

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Ex-Chief William G. Zwerlein
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 William G. Zwerlein
pk

by Sally Olds
June 30, 2004

Q: Today is June 30th, 2004. This is an interview with William G. Zwerlein. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Can you please say your name.

William G. Zwerlein: William G. Zwerlein.

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

WGZ: Protection.

Q: How old were you when you joined the Port Washington Fire Department?

WGZ: Eighteen.

Q: And, so then, how long have you been a member?

WGZ: Forty-two, three years now.

Q: What made you decide to become a firefighter?

WGZ: Family, I guess. Father and uncles were firemen, you know, in Protection.

Q: And what kinds of things did they tell you about firefighting?

WGZ: Not much, really. Not much. I don't remember them really explaining anything to me. I just assumed that I was going to join.

Q: Well, what did you know about their service?

WGZ: I don't know. I didn't--you know, I was a young kid then. I didn't know that much. Just that, you know, they enjoyed it. They were very active. Well, my father and my uncles were very active. So, you know, from watching them run out to fires and stuff, and, as a kid, like chasing fires that were in my neighborhood and stuff, that's about what I knew, you know. Stuff like that.

Q: You chased fires yourself in the neighborhood, or you ...

WGZ: Yeah, you know, when I had a bike, like younger teenage years. Just because I was interested, you know, to see what they did.

Q: Do you remember any particular ones that you saw during those years?

WGZ: There was one on Shore Road, right opposite the Mill Pond. Used to be a restaurant

there that hung out over the water. It was the Miramar in the old days, and it was a disco or a go-go place or something, I guess. There was a fire there; I guess I must have been sixteen or so. Oh, and then right around the corner from my house, I was playing basketball at my grandfather's garage, and that went on fire while I was playing basketball. I didn't even know it, because there was a truck parked in between me and the building. So that was exciting, you know, because I was right there before anybody even knew there was a fire, I was right there.

Q: So what--what do you remember about those fires?

WGZ: How exciting it was, you know, at that age. You know, it felt very exciting and everything. You see, I already know--knew all the people that were in the fire company, so you see them doing their thing, which you don't often get to do when you're young. That's what I basically remember about that.

Q: Do you think it was a plus or a minus for you that you had relatives in the Department?

WGZ: Oh, I think a plus, yeah, for sure. Especially getting into the Department. Because when I--when I turned eighteen, there was like a dozen people on the waiting list. Company books were full. We had a hundred members and couldn't get in. So there were twelve people on the waiting list, and my father got up at the meeting before them and said, "My son should go to the head of the list, because I'm a fireman," and I did (laughs). So that

probably saved me a year getting in. I got in about a year earlier. So that worked out well for me.

Q: Do you remember who the Chief was at that time?

WGZ: *The Chief*. Maybe John Michalak, Alexander Morrison back there in the early '60s. 1961.

Q: And who was ...

WGZ: [Ralph] Nofi. It could be Nofi from Atlantic. It's a long time.

Q: Yes (laughs).

WGZ: I remember they were Chiefs, but I don't remember--I can't even tell you what order they came in right now.

Q: Yes. Do you remember who the Captain of Protection was when you ...

WGZ: When I got in, I believe Reginald Bedell was the Captain. Yeah, Reggie Bedell.

Q: And is there any formal mechanism for taking in new firefighters?

WGZ: Yeah, you fill out an application and you take a physical, you know, and they'll check on your character. Check with the police, make sure that you, you know, you didn't do crimes and stuff. They don't want you--you couldn't bring a thief into the Fire Department, because you're going into people's houses on an emergency. So that's about it, really. Check on your character. Obviously, it's very physical work, so you have to be physically fit, at least.

Q: Did you have to pass a physical exam?

WGZ: Yeah, but in those--in the days when I got in ... [schwww!] ... You went to your doctor, and he said, you know, "Cough. Breathe. Can you see my hand?" you know, and you were in. That was it. He'd just fill out a little thing, and nowadays, it's crazy nowadays, you know.

Q: What do they have to do now?

WGZ: Oh, God! The physicals are--well, when you're younger, you only have to take one every five years when you first get in, if you're below, I think, thirty-five or forty. So every five years. But once you hit, I believe, forty, then you have to go like every year. You've got to keep getting physical, physical, physical. Because they're afraid of heart attack and stuff like that. But it's a lot different now. And the physical is, I mean, like a

complete physical--breathing and lung capacity and all that stuff. And like I said, when I got in, you just, "Hi, Doc," and he signed the paper, and you brought it back to the company, and that was it.

Q: Do you have to perform any particular physical tasks?

WGZ: What do you have to do?

Q: Physical--yeah.

WGZ: No, no. No, that all comes after you get in. There's no like set--like, say, for New York City where you have to take this rigorous course, go through a course, dragging this and climbing this. No, we don't have that. No.

Q: And so once you're accepted, is there a ceremony to bring you in?

WGZ: Just, it happens at a monthly meeting, and people--people vote on you. You know, people in attendance at the meeting vote on you, and then you just raise your right hand type thing, and they hand you the keys to the building and a book of rules and stuff like that, and your badges. You're in.

Q: And is there any kind of set-up where the more experienced firefighters will take a rookie

sort of under their arm and teach what needs to be learned?

WGZ: Well, not specifically. But that happens. It's just a natural thing when you're in the fire company, that an experienced guy would, you know--obviously, when a new guy gets in, he's got to be interested because he joined, right? So he wants to know how to do everything, so he doesn't mess up at a fire or something. So he'll ask questions, you know. It happens all the time. A kid'll come up to you and say "Willy, you know ..."--that's my nickname, "Willy"--"how do you do this?" so you could tell him, you know. But they--obviously, they have formal training also. But they can learn a lot, too, from, you know, when you sit in a classroom and somebody explains something, the names and things just don't go right into your head because you're new at it. But, after the class, if you ask a guy, he says, "Oh, yeah, this means that," you know. Try to keep them so they're not overwhelmed by new terms and procedures and stuff. It's hard for a new person, you know. I had the advantage of, for like, from the time I was sixteen, I hung around the firehouse, you know, every minute I could so I had somewhat of an advantage of knowing everybody in the company and knowing what the trucks worked like and stuff. It was an advantage to me. But nowadays, kids get in real quick. It used to take three months from the time you put your application in in my day. That's just the way--that's the procedure it was, you know. You go from monthly meeting to monthly meeting, and it took three months from--well, two months, actually. Three meetings. The time you applied, and then you got your stuff done, and then they vote on you next--the third meeting. Now, they could be in in a month, in weeks, really.

Q: And why is that?

WGZ: Well, because you have different procedures now, and we're very hungry for members so we don't want a guy to say, "Oh, it takes me two months to get in? You know, I don't want to join." We want to get them in fast, you know.

Q: How many members do you have now in Protection?

WGZ: I'm saying probably in the eighties, somewhere in the eighties. You have to go count the pictures on the wall. We were worse than that for a while, but after 9/11, we got a big influx of seventeen- year-old kids, even. We had to drop the age from eighteen to seventeen, because the other companies did it. Now, we were losing members to the other companies because they wanted to join right away. So we changed it, and we got some nice, some good kids, you know. But, the thing is, how long they're going to last? That's the story with high school kids, that you get them in and then they go away to college. Then you cross your fingers. Four years later, they're out of college. Are they going to stay in Port Washington, or are they going to remain as firemen? ... But you live with that, you know. You have to live with it. Most of them go to college. In my day, that wasn't the case. Mostly guys got in at eighteen, and they stayed around all the time. And they didn't have to work three jobs. They could afford a house in Port Washington, you know. The same deal. So, we didn't lose that many moving out of town, either.

Eventually, it started.

Q: What was your first job with the fire company?

WGZ: Just a fireman, you know. You come in, you're a probationary fireman or a rookie. So then you start learning.

Q: And then, after you learned a little bit.

WGZ: Well, then you had to decide to run for office. Usually at--you usually start at the bottom, which would be, in each of the companies, the engineering staff. They're the people that basically run your weekly work night. You know, make sure the trucks are clean and everything is in its proper place. Things like that. Fuel rigs and stuff. So that's engineering staff. We had an engineer and four assistants when I ran for the lowest, the fourth assistant. That was back in the--well, when was that? In '65. Right around '65, '66, I ran for office. Never lost either. All the way up I went without losing.

Q: So, where did you go up the ladder? You started as Fourth Assistant Engineer ...

WGZ: Third Assistant, Second Assistant, First Assistant, Engineer, Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant, Captain. Then Chief, eventually. Assistant Chief.

Q: And what were your responsibilities as Second Lieutenant?

WGZ: Oh, that was like a vacation. Well, as far as now you were an interior leader, now. You got to lead the men inside the fires. Whereas engineer, engineer, they, in those days, we had so many--so many men at fires that the engineer was supposed to stay outside, help pump the truck and do outside work, in other words. You know, make sure everything went nice on the outside. But when you go to Lieutenant, then you're inside, which was-- I felt I was much more suited to. It killed me to be on the outside for those engineering years, you know. So, you're just a leader. You're with the nozzle. You're right behind the nozzle and directing the men on the inside. That's what it is. And then, First Lieutenant's just a higher rank of doing the same, and the Captain's a higher rank. You know, he's the company leader. Same thing, only now you have--you have to run meetings, monthly meetings. You have to sit at the--preside at the meetings. Maybe sixty, seventy guys sometimes, in those days at a meeting. So that was a lot different. And I found the biggest pain in the neck about it all was having to reprimand people or bring people up on charges, which didn't happen a lot. But, I mean, the people, you know, some people want to do the job; some people are halfhearted about it. So you try to keep everybody up to snuff, and some guys do things wrong or-- not so much at a fire-- they do pretty good at fires. But their personal conduct. Say we went to a parade out of time or something, they might misbehave or something, and it's bad on us because they're wearing the uniform, you know. And one time when I was Captain--this was in the long-hair days, the hippie days--we had strict rules about hair cuts, all right? And facial hair,

because you couldn't put on your air mask. You couldn't get a seal with the facial hair. So about, I'm saying, ten of our members of the company decided that they were going to buck it and they weren't going to have their--they were going to let their hair grow long. And these were ten active guys at the time, right? I had to suspend ten of them at one meeting. But they--and I'm not boasting--but they came crawling back after a couple of days because they couldn't stand being out of service, so they got trimmed up a little bit, you know. But yeah, they were pushing it just to see if they could get something to crack. But it was very strict in those days.

Q: So was it the long hair in the back or the facial hair?

WGZ: Both. Both. Long hair was because of parades. They had--when you went out of town to, say, a county parade or something, they had strict rules about hair length and stuff. Or if you had three guys with long hair and the rest with short hair, then you lost points when you were competing in a parade to beat out other departments for a trophy. That was the thing.

Q: And ...

WGZ: But I mean, let's face it, the guys that were Chief then were old-timers. They didn't want that long hair. They didn't want it. So they used the parade rules as a thing, you know. Even though the guy might not have a parade. He ain't going to walk around the

firehouse with long hair, either. So that's what we went by. And I was the same way, sort of, but still, I never liked the long hair, for me. I always had short hair. But I was going by the rules, you know. And I could see what was up. They would--they were going to stand up and fight, so I sat them down for a couple of days. It turned out all right, you know. Worked it out.

Q: And after those ten were suspended, did you ever have any--any more problems with the hair?

WGZ: Not that I remember. Don't forget, you're only Captain for two years, so, then the next guy takes over. So, I don't think--nothing like that, no, we never had anything like that.

Q: Have you had to deal with any other controversial issues when you were an officer?

WGZ: Oh, of course. Don't ask me what they were, because there were many. But always head-butting, you know, with people. Not everybody likes you, you know. Some guys would say, "Oh, this guy does a great job." Some, "Oh, he's a dummy," you know, "He's no good." Just personal, you got a lot of personalities in a hundred-man company; that's for sure. So, I dealt with a lot of it, believe me. Especially when I was Chief and all that. But nothing--it wasn't like somebody murdered anybody or anything. It was all having to do with Department rules, and so you have to bring a guy up on charges or suspend--oh, first you suspend him. Then, if he accepts the suspension for so many days or

whatever, you know, whatever you see fit--fine, he serves it, and he goes back into service. Or if he don't like that, then he can fight it, and then you got to bring him up on charges, which is more serious, and have a panel meet and everything, you know. It's like a jury. It's, you know, that's the stuff that when you're an officer, oh, you got to worry about that stuff all the time. You'd like to worry about the firefighting, but you got this other stuff you have to worry about, too. Aggravating. It's only--and you're not getting paid to do this either, you know. It takes up another meeting. You're going to meetings anyway, but stuff like charges, and it's an upheaval and the whole Department, oh! that's all the talk for weeks, you know. "What's going to happen?" You get through it. I got through it.

Q: What other kinds of things would people be brought up on charges for?

WGZ: Mostly--very few actually having to do with the firefighting. It's bad behavior, when you're out in public, you know, and you're representing the Department. Things like that. That's, you know ...

Q: Like what?

WGZ: Well, to tell you the truth, a lot of it came from drinking, all right? Not that--they could drink, of course, but the drinking caused people to lose their inhibitions and, you know, they forget that they're supposed to act a little civilized when they're representing the

Department, you know. I'll take you back to when I was--before I even got in. I mean, say a picnic that Protection would have. In the early '60s, we'd--one of the big estates down in Sands Point would let us have a picnic down there and they'd dig latrines. A lot of work, you know. In the morning we'd lay like a thousand feet of hose from a hydrant so we could have water to cook with and everything. These guys are out, like five o'clock in the morning, starting the picnic. But by the time the afternoon came around, they'd been drinking all day. So clean-up was a horror every year, believe me. More arguments. Unbelievable. Fights almost every time, you know, because of the drinking. But at least we had a good time till we got to that point. So that's, you know, stuff like that. You're arguing back and forth, and then one guy happened to be an officer, you know, you say a few words to him, and then you could be brought up on charges. Meanwhile, the officer might have been drinking, too, but these things happen. It's a hundred personalities, you know. It's not easy. That's the way it went. Things got a lot better as time went on, you know. You had to be more responsible and, you know, driving--drinking and driving, and stuff like that. So, the parties really, really tamed down over the last twenty years or so. I mean, really, compared to the way we used to have parties.

Q: What do you think caused that?

WGZ: The general public. You know, driving while intoxicated and everything, in the old days if one of the guys got caught by the Port cops, the cop would probably make him lock the

car up and drive him home, you know. That doesn't happen now.

Q: What happens now?

WGZ: You get locked up. So the drinking in the firehouse went like ... [WHISTLES] ... way down. Way down! I'll tell you.

Q: And when would you say that changed?

WGZ: Probably, even in the '70s, I think the changes started coming about, to tell you the truth. To tell you the truth, yeah.

Q: When did you become Chief?

WGZ: *The* Chief? In '83. I was *the* Chief. And four years before that, I was the Assistant. Work your way up, just like Lieutenant and Captain.

Q: And what did you find the most challenging thing about being the Chief?

WGZ: Oh, like I say, the problems with the personnel. That was it. And I hated going to parades, because you had to look at every guy and make sure that this guy brought the flags and the banner ... And, oh, my God! It was so aggravating to go to a parade or

something like that where people had to--had to look sharp and everything, you know. A guy would come with his uniform jacket and work pants on, a different color. " Why can't I ?" "Out!" you know. And then, he's mad at you for seven years after that because you wouldn't let him parade. And, like I say, I got through it (laughs). I'm still living twenty years later, almost.

Q: What was the best part about it?

WGZ: Firefighting, you know. I don't know why some guys join, but that's why I joined. I wanted--I knew I wanted to fight fires in town. And that's what I did. And that's-- the satisfaction you get from doing a good job is like priceless, you know. It's a very tough job, and if you do it right and everything gets done fast, it makes you happy. And then, you have, of course, friendships. Geez! People I've been friends with over the years is unbelievable. And some, you know, my age, still good friends. It's amazing, really, the friendships when you, say you're jumping out of bed four o'clock on a winter morning, then you crawl through smoke and fire. You get to be friendly, believe me, you know. You depend on each other. And, of course, that carries over to party time and whatever. It's good. It's close friendships.

Q: So the people that you made friends with in the Department are your friends outside of the Department, too.

WGZ: Yes. Too much so, in my case, yeah. I more or less narrowed everything down. All my friends were in the Fire Department, you know. I just didn't have room for outside friends. That's the way I was.

Q: But why is ...

WGZ: I mean, there was plenty of friends. There's like three or four hundred people I could be friends with. So, I wasn't short on friends, but, oh, that's just the way I was. I thought a lot about the Fire Department. I thought it was important. These were all people in my same general, you know, financial situation and stuff like that. So, I had a lot of good friends.

Q: But why do you say it's too much so, that you ...

WGZ: Well, that was me, you know. I never went to college or anything. I was always a home boy. I lived in Port all my life. I liked it that way. I just didn't branch out to, like coming to the library or whatever else you might do at a VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. I never joined anything like that. Just the Fire Department. That was it. So ...

Q: I've heard firefighters talk about a "good" fire. What would you--have you ever heard that?

WGZ: Well, if it was your house, you would say it was a bad fire. Put it that way, you know.

And we know when it's a really tough fire and everything, when you get experienced, and you know when you did a good job or when you screwed up a little bit, and the fire, you know, burned an extra thirty seconds or something. That's what we mean about a good fire. A good job or something. We call them "jobs", which is a bad fire.

Q: And what makes a good firefighter?

WGZ: You got me. I don't know. I couldn't tell you. Because people join for so many--in a volunteer situation. Some people that join the Fire Department, I don't know why they joined the Fire Department, because they never did diddly for us, but, you know, you'd see them standing out on the front lawn at every fire. Never take part, like other people wanted to. And, but they were in the Fire Department, so some of them became good administrative people, and some, you know, it's very different. Either you had the gung-ho guy. You had---most of the people are middle guys. They'll go into a fire, but they're not crazy about it. And then you get--always got a couple of guys that are just never--never into it, you know. They go to all the training and scheduled stuff like that, but when it comes to the actual, you know, diving in there and doing the job, you just never see them there. People's personalities, I guess, you know. And there's no way for the Fire Department to know they're not going to be hot-shots. How do you know? I've seen some guys join and said, "Look at this guy. He's never going to get ..." you know, twerpy little guy or something, skinny little runt. And he can end up being the Chief, you know.

So you can't tell by people. You don't know what their attitudes are going to be when they're faced with the pressure situations where their necks could get broken or something, you know. You just don't know. And you got to feed them in there little by little, and let them do more and more, and hopefully they'll take off.

Q: What was the hardest fire you ever fought?

WGZ: Oh, my God! In forty-something years?

Q: Well, what--let's put it differently. What are some of the fires that you remember, the memorable ones?

WGZ: Geez. Well, when I was Chief, we had a really bad fire on Shore Road between Manhasset Avenue and Manorhaven Boulevard in that row of stores. That was a really bad fire, but we did an excellent job that day. When you're Chief, you're standing outside, you see, so this is different. You get an overall view. But I suppose when you're--when you're really new, that's when you're really like a hero because you don't know what you're doing, and you're immediately crawling around inside some house that you can't see. And, I mean, you can bet I've seen a lot of fires in forty-something years. So, I've had some bad situations, but I never got hurt badly, so I lucked out that way.

Q: Were you ever ...

WGZ: I remember--I'll tell you for sure the one--the one worst fire was when we lost a fireman up here on Main Street, 165 Main Street. That was in 1988.

Q: What happened?

WGZ: Went in to make a search, and he ran out of air, and that was it. And he was a city fireman, too. Fairly experienced city fireman. He was a fireman here first, and then he got in the city. But that was--for us to lose a fireman was like, ugh! what's happening here.

Q: What was his name?

WGZ: Bobby Dayton.

Q: And were you at that fire?

WGZ: Sure.

Q: Yeah. So, what happens when you lose a fireman?

WGZ: Oh, it's gut-wrenching, believe me. A lot of crying, a lot of shaking your head, you

know. I mean, you know it's dangerous, but of all people, you wouldn't think that Bobby Dayton, with all his experience and everything in the city, that he would--we'd lose him. But we did. And the ironic thing was the guy that was with him making the search was a rookie fireman from my company. And he gets out; Bobby Dayton didn't get out. I prefer not to think about it, to tell you the truth. You know, the whole big funeral thing and everything. Wife and kids.

Q: How old was he?

WGZ: Bobby must have been in his twenties at the time, I'm sure. Maybe late twenties, yeah. I had just gone to a fire with him like the week before. A car fire or something. He was driving, and I was riding in the front seat next to him. It was nothing, but, you know, we were conversing on the way and on the way back and touching base with each other. Then he's gone. That was certainly the worst fire. That's for sure.

Q: How do you ensure clear communication at a fire? You know, from one firefighter to somebody who may be in a different part of the building?

WGZ: Well, that depends mostly on how many officers we have available, because they wear the radios. The walkie-talkies. Hand-helds or portables--whatever you call them. So, each rig would have a portable for the officer, a portable in the back for the firefighters, and a portable for the driver of the rig. So that's basically how you do it. But, I mean,

most fires, you can talk face-to-face. You know, if the guy's in the next room, you walk over to the door, and you say--that's the best way, because radios, as great as they are nowadays, you got to work a fire, and people talking at the same time, you know (laughs), it's crazy, I'm telling you. Everybody's trying to talk at the same time, because they think what they want to say is the most important thing. People get stepped on. Very seldom, at a really large, bad fire, you don't get radio interference between, you know, because of the timing. You know what I'm saying. That's how we, you know, you communicate. I always thought the best deal was just to talk face-to-face, you know. But, when you're a long ways away from, say, the command post, which is where the Chief would be, you can't just yell, so you--you have the radios. We have good radios, which is if you really read about 9/11, the communication problems there, well, I'll tell you, if you go to a one alarm fire in the city with all the units that are there--five or six units--your own crew is stepping on each other, talking at the same time. So you can imagine the number of fire truck, fire radios that were in that fire at the time. No wonder they couldn't communicate. Everybody was trying to talk at the same time. It's just overwhelming, you know. That's what was wrong. And you're never going to change it. I mean, that, you can't possibly change it. So, radio communication is the thing. And we get--here, we have very good radio communication. Although they put--gee, we have three different radios in each truck now. I'll tell you, it's so confusing. And they say it's not confusing. The Chief tells you, "Oh, no. That's the way ..." Baloney! You're driving that truck and there's three different radios talking at the same time? It's crazy. But I think it used to be better when we just had one set of radios, one frequency. But that's

what they want, so ...

Q: What are they? Three different kinds of radios?

WGZ: Frequencies. Different frequencies. Yeah, there's three different radio heads in the truck, and, you know, I don't know. I can't keep up with it. I'm trying to listen to the one I'm supposed to be listening to and somebody else is talking on the other radio. It's very confusing.

Q: So ...

WGZ: Not something once you get out of, step out of the truck, but when you're in the truck, you have those three radios and (laughs), it's crazy.

Q: There are--and different people are talking on each ...

WGZ: Yeah.

Q: ... of the three radios.

WGZ: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Whatever radio. You know, we have procedures, but sometimes you want to be off the main radio so you can say something. The Chief or somebody will get

on that radio and he'll be talking while you're trying to talk, and it's weird, I'll tell you.

That's the only bad thing--we got too many radios.

Q: You mentioned 9/11. How was the Port Washington Fire Department affected by 9/11?

WGZ: Well, first of all, we have city cops and city firemen that are members here, all right?

That day, not one of them got a scratch. Most were off. Off work. And we had one guy in sort of a rescue company. His firehouse lost eighteen members, but he was home, off work that day. Thank God. And the other fellows that were working that day were far enough away that they didn't get called in before the collapse, you know, so they weren't in the building. And, as volunteers, we went in, you know, to help with the initial rescue effort and everything. Matter of fact, *National Magazine* had a big long pull-out picture of them passing one of the dead--I guess it was a fireman. I don't know. You can't tell that. But a big long line of firemen passing the stretcher down, and our guys were right in the middle of that picture. You see PECO on there and PWFD. They worked. They went there, and they did a good job. They were crawling around under the rubble and everything. One guy crawled so far down he came out in the subway and walked down the ramp and came out the regular steps of the subway. They thought they lost him, but he was just walking around down there. Now, myself, I didn't get to go in there. I was working, and by the time I got back to Port Washington, you know, they were already gone and everything. They wouldn't send me in. I'm too old, anyway, to be crawling around in steel girders and stuff like that. So they sent the young studs in there, you

know. Got the physical prowess still.

Q: Is there any kind of age limit? Formal age limit? You know ...

WGZ: Oh, well you work ...

Q: ... on the job sending you out?

WGZ: Well, sixty-five, you can't drive any apparatus after that. But, you could still go to fires and help whatever you could, you know. But at sixty-five, what are you going to do? You're not going to be going inside the fire after you're sixty-five. You just--you've had it by then. But that's about it. Seventeen to get in. I could be a hundred and still be in the fire company, you know. But that's not going to be my case, because I got to get out of here when I retire and move out. I won't be able to afford living here.

Q: When you retire ...

WGZ: Not without a job.

Q: ... from your work?

WGZ: From work.

Q: What kind of work are you doing now?

WGZ: Now, for the last nine years, I've been driving a school bus for Manhasset Schools.

Before that, twenty-nine years I worked for Lewis Oil, which is--was a local oil company. It has since been moved out to Plainview. I left them. I just couldn't do that work anymore. It was too much.

Q: What were you doing for them?

WGZ: I was an oil burner serviceman. Worked on the oil burners. Disgusting work, really. It was tough.

Q: Why? What was tough about it?

WGZ: I mean, you're in people's basements. You're down on your knees. You had soot, and oh! it was crazy. Carrying heavy stuff all the time. No wonder I got a bad back. So, I finally said, well, I got the three kids through college. I'm almost done paying off the loans. I think it's time for me to do something a little less physically taxing. So, I got over there, and after I started working there, I said, boy, when I came out of high school, I should have started doing this. I said I'd have been in much better shape by now. It's a hell of a lot easier driving a bus than it is doing oil burners, I'll tell you.

Q: How did your being a firefighter fit in with your work for Lewis or for the Manhasset School District?

WGZ: Well, with the school bus, obviously I'm out of town for the day. So--and I work a lot of overtime, so--I have been anyway. That's changing. So, when I was out. I was out, you know, couldn't do anything. But when I worked for Lewis Oil, well in the beginning anyway, I started there in '67? Yeah, '67. About half the working force then, it was members of Protection Engine Company. And we went to fires, you know. Then, later on, toward the end of my career, there, they got bought out by this company and that company. Very impersonal. And people came in from Connecticut to run the thing, and they--shall we say--frowned on me leaving-- leaving work to go fight a fire, knowing that I was getting paid. You could see their point, but I snuck out whenever I could. The boss gave me the bad eye many a time. So, that's the name of that deal. Twenty-nine years. Figured I was going to work there till I was sixty-five. Couldn't handle it.

Q: And you said that when you retire from your job at Manhasset, you think you'll have to move out of town?

WGZ: Oh, definitely. Definitely. I'm one of those dummies that didn't buy a house till he was-- well, late in life. So I'll still have a mortgage to pay. Not a lot, but some. Over time, school taxes going up and everything, I mean, without a job and no money coming in,

there's very little money coming in. Florida sounds good to me. Huh? Move down there to live cheap. Jump in my car, run down and jump on a cruise cheap, any time I want, I'm going to love it. I'll tell you. But, you know, you got to--you need a new life once in a while, you know. I've lived here all my life. Raised kids. Fire Department. It's time for--so, when I get up in the morning down there, I'll have something--"Oh, look! We can do this! We haven't done this," you know. But here, we've done everything. Let's face it. I'm going to be nothing like the guy--old guys at the firehouse, but if I stay here, I'm going to be getting up eight or nine in the morning. Then, I'm going to wash up and go up to the firehouse and sit with the boys for a couple of hours. And then it'll be lunch. It'll be like a routine every day. You know, same thing that they do. I'm not doing that. I'm just not doing it. Go down, and I'm the kind of guy that likes to see where I live. Find places and everything. See new places. So that'll be great, you know. Then I'll die. All works out, I guess.

Q: So your wife thinks this is a good idea, too?

WGZ: Yeah. Not as good as I think it is, but because, I don't know, we don't have any grandchildren yet, but once that's--that's going to be tough when we get grandchildren. My daughter lives in Larchmont now, and trying. And my youngest son lives here. He's a cop in Port. He's not married yet, but he's, I would say he's not too far from getting engaged, possibly getting engaged. My other son moved to Colorado. So, once the grandchildren come, I know it's going to be hard to get to Florida, but I'm going to do it.

I might be alone. I might be coming down there by myself.

Q: How did your firefighting career affect your family life?

WGZ: Not well.

Q: In what way?

WGZ: Because I was very active, you know. My wife hated the Fire Department, even though she was the daughter of a fireman in my own company. We got married. I really put a lot into it. A lot of time into it. So, and I raised three kids, you know. They all grew up. None of them were drug addicts or anything like that, or criminals. They seemed to get along in life all right. Now my wife and I have it better. You know, the empty nest. It's nice. The empty nest is nice, even though we only have one kid really close. We hardly see him, because, you know, why would he want to come out and see us? He's got a girlfriend now. But, it was tough, I'll tell you. But my wife and I made it through somehow. Now, we're better friends than we used to be. For a while, I should say that I slowed down a lot with the Fire Department too, because I'm old now. I'm in my sixties. I'm sure not jumping out of bed in the middle of the night anymore like I used to, or going to meetings--three or four meetings a week and stuff like that. I'm just not doing that anymore.

Q: But you were just at a meeting in Michigan relating to the fire ...

WGZ: Wisconsin. Yeah, we just got back yesterday.

Q: And was that Fire Department business?

WGZ: ... Oh yeah, yeah.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit ...

WGZ: We bought a new truck, a new pumper. And this was the last visit. We went out to see the truck. Make sure that everything was up to specifications on the truck. So, now, today, as a matter of fact, it's on its way back. It's probably like in Ohio now, or coming through Pennsylvania. We went to Appleton, Wisconsin. That's where we went. So we also--the committee, we have a committee that, you know, does the specifications on the truck and all with the truck. And I was committee chairman two new trucks ago, all right? And we were looking at all different manufacturers, and we settled on this one that we thought was the best. So I was the chairman of that committee. But, turns out when we had the trip to go out to Appleton then, I had just started the bus driving job, so I couldn't very well ask them for time off, all right? So I didn't get to go. And then the next truck, we bought another truck from the same manufacturer, and something else happened--a wedding or something. I couldn't go then. So, finally, they throw me a bone

and let me go with them this time. I finally got to see an amazing, amazing place. I'll tell you, it's huge, do such beautiful work on the equipment and everything. I was staggered by it, really.

Q: What's the name of the company?

WGZ: Pierce Fire Apparatus. They're probably the best now. See, my company always used to scrimp on the trucks we bought. We bought--we didn't buy the Cadillacs in the fleet; we bought like the Chevys of the fleet, you know. But now, now we said, look, the other companies are buying all top-notch, you know, top-notch equipment and we're buying these--not rickety; they're all right, there's nothing wrong with them, but, you know, they cost a lot and we're trying to save the taxpayers some money. Now, we said, "Look, in a way they're right, because you get what you pay for," you know. A better rig, you could do more. So now we went to Pierce. I was in the--when was I chairman. I guess, '96, we got the truck? Yeah, late '96. I was chairman around that time. So that committee was hard, because we were looking at all different manufacturers, going all over the Island, looking at--going to firehouses, you know. Now, the next two committees, we brought up--we knew we were going to buy Pierce, so then you start--they knew what the old truck was like; they just made adjustments to what they wanted. Now, this one was a piece of cake, really, this last one, for the committee.

Q: So, how much does a truck cost?

WGZ: Oh, Geez! This one is almost a half a million dollars, I guess, this one. I think the one I--that in '96, I think, was like 325 or something. And we really didn't add or make it that much bigger compared to that one, but the prices just skyrocketed. What we saw, too, when we were there is that they're doing a lot of work for the government with the hazardous material and home protection and all that stuff. Big tractor trailers, huge compartments—oh my God, the stuff they have there. The Navy had three trucks out there for Japan, where the steering wheel's on the right. Pump operator's panel was on the right side of the truck instead of the left, you know, like we have. We have them on the left. It was interesting. But the controls were in English. So I guess it must be an American driving the thing. So, it's amazing what they make. Amazing. I'm still--my head is still spinning. You know, walking around those factories, they got such a huge factory. See how they come together and put everything together; it comes out at the same time. Painting, and oh! It's sickening, really, and I'm not a mechanic. But I can see the--God! the problems they must have keeping everything on the assembly lines flowing smoothly, you know, and come out with a high quality product, besides.

Q: So, how much of a difference do you think that will make to fighting fires here in Port Washington, having the new rig?

WGZ: Well, this will--you see, the rigs are so much more sturdy and everything. They're built to last longer than the kind that we used to buy. We used to buy a Ford truck and put a

fire pump on it, a hose bed and stuff. Basically, that's the way we used to do things. Try to--but they used to wear out, you know. They couldn't take the beating. Then they realized in a volunteer situation where you have all kinds of different guys driving the truck, and that doesn't help. But now, well, once we went to automatic transmissions and diesel engines, and that made a big difference, yeah. The trucks are a lot bigger than our old trucks, but they're so much easier to drive, really, if you really look at it. Much longer, much higher. But they're easier to drive because of the, you know, power steering, all that good stuff. Makes it a lot easier.

Q: You talked about how the other companies were, you know, buying the more expensive machines. How much competition is there among the four companies in the Port Washington Fire Department?

WGZ: Well, first of all, you can't consider Fire Medics as competition, because they're ambulance, you know. Nowadays? Very little competition. But when I got in, we were Fire Department in name only. We were three companies. When that horn blew, you watch out, because we were going to get there first, you know. Oh! What competition! Unbelievable. You know, even to go up to walk into somebody else's firehouse was a big thing, you know. You walked from your company and stopped up at Flower Hill, that was a big thing in those days, you know, because you weren't from Flower Hill. Nowadays, with even the operation--I'm sure somebody else has told you about the way the operation has changed over the years because of lack of manpower and everything ...

[END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: ... about the competition between the fire companies when you started.

WGZ: Well, that's the way of everything now. Because we all come out of one firehouse during the day. We have like five firehouses in the town. But you got to the point with manpower that you'd have a house fire during the day and you'd get three guys to one firehouse and two to another, three to another, which really isn't enough to even roll one truck, you know. So, you're all sitting around waiting and waiting. So they figured putting two pumpers and a ladder truck and a rescue truck into one big firehouse, everybody'd come to one firehouse and we'd get the truck out. So that's what they do now. That brought us all closer together, although I'm not telling you that we were like enemies or something, that we didn't want to--that wasn't the case. But it was very segregated between the companies in those days, up until probably the '80s, we started getting together, realizing that people really--in the town--really don't care what name it says on the side of the fire truck, as long as the fire truck shows up at their house when they want it. So it became gradually more department oriented, and that's where we are today. Holding on.

Q: So today ...

WGZ: Still trying to hold off from paid firemen, you know.

Q: Where does everybody congregate?

WGZ: Well, socially, in your own firehouse. It's just a matter of where you go when the fire whistle blows.

Q: No, but that's what I mean, when the fire whistle blows.

WGZ: That's the Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company on Carlton Avenue, because they have, by far, the biggest firehouse. It's big enough to hold four pieces of apparatus. None of the other houses could do that. And basically, too, it's more centrally located than any other firehouse.

Q: In the earlier days, how would you decide which company would respond to a fire?

WGZ: We all responded. Fire horn blew, we didn't have radios in our houses or anything to tell us where the fire was. That's how you got the calls. Fire alarm blew, the whistle blew, whatever, for a general alarm. You ran to the nearest firehouse and away you go.

Q: Was there any pattern in the way the fire horns blew to tell you ...

WGZ: Oh, yes.

Q: ... where the fire was or ...

WGZ: Oh, no, no. Where it was? No, not location.

Q: So what did it do?

WGZ: Type of alarm, which was what they, in the old days, called a “still alarm”. That was a lesser alarm--say, car, brush, something like that. Something minor, you know. And then you'd have the general alarm for a structural fire. Or a general alarm if you, say, you had started out with a still alarm for a brush fire and it got out of hand, you'd blow a general alarm and you get more people out. That was simple. And the ambulance also had some blasts on the horn to get the ambulance out.

Q: Do they now, or did the three companies have any different kinds of customs? You know, like would they have--would you have your own song, or your own mottos or ...

WGZ: Nah, nothing like that. Nothing like that. Just a bunch of personalities, I guess you'd call it. You know, that was the main thing. And, of course, Atlantic's was different, because they were the ladder company. So they really didn't have any competition, because the other two companies didn't have a ladder, you know, big ladder on their truck. So the competition was mainly between Flower Hill and Protection, because they both had--did

the same job in a fire, you know. That was really the competition with it.

Q: And the competition ...

WGZ: And we would all bad-mouth each other all the time. That was commonplace.

Q: Were the ceremonies different in the different firehouses?

WGZ: Say what? Swearing in and stuff like that? No, no. They were very, very similar. Very, very similar. You know, a lot of tradition in the fire company. So, back in the '20s or teens even, when the 19-teens, when the companies were formed, very small community, so the fire companies were very much the same, I think, you know, and did the same things. And that, a lot of that holds true, you know. Just carries through. You just hope the firefighting doesn't go that way because we'd be at a loss now if we tried to put out a house fire with buckets. You know, we'd be a little out of place. So those improvements obviously happened in a period of years.

Q: Were you ever at a fire where one of the people in the house was injured?

WGZ: Oh, sure. Killed, sure. Definitely.

Q: Yeah.

WGZ: Three kids we lost back in the '60s. We didn't lose them. They were dead before the whistle blew most likely. But, yeah, every once in a while, that happens also. It's not pretty. Believe me, it's not pretty. Especially if you go in there and find them, you know.

Q: Have you ever had to do that? Go in there and find them?

WGZ: Oh, sure. Uh huh. A few times. It kind of leaves--gives you nightmares for a while, you know, till you--it wears off eventually. Couple of the gory sights that you see.

Q: Do you still ever dream about fires?

WGZ: Dream? No. Not about fires, no. Nope. Too old for that, now. I mean, let's face it, after a while, fires don't leave as big an impression on you, you know. When you've been in longer, you've seen them. Then you just do your work, and you're much better off than when you were young and running around like a headless chicken at a fire, all impressed by the flame and everything. You get used to it, and that's how, you know, when you become an officer, you have to get used to it. You got to keep your head more, so.

Q: As an officer and chief, are you expected to go to every fire in town?

WGZ: Yes, you're expected to. Nobody can do that, but that's why we have three Chiefs and

company officers.

Q: And after the fires, what kind of critique would you have in the Department to talk about how things were done?

WGZ: Well, informally, within your company, you'd always talk about it. You'd probably talk about right after you brought the trucks back to the firehouse, you know. Did something go wrong, or, you know, could it have been done better? But, at the Department level, we have officers' meetings every month. So, specifically designed to talk about firefighting, you know. What do we do? Should we adjust this, or, you know, change the operation? Very good. But you really should do that right after it happens, because once you get--say, we have an officers' meeting, and then the next day you have a fire, well, by the time a month goes by, people's memories get skewed around a little bit, you know. What happened here or there. It's a hard thing to do in a volunteer system. It really is.

Q: So what kind of things, though, did you learn in talking about the fires afterwards? You know, what ...

WGZ: Oh, God, are you kidding? There's a thousand things, I mean, that could go wrong in a fire or a thing that pops up at a fire that you never ran into before.

Q: Like what?

WGZ: You're always talking about it. Like when we started to get into plastics in the houses and stuff like that, how the fires became deadly. I mean, you heard the term "smoke-eaters," right? Well, smoke-eaters was before people's houses started loading up with plastics and stuff. Because when plastic burns, melts, you can't take a breath of that smoke. You'd go down right away. But when it used to be all wooden products in a house and paper and stuff, well, some guys could take a little smoke, you know. They could breathe for a while and knock the fire out. Just didn't bother your lungs as much as plastics do. It's stuff like that you learn as you go along, you know. When I got in, there wasn't that much really plastic. But it probably was just starting really, early '60s. But then everything in the house is plastic all of a sudden. You get this wicked black smoke and everything. You're just not breathing it. One breath and you're heading for the door. And they taught you all that. But when I got in, it was so long ago we barely had air masks really, to tell you the truth. The ones you see now with the air tanks on the firemen's backs, which is what everybody uses now. Protection only had one in the whole company when I got in. Most were just a filter mask. You breathed in through the bottom of this thing, you know. The mask and the hose, and it was attached to a canister, which had like charcoal filters in there and stuff. So you breathed the smoke in and it was filtered. You could taste it, believe me (laughs), because it was coming up, but that's what we used. The very light-weight, strapped in front of you. I loved them. Geez, they were--because everything I wanted to do, I wanted to do fast in those days. So, getting

that tank on your back in those days, that thing weighed a ton. It was very restricting, though. That then, you know, you evolve. You know, you evolve as the technology evolves and all, fire services in general. We see all that, so now, of course, we have the most up-to-date breathing apparatus that you could have. That's what happens with the Fire Department. People keep making things better and better supposedly, and manpower gets worse and worse somehow. I don't know.

Q: Well, what exactly does the term "smoke-eater" mean?

WGZ: Well, that comes from the old days when they didn't have masks, like I told you. If you wanted to go into the fire, you had to eat some smoke. You know, you had to breathe smoke. Of course, you got down at floor level if you could to keep ahead of the smoke, keep your face out of the smoke. But you were bound to breathe some smoke in the old days. They just didn't have the equipment. Period.

Q: Do the firefighters have more lung problems than ...

WGZ: Oh, sure.

Q: ... people in the general population?

WGZ: Sure, not nowadays, maybe, because everybody wears breathing protection, you know.

That's mandated. You don't go into a smoky fire without wearing breathing apparatus nowadays. And that's compressed air that you're breathing. So basically, you should never get smoke in there. But they all do it. After the fire is knocked down and they want to open the walls and check for fire, they--you know, the room clears out, you take the mask off. Because that kind of work is very demanding, physically demanding. ... Poking holes in ceilings and pulling down. So you don't want to have that tank on your back, if you can help it. It's just a matter of clearing the room out. But there's always smell of smoke, you know. Nothing that you can't handle. So that's the deal now with firefighting.

Q: So, when you would come home after a fire, would you smell from the smoke and ...

WGZ: Of course. Of course. Like a skunk, you smelled. Yep. I mean, you might have just took a shower an hour before the fire whistle blew, and two hours later, you're back taking another shower, you know. Clothes all stinky. It's all part of the job.

Q: How do you think the Fire Department is perceived by the general public?

WGZ: Ahhhh---by the general public in Port Washington, I don't think they even know we exist, to tell you the truth. That's the way I feel. Because most of the town is people who've moved in, you know, haven't lived here all their life. They're probably in their thirties and they buy a house here and maybe lived in the city where they had paid

firemen. You know, it's crazy. Do you ever think about the Fire Department till you're house goes on fire? Not really. Maybe you see them in the parade, Memorial Day or whatever. Some people think we're jerks for doing it, you know. Some people think we're heroes, which we're not, but ...

Q: Well, people whose houses you've been called to, do they show their appreciation in any way?

WGZ: Yeah. Of course, they're going to be thankful you helped them out, you know. And people are people, you know. Really. Some people, they call you, and you got to go check--check their house, make sure there's no fire or something. They don't want you to go in because you have your boots on, you know. They don't want to get their rugs dirty. That's the way it is. People are different. You know, some people, "Oh, come in. Check my house. We got ..." Some weird situations you get into (laughs), I guess, with people.

Q: What are some of the weirdest?

WGZ: Oh, just the way--in an emergency--you know, even if somebody's house isn't really burning but their alarm system went on, people can really freak out, you know. They come running out of the house like there's smoke, and there's absolutely nothing. It's just a malfunction of their system, you know, that's going off. People react to emergencies so

different, you know. Some are cool. Some are not. Then, of course, we do the ambulance service. You see a lot of stuff there. I was never heavily involved in the ambulance side; that's for sure. You know, I would drive the ambulance when I was younger, and stuff like that. But I was mainly into the firefighting. But they get to see some gory stuff, I guess, you know. People at their worst. Going to somebody's house whose loved one is dying or something, it's hard, you know. Trying to work with people screaming at you all, and crying. That's what doctors don't realize. They're always working in a sterile environment, you know. But these people that do the ambulance work, they're crawling into burning cars and doing all this stuff out in the cold and everything. Then, when you bring them to the hospital--"Oh, thank you very ..." you know, they can't understand it. They're in this nice, warm hospital, all the equipment sitting right there. These people that do the fire medic work, I'll tell you, it's tough. Tough work. Constant recertification and everything. Hours-- you know, a hundred hours. Freaks me out when I think about all the time they have to put in.

Q: Did you yourself ever go to car accidents and ...

WGZ: Oh, certainly. Certainly.

Q: ... things like that, you know.

WGZ: Yeah, not so much as an ambulance personnel, but as a firefighter, you know. What we

call “pin jobs”, which is when somebody's trapped in a car. That's just a term we use-- people pinned. That's a pin job. And we have to go to--we go to a lot of them. Matter of fact, now--nowadays, we go to all automobile accidents. We respond. That really upped our calls a lot too, when we did that. My thought was with all the proliferation of cell phones that why don't you wait till somebody calls in and tells you that the car's on fire, that somebody's trapped, that somebody, you know, instead of rolling out immediately and using up a lot of manpower. And we've got, what? four, five accidents a day in Port Washington that if we get the call we go out on it. Most of them, we just turn around and come back because they don't--it's minor, you know. What I'm saying is with all the cell phones, why don't we wait till somebody calls in and says "Listen, this guy's really, you know, trapped in the car," or the car overturned, and then we could go. But, you know, that's the way we do it, though. It's automatic.

Q: So you go even it's a little fender bender.

WGZ: Even if it's nothing. Well, it's the same, if you think about it, it's the same way with fires.

Fire calls, fire alarms. Most of them are nothing. But we have to go.

Q: So you mentioned your nickname in the Department which ...

WGZ: Well, see, my father was a fireman. He's William C., and I'm William G., so they had to like differentiate. So they started calling me “Willy” instead of Bill, which I was called

most of the time when I was growing up.

Q: And there was a number on that, too, wasn't there?

WGZ: Yes, because ...

Q: Now, what ...

WGZ: ... actually, it was--when I went in as Chief, then we had this one guy who was giving nicknames to the Chiefs and everything. So I think I was the first one. See, the call letters for the Port Washington Fire Department are 8-5, and then the truck number, or the Chief's number or whatever. And I was "8-5-Willy." And the next guy down the line, his name was Donald so he was "8-5-Ducky." And the next guy was Charles, so he was "8-5-Chuckie." And all these crazy nicknames, they give you. So, most of the guys almost always called me "8-5-Willy" or "Willy." Certainly "Willy." Nobody calls me "Bill" or "Billy" anymore for the last forty years or so. Now, another one I had was "W.G.," because my father was "W.C.," so the guys used to call me "W.G." Nicknames are silly things, and you never give yourself your own nickname. Somebody else gives it to you, so you got it. That's the way it was.

Q: Were there any other kinds of silly things that you remember going on in the Department? You know, jokes people would play on each other?

WGZ: Oh, all the time. You have to understand the firehouse mentality. I mean, it's completely different. It's a very tight-knit family, you know. Nobody is above getting put down or-- I mean, from what I understand, in the city, it's even worse, you know. Because those guys are really smaller in number and really, really tight. They work the same shifts together and everything, so they--they really cut each other up, you know. Here, it's the same way, but less, I would say. Just fun.

Q: Like what kinds of things?

WGZ: Ah, geez. You're talking about millions of things, now. You know, nicknames. My friend, Charlie Lang who is now an ex-chief, too, when he was on the racing team, he used to climb the ladder, and he was so bad, I used to call him "Flounder-Foot" all the time because he was so slow climbing the ladder. So, I think, "Flounder" stuck with him forever. And there's this really huge guy in Flower Hill, called, his name was Tom, and so he was "Fat Tom," or "King Farouk." You know, these names, I'll tell you. In my company, we got "Porky-Poo" and "Dirty Harry [Hooper]." Unbelievable, the names they come up with sometimes, you know. Of course, if you have an embarrassing situation and something happened to you, and if somebody finds out about that (laughs), you get some kind of a nickname from that, you know. Something that's applicable to the situation. It's funny sometimes. It really is. I do that myself. I give guys a lot of deprecating nicknames every once in a while.

Q: But, do people take offense at it?

WGZ: Not really. Not really. Maybe at first they would, but then, you know. Like I could have taken offense at being called "Willy," but I was never called "Willy" growing up. But when your friends give you nicknames (laughs), you keep them, you got them. You're stuck with them. And that "8-5-Willy," now that sounds stupid. But then, you know, what am I supposed to say? "Don't call me 8-5-Willy"? If they're going to call me that, that's what they're going to call me. There's worse things I've been called, too. I accept that.

Q: Do you remember any funny calls that you, you know, were called out on for the Fire Department? Any kind of silly things?

WGZ: Funny? It's not really ...

Q: Frivolous things?

WGZ: Oh, I'm sure. How much time we got here? Silly things. I remember once when I was Chief, we were at a kitchen fire and we had a big extinguisher standing in the middle of the kitchen. He bent over to look in the oven to see how it was, and his butt comes down on the handle for the extinguisher and shot the extinguisher all over the kitchen.

Probably did more damage than the fire did. So we were like, "Oh, God!" you know. And breathing that stuff, that dry powder. Oh! You don't want to get that in your lungs. It's worse than smoke, I swear. Funny things. You know, we have conventions and stuff. We go away, we always have fun there. Now that's a great thing, because, to get out of the fire district where you can't hear the fire whistle and you know you don't have to go a fire, it's so relaxing, you know. Because you're on twenty-four hours a day when you're around here, really. People expect you to go... we'd go, let's see, New York State Chiefs' Convention used to be up in the Catskills. We'd go up to Kutsher's for three days. That was so relaxing, you know. Take your wife. No fire whistle blowing. Just play golf. Whatever you wanted to do. No interruptions except to go to meetings, up there. But that wasn't too bad. It's a lot of fun. I always enjoyed the State conventions from the time I was like--before I even got into the fire company, I went up with them once, you know. That was what you looked forward to. Go up there and race with the drill team and convention back to back, so it was like seven days in a row, and that was cool. A lot, a lot of fun. A lot of stories that I'm not going to tell you.

Q: Why not?

WGZ: Because it has nothing to do with history.

Q: (Laughs)

WGZ: It was out of town, so it don't count. It was a lot of fun, though. Some guys got in trouble, but nothing ever really bad.

Q: What are you proudest of in your life as a firefighter?

WGZ: Proudest of? Well, I lasted a really long time at a high rate of activity. Really long, compared to other guys. I mean, you get a guy sometimes he lasts eight years, then he's in the Fire Department for the rest of the time, but he, you know, he just doesn't care and doesn't show up. But I lasted like thirty, thirty-five years going to every little thing, breaking my butt. That's--that's what I feel. I stayed around at a high level, helped, you know, wherever I could. Even after I went out as Chief, I went back to fireman again. Still coming and coming and coming and coming. Training people. So that was probably it. Matter of fact, in, I guess, all three companies--I'm not sure--when you get twenty-five years in the company, you don't have to do anything anymore in the career. You could really like retire, but you'd still be in the company. But the day that I got--the year that I got twenty-five years, I got the award for having the most points in the company. That's like unheard-of, you know, because people don't do that. They just don't stay around that long going to fires and stuff. So, I did that. I wanted to do it, so I did it. But, eventually, old age caught up to me. I've got diabetes. That really knocked me down, had to slow down.

Q: When you say you got the award for the most points, what do you get points for?

WGZ: Fires, meetings, schools. Stuff like that. It's a whole big deal. We have different categories from like rookie to--rookie, then from three years to five, and from five to ten. So, different times, different year slots get in competition every year to see who gets the most points. But me, I had twenty-five years in, and I beat everybody in the company. So that was quite an accomplishment. And I didn't think anything of it, because that's just what I did, you know.

Q: Do you remember how many points you had?

WGZ: No, I don't.

Q: Have you gotten any other awards?

WGZ: Awards? Not really. I got, what do you call it? a "valor medal". Remember the time I was telling you about, the guy got killed, and I helped them drag him out the window. I got a little award for that, which I would rather not have gotten. But I guess that can't be helped now. Awards. Oh, well, when I was forty-three--this was like at the end of my Chiefdom--I had always been a softball player for the Department softball team. But, you know, during the Chief years, you're so busy that you really can't be out there every weekend playing. But anyway, I came back to play softball. I was forty-three, playing with mostly twenty year olds. Guys in their twenties and thirties. And we went up and

won the State championship up by the Firemen's Home up in Hudson, New York. That was my last year. Hung my spikes up after that, and that was it. But I got--I was a state champion. Played every inning of every game. Two games on Saturday and seven on Sunday. Whew! It was very exciting. And I was on the racing team when I was younger, but I quit just before they won their first State championship. They won a couple back in the '60s and '70s. Long time ago, now. So I would have liked to have done that, but the racing team takes up too much time.

Q: But what do you do on the racing team?

WGZ: Well, if you've never seen it, it can't be explained. You have to see it. Some people may have seen it on the "Wide World of Sports." Occasionally, they had the State tournament on there. Something to see. You ought to take a ride, I mean, we have a lot of them during the summer, but you got to spend like six, seven hours there if you want to see the whole thing. It's a long day in the hot sun. They have grandstands for the spectators. It's not real costly. Probably five bucks for the day.

Q: But for like ...

WGZ: You have to see it!

Q: I will. I will. I'm going to go (laughs).

WGZ: You're thinking of fire trucks and everything, well, these aren't really fire trucks there.

Dragsters, more or less, but I'm--I can't (laughs)--if you've never seen it, you have never seen and never heard of it, it can't be explained to you. You have to go see.

Q: Well, okay, but there are going to be people who are going to look at this website or listen to, you know, some of you firefighters talking, and maybe they won't have the chance to go to see it. So how would you explain it to them?

WGZ: Well, it mainly involves two separate fire trucks on each team, which are---- racing cars is what they are, but they're made to look a little bit like fire trucks. We climb ladders. We hook up hose to the hydrant and hit targets. I mean, this is all timed out to one-hundredths of a second with special timing equipment. Very, very tight now, sanctioned, you know, in case somebody breaks a record or something. I'll tell you, if you want to have an interesting afternoon and have a lot of fun, you could go to a tournament. Thousands of people go them, you know, follow them around every week, and like you'd probably have forty, fifty teams running in the tournament. So, basically, they line up, and one goes down and they pick up their equipment. Then the next one goes down. All timed. Electronically timed and everything. It's amazing what these guys can do. But they practice an awful lot to do this.

Q: Do you still go to them?

WGZ: I haven't gone to one in a couple of years now. I used to go them a lot after I quit. It's a long day. Whew! Long days. You know, if you have nothing to do but watch. It's different when you're racing. Once you get doing something, you're preparing to do something. A lot of beer under the bridge, I'll tell you . And it gave me and my friends something to do, you know. Old racing guys. And you always meet guys your own age from other teams that you raced against in the years past, and stuff like that. It's fun. This year, I haven't been yet. I've got to figure out how I'm going to go to a tournament this year. We have one this week on the 3rd of July, but I'll be away so--Block Island. So, I won't be able to go. We have to start doing that again.

Q: Did you ever take your kids to the ...

WGZ: Oh, of course.

Q: Yes.

WGZ: Of course.

Q: Yeah.

WGZ: They went, you know.

Q: Would you want them to be firefighters?

WGZ: Sure. But none of them joined. My youngest is still in town, and he's always wavering on joining, and, you know, he grew up with the radio blasting all over the house and me running out. I don't think he's really too hot to do that, you know. It's a big imposition on you. And he's lasted till he's thirty-one now, so he hasn't joined yet. So, chances are slim. And the other boy's out in Colorado, so he won't do us much good, if he joined.

Q: Well, going back again, how did you get over that initial, basic instinctual fear of fire?

WGZ: Get over it? I never had it, really.

Q: You never had it? You never felt that ...

WGZ: I mean, you're not going to stick your hand in a flame. I'm not talking about that. But as far as from a firefighting standpoint, I don't know. People are different. That's all I can tell you. I wanted my nose to be right in there every time, if I could, you know. That's the way I was. So I wouldn't say I was fearful of anything, really. I figured, the other guys are going to be around, you know, telling me what to do, or show me. So I was always ready to go.

Q: Did you have anything that you did for good luck? Any charms or ...

WGZ: Nah, nah. No, nothing at all.

Q: And did you ever save objects from a burning house? You know, like photos or things like that?

WGZ: Yeah, that happens once in a while, sure. But that's mainly--see, that's mainly the job of the ladder company. Because when you get there on the first pumper, you're busy just trying to put the fire out. But I've--I've done that, you know, before. Maybe took a couple of people out of the house that didn't want to leave, or whatever, but ...

Q: They didn't want to leave?

WGZ: Oh, one guy was drunk on a couch, set the couch on fire. He was still laying on the couch when we got there. He didn't get burned. I don't know how he didn't get burned, but these are all just things you, you know ...

Q: Now with something like ...

WGZ: ... when you live as long as I have, then they all blur into one sometimes, you know. Then, all of a sudden, you'll think of some--oh, I remember that. Oh, yeah. I remember.

But you don't remember, unless somebody mentions it, half the time.

Q: Were there any things that you learned as a firefighter that you think helped you in your other life, with your family or your work life?

WGZ: Maybe driving. Driving the apparatus. I mean, I did--well, I'm driving the school bus now, and I drove when I first started at Lewis Oil. I drove oil trucks for a while. So that was probably the biggest, you know, even though the trucks weren't that big back in the days, just know how to drive and stuff like that. And it kind of, I don't know, fighting fires, it kind of makes the rest of your life, you don't get fazed by a lot of, you know--you get fazed less by stuff other people would get fazed by, because you're used to dangerous situations, you know, seeing hectic things go on. And I think it kind of helps you in your regular, everyday life. If you run into a situation where it's not Fire Department-related or something, you're probably better able to handle it. If your kid falls down and scrapes his knee or something, maybe your wife's going bananas, but--or like my son breaks his arm playing hockey, then I knew it was bad but I didn't get terribly upset. If my wife had been there, she'd have been doing back flips, you know. So, it helps you. I think. I don't know. But I got to say, some people join and they never change. They're just as excitable twenty years after they've been in as they were when they got in. I guess how you approach it is different. You know, the reasons you get in. I know a lot of guys got in just for the camaraderie and stuff like that, but and then you're going to be lucky if they're good firemen. Sometimes that doesn't work. It's hard. A hundred people in one

company. And that's just my company. The other one's got a hundred and the other one's got a hundred and twenty-five. That's a lot of people to coordinate. And we work it out here, though. We're very aggressive in this town. Our firefighters always very aggressive, you know. Some people feel--some people might feel that you're not getting paid so you're not aggressive, you know. You don't really care. But that's not the case.

Q: And aggressive in ...

WGZ: Sometimes they're more ...

Q: ... what way?

WGZ: Sometimes we're more aggressive, because that's why we joined, to be aggressive. Well, aggressive fighting a fire. Going in and putting a fire out, you know. Different Departments have different things where maybe they stand outside and dump water in a window and stuff, but we go inside and put the fire out from the inside, all the time. That's just the way we did things. And I guess that old competition is really what made it like that, you know. So, if your company got there first and you weren't aggressive and pushed your way into the fire, some day the next company would get there and take the line over for you. Then, you'd have to hide your tail between your legs for a couple of weeks till everybody forgot about it. So, competition was a big thing back then. Whew! Really big. Oh, we had three different racing teams back then, and each company had its

own racing team. So there's another competition, that was really competition. Now we have one. Folded into one. And that was a lack of manpower too, because, well, you know, '60s and '70s, and people started having those--have two jobs and then less people. Less people on the racing team. So we figured we'd consolidate into one racing team from the Department, and that did help. It helped a lot.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

WGZ: Oh, you're very welcome.

Q: Is there anything you think that we haven't touched on that you think is important you'd like to talk about?

WGZ: You know, I could spend fifty hours here if I really thought about it, you know. But ...

Q: Okay.

WGZ: ... if I think of something, then, you know, maybe I'll ...

Q: You can call me.

WGZ: ... tell one of the other guys to tell you (laughs).

Q: (Laughs)

WGZ: But not about that. No, no. Don't tell her about that.

Q: Okay, well, thank you so much for a wonderful interview.

WGZ: It was fun. It was fun.

Q: I really appreciate it.

WGZ: Good. Thank you, Sally. I appreciate it.

Q: Thank you, Bill.