

Today is May 13, 2009, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Ron Burke from the Aroma Fire Protection District. We are discussing Lawrence Thornburg and Edwin Anderson who died in the line of duty in 1958.

AG: Can you tell me about the history of the Aroma Fire Protection District?

RB: We bought one truck, it was an old '49 Ford, and we had a one-bay wooden garage with meeting room upstairs, and then we built a two-bay block building in back of it. The wooden building is not there anymore. We built a new fire station where this station is at now, and it was burnt, and they rebuilt it in the same location. So they have manned it with bigger and better equipment.

AG: Okay, and can you tell me about your personal service with the fire protection district, and that of your family?

RB: Well, actually I started like a cadet, but it really didn't have a cadet program. So I was here at the department maybe three years before my name actually went on the roll, and that was in '57, I believe. My father was, I believe he was, one of the original members, and he served as [assistant] fire chief for a period of time which I can't tell you the amount of years. My older brother was a captain on the department, and then I also had a brother-in-law that was on the department.

AG: How long did you serve on the department? You are retired now?

RB: Yeah, I'm retired now. I served officially, roughly thirteen and a half years.

AG: Okay. Can you tell me what the department was like in 1958-- what sort of apparatus you had, what the fire station was like?

RB: In '58 it was in the new station because we had just built it. We had two trucks and an equipment truck: the old Ford and then we had another Ford, I think it was a '52, front-mount pump. That's the one that was in the accident.

AG: Okay. How many members were on the department? Do you know off-hand?

RB: I would say, off-hand, probably between twenty and twenty-five.

AG: Okay. And they were all volunteers?

RB: Right.

AG: Okay. What can you tell me about Firefighter Thornburg and Firefighter Anderson-- not just their service within the department, but also their work in the community?

RB: Well, Thornburg, he went by “Thorny,” and most people didn’t know his real first name, so that was Thorny. He was crippled real bad with arthritis, but he was always there for every practice. Whenever something was to be done, he was there to help with it. Ed Anderson, he owned the grocery store right next door to the fire station, and he made probably ninety percent of all of the calls. He was usually around close, for a daytime fireman, which we were always short of.

AG: Okay. Can you please describe the incident in which these firefighters died in the line of duty?

RB: It was a small grass fire on Hieland Road, and we had pulled the booster line off and it was laying in the ditch. Myself and Melvin Nourie, which was a captain, we were pulling the hose out of the ditch so it wouldn’t burn because a pin had come out of the pump and they were trying to put the pin back in the pump to get water. They were all standing in front of the truck except me, I was out in front of it, and the car come through the smoke and hit all of us.

AG: Okay, and so this car hit the firefighters and it hit the truck? Was the truck thrown any distance or anything like that?

RB: Yeah, I was the first one hit. I went through the windshield, and when it hit the truck I went back across, out into the ditch. The other firemen were standing directly in front of the truck, and it probably moved the truck fifty to sixty feet to the rear.

AG: Okay, and Firefighter Thornburg was fatally injured immediately, and a number of other firefighters, including yourself, were also injured on-scene?

RB: No, Thorny died maybe an hour-and-a-half, two hours afterwards at the hospital, with massive internal injuries. And Ed died, maybe, I can’t remember the exact time, maybe six-seven weeks afterwards from bone marrow [that] got into his bloodstream.

AG: Okay, and what was the on-scene reaction of the other firefighters after this accident, I guess those who weren’t injured?

RB: Assistant Chief Hubert Spelbring was laying under the truck, so he didn’t get hurt. Captain Nourie was with me, pulling the hose. It just brushed his coat, so he didn’t get hurt. So they were just running around trying to take care of everybody that was hurt. Plus there was a lot of cars stopped, and just average people come over and helped wherever they could.

AG: Okay, do you know how you and the other firefighters made it to the hospital?

RB: They called several ambulances out of Kankakee. As far as I know, that’s the way all of us were transported at that time because we didn’t have an ambulance of our own.

AG: Did the injuries have an immediate effect on responding to this original grass fire?

RB: No, not really. Do you mean the day of the fire or afterwards?

AG: I guess, was the already fire out, or was it mostly out, when the accident occurred?

RB: It was still burning, and I don't know who actually put it out. I know they brought the other truck out there at that time.

AG: Okay, so it was Aroma Fire Protection District firefighters?

RB: Right.

AG: Can you talk about the recovery process for the department, with a number of firefighters injured, and you were hospitalized for some time, correct?

RB: Yeah, I was in the hospital thirty-one days the first time, and then six months later I went back for, I think it was fourteen days, for a bone graft on my leg. The other guys, they had amputations and all sorts of different problems, and some of them never really got back on the department because of their injuries. We kept them on the books for a long time until they decided to retire.

AG: How did this accident, and then the line of duty deaths, affect individuals within the fire protection district, or then, also, within the community?

RB: There was an outpouring of help, monetary, people giving wheelchairs, just anything and everything that could be done people did. I mean, it was just overwhelming. The department, I think it really strengthened them because it brought everybody a little bit closer, and they instituted some more safety rules while they were at it.

AG: Since a number of firefighters were injured, do you remember, did more volunteers join the department to help out during this time?

RB: Yeah, there were a few of them that joined. Back then, you didn't have to be on the department to make a call. I mean, we're talking rudimentary firefighting here. There were some volunteers from town that would, if there wasn't any regular firefighters showing up, they would go on the call. It did bring everybody closer together. We really never had a problem answering calls.

AG: Can you talk about how the organization or the community memorialized Firefighter Thornburg or Firefighter Anderson? Do you remember any details about the funerals or anything?

RB: No. Thorny's was while we were all in the hospital, so none of us got to go to it. Ed, he had a Mason's Funeral, so it was quite elaborate.

AG: And, now, so, the fire protection district has a memorial to these firefighters in the station, is that correct?

RB: Yes, Captain Luke Shepherd has taken the project on, and he put in a lot of work to get everything going. There is a big memorial in the firehouse, and a plaque underneath the memorial also.

AG: Can you describe any changes within your organization as a whole following these line of duty deaths?

RB: Well, we went through a hard problem there for a while because of leadership and everything else, but, overall, I think the department strengthened itself, and it actually grew in size for a little bit there. And we got better equipment, new equipment, and, all in all, it was a blessing in disguise.

AG: You briefly mentioned some safety issues that came out, some changes in some of the safety practices. Do you remember any details about that?

RB: Well, after the accident, the big thing was whenever we had a truck on the road or highway, was to put out road guards to flag traffic, which we never did before. Then we also had a lot of ladder training, hose training, and different stuff like that. It brought the training process into being, actually.

AG: Okay. Is there anything from this incident that would be helpful to today's firefighters?

RB: Well, all I can say is you have to be careful. You have to be on your toes all the time. Expect the unexpected, and wear your safety equipment.

AG: Is there anything else that you would like to share about Firefighter Thornburg or Firefighter Anderson or the Aroma Fire Protection District that we did not cover during this interview?

RB: Well, Thorny kind of kept to himself, so there really wasn't a whole lot of stuff that I could tell you about him. But, Ed, now he loved kids and he supported the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, anything like that. We went down and shoveled snow by hand off of the big bayou so the kids could go down and ice skate one year. And we took a pump down and flooded it so the ice would be nice and smooth. Just all sorts of things like that.