any type of situation. But the issue is that getting manpower to go to these calls. When you had 300 calls, there was not-- people went. But now ...

Q: With twenty-two hundred calls, how many fewer people do you have (laughs)?

WLT: Quite a few. People, and again, when it comes over the radio and tells you what type of call it is, people tend to not go to recorded alarms, the CO alarms. If they hear a general alarm fire at-- well Shields Harbor, that was another, that was a major fire that something like that, everybody shows up because they know it's a real fire. Or the potential of a major type of fire.

Q: So they show up for the ones that are ...

WLT: Really ...

Q: ... more glorified?

WLT: Glorified. Yes, that's an easy way of putting it. But something where you really need, you know, you get up in the middle of the night to go to, you know, you woke up two o'clock in the morning ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: You're saying is that people are now responding to only those calls that they feel are more real fires.

WLT: Because, again, people have only so much time to volunteer, because they have so many other obligations that you sort of-- I'll use the word "pick and choose"-- to what suits. I mean, a lot of the young kids go to everything because there's just nothing else to do.

Q: What is the silliest thing you've been called out to? Can you recall?

WLT: I don't think there was anything that ever really silly. Everything that we responded to were emergencies to the person that called. You know, the old story that goes back, you call the fire department for your cat stuck in a tree. We don't do that. We refuse to do that. And not use the-- what I always tell people when they call me and say, "Can you come get my cat out of the tree?" I say, "Have you ever seen a cat carcass in a tree? They'll get down themselves." We're not going to risk the lives of a firefighter climbing up

a tree when the cat's going to try to jump when you go after him anyhow. So it's a safety issue.

Q: I'd like to ask you why you joined Protection Company, in particular.

WLT: At the time, my best friend had just joined the Protection Engine Company. And the reason that he joined, his father was a member of that company for many years and Chief of the Port Washington Fire Department at that time. So, when you join, you don't really know that many people, so I-- at least I knew somebody that I could-- knew and that would introduce me to people and get to know what's going on.

Q: Is that person still in the Fire Department?

WLT: No. Again, back to my same thing is that he had to move out of town. He bought a house out in North Port or Huntington, someplace like that.

Q: For financial ...

WLT: Financial reasons, yes.

Q: I want to ask you about the Memorial Day ceremony. It was very, very moving at the fire stations. When was that instigated? When did that start?

WLT: We've been observing Memorial Day for a hundred years or whatever. I've been a member for thirty-five years, and the same ceremony has been repeated every year for thirty-five years. So it wasn't something new thirty-five years ago, no. Only thing that's changed sometimes are the names.

Q: And you all come out to honor your past members that have died, in full uniform. How often do you wear your uniforms? Do you wear them only on those occasions?

WLT: We wear them to parades. Memorial Day is a solemn parade. This Sunday, we're going to a parade in Great Neck. It's a hundredth anniversary parade. You'd wear it there. There's a Nassau County parade once a year. There's other parades. A Labor Day parade that we go to. New York State parade that you go to. You wear a uniform for that. At an installation dinner, you wear your uniform, where you're sworn in, people that take office. And you wear them to funeral services.

Q: How many members, older members have deceased in your company?

WLT: I mean, in my thirty-five years that I've been there, probably fifty or sixty. I mean, it's nothing-- I mean, just through normal ...

Q: Attrition.

WLT: ... attrition, yes. Nothing of anything related to the Fire Department.

Q: And is there anything in particular you'd like to talk about, being a firefighter? Like what is your proudest moment during all these years. And ...

WLT: Well, the proudest moment was the day that I was elected Chief for the Port Washington Fire Department. There's an honor to the people let me become Chief. Elected me to Chief. They trusted me to guide them for two years. And I was able to help the community for that two years in a lot of ways that would, I felt, help the community.

Q: What was the most important thing you think you learned as Chief? How to deal with people?

WLT: No, not-- well, you learned that before you became Chief. Not that I learned, but the most important thing is that I helped people. That hopefully I helped people save their lives, dealt with situations that were disturbing to them, and made other people's lives better.

Q: With the terrorist threat constantly in the background, what are the changes in your department? Anything specific? Are you in constant contact with, you know, Homeland Security, you know, the Homeland Security? Or do you just go about your own business

and if you hear from them, then that's it?

WLT: Well, what was-- and I had-- I was one of the original members-- was that the formation of E.O.C. It's Emergency Operations Centers, which came out of basically 9/11. They're designed for major catastrophes, whether they be tornados, hurricanes, 9/11 type of situations. It no longer becomes a small Port Washington Fire Department. Manhasset Lakeville Fire Department. It becomes a much bigger organization. You group all your supplies, your manpower together, and stuff like that, and work together. Because when disaster hits, a lot of your normal manpower, like, say, members of Port Washington Fire Department, city policemen, city firemen, they all went to work in the City. So we lost a lot of our key people that had to go to work. And the Emergency Operations Center, you sort of group your stuff together, and if one department's short on something, maybe you can help another department.

Q: Do you work closely with the Police Department here in Port?

WLT: Very closely.

Q: There aren't any animosities or jealousies between the two?

WLT: There might be a few individual cases, but on the whole, you're very closely related.

Q: And who takes over at a scene when you come to the disaster area? Is it the police or is it the Fire Department?

WLT: Each particular situation is determined at the time. Of course, if there's a death or something like that, or a criminal matter, the police. But you usually work hand in hand. The police are so-- any major catastrophe, the police have so little manpower that they rely on our 300-plus members to assist them in major situations. They felt so strong-- the relationship is so great that they put police radios in all the Chiefs' cars. You know, like I talk to the police on the radio, if I need help. You work hand in hand with them. If you get to a fire, basically, the police are in charge-- I mean, the Fire Department is in charge. The police are always there. The structure of the Fire Department is a chain of command operation. And the Chief, or the highest ranking officer at a fire stays at the car and directs the operation and does not go into the building. And at that time, the highest ranking police officer stands beside you, and if you need police help, you, you know, work together. There's never been really any animosity. It's a team. It's a team effort.

Q: The final question I'd like to ask you is do you think anything is going to be different now than-- what do you predict in terms of what's going to happen to the Fire Department in terms of what was then and what is now. Back then you had all the help, you seemed to have more than you could use. Now, you have less, fewer people. How is this going to impact our community?

WLT: The impact is going to be probably that, at some point down the line-- and I talked about it a little bit earlier-- have a few personnel that are not real firefighters, and you're going to have to probably hire a few more paid personnel, which will impact the tax dollar more, to supplement the volunteers that just can't volunteer their time anymore.