

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Virgil Zirpolo, Jr.
Flower Hill Hose Company No. 1

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

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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is November 18th, 2004. This is an interview with Virgil Zirpolo. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Can you please say your name?

Virgil Zirpolo: My name is Virgil Zirpolo Junior.

Q: And which fire company are you affiliated with?

VZ: I am affiliated with Flower Hill Hose Company Number One.

Q: Okay. You grew up in Port Washington?

VZ: Yes.

Q: What was it like growing up here?

VZ: Very different than it is now. Where the library is now was a church--the Methodist Church. We used to play over at the Main Street School. We also played in Stannard's Brook Park, which is still there. Because I lived on Preston Street when I grew up till about nine years old when I moved up into the Park section on Park Avenue. I lived there until 1960 when I went into the military. I joined Flower Hill Hose Company in

February of 1958. It was a cold winter, I remember (laughs). At the time I think it was around March of '58, February or March, I'm not sure--we had a fire down in the barges--the old sand barges--down along Hempstead Harbor. I was riding the back of a truck, but we had to come all the way up to Beacon Hill to get water to supply the other trucks as with the other firefighters were fighting down there. That was my first big fire.

Q: What exactly did you do in that fire? What was your job?

VZ: I was just riding the truck, filling the truck with water from the hydrant, I mostly, helping the chauffeur out. And we hooked up to the truck to watch the--when we filled the tanks. Because --we would relay from one truck to another, and as one truck tank emptied, that truck would go up on the hill and fill up. In those years, that's what we used to do is relay back, you know, because we didn't have the hydrant system we have today. And Shore Road--Roslyn West Shore Road, as we used to call it--was two lanes (laughs). And it was fairly straight, and we used to go down to Bar Beach a lot and practice driving and pumping and so on, those years.

Q: How far was it from where the sand barges were where the fire was to the closest hydrant?

VZ: Oh, the sand barges would be about where--well, where Bar Beach is was about, I'll say maybe a half a--about a quarter of a mile south of Bar Beach. And the nearest hydrant

was up on the top of Beacon Hill, which is a good mile or so, just about a mile or a mile or so. And Beacon Hill was not a straight road. So, we did not get very much speed out of going up and down the hills. At that time, we had all the apparatus, all the pumpers were working. We had six pumpers in town at the time. That was one of my major fires. We were there all night long and then went to work the next morning about seven o'clock in the morning. No sleep. Just went home, changed clothes, showered and went to work. That's the usual routine we did when we had big fires.

Q: How old were you then?

VZ: I was twenty years old. And at that time, in 1957 when I applied to the company, we had a waiting list at Flower Hill, of maybe six or eight men. I was fortunate enough that three of us got in at the same time. Because some had resigned, some moved out of town, and three of us got in the same day.

Q: Who were the other two?

VZ: The one fellow was Dennis Langley, and he lived in Baxter Estates I think, if I remember right. His family did. And Norman Turgesen. He lived on Haven Avenue, and I still see Norman once in a while. He's still around.

Q: Are they both still members?

VZ: No, no, they're not members. They resigned for--Dennis went in the military soon after he got in the fire service, and Norm just resigned because, I guess there was, between his work and--didn't have time.

Q: Did you ever think of resigning yourself?

VZ: Yes and no. But not at that time. I had to take a leave of absence at one time for family reasons, but that's just a few years ago. But as time went on, I went into the military in 1960 to '64--June of '60 to, let's see, October of '64, I think it was. And I was in the fire service in the Air Force, stationed in northern Italy. And we had some aircraft fires. Training, my volunteer service, when I was in training school in the service, helped out very much so, because the military people were glad to see some volunteers in at that time.

Q: So you mean your training with the Port Washington Department helped you in the military.

VZ: Military, yes.

Q: And then, did the additional training you got in the military help you when you came back here?

VZ: Yes. When I came out in 1964, the training I had in service helped me in volunteer service also. The knowledge I picked up of the firefighting in service helped here, because the training we had in Nassau County Fire Academy was just starting to come up-to-date. As I say, it sounds funny, but it just started to get coming up-to-date at the time. It's an excellent academy now. When I was in service, some of the members, some of the officers, or some of the trainers that trained me, heard about it, and they said it's one of the best at that time. In the '60s, that was, too.

Q: Where exactly were you in Italy?

VZ: I was in northern Italy. For six months, I was in central Italy, just north of Rome. And from there, I went up to a place called Aviano Aerodrome. It was just near the Yugoslav border. We were ninety miles north of Venice. Very big--it was a big base. We had a lot of activity. Twenty-four hour, around-the-clock activity. It was a big base.

Q: What specifically then did you learn in the military that helped you back in Port Washington?

VZ: Some of the hazardous materials that we handled in service helped me here. At that time, in the local area, the handling of hazardous material, such as petroleum based products, which we had for the gasoline heating oils and things of this sort. We had big tankers in

service that had helped us out to learn how to work them, firefighting with those. It's like fighting an airplane, because the airplanes were full of fuel. And some of the buildings we had. The training. I learned a lot of--well, the rappelling off the buildings and what we have to do today in certain fire service, we learned--I learned there. I knew a lot before that even, when I was in Boy Scouts (laughs). I did a few rock climbing in Boy Scouts, so that helped in the rappelling off the buildings. I was also an instructor at base. We did chemical, biological, and radiological team. I was the instructor for that, because I was a First Aid instructor here in Nassau County.

Q: How did you happen to ...

VZ: Through the Red Cross. It was through the American Red Cross that I became an instructor, and while I was on base, my commander, the squadron commander, found out that I was an instructor, and he put me in charge of it for the section and for the base. So it, you know, worked out.

Q: And then when you came back, did you continue to instruct?

VZ: Yes, to a point. Because then they were starting with the Emergency Medical Technicians, the Advanced Medical Technicians, the paramedics. It was getting too far advanced. I did ride the ambulance also, for the Port Washington Fire Department for quite a few years until we started our present company, which is twenty-five years old

this year. So I rode it for twenty years, I rode the ambulance.

Q: Were you involved in starting the Fire Medics Company?

VZ: Yes and no. Yes I was, because I was a First Aid instructor. I did help. But I was not on the committee. I was not on the committee. They had a very good committee for it. And they had members that were medical technicians, so they knew what they wanted, what they needed. We helped out in getting the other end of it, the vehicles. So, but after that, I was still in Flower Hill ...

Q: Wait, just a second on the Fire Medics. That was the first time women came into the Department, wasn't it?

VZ: Yes.

Q: And how did that go? How was that received?

VZ: That was, by some, it was received very good, because it relieved us fellows that were being called out day and night. A lot of the women that were on were nurses, housewives, women that worked shift work, say evenings, afternoon, other than nurses. But they joined, they took daytime responses for us, or afternoons--things of that sort. That's how it really helped a lot. And then they were trained, some of the nurses, they

were trained in the process of the county protocol, as they called it. They were trained in that. And they were also, a lot of girls, it helped us a lot. It relieved a lot of the men to do fire service, so we didn't do double duty. Today, they still are, there're still a lot of members doing double duty. That are firefighters and that are medics. They're in there as squad members. They're not members of the company; they're members of what we call the line companies--Atlantic's, Protection, Flower Hill.

Q: And why is that? Is that because you don't have enough in Fire Medics?

VZ: No, they keep up their medical technicians' status. We do have a large group, but they're--they keep it up. It's a good idea. My son, Gary, who is an ex-Captain of the Medics, he was a city paramedic for eight years, and then he moved up to New Hampshire. He went up through the ranks, made Captain. I forget the year. I'm bad on that (laughs).

Q: So you said some of the men in the Department welcomed the arrival of women. What about those who were less enthusiastic? How did they--how did this come out?

VZ: Well, it worked out in the end. It worked out in the end. I mean, some guys thought, well, if they're going to join the Medics, then they want to join the Fire Department and want to be firemen, or firefighters. Some did. We had a few--in fact, we still have a few young ladies that are in the fire service. I look at it this way. They do the same job I do, that's fine with me (laughs). Because I was a line officer in the company, in Flower Hill,

and they asked me what I thought of young ladies coming in, and that's my exact words:

"If they do the same job and can lug the same hose and do the same job as I can, then they're very welcome."

Q: What was your principal job when you first became a firefighter?

VZ: Those years, you did everything, except when you're on probation, you couldn't become a chauffeur. But you were on the nozzle. You did the hydrant. You dragged hose. And that was the--until you got off probation. Then, when you were off probation, you became a chauffeur. You learned how to drive the trucks and pump them. That was a procedure that we'd go out on a Thursday night when we had a work night, learn how to pump them. Sundays we'd go out and have, say, the drills or practice, learning how to pump the trucks, how to drive them. We did not have power steering the way we have today (laughs). But the trucks were not as big. We rode on the tail. We rode up on the hose beds. Getting dressed in the snow, in the rain, in the wind, and whatever. But I'm very thankful that they've put the cab to ride in--they've done it the way they are. It's a lot safer, and it's warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer (laughs).

Q: So you don't miss the way you did it in the old days?

VZ: Well, yes, a little bit we do. Yeah, some of us do. But it's--I'll tell you, it's a lot better now for these gentlemen and ladies that are fellow firefighters. The training they get is

very well--the training we had then was a lot of our own on-hands before the county came and taught us a lot. Before the County Training Center, you know, in Old Bethpage was as it is today. We'd do a lot of our own stuff here in town, but the instructors, some instructors, came in from the training academy. They taught us some of the advanced workings of the science of fire. A lot of men, a lot of people just thought, okay, you put the water on a fire and it goes out. But there's a lot of--so we were taught the science of it, which is knowledgeable today that some of these, the people which they do know.

And that sort ...

Q: What--I'm sorry.

VZ: No, go ahead, okay.

Q: Oh, I was going to ask, what did you find the hardest thing about the training?

VZ: The hardest thing of training? To me, it was nothing. Because being in the military, I had the--because of the military structure, if the instructor told you something, you learned it. You--if you had a question, you asked, and they answered you. The hardest thing with training? The training was after everything was all done--packing the hose back up and that was--it wasn't hard, but it was just tedious. But we had a lot of fun doing it. We always had a lot of fun.

Q: Was there anything that surprised you about the training?

VZ: Not--in today's day, today's, yes, it's a lot. The training is, as I say, scientifically. Some of the stuff that I learned in service was carried over, and it was a little more advanced. Some of the chemicals I didn't have..that are out there today--the hazardous materials, the training, we learned a lot more than we did in the service, than we did years ago. The phases of hazardous material today is not like we did years ago, as I say. You had a fire, a tanker truck or a fuel fire, well, you'd try to put it out with water. Gasoline, you'd try to put it out with water. The advances for using chemicals--a certain type chemicals to put these out. That's the training that was learned over a period of years.

Q: What do you mean, the "phases" of hazardous materials?

VZ: The type of different chemicals--how they're treated, how you treat them. That's the phases of it I'm talking about. Each--with the hazardous materials today, the trucks, or the vehicles--I can't--shouldn't say--the vehicles, the containers they're in, they have a marking on them. Each vehicle has a book that tells us what that marking means, and it'll tell us, that's the phases what I'm saying, the different phases. The knowledge of today compared how it's gone over the past thirty years even, the phases. Has improved of that.

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

VZ: I think it was John Ross. He was one character.

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

VZ: Oh, boy! (Laughs).

Q: It's okay.

VZ: I know Mike Chester was the Chief. I'm trying to think of the names of fellows. Jimmy-James, yeah, James Murray was another one. I'm trying to remember who was Chief. Was it Lennox first? No, that's when I came home from service.

Q: Can you tell me about your nickname and how you got that?

VZ: (Laughs). Zippy? That's a family nickname. My father, he was born in Italy. When he came over, he lived in town. He was in town. And they called him "Zeep." And that's how it's got down to "Zippy" over a period--I would say it's pronounced--spelled the way it's pronounced. But that was the Italian. And as he grew up and as they called him--ended up calling him-- us "Zippy." They called my brother and myself, and my sons were all called "Zippy."

Q: So not just in the Fire Department.

VZ: No. No, no, no. Because my brother was never a firefighter. And I had one son that was a fireman, but due to his employment at the time, he had to resign.

Q: What brought your father to Port Washington?

VZ: He came over when he was four years old. His father and I think it was his mother-- and they weren't married at the time. They came to Port Washington, because back then in the late 1800s and 1900s, this was a big Italian community, because of the sand mining. And that's how we got here. That's--he passed away, what was it? thirty years ago.

Q: Did he work in sand mining?

VZ: No, no, no. He worked at the time in a grocery store in Manhasset at one time. He worked for Manhattan Food Stores over here in Port Washington. And he worked for Grumman Aircraft--Grumman Corporation for thirty-two years. And he also, at the time, during World War II, he worked down here on Manhasset Isle. He worked nights, and my mother worked days. My mother was--you know the expression "Rosie the Riveter." She was one of them. She worked there all during World War II.

Q: And what was that like for you?

VZ: Very nice, because my mother and father were very--they--my mother was home for us.

My father was home during the day, and Mom was home in the evening. And they--it was very nice. It was a--we had a very nice household, very--we all--it's--how can I say? The three of us, it was a family. It's not just the three of us. Five of us grew up as a family.

Q: Did you consider yourselves clamdiggers?

VZ: Yes indeedy (laughs). That's an old expression of the old-time families in town. And that's my wife's family was clamdiggers.

Q: And did they actually dig clams?

VZ: Yes in--yes.

Q: Did you, yourself?

VZ: Couple of times. Sometimes we did. I can remember when I lived on Preston Street. I'll never forget it. We, one winter, we walked from the town dock out on the ice and went eeling. Cutting holes in the ice looking for eels or fish, and walked basically all the way around till we got to Bar Beach, and we got picked up by a car there. I can't remember the year, but I just remember the bay being frozen. People talking about it in the '30s, early '30s or mid-'30s, people driving from Port Washington to Great Neck on the ice. So

(laughs) ...

Q: So do you consider "clamdigger" a positive term or ...

VZ: Oh, yeah. It's not a derogatory--people still cast about talking about old Port Washington and they'll say, "Oh, you're an old clamdigger. You know how the town was," or different things. Different things. And they--couple of girls in my wife's office, they call her-- there's another gal that works with her who lives--an old family in town. And they start talking about the town, or different things about town, questions come up in the office. And the girls will say, "Oh, you townies. You're all clamdiggers," you know (laughs). But it's not derogatory. It's not a derogatory thing. In those years, they'd go down and dig them and come home and have clam chowder or whatever, you know.

Q: Well, what do you think about the way the community has changed?

VZ: Very much so. It's a big change. It's tough in town--it's a nice change to a point, but a lot of the old part of town is not the way it used to be.

Q: In what way?

VZ: Sands Point is being built up. We're losing a lot of the shops in town--the old mom-and-pop stores we used to have in town. Where, right down in this section of town here, there

was two clothing stores--the Zeidels. Sammy, and I forget the other Zeidel. And it used to be fun. We used to go to one store. "Well, I don't know. I'll go to your brother and see if he can give it to me cheaper," you know. And down where Shields's store is, the Scott's Paper Store, it's --candy, stationery, paper store. That was an old--not a hangout, but it was an old landmark. We had the church here, and then we had Baker's Funeral Home next door. Down along Main Street where Anchorage is--Anchorage Road is, there was an old house. We used to call it the haunted house. And when we were kids, we used to go down there, and there was supposedly, back in the seventeen--I guess seventeen or eighteen hundreds, there was supposed to be a murder in there. That's why they called it the haunted house.

Q: What are some of the other major fires that you remember?

VZ: Oh, the major ...

Q: That you were involved with?

VZ: On Haven Avenue was the Renga Brothers' Upholstery Shop. That went off after midnight. I don't remember the exact year.

Q: And what did you do in that one?

VZ: At that time, I was--by then, I was Captain of the Fire Police. That was back in the '70s. That was under Chief ["Flash"] Marra, Chief Edmondson, and Chief [James] Murray. I was Captain of the Fire Police at that time. And--oh, excuse me, Chief [Leonard "Pecker"] Seifts, not Edmondson. Chief Seifts. Edmondson was later (laughs). To show you how bad it was, when I came out of my house on South Bayles, the flames were licking across the roof of those stores, and I thought they were all on fire, because the trains were there. You couldn't, you know--but it was a--at that time, I was assisting the assigning of the vehicles, hooking up to the hydrant, stretching lines. Mostly that's what I did at that fire. And another one was a very bad fire down in Bayview Colony. I can't remember, was it South--I forget the exact street. It was the Busby's fire. We lost three children. That was one of the bad--just very bad fires that stick in my mind also at the time.

Q: How did you get involved with the Fire Police?

VZ: That's a good question (laughs). I had--there were some younger fellows that came up, and I didn't go into buildings at the time. I was a chauffeur. I was driving. I was, you know, operator, and so on. And I had had some background in traffic control of that sort. That's what basically the Fire Police used to do. And, Chief Murray, at the time, asked me if I would take the position and become a fire policeman, because they only had a few guys. And I says "Ffine," you know. So I did it, and I took the position in the Fire Police. I did help train some of the members. We had the training and so on. There, that

was more traffic control, crowd control, secure the buildings, you know, after the--if the Fire Marshal was there. If it was a suspicious fire, we'd stay there for the Fire Marshal, and so on. Oh, another big fire was the lumberyard on Willowdale Avenue. Willowdale and South Bayles. I came out of my house and went up the street, and I ended up with a truck, pumping a truck for eight hours (laughs). Supplying water to most of the vehicles that were fighting the fire in the lumberyard itself. I was at a hydrant on South Bayles Avenue, standing there pumping my truck and watching the flames go by and the brands(?) ... go by. That was one of the other major fires. Sands Point Bath Club was another major fire I was at, and that was I was on the truck, but I was not at the actual scene. Yes, I was at the scene there, helped assisting laying hose, working--you know, working, laying hose, relieving people on the hose lines.

Q: Going back to the Fire Police, what were the major challenges for that job? Then, you became an officer in the Fire Police ...

VZ: Yes.

Q: ... right?

VZ: For me, there was no challenges on it. There was just traffic control. In those years, it was not just problems. We still had the local law enforcement agencies to help that we assist and they assist us. Then, there was, you know, making sure people didn't ride over

the hose lines or come into the fire scene with their cars. Making sure that the crowds-- the people that came there--were not in the way of the fire, the firefighters and so on.

And that's basically still our procedures with the Fire Police, with that. And I also, have gone up through the County Fire Police Association, I'm past president of that.

Q: What does that involve?

VZ: Well, they started the organization thirty-four years ago. A group of men got together in Nassau County, because they--the Fire Police were getting big throughout the county. To relay information, updating them on different laws and so on. I've been in there about fifteen years--ten, fifteen years, I think. And we have--we have about five or six members in Port Washington that are members of the County Fire Police. And that's our main--main thing is to be the--I should say firepersons--we have women in there too. To bring them up to date on the new traffic and vehicle and traffic laws. New penal laws. Because we are sworn in as peace officers in the State of New York when we are on duty-- when we're at a fire scene or a rescue, anytime that we are called out by the Chief of the Department.

Q: Can you issue a summons or tickets or ...

VZ: Summons, no. No. We're-- in some parts of New York State, they can, but we here in Nassau County and Suffolk County, we cannot.

Q: Have you ever had somebody who was obstreperous or ...

VZ: Well, that's when we call the local law enforcement.

Q: So you have--you have had ...

VZ: We've had people ride over the hose, or want to come through the traffic line, or that, you know, you try to be as diplomatic as could be and they turn around and they start using, not nice--they start swearing at you. And you tell them, "Hey please, you know, either you do as I say or I'll call a law enforcement agent." And if they give you any more trouble, you call law enforcement, and they handle it. They handle it in their way. Because we cannot make, or issue, excuse me, we cannot issue summonses. They wanted to, when they passed us as peace officers, they wanted to--the law wanted--legislative, I should say, wanted it to read that we could make arrests and issues summonses. Quite a few of us in the State of New York said fine, but we do not want to have that responsibility. We will take the responsibilities of peace officer status, but not as--swear as not issuing summonses or making an arrest.

Q: So what does it mean to be a peace officer?

VZ: We can detain until law enforcement gets there. That's the difference. We can make a

citizen's arrest, but we don't want to do that. That's, then that's why they gave us the peace officer status. We can detain a person. In the State I am what they call Area Vice President, which I cover just Nassau County.

Q: This is now?

VZ: Yes. I've been that for six years. We have eight areas in the State of New York, and I just cover one area, which is Nassau. We have -- Suffolk is another area. Upstate is divided into six different areas. And we talk--we have quarterly meetings. We bring up new--if there's changes in the laws, procedures, new equipment for Fire Police. We even talk about firematics also. It's not just one thing. And we travel all over New York State to go to meetings, conferences, seminars. We have a seminar, which is a training--each meetings we go to quarterly, we have a training session. And once a year we have a big seminar at Montours Falls, which is out by Watkins Glen, which is the New York State Fire Academy. And that's not just for us; it's for all firefighters for all types of training. You name it, they do it.

Q: Can you give me an example of a new traffic regulation that you would be involved ...

VZ: Well, one of the new ones, too, is the riding over the hose, which is against the vehicle traffic laws. Some of the others that is going through a fire line, if, say, for instance, they bypass me and go into a scene by disobeying traffic law signals or the officer. Another

(laughs), I'm trying to think of some of the changes, but it's hard to say because the vehicle and traffic laws have not changed that much over the years, but it's just that they've added to it. Different things to it. The equipment: people parking too close to the equipment, or tail-gating the equipment. There's a change that we can notify the law enforcement about, if we spot them. So things of this sort. That's more or less it as far as the traffic and those things.

Q: Can you tell me about your involvement with the Explorer Scout Program.

VZ: Okay. I started--I was in Scouting for years. We had an Explorer Post here in Port Washington when I was fourteen, growing up. And we had a program that was more or less camping and high adventure, as we called it. That's where I learned my rappelling (laughs). Then, when I came out of service, I was involved with the district, with the county Scouting.

Q: Right. What do you mean by rappelling?

VZ: Mountain climbing.

Q: Yeah.

VZ: Mountain climbing. Rappelling off the mountain, or rappelling off buildings, etcetera.

Of course, then in Scouting, we did it off mountains or hills or stuff of that sort. But that's like, when we say, back--that--when I was in service, that's what helped. When I said, rappelling off buildings. And the Explorer Program, when I came out of service, I went on to the county and district level of the Nassau County Boy Scouts. Nassau County Council of Boy Scouts. And we were starting then to get the Explorers--they wanted to find something for fourteen-, fifteen-year-olds. We diversified in different categories to high adventure--which was camping and that sort. Law enforcement, which some of your local police departments or precincts started a post. Their children were looking interested in that. Computers. Business. Fire service. At the time when I started it here, there was--my sons were in Scouting. And we talked about it. There's others around the county. And I thought to myself, gee it'd be a nice recruiting for this town. And I sat down with the Department officers and so on. We talked about it, and we started it. Flower Hill was sponsor, was the chartering organization at the time. Not the Department, but Flower Hill was. I was the advisor. And at the time, we had about maybe ten or twelve young men and young ladies in it. And ...

Q: Girls were in it right from the beginning?

VZ: Yes. Yes, indeedy. Girls were in it right at the beginning. There was a couple of gals that-- one girl, she joined. When she became seventeen, she became a firefighter at Flower Hill.

Q: What's her name?

VZ: I--I don't want to say, because (laughs)--I would have to ask her first.

Q: Oh, okay.

VZ: I would have to ask her permission for it. But she went into the firefighting service, and she was a very good firefighter. And then she became a law enforcement--she went to the city Police Department, and that's when she got tied up in the city as law enforcement, and she resigned from the Fire Department. But she was a good firefighter. And I've had many line officers in all three companies that went through my Explorer Program.

Q: What did they do in the Explorer Program?

VZ: Mainly, they learned basic firefighting as a probationary firefighter would today. They were able to handle hand lines. They learned how to--they didn't pump the truck, but they learned how to operate the trucks. How to--the different appliances. The nozzles. The different appliances, we call them, that we use in the Fire Department. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... We taught them the appliances, how to use them, how to use the extinguishers. How to put out little fires with the fire extinguishers, the different type of fires. I was able to bring them over to the Fire Academy, and they were able to go on

the fire ground with us, while the Department was there.

Q: What's the fire ground?

VZ: The Fire Academy. It's where they have the training, where the trucks are, where they do the actual firefighting. They did some, with extinguishers, put out little fires with the different type extinguishers that the Academy instructors were there also, teaching them. I taught them also with lectures, and they were able to come to fire schools with the men.

Q: Most of the training, though, took place at Flower Hill?

VZ: Yes.

Q: At that firehouse.

VZ: Yes. Well, we went to Atlantic Hook and Ladder for learning the ladders part of it. That--the forcible entry and things that they learned through the ladder company. The members down there instructed them also. I had members from, as I said, the Explorers. They went up through the line officers of all three companies. And I'm proud right now that the present Chief was one of my members and the Assistant Chief, John Walters, was one of the members.

Q: And the Chief ...

VZ: Chief Bollerman right now. And I used to kid him about it. "I taught you everything I know in one day" (laughs). Chris is--Chris is a wonderful man. And I--he's a lot of fun. And same with all the--all three Chiefs I know. I've gone through a lot of them. But, see, I've been Captain, oh gee (laughs), I'll say over thirty years--twenty-five to thirty years. And it was funny. When we reorganized, there was Chief [Joseph] Fico who was Chief at the time. And John, not John--Tom Tobin was Chaplain. Was Chaplain at the time. And he says to me, "Why don't you take the ..." Tom Tobin, the two of them, said to me, "Why don't you become--take the fire police. You know so much about it," and so on. I said, "All right. I'll take it till we reorganize. I'll hold--I'll do it for about a year or two." I told him, I says, "Chief Fico, until you go out of office, I'll do it. Okay." How many Chiefs later (laughs), yeah. How many Chiefs later is this, as we go. But I enjoy it.

Q: On the Explorers, did these young people, did they get a certificate or any other recognition when they completed the program?

VZ: Well, when they completed the program, most of them came into the fire service, with the fire knowledge which helped them, and I, at the time, I didn't give them training--you know, didn't give certificates. But they, like a lot of them said they had the knowledge that followed them through. And they had a nickname for me. We had civilian band radio, CB radios, and they used to call me "Big Daddy Zip."

Q: Was that your handle?

VZ: Yeah. But some of the kids--some of the kids--they're still kids to me--some of the guys still call me "Big Daddy" (laughs). But, I'll never forget the--they gave me a beautiful plaque with it on it.

Q: What does the plaque say?

VZ: Oh, gee. Well, it's--because the post more or less dissolved, because it was hard to keep, get them in. And it was--maybe it was the last meeting we had, just says, "Presented to Big Daddy Zip for all the recognition." And they put the years, or the year on it.

Q: The post is--you mean, you don't have the Explorer Program anymore?

VZ: No, the post is running now. They are still operating. They're operating very well. But I'm not involved in it now. It lay dormant for a couple of years--couple, three or four years. Then they started it up again. Because we had some of the members, their sons were starting to get interested, getting a little older. They were in their teenage years. And we reorganized. We got a committee together and reorganized it into the Explorers. They had the option at the time to go with what they called Junior Firefighters or Explorer Program through the Boy Scouts of America. And they sat down with people

who were other members of the Department who have Junior Firefighters, and the Departments that have the Explorer Program, and people from Nassau County Council. I more or less was on the committee. I just sat back, because I, you know, I gave them the knowledge that I knew, and whatnot, and I told them, "You people, you will run it." I says. They says, "Well, how come--why don't you want to run it? Why don't you do this?" I said, "No. It's your sons and daughters. You're--they'll look up to you as a peer." I says, "I'm much older than them." I says, "There's knowledge I can give you, but if you need it I will be there." And it's worked out very nicely. And the ...

Q: Well, what is the difference between Junior Firefighters and the Explorer?

VZ: A lot was the--some of the advantages, as far as the training, the Juniors, a lot of them, their own Departments trained them. There was restrictions on them. They couldn't do--either one of them couldn't do what we call "burning," you know, going into buildings and such--fire buildings. With the Explorers, they can do, like I say, handling of extinguishers. They can't do actual firefighting, but they can do the handling of the hose lines--same thing with the Juniors. But, insurance-wise, there's a difference, also. The Fire Academy--the Nassau County Boy Scouts has an insurance program, and also New York State has a program for both Juniors and Exploring, that they can go up to this Montours Falls, the Fire Academy. They do some things here at the Academy--Nassau Academy--but not so much as the men do. They can go and observe, but they can't, you know--but it's a good program. It's a good youth program.

Q: Who's directing it now?

VZ: I think Jimmy Penrose who's Fire Marshal and, I think, Jimmy Interdonati is involved in it also. I'm not sure.

Q: And do you know how many young people are in the program?

VZ: I'll say around fifteen. And that's just a guess. About fifteen. Boys and girls, or young men and young women--teenagers. It's a very good program. They learn discipline, they learn firematics, they learn everything--every aspect of it. It shows them leadership, because they elect their own officers, and it gives them a chance to learn leadership. And it does. As I say, it learned--quite a few of those I had learned leadership. And it's a lot of fun. It's a lot of camaraderie in both the Explorers and in the adults--the men and the women.

Q: Can you define firematics?

VZ: It's--well, you can't--firematics, the reason they say that is it--you can't use the word "firemen," because you've got females in there (laughs). They call it fire persons, they call them. Firematics is the science of firefighting. That's that part of it. And today, firefighting is a science; it's not just running into a burning building with a hose line. I

still do training. I still go to some of the training. I don't go into burning buildings anymore.

Q: When did you stop going into burning buildings?

VZ: Around, say fifteen, twenty years ago. Sounds funny, but the younger fellows, let them do it. They're trained. I mean, you know (laughs), you're still--I mean, plus they're--I still look at it that way that I might take the training, but I still don't go back--but if I desperately had to, I could go in. The new self-contained breathing apparatus is a lot different than I had. It's more modern. Basically, it's--you can do a lot more than we did, than what we had when I first got in the Department. We didn't have the canisters--the bottles. We had what they called cardocks. They were little canisters that when you breathed the air in, it would change the foul air into fresh air. Had charcoal filters in it and some other filtering systems in it. But you were restricted on what you could do. And the face masks were not like they are today. All we had were--you'd see out of here, and just the face piece around here. Helmets, you know, over the head and, you know, also. But not the way it is today. Today, they're breathing compressed air, which is filtered fresh air. Clean. Ours sometimes wasn't (laughs).

Q: So how do you feel about all these changes in the equipment?

VZ: I feel it's changed for the better, even though there's this regulations that the--have come

out of OSHA [Occupational Safety & Health Administration]. We complain about it, but it's something that it's for the better; it's for our safety or our own betterment. The NFPA, which is National Fire Protection Agency, has come up with regulations also. And it's, well, between the two, it's all because of firefighters dying in the line of duty. How to prevent--how can they prevent it. Bettering of the equipment. The turnout gear. The helmets we used to have, if a ceiling fell on it, you'd end up with a headache (laughs). Today, they're the same helmet, but it's a good--it's the same type, not the same helmet. Same type of helmet, but there's cushioning inside. There's head protection. The protective gear is a lot different. The turnout gear is a lot different. They can withstand more of the workings. We didn't have the pants that they have. We had regular rubber boots--hip boots like the wading boots that the fishermen used to wear. And today, they have full boots that are like a pair of pants, and the boots that they wear are similar, but not as high. They're insulated. They're lined against the heat. They're not heat resistant; they're not fire resistant. They can withstand a little bit more heat than we did. We had rubber coats, like a raincoat. Now, they have this material, which is a better, is a safer material. I am glad that they've gone with this advanced equipment the way it is. It's saved a lot of lives of the members. And most of the fatalities are not from the fire itself, like we used to have. A lot of it is due to--there's a lot of heart attacks. A lot of personnel that die of heart attacks. And it's a shame when it happens. But, as I said, the advancement in the equipment and advancement in apparatus is all for the good.

Q: You mentioned the camaraderie. Do you think that's a major aspect of being in the Fire

Department?

VZ: It's a family, you know. It's--you may stand there and argue and fight, call each other names and whatnot, but don't call me--don't, you know, don't pick on him. They'll be outside picking on us, you know. We stick together. But I mean, this is the way it is. You could--you could stand there in the firehouse and argue with a guy till you're blue in the face and walk outside and keep talking, you know. Or argue at a fire scene, you walk back to the firehouse, you sit down and have a cold drink, you know (laughs). Or we'll sit at a meeting and argue tooth and nail over something and, after the meeting, sit down and we'll be talking like you and I are. That's camaraderie. That's brotherhood. It's friendship. Families. Something happens to a brother firefighter or a sister firefighter, everybody looks out for each other, helps each other. That's the camaraderie of the fire service. Not just here in Port. Not just here in Port. It's throughout the nation. Because, like I said, I go all up the state of New York. I have family living up and down the east coast. My one son who lives in New Hampshire is a paramedic. And he says, "Dad," he says, "it's like just these ..." he drives--rides in an ambulance. And he says, he says, "Dad, it's the same way up there as you guys are down there." He says the friendship, the fun--I was up there--they had a field day--firemen's field day. And I said to him, "It's just like we have down here." All the fun. Everybody's kidding around, having fun, like, you know, the firemen's tournaments that we have here. It's just like that. The friendship between the teams. Or, the rivalry on the course. But off that course, they're brothers and sisters.

Q: And the kidding around, can you think of any particular humorous times?

VZ: Oh, geez (laughs).

Q: Any funny pranks.

VZ: Oh, I can remember one Labor Day tournament, it was--this is going back in the, oh, what, in the '60s, was it? I think it was in the '60s--late '60s. We came back from Labor Day. It was a hot Labor Day--summer's day. And we got quite a few trophies. It was up at Flower Hill. And they were having a little party. Everybody was, you know, throwing cups of water at each other. The next thing, it came to buckets of water. Then, they got garden hose. And I'll never forget this. This other fellow and I--Danny Swiacki--he's passed; he's deceased now many years--his family and our family are still very close. One of the pumpers were parked across the street. There's a fire hydrant right across the street from the front of Flower Hill. I says, "Come on Danny," and we were dry. Very dry. We went across the street, hooked the truck up to the hydrant. I started the truck, and all we did was turn the deck on into the firehouse. We flushed the whole firehouse (laughs). I mean, fun like that. Other times, work nights, we'd be out there. We'd go up on the roof with buckets of water, and the probationary members, you'd make sure you're--they'd be out on the ramp talking and everything. Go up there with a bucket of water and I mean, the fun, yeah. And, we have a lot of fun. I mean, things like that. But,

today, we still do it, but we don't have the big water fights like we did.

Q: Why do you think ...

VZ: Well (laughs), the floors are slippery and you don't want to get hurt sliding around. I mean, we still have little water fights. Don't get me wrong. We still have little buckets of water here and there.

Q: Only in the warm weather?

VZ: No (laughs). No (laughs). But I'm saying that's camaraderie. That's the fun. We still have a lot of fun with the guys.

Q: When did you first get the sense that you were on a team?

VZ: When? When I first got in the Department. Forty-six years ago. Because you work together. And if you work against each other, it's not worth--you've got to remember, you're relying on the guy in back of you and he's relying on you. You always go in as buddies. You're always a pair. That's why I say it brings the camaraderie. It's, like I say, when you're at a fire scene, you're buddy-buddy, you know. It's the buddy system. You don't go into a burning building unless it's to save a life. But if you go in, you hope there's somebody with you. Same thing is when you run a hand line, you've got maybe

two or three guys with you. That's the buddy system.

Q: Were you ever injured?

VZ: No.

Q: Did you ever have a narrow escape?

VZ: In the military I did; not here. Military I did, because I--we were in this fire. We were doing a demonstration fire, and my hands got burned, but that was--that's not what this is. This is psoriasis (laughs). But here, I can't say I did.

Q: Now, your wife's father and ...

VZ: Uncle.

Q: ... unclare also in the Department.

VZ: Yes.

Q: Also in Flower Hill?

VZ: No, they were in Protection Engine Company. One, Irvin Foster, was a Chief. That's her uncle. And my wife's father was foreman. He was Arnold Foster. He was the foreman of Protection, which is the Captain now. He passed away, probably around forty-six years ago.

Q: And did they tell you anything about ...

VZ: Well, I didn't know them--I didn't know her father. He passed away before I got in the company. But her uncle I knew. I knew her uncle, because he was still alive. Irvin Foster. He was Chief at the time. He was Chief, but he, you know, he used to talk about some of the old-time fires where--I used to get a kick out of the--when I was a young--in the service, listening to the older members then, where they used to run from here to Sands Point with the old hand-drawn carts, or the horse-drawn carts. And the guys, the young fellows today, kid us, some of us like myself, when we talk about, you know, the fires: "Well, were you here when they hooked up the horses?" (laughs). I mean, that's the fun we have. That's the fun we have. As I say, I enjoy talking with the young members. They, you know, the old-timers at that time used to talk about some of the older fires they had down in Sands Point where they used to literally run from here to the estates. Of course, they were in a heck of a lot better shape than we are today, because a lot of them were farmers and whatnot around town. But we listened to those old stories, and you think back, as I say, I think back, because I've gone to a few museums. And we were down in Baltimore where my son lives--he lives outside of Baltimore. We went to

the Baltimore Firemen's Museum, and my grandchildren kid me about it. "Grandpa, was that one of them that you used to run around with?" (laughs), and I tell them, "No, I used to ride on this one over here," you know. Yeah.

Q: So what was your worst day as a firefighter?

VZ: My worst day was in November when Bobby Dayton died. That was one of my worst days.

Q: Did you work that fire?

VZ: Yes. I was on the--I was the hydrant man on that truck. And Bobby got out of the cab as the officer, and I told him, "Bobby, I'll give you water in a minute." And that's the last time I saw him. And the other one was when Ingrid Sowle was hit by a car. It was another day. I wasn't home at the time, because it was late at night. I wasn't home at that time. But they are the worst times. And, of course, there's other days and losing friends just more recently, and some more ...

Q: How did you integrate your firefighting work with your paying work, your job?

VZ: I worked in Grumman Aerospace for thirty years. And, in fact, we had a fire brigade over there. We were--they had paying members. And we also were firefighters there

when they needed us at Grumman's. Well, when I came home from work, then I would go--and, of course, my wife worked evenings for years. She was a nurse at the nursing home. And, it's funny, my mother would come down, because my father worked nights. My mother would come down, and she'd babysit for me, if I had to go out someplace. And I'd go after night--after my wife came home, or before I went to work, weekends. And then she got on days, and I'd go in in the evenings. And it used to be funny when the kids were teenagers and everything. The fire alarm would go off, and one of the kids would turn around and say, "Well, look, there's another cold dinner for Dad" (laughs). Or they'd call out the door, as teenagers, "Hey, Dad, after the fire it'll be in the oven when you come back!" (Laughs) My wife still tells me that: "It'll be in the oven when you come back."

Q: What was your best day as a fireman?

VZ: They all are. They all are, really. I mean, every day is a good day, I say. Every day's a good day. If we all get back from the call, that's a good day. And, as I say, we're all friends; we're all family. And I look back on--you know, people say, "Well, what's a bad thing." I say, "Whenever, you know, we lose somebody, that's a bad thing." Or when we lose a resident or somebody of that sort, you know, when you lose somebody that's at the scene, that's a bad day. I say the best days is when we all come back and sign in.

Q: What are you proudest of in your firefighting career?

VZ: What am I proudest of? My wife.

Q: Why? For what?

VZ: She sticks with me. That's, you know (laughs), she's been through it with me, you know.

We've been married forty-two years, and she knew me before I got in the Fire Department. Because I went out with her for a few years and--but she sticks with me. I mean, we, side by side--that's my wife. You know, I don't know what a lot of guys have said, but I said to the company, I says, "When I get my fifty years in the Department," I says, "after you call me up there," I says, "you'd better call my wife." And one guy said, "Well, what for?" I says, "Because she's been with me for fifty years in this Department, and she's going to stand with me." Just like that, I said, "She's going to stand with me, whether you like it or not."

Q: How many more years do you have before you get there?

VZ: In 2008, I'll have fifty years in the Department.

Q: Did you ever do anything for good luck? Carry anything or ...

VZ: No.

Q: ... anything like that?

VZ: No.

Q: Have you ever dreamed about fires?

VZ: No. Never--never really had any bad dreams or nightmares about it. I've stayed up many a nights after, you know, coming home after a fire and not going to sleep, because the adrenalin is so much and so on. When I rode the ambulance, we had--well, we've had quite a few bad accidents that I was at years ago. It's not like today where we have the equipment to extricate people out of cars. Those years, it was a crowbar and strength, to open the door or things of this sort.

Q: Do you remember any in particular?

VZ: There was a bad accident on South Bayles and Willowdale Avenue. There was a car wrapped around a telephone pole. That's one accident. Some down along Roslyn West Shore Road, there was another few bad ones.

Q: What do you think it is about that road, there've been so many ...

VZ: It's--well, people from--not paying attention to the road itself. Because if they know it's a straight road -- it's not. It's got slight curves in it, dips and so on. People don't pay attention. That's the biggest thing today. People don't pay attention to their driving. Some people, it's they're tired, sleepy. Fall asleep at the wheel. The DWIs [driving while intoxicated], that you read and hear on TV--things of this sort that you see all over, not only here, but all over the country. Things of that sort, you know. That's the the major thoughts, when I go to a call. I would be, "Am I going to make it there the way that people're driving?". I don't drive the big apparatus – the pumpers and such. I don't drive them. I drive one of the utility vehicles--the Fire Police vehicle. And people don't--you know, that's one of the things I watch, you know, because you don't only look in front of you. You look around you, because people--you don't know where they're coming from. There has been a few times that, when I did drive the trucks, that I had people darted out of nowhere in front of me. I had a couple of guys that can attest to that with the black and blue marks when they got back (laughs). At the time, being quick with the brakes, and being able to, good judgment, as some people say. But, today, you just don't look in front of you; you've got to look all around you, because of the way they drive. But ...

Q: What about--would there be one piece of advice that you would give to people to avoid home fires?

VZ: A lot of it is just be patient because your carelessness is a lot of it. It used to be smoking in bed, but not anymore.

Q: You don't see that any ...

VZ: No, but we do get like sometimes we'll get a piece of furniture, you know, something like that. But not smoking in bed as much as they used to. A lot of house fires, I'd say twenty years ago, twenty-five years ago, were related to smoking. But today, it's not. Today it's hard to say what a lot of them are, because a lot of our calls are automatic alarms. The carbon monoxide alarms. That's what the major calls are today. And it's not like we have major fires to speak of. I mean, we do get house fires--bad house fires. Sometimes a house gets struck by lightning, or things of this sort, which would cause a major incident. But, it's hard to say, you know. The big ones today is carelessness, a lot of times. "Undetermined" is, you know, they can't tell what they're caused by.

Q: Have you ever been involved in an arson investigation?

VZ: Yes. I assisted the Fire Marshals a few times.

Q: What happened?

VZ: Well, you walk--you go with them and I have taken the Arson Recognition Class. It's to distinguish where a fire started, how it started, whether it was electrical, carelessness. Whether it was set. And you're walking around with a--not only yourself, but the Fire

Marshal or the arson squad, some of the other members that are trained, you're looking at its--and they'll tell you, okay, you look in this certain section. Tell me what you see, while I'm over here, or another guy's over here looking at a totally--first floor was totally burned out--how it started. Where can you give them an idea, or assist them. Or I could say, "Yeah, okay, it started over here with an appliance," you know, it's starting at that point with an appliance. You could tell how the wall was burned and such. Where some, see, today, sometimes it's with candles. Somebody'll leave a candle burning someplace and forget about it, or go to bed with it and, or a barbecue fire, or, yeah, things of that sort. But assisting investigations, yeah, I've done a few of them that way. And it's another set of eyes, as they call it. Seeing a--it's a--from three different angles. Three different men--three different people look at it. And you'll say, "Well, gee, it looks like it's burning here for maybe ten or fifteen minutes before it spread." And somebody'll say, "Well, no, it looks like it was burning, started over here ..." and it's more science. Today it's a science, too. They can tell by taking a piece of wood and bringing it back to the lab, and tell whether it had accelerant put on it. And they also have the dogs that sniff the--can tell whether it was, as they say, a petroleum-based product, or what was used as an accelerant, as they call it. They have dogs that can do that. Like you see them at all of the airports, or wherever. And those dogs are a lot of fun. They're good dogs. And that dog gets better treatment sometimes (laughs) at a fire scene. He'll be sitting there. It can be a cold winter's night, and he's in a nice warm car. And when they bring him to the scene, they take the car right up to the scene. And there are times they put little booties on the dog, so it doesn't hurt their feet, to go into the buildings. And that's why I say,

they're very (laughs)--but the arson dogs are very good. Or I should say the, not only arson, but the dogs that they use for finding--they can find different chemicals, or, you know, whether it's a bomb or something like that. Explosives. So it's really--that's how advanced we've come in investigations. And it's an interesting field.

Q: Oh, yeah.

VZ: It's an interesting field.

Q: Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you think is important?

VZ: No (laughs).

Q: What do you think the value is of the Oral History project?

VZ: Very much. Because right now, I am, we have the Museum Committee--the Museum of Nassau County Firemen's Museum [Nassau County Firefighters Museum and Education Center]. This is what they're looking for--the oral history of the departments. I don't know if you're aware of it.

Q: No. Where is the museum?

VZ: At the Cradle of Aviation. We have a section over there, they're giving--we're using, over at Mitchel Field. And we will have within, I'll say two years, we will have our own structure of the--it's Nassau County Friends of Volunteer Fire Service Educational Center. I think that's the name of it. I know it's a long name. But it's Nassau County Firemen's Museum. It's been in the works for a good, oh, five years I'll say, or better. Frank Pendl [Francis X. Pendl]. Frank Pendl. I'll get it straight. From Bethpage. He was an instructor at the Fire Academy, started it. And it's named after him. And it will be named after him. He passed away last year.

Q: What do you have there?

VZ: Well, right now, it's just a small little exhibition of what's going to be. But they're going to have apparatus--old and new. Different turnout--you know, the turnout gear that we've had. Different, how a fire was years ago, how it was called in, dispatched, to the present day FireCom. They will have memorabilia from all years past, even, you know, from as far back as they can get to the present day. Conference centers. They're going to have a theater there for lectures.

Q: So it's not open to the public yet.

VZ: It's not open yet. Well, not yet. But there's a section. There's a piece--there's a portion, a little place in the Cradle of Aviation that is they've given us to put up a small display of

what this is going to look like. And, as I say, the date for the opening is going to be in roughly October of 2006, I think it is. 2006 or 2007--I'm not sure. But ...

Q: And what is your role on the committee?

VZ: I'm just on the committee as bringing, as a liaison, as a representative from Port Washington Fire Department and Nassau County Fire Police Association. I'm the representative.

Q: Do you think that some of the items that are now in Protection will go to that museum ...

VZ: If they ...

Q: ... or do you think they'll stay here?

VZ: That's up to the company. Some of the equipment -- it'll be there on loan. It won't be permanent. Now, say, for instance, Protection wants to loan them, or any department throughout the Nassau County, wants to loan them this, they can loan it for six months. And just to keep the stuff rotating around from the different Departments. And this oral history is what they're looking for for the histories of the departments. There's seventy-one departments they're looking for the history for. Like we're one of the oldest departments. Like you have Levittown is considered one of the newer departments, and

they started right after World War II. You know, you have a lot of the older departments like Roslyn or some of the older ones. Oh, gee, I'm trying to think who's over a hundred years old now. There's quite a few of them over a hundred years old in Nassau County. And we have representatives from almost all the departments come to the meetings. We meet about once every other month. They just had a big gala over at the Cradle of Aviation last month, and I had to be upstate at the time (laughs). It's a fundraiser, like Cablevision has done a big thing, has done a lot for us. Like they gave us a--they made a tape, a videotape, and a CD of the museum of what they expect is going to be coming. I should bring it down and let you people make a copy of it.

Q: That would be great, yes.

VZ: Okay. I just thought of that. But it's something that they--a lot of big corporations on the Island, well, not only over here, have donated funds to support the Firefighters Museum. And that's one of the big goals of Nassau County Firefighters is that. Yep. That's okay.

Q: Okay. Okay, well thank you very much. This has been wonderful.

VZ: I enjoyed it, too. And any ... [END OF INTERVIEW] ...