

Today is February 27, 2008, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Ray Hoff from the Chicago Fire Department. We are discussing Thomas Hoff who died in the line of duty in 1962.

AG: Can you tell me about the history of the Chicago Fire Department and your family's history in the fire profession?

RH: Yes, I can. The Chicago Fire Department was a department that became full-time around the time of the Chicago Fire. My family entered into service in the form of my grandfather, Joseph, who was hired as a civilian employee in 1908, and within a couple of years he was a career service, or civil servant employee, firefighter. I have pictures of him as a member of a truck company in the fire gear as far back as 1911 and 1914. He worked until 1936 where he passed on at the age of, I believe, fifty-six years of age, from complications from stomach surgery for ulcers. But his career, he had been a firefighter, lieutenant, and a captain. At the time that Grandpa Joe passed away, he was a captain of Truck 59 which was located at 8200 South Ashland Avenue in Chicago. We have pictures of the dedication of that house. It was a brand new house. They had one of the hook and ladders that he was on was one of the first with the chain-driven Mack apparatus, open cab, etcetera, and the trailer that the ladders were hauled on was just converted from being pulled by horses to being pulled by a tractor.

Then my father started on the fire department in 1945 when he got out of the U.S. Navy. In the time in between, my grandfather's cousins, he had several cousins, Ed and John, and an uncle who were also on the Chicago Fire Department. I'm not very familiar with that side of the family, they had all passed away by the time I became seven or eight years old, and I didn't get to meet them. But my dad came on in 1945 and was a firefighter at Engine Company 61 at 54th and Wabash on the south side, very busy firehouse. He spent time as a lieutenant in the fire prevention bureau, then he went to Rescue Squad 3 as a lieutenant. Later became a captain, he was on Engine Company 59 in the Stockyards, south side of Chicago, and he became a battalion chief in, I believe, 1960. He was in the 8th Battalion, at that time was on the south side at 14th near Halsted Street, 1400 South near Halsted. Then he was reassigned to the assistant drillmaster's position at the Chicago Fire Academy where he instituted training programs, trained candidate firefighters and instructors, and was also a duty officer for extra alarm fires. The upper ranks would alternate days that they would supervise 2-11 alarms or greater. So, there was always a couple duty deputies around the clock available for firefighting and supervision. He was working out of the fire academy the day he died.

Two and a half years after my father passed away in '62, I joined the fire department or got called off the list for the Chicago Fire Department. Went to Rescue Squad 8 after my candidate academy time. Within six months they took the rescue squads out of service, and I transferred to Truck Company 15 at 4600 S. Cottage Grove. Spent about eight years there as a firefighter, and it was the busiest truck company in the city. In 1973 or so, I got promoted to the rank of lieutenant and went to the fire prevention bureau for a short while, then first division relief lieutenant for a year. Then I was assigned to Truck Company 21, which is at School and Greenview in the uptown area. I stayed there for

about four and a half years. Then, in 1980, right after the firefighter strike, I was promoted to the rank of captain, and I was detailed to Truck Company 10 in Cabrini-Green Projects, where I took the assignment full-time. Spent thirteen years there in that house. Then I got promoted in 1993 to the rank of battalion chief, and I went to the 4th Battalion which was at Roosevelt and May, and I spent approximately my last five years as a battalion chief at that location.

And in, I believe in, 1978, my younger brother, Robert, got called for the fire department. From '78 to the time I retired in '97 we were both on the job. He is, as of this date in 2008, is a deputy commissioner for the Chicago Fire Department, and still on active duty. My son was a volunteer firefighter for a while before he passed away. I have cousins that are on the fire department. The McKee family, who would be my mother's sister's boys and their father, Howard McKee, was a battalion chief on the fire department, too. I have a nephew, my brother, Bobby's, son, he's our fourth generation firefighter in the Hoff family, but he is on Downers Grove, Illinois, Fire Department at this time.

AG: Okay. Can you tell me what the Chicago Fire Department was like at the time of your father's line of duty death?

RH: At the time of Dad's passing, the fire department was I think heavily consisting of World War II veterans. Some Korean War veterans were coming into the fire department, but a vast majority of the make up of the men came out of the Depression era, World War II era. And they were working three shifts at the time of my father's death. Prior to that, they had worked two shifts, twenty-four on, twenty-four off, but he had been there long enough to get into the three shift system.

The improvements at the time were some of the equipment was becoming more state-of-the-art for the time, engines and trucks. Radios were in the apparatus, but only the chief officers at the time carried a hand-held radio. That's all they had. The company officers and firefighters didn't have them then. The gear was leather helmets, hip boots, three-quarter length hip boots, canvas duck coats for the truck men, and the engine men wore a rubberized type of coat. So the fire protection was not really state-of-the-art, but rather basic at the time. Use of SCBA air masks was not in function at that time. There were some archaic masks from World War II that the navy had used that were oxygen rebreathers, and they carried them on some of the rescues and some of the truck companies, but they were rarely used because they took so much time to generate and get them into service. So it was kinda pre-SCBA. Pumpers were very basic pieces of equipment, no booster tanks, no hard-lines. The truck companies, still the majority of them, were wooden, main ladders; eighty-five foot, two-section, extension ladders. The ground ladders were still wooden.

It was a very strong, family-oriented group, though, because they had family and battalion picnics and so on. So the shifts and the firehouses were even closer than they are today because the shifts that we had at this time were three, but there's "Daley days" popped in there every fifth working day you have off, and we went from one thirty-day furlough in my father's time to now it's three seventeen-day furloughs a year. The

cohesiveness of the crews, and that, gets a little more lax or spread out, and the personal involvement, a little less than it used to be. Very much more of a family-oriented involvement at one time. It was, I would say, a very rugged bunch of individuals who had little fear after what they had been through with the Depression and the war and things of that nature. They were a highly-motivated, under-paid, dedicated group of men, who I think found a continuation of their devotion to duty and things from the service in civilian life through the fire service.

AG: You already talked at length about your father's career. Is there anything else you wanted to share along those lines? Any special responsibilities or leadership activities that you didn't touch on already?

RH: Well, I know that while he was working at the Chicago Fire Academy, which was brand new, it opened in 1960, state-of-the-art facility, he also worked on some programs for airplane crashes that had taken place, like at Midway Airport, etcetera. He developed a critique, and would speak on those things, on some special incidents. He helped format some of the training programs for that day, for the new people and company operations, and so on. He kinda authored some things, and was a speaker, a public speaker, for the fire department. He had a very strong effect on leadership because of the respect people had for him and his operations. He wrote articles for the first fire department publications of the Chicago Fire Academy Training Bulletins, so he wrote for several of those before he died.

AG: Do you remember any interesting or unique anecdotes about your father that you'd like to share?

RH: Well, I'm trying to think of some of them, but I can remember some things that were kinda interesting that, in his being gone so much, he'd be gone thirty-six hours at a crack, twenty-four at work and then eight at the side job, and then we'd see him after thirty-six hours for a short amount of time. I think he brought a lot of his firehouse humor and debriefing of a tense situation at home with him. My mother, Eleanor, who was Irish, loveable, and excitable, would be very upset sometimes with sick kids. I don't understand why, we were wonderful! But he had a way of calming her down and bringing the situation to a lower level of stress. I know that he worked quite well with people. He was liked by a lot of people. He could kid people, and they liked it and took it from him. He just had that kind of a personality. At the firehouse, I remember as a little kid going to the firehouse with him. Staying overnight and he would drive, he would be the acting officer, he could cook. So, I don't know, just kinda somebody to look up to and a fascinating all around person in the fire service. That's my recollection of some of that.

AG: Can you please describe the incident in which your father died in the line of duty?

RH: Sure. In February of 1962, there was a fire in an L-shaped apartment building at 70th and Dorchester. I was working at 64th and Dorchester for the Illinois Central Railroad watching the fire out of the window, and I could see over a period of fifteen,

twenty minutes, half hour, more apparatus responding in. So I knew that it was now up to an extra-alarm level, and I knew my father would be in there as a supervisor. For a couple hours I'd stop by the window and check and see how the smoke was going or whatever. Then right after lunch, a supervisor came up to me from work and told me I got a call from home that my father had been in an accident, and that they wanted me to head for home. Well, I knew where he was, so I left work and headed the six blocks down the street to the fire scene. At that time, it was pretty chaotic because a third of the building had collapsed, which trapped him, Chief Robert O'Brien, Chief of the Fire Prevention Bureau, and both their drivers in that section of the building when it collapsed. There was one of the black Cadillac limousines from the Commissioner's Office on-scene, and they already had picked up my mother and she was in the back seat along with my Uncle Howie McKee, my ma's sister's husband, and my Uncle Ed who came from his firehouse at 86th and Emerald, Engine 73. So they were already on-scene, and then my brother, Tom, came from Braniff Airlines at Midway Airport.

We were there. It was very cold, very damp, very windy, and they were crawling over the structure with still hanging walls around the firemen. The firemen were just wildly upset. Not just because a firefighter had been trapped, but a lot of the emotional stir came from the fact that it was him, and he was well-known and well-liked. So they were trying to get in and dig hand by hand, but they had to call in a crane to knock down the walls that were in a precarious position around the collapse. It took them six and a half hours before they finally dug him out. They had gotten all the others out within a half hour, so we spent a long time there. Then, when they got him out, my brother, Tom, had to identify him in the body bag, and they took him off to the hospital for pronouncement or whatever.

And that began a long, slow process of the wake, etcetera. There was an inquest, which held up the body being released. In any kind of fatality like that there's an automatic inquest. Then, Chief O'Brien's funeral was held first. It lasted three days, and the firemen continually called my mom and asked her to put off my dad's burial and that, so that they could attend that en masse. When they released the body after three days, then there was a five-day wake, and there was a funeral procession well over two miles long going to the cemetery. I can remember this, and I was twenty years of age at the time, and so it was quite an impressive sight to see all that and all the people that cared. People from all over the country that, you know, came in to see him, and the state and so on. That was pretty much my recollection of the incident.

AG: Do you have a clear idea of what your father's on-scene duties were at this fire?

RH: Yes, I do. He was, as I said, brought in for supervising. He would be assigned some particular sector or part of the fire building to watch out as safety operations for the companies working in that area. During the course of that fire, the fire commissioner, Quinn was the commissioner at the time, Bob Quinn, decided that the troops had been in long enough fighting this fire with an interior attack, and it was an old building, and he gave the order to have them all removed from the interior. They were going from offense to defense. And in that process, Chief O'Brien, and his driver, and my father, and his

driver, were ordered to go into the various sections of the building and get all the firefighting personnel out. So this is what they were in the last phase of doing, in the very last section of the building. There was, I believe, about six sections. On the third floor, the top floor, they were coming out of the last apartment, clearing out the last firefighters, when the collapse in that section occurred.

To the best of my recollection, Chief O'Brien had one foot in the kitchen, one foot on the back porch when that collapse went, and he got sucked back in, turned upside down, went down along the wall, and got hit by a heavy timber and killed. His driver was standing next to the kitchen door against a side wall, and when the floor gave out he slid right down that wall three floors into the basement on a pile of rubble right next to the boiler, and a piece of the first floor shifted over the boiler, creating a pocket where Firefighter Murphy was caught. But he was okay, he could breathe, he could live, there was no fire in that pocket. And he ended up with a broken wrist. And then my father's driver was standing by a kitchen window on the other side of the kitchen door and when the collapse occurred he was pushed out the window and fell down to the second-floor level where he injured some ribs and bruised some organs and things. He lived, but he was hospitalized for quite awhile. And then my father was in the middle of the kitchen, heading for the kitchen door, when the collapse started in the center of the kitchen area in that section, underneath him, I believe. I don't know if it was the first or second floor started the collapse, and it just pancaked all the way in, and he ended up on about a six-foot pile of debris off the basement floor, but with a lot of the other floors and debris pancake-layered over him. And he was talking with the injured driver who was next to the boiler for about fifteen minutes off and on, and then there was a shift in the pile of debris and the firefighter could no longer talk to or communicate with my father. And it took about a half hour for them to tunnel in to a basement door to get Firefighter Murphy and get him out from alongside that boiler. So, Ed Stack was my dad's driver, he got blown out the window, and he was the first one reached. Chief O'Brien was reached because he was inside the kitchen door, but around the first floor by now. And then Firefighter Murphy was third, a half hour. Then it took six and a half hours after that to get to my father.

AG: Okay. You already, you talked at length about a lot of firefighters coming in during this six and a half hour wait, and how it was very emotional for everybody, but do you remember anything about the on-scene reaction of the firefighters who were fighting the fire? At this point, after the collapse, what was going on in trying to get the fire out? Did the injuries and deaths have an impact on the emergency response operations?

RH: To a degree, yeah, it pulled a lot of firefighters away from what they had been doing to focus in on trying to make the rescues which were very precarious because of the building condition. But, normally, if you pull that many firefighters away from firefighting duty it would allow the fire to grow back in proportion, etcetera, etcetera, but they had already been pulled out of the building, so they were in the process of setting up defensive fire streams. But the mood was one of shock. I could see there was a lot of them that I knew that when you'd look at them, they couldn't even look you in the eyes, the head was down, they were just so upset that he was lost. It was a very sober, somber atmosphere at the fire because of the events that took place.

And if I might just jump ahead some years, a lot of those firefighters that were there had been guys that worked with my dad, in the same firehouse or district for years. Later on at their retirement parties, some of these guys came up to my brother, Bobby, and myself and took us aside when they were retiring, and had big tears in their eyes, and they felt for all these years that they were partially at fault for it, for dad's death. Because they were telling them to get out and they were kinda saying "give us a little more time, give us a little more time." That's the nature of firemen, they hate to give up. And they all felt that somehow if they all would have moved a little faster. And I use that, I'll talk about it later, but I use that as a teaching process in tactics and strategy to this day: the importance of listening to orders, and etcetera, etcetera. But a lot of them carried from that day, carried a lot of guilt, figuring they maybe could've done something or shouldn't have done something, and they took that to their retirement and, as far as I know, to their grave with them.

AG: Okay. You already, you did talk about the funerals for your father and Chief O'Brien, and aside from what you were just sharing, did you feel that these line of duty deaths had any effect on the individuals within the organization or within your community?

RH: Yes, and I can tell you one particular fella that had a devastating effect on and that was Curtis Volkamer. He was the drillmaster, my father's boss at the fire academy. My dad had finished his twenty-four hour shift for supervision at eight o'clock in the morning when he went to work at the fire academy, and now he turned the car and that over to Chief Volkamer who was now, for the next twenty four hours, going to be extra-alarm supervisor. Chief Volkamer had a speaking engagement at lunch that day before some business group, and when the fire came in around ten-thirty in the morning, or whatever it was, my dad says, "hey it's during the work day, I'm here, I'll take it in, go ahead, you got that speaking engagement." So Chief Volkamer agreed and he went to the speaking engagement, and before he got started speaking he got called to the fire because of the death. He was the Chief Fire Marshal when I came on the job two and half years later. A very moral, ethical, upright, strict, and serious man, a student of the job, etcetera, etcetera. He always had a sense of assuredness about him, I think, but you could see that that really put a chunk in his confidence, and he knows and he felt so bad every time he saw my mother or one of us kids. He couldn't do enough for us as a family to help us out wherever he could. But that changed him forever. Every time he saw one of us, it was a reminder that it could have been him and so on. So that was one impact. The other firefighters and that, like I said, over the years it impacted them. They took the loss very personal. They felt some responsibility for it.

I think one of the things that came as a change because of the deaths of Chief O'Brien and my father was they developed a system for having the abandon ship drill for the firefighters. At that time, there was only, I think, one snorkel on scene with some air horns, and you couldn't really hear them over the din of all the noise, they were small ones. After that, our department developed a process with air horns and sirens, because we had a lack of hand held radios. Blowin' them three times, give it a rest, blow them

another three times and that became the signal for the abandon ship drill. So it updated that process, and I think it brought attention to the size-up practices of the fire department, as well. They looked a little harder, because there was something missed, which I use as a point of teaching.

AG: Sure. Would you like to describe any more of these changes within the organization following this line of duty, or would you like to elaborate on some of these points where this incident would be helpful to today's firefighters?

RH: Well, as of this point in history, both my brother, Bobby, and I have used our father's situation as a training tool to make impact in our classes of officer and firefighter training. And the size-up process is a process which you take a look at the structure, the fire condition, smoke conditions, the type of the construction of the building, the type of fire behavior in that construction, and you pick a plan and go to work. And you commit personnel and equipment to closeness and interior operations based on that knowledge. Certain types of construction, you have more time allowed, because of its strength, than others. Then there's some buildings that are old that are strong, some that are old that are weak. So that's a size-up process. Helps you determine what you're playing in and how to play.

In the original size-up, the original report was given, the height and dimensions of the building, but the construction was given as ordinary construction which meant heavy masonry walls and large, dimensional lumber for floor joist, rafters, and support. And it was found out later on that this building was built around 1917 or earlier, and it was a three-story, L-shape, frame apartment building, balloon construction which has a lot of woods which allow fire to travel up between walls all over the structure. And in the '20s, it was veneered with a layer of brick to modernize it or whatever their desire was there. Due to the age of the brick veneer alone, you can figure on from the 1920s, you had train tracks right there, so you had coal-fired trains, diesel trains over the years, you had coal fire boilers and smoke in the neighborhood and factories. So that was pretty dark and dirty brick, and when the firemen originally who, or officer who, sized it up looked at it that blended in together, that it seemed like an ordinary constructed building. During the reevaluations, even though there were people inside picking this place apart looking for fire, the information that it was balloon construction and a brick veneer never got fed back into the information system.

What we stress, part of what we stress, is that, in your size-up, that you read the building, read the smoke, read the fire. That you "B.A.G." it: it's an acronym for figuring out where the fire's Been, where it's At, and where it's Going. Then you set your strategy and tactics in place. Then you start that whole evaluation process over again. And you train the company officers and firefighters to be more aware of their surroundings, and when they discover things as they open up walls and ceilings, to feed that new information back into the system, so that reevaluations and judgments can be updated. So that's one of the things we did. We use it also to impress upon people that if each one of those units those chiefs and drivers went in to get out had not argued for three to five seconds to stay, if you added, going through those six sections, added those five seconds

up, all hands would be alive today. So we use it as a motivational tool. Given an order? If you want to argue about it, argue about it the next day.

AG: Is there anything else that you would like to share about your father or about this incident, or about the Chicago Fire Department that we did not cover during this interview?

RH: Yeah, just from my own point of view, I, within six months of my father's death, I was riding a fire truck and working with my Uncle Howie on Rescue Squad 8, and I was a fire fan. He taught me the job as if I was a candidate, and within two and a half years, I was on the job full-time. I got a lot of small injuries in that, in the first three years that I was on. Fifteen, I think, to be exact, from being a little too aggressive and so on. Later on, in family counseling and different things that I have been through in my life, I realized at the time that I was, each time I go into a building, I was trying to rescue my father, which you couldn't do. And the other thing was that coming in under, following in the shoes of, a dead hero is a lot of added stress. I worked with a lot of people that he worked with who would in their way remind you, "if you're half the man your father was," etcetera, which put a lot of pressure on me to perform. It took me a few years and some good officers to get me in line, to get that controlled, because the realization was that if you're trying to tie the reputation of a dead hero that's the best you could do. So that had some effect on my early firefighting years, and then as I grew in experience and wisdom and under the tutelage of some great mentors, you know, I got my own reputation. I got my own awareness, and this factor of being the son of a fallen hero, etcetera, etcetera, played less and less of a role as I matured in the process.

But it's something I watched because there were six kids at the time. My brother, Tom, was a year and a half older than me. I was twenty. Mike and Ed, the next two brothers, they were in high school at Saint Regis, and my sister, Susan, I think was in about fifth grade or so in Saint Margaret's Grammar School. My brother, Bobby, was just five years old at the time. I can see to this day each kid was impacted differently by the loss of our father, and the awesome impact on Mom, and the stresses and strains of family life without a father. One, when you think about it, that was ripped out of the scene in what you could basically say was an unnecessary death. It was a heroic death in that they were getting other people out of harms way. If, to me, and this was frustrating to me, if the information was handled right and updated at the time, they would have lived past and to that, and, that's not to put blame on anybody, that's just sharing what I was doing with my grief was looking for an out for it. Somebody told me you ought to be proud your dad was a hero, and I wasn't proud, I was angry.

My brother Bobby is so highly motivated, and always has been, because I can remember being five years old and looking at my dad walking out the door, or walking somewhere with him in uniform, and just swelling with pride and things of that nature. Bobby got to finish my dad's favorite breakfast that day when he was going to work. He loved sliced bananas and milk. So when the fire car came to pick him up, he said to Bobby, "here, Bobby, you finish them up," and that's the last memory Bobby had of him: walking out the door and getting to finish Dad's breakfast. So that highly impacted him and his

motivation. It, I think, caused my older brother, Tom, a lot of emotional problems. He ended up married and divorced four times. Then, I think, Mike and Ed being in high school, they dealt with it in their own way, but they recovered. I think that it was confusing for my sister, because of her age, and so sad. Then, I think, you could probably write a book on all the implications down the road of the death of a firefighter and the impact on his family. I mean, there were his sisters, my dad's sisters, his brother's and their families, and my cousins, who, over the years, I have become aware of all the impact they went through, because of Uncle Tom to them, and stuff. So, any death, in any way shape or form, I'm sure is tragic and has its lessons. My ma died eight years later at fifty-two of cancer. She died over a six month period, my dad went instantly, and I know there is no good way, neither one is better. But the impacts on mom and dad are different, but he had quite an impact on the Chicago Fire Department and a lot of local fire services. So, in that loss, that was greatly felt, and I think a lot of people took stock of their practices. So it's not like a total loss. That if there was no lessons learned from it, then I would be angry to this date, I think.