

*Today is October 20, 2010, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Keith Patterson who is retired from the Monmouth Fire Department. We are discussing Assistant Chief Dennis Olson, who died in the line of duty in 1993.*

**AG:** Can you tell me about the history of the Monmouth Fire Department?

**KP:** Monmouth Fire Department was a fire department in a rural setting. Population at the time, in 1993, was about 10,000. We had two stations, five-man shifts, three five-man shifts, and then we had a complement of 18-20 volunteer firefighters. Averaged, back at that time, I'd say close to five-to seven-hundred calls a year, and probably fifty to seventy of those were structure fires, confirmed structure fires. We had Monmouth College, which was a liberal arts college that's still there today, that was in the middle of our community, and we spent a lot of time with them, working with the college students, in education. And then we worked very closely with the rural departments around us, and fire protection districts, to create a mutual aid response.

**AG:** Okay. You described what the department was like at that time, can you tell me when you joined the department and what your involvement was?

**KP:** I actually became a volunteer firefighter in 1974 as a high school student. My junior year, we had a fire downtown and they needed help. At that time, the chief just looked for warm bodies who could stand on a hose line, and I raised my hand. He says, "can you get down to the station, get some gear, and get back here, downtown?" which was about four blocks away. So my friends and I, we went down, we got suited up with some gear, came back, and we stood in a hose line all night long, basically. Then we turned our applications in to become volunteer firefighters.

In 1978, I became a career firefighter there, and that was the beginning of my dedication, so to speak, to the community as a career member. And then in the late-eighties/early-nineties, I got promoted to captain, and I finished out my career there, and then went to the Chicago suburbs after that.

**AG:** All right. What can you tell me about Assistant Chief Olson and his career?

**KP:** After I'd been on, I hadn't even been on, the job nine months, Chief "Swede" Nelson, who was the fire chief at the time, called me one Saturday evening and said "hey, we want to move you up to a driver." They'd watched my driver training skills, and I'd only been on, like I said, eight or nine months. He says, "you know how to drive a fire engine and you do real well, and, come Sunday morning, you'll be assigned to Station Two." And that was really something, because you didn't just get to drive a fire engine there, you had to earn your right.

So I got assigned to Station Two, and Dennis Olson was my officer. Spent the day learning how to run the pump. He had been their training officer, and so he knew what

he was talking about. He told me, he said, “if you have any questions, don’t be afraid to ask,” and we worked over and over and over again. And about 5:30 that evening, we caught a garage fire, and it was snowing on the ground. We had such a large amount of snow that I couldn’t see the driveway, and so as I turned in, I buried one of the front tires into a ditch, trying to make the turn to get into the driveway. But we still had enough hose to fight the garage fire.

And, afterwards, I thought, “Okay, I’m in trouble now. I’m the new guy, I just got the fire truck stuck.” And Denny says, “The chief’s looking for you.” And so the chief came over, and he goes, “Did you put that fire truck in the ditch?” And I said, “Yes sir, I did.” And he goes, “You and I are gonna get it out.” So he climbed in the other truck, we hooked a tow strap to it, and he pulled me out. So that was my first learning experience. I was really nervous. I thought, “Okay, I’m gonna get sent back down to firefighter” from that point on. And Denny gave me the courage and support to keep trying and learning and stuff, and every day he would ask me questions about the pump. And not only did he know about the pump itself, but how to get underneath if something froze up, how to make the pumper work when it was froze up or when valves were frozen, how to get them freed so you could get them to do what you wanted them to do.

So, I thought I was very blessed to have that opportunity, to have someone like him to teach me. And there were three or four guys on the department from that, I call it the military background, who served in the military, and they all started at the same time and Dennis was one of those. He was a navy man. When he came home, he joined the fire service, and worked his way up to assistant chief. He was really a fun guy to be around, but when it was time to be serious, he could be very serious. He was a very devoted Christian in his beliefs, and he loved to play the banjo. In fact, we called him “The Banjo Picker.” He was a craftsman, as far as doing woodwork and that kind of thing, building things. He was always, in the evenings, working on some kind of project, and very proud, very proud of what he was able to accomplish.

He was a loving father and husband. His parents, his dad would come to the fire station and bring us doughnuts. Saturday morning, [his] dad came down and had coffee with us. One of the biggest honors I had was when Denny’s name was added to the wall out at Emmitsburg, Maryland, at the National Fire Academy. I was there to present his flag to his parents, and they didn’t know I was going to be there, it was a total surprise. And afterwards they came up to me and says, “you know, you look just like this kid back in Monmouth that worked with Denny.” And then I told them the truth. I says, “Oh, what was this kid like?” and they told me. And I says, “Mr. and Mrs. Olson, I’m that kid.” But he was really a great guy to work with. Yeah.

**AG:** Do you remember any other interesting or unique anecdotes about Assistant Chief Olson?

**KP:** Oh, he'd always have little one-liners that he would say to you, and he loved to pick on you, but it was one of those picking on you to make you stronger, not to belittle you. I was the first person of color on the fire department, and so from the assistant chief down, including the fire chief that hired me, they wanted to make sure that I had a successful career, and Denny was the start of that. He taught me a lot about respect, about understanding people, understanding giving and helping. Helping in the community, not just limited to just doing our job, and he lived it. He lived it.

He loved bluegrass music, and so he'd sit in the station and play. He could play the guitar, he could play the banjo, and he'd sing some of the songs. But we'd get him wound up to get him to play, and then after he'd play everything was cool. The relationship that we had with him was a positive one.

**AG:** Okay. Can you please describe the incident in which Assistant Chief Olson died in the line of duty?

**KP:** It was in March. We'd had a fire, or a call, there the day before. This was about the same time as the bombings in the World Trade Center in 1993. And we got a report, the day before the fire that he lost his life, of a bomb threat in one of the schools. We had four grade schools, a junior high, and a high school, plus we had a catholic school. The bomb threat came in that the bomb was going to go off at this certain time and because it was such overwhelming for the police department to try to get everyone out there to every school, and do it within a reasonable time period, they involved the fire department and we actually parked at each school and then started watching the traffic going by to see if we had a common denominator of license plates, so someone was driving around. We kept a crew at the station and that's when we got the call of a fire at Term City.

The fire started, our engine crew that was there responded, made a quick attack on the fire and put the fire out. What we didn't know at the time was that bomb threat was made by the manager of the store, and he thought, when he saw the fire trucks all leave, that he could set it on fire and pull off a fully-involved fire before we could get back to it. That didn't happen. Thanks to the guys that were on shift that day, that made that quick attack, the damage was contained to basically stacks of unfolded cardboard boxes, so they were flat, in the warehouse portion of the store. The front part was a showroom, like a rent-to-own store, called Term City. The back part was just a vast array of products from different businesses that were renting storage space, including the cardboard boxes.

Later on that night, the two gentlemen came back and set the fire. I should say early morning. And we responded in, and as we were fighting the fire, we'd been there for a while, Dennis, myself, Doug Ray, and Tim Tarleton-- Tim was a new firefighter at the time, Doug Ray was a volunteer firefighter, his dad was a past chief on the department-- and myself and Dennis were all standing and we were opening an overhead door at the

back of the facility. We got the door open, and everyone started to walk away, and it started to come back down again. So Denny called for a pike pole, and so he took the pike pole and he wedged the door up. Now, looking back at what we did at that time, when that door came down that was our clue that the ceiling temperature was getting hot enough to cause the springs to fail, to become weak. And if we had known then what we know now, we'd all be standing here and we wouldn't do this interview today because we would have known that the next thing to happen was the wall kicking out.

It was block wall construction and it had steel beams to support the roof. And when Denny went back to open the door, as he was starting to walk away we heard the sound of the wall kicking out. And when they tell you you have three seconds to do something, they're not exaggerating. We heard the sound, at that time I was walking along the wall with the new guy. Doug Ray was walking back to the hose line. And Tim pushed me, and I looked at him like "what's going on?" And it was one of those hard, playground sneak attack pushes, and what he was doing was trying to get us away from the wall because he heard it, saw it, and I didn't realize it because we were walking straight ahead, and he pushed us out of the way as that wall came down.

When he turned around, he saw that Denny was in the debris, and he yelled "man down." And I turned around and looked at him and go "what are you talking about?" because I didn't see what was going on behind him. And then we turned and saw and we ran over and, a group of us that were back there, started pulling the debris. It was a sudden, sudden impact and he wasn't doing too well at that time. We radioed to the front, to the chief at the time, Chief Doug Hoelscher, and he came around to the back. He sent me to the front to take command of the front. At that time we pulled all the hose lines out of the collapse zone. And this is where everything started really coming into play. They called for an ambulance and, of course, all of our wives listen to the scanners and radios that we had at home, and they started showing up to figure out what was going on. They took Denny's wife to the hospital, and he had two children, Becky and Chad, and they got called home at that time.

It was a very tough time, from the time that happened until we found out what really happened because the firefighters themselves assumed that we didn't get the fire out the first time and we thought it had rekindled, and that's always the worst nightmare. It wasn't until later on that morning when the investigators from the State Fire Marshal's Office, Ted Anderson, Bill Glover, [Donald] Tankersley, Mitch Kushner, I believe, came down from Chicago, so we had three canines there, and they started pulling the debris back. And as we were starting to look inside this structure we saw that the big screen TVs that were there on Friday were now small screen TVs, and those were the red flags we started picking up on. Fortunately, some of our investigators took photos of things that Friday after the fire in the showroom. It was later brought out that this was to cover up a crime of embezzlement. And when they started getting down to the main surface of

the showroom floor, the dogs started making hits left and right. Then we could start to see the accelerant pattern. And after that happened, of course they interviewed the owner on television and he blamed the fire department for not getting the fire out, which really caused a heightened state of alert. So, everyone made sure that their "P's and Q's" were in the right place, and the "I's were dotted and the T's were crossed," and the investigation started.

It was all like a dream, you know, to be with someone one day and the next day they're not coming back. And I had to go with one of the members of the department to plan his funeral event with the family, and work with their minister. And it was a challenge because we'd never dealt with this before. I mean, when I started, we lost the assistant chief that I worked under, but he had died of cancer, and so it was a gradual thing. And he had a full-blown firefighter funeral and honors, but to be with someone and then the next day they're gone, and then planning for the funeral event, it was very traumatic.

Our children came home and said, "Dad, are you going to go back to work? Are you not going to come home?" because they didn't want us to go back to work.

The traditions, I mean, there were a lot of rumors that were going on in Monmouth. During the sixties, when I was a kid, there was an arsonist who every twenty years would come back and set stuff on fire. At one time, and it's documented in our history there at Monmouth, he would call the mayor's wife and tell her what he was going to set on fire. And so those rumors started to come back, that the twenty-year arsonist had come back to Monmouth and he was going to keep killing firefighters every twenty years.

So you had all those rumors, you had the internal issues of dealing with a line of duty death, and being from a small town where everybody knows everybody, it was really tough. It was really tough. And to see the family during the funeral and the visitation and everything that took place, knowing that Denny wasn't going to come back, it was tough. It was tough.

**AG:** Okay. You described the incident at length, and so I think I'd like to move on and ask some questions about what things were like after the incident. So, I guess, can you elaborate a little more about how the line of duty death affected the individuals within the department or within Monmouth as a whole?

**KP:** Well, being a small town, we were very close-knit. We had water fight teams together, we did family picnics, that's when we started bringing that type of stuff back, so the closeness was really, really starting to grow as far as a family-type atmosphere. And the loss was devastating. The firefighters were, you know, when we got a call we were looking at each other like "who wasn't going to come back this one?"

But in all of that chaos, the one common thread was we trained so it wouldn't happen to us again. We started paying attention to those signs of a building, and fortunately the leadership of our fire department paid more attention to what that structure was telling us. So we were learning the art of reading smoke. We were going more and more in-depth in building construction. "How much time do we have before it falls down on us?" Courses that we see today, we were addressing then, so that we didn't get caught in that trick bag ever again.

The younger guys that were on the department, it really affected them because it was something they'd never thought would ever happen to them, that they would ever experience. We had enough time under our belt that I'd been to firefighter funeral events and I saw what it was like. I learned to play the Scottish drums and give those honors, and so I was kind of, kind of knew what was going to take place and what was going to happen, I just didn't know how I was going to deal with it and neither did anybody else.

The funeral itself was a dreary day. Firefighters from all over came. That's when I learned the true meaning of brotherhood. They were from Chicago, they were from California, the rural volunteers came and stood next to their equipment. The processional from the time we loaded him on the caisson at the church to the time we got to the cemetery, it basically split our town in two, and the town was about two miles across. So to have that type of processional, it was unbelievable.

I wasn't able to sit in on the debriefing because of my duties with the family, but I went to my pastor and just wanted to know "Why?" It was a challenge, and a lot of guys started going back to church after that to kind of make things right in their lives, and that's what Denny was all about. Even when he was having some challenging times in his own personal life, he would revert back to praying, and he would tell you, "I'll pray for you." And there were many times that we were back at the station and a group of us would go in his office and he would just issue a prayer. And you don't understand how much strength that gives you, and so his loss really affected everyone. Not only internally, but our families, the neighboring departments that came out to help out. It brought us closer together. All the things of why we couldn't train with rural departments, all that fell by the wayside because they were there for us, we're going to be there for them, and that's probably the best thing that came out of it.

**AG:** All right. You of course described the funeral, can you tell me about some of the other ways that the community memorialized Assistant Chief Olson. I know that there is the memorial flagpole.

**KP:** Yeah. The family decided to put a flagpole up at the south station. They'd built the south station because the railway that went through Monmouth, Burlington Northern, it's the fourth busiest route in the nation. So we started running more and more trains

through Monmouth, we needed to make sure that we had the base for the folks south of the tracks because the main station at that time was just north of the railroad tracks, and the south station was further south, about eight or nine blocks south. And the family wanted to put a stone and a flag in his honor because that's where he was stationed at. We did a little ceremony, dedicated it, had cake, and it was kind of a celebration of Denny's life.

The day of the funeral, the kids at the grade school, when the fire truck went by the grade school, they all stood there in silence, and my son was there.

But the community came out, they embraced the firefighters. They did things, at that time we played donkey basketball, there was a tribute to Denny for that. We did a lot of different things and the community really did come out and support the firefighters.

The honor of having his name put on the wall, not only in Emmitsburg, but I believe they put, yes, they did put his name on the wall in Colorado Springs because he was a union member. I was able to be at both of those, and a group of us went to Colorado together and it was quite the experience. Quite the experience.

**AG:** You described a number of changes within the organization after Assistant Chief Olson died. Were there any others or is there anything from this incident that you think would be helpful to today's firefighters?

**KP:** It's so important to learn about building construction. That building will tell you whether you should be in there or not. Now, a lot of times our egos get in the way, and a lot of times we get misinformation through dispatch and communication, and we speculate. The one thing we learned that if we're not there within the first two minutes or three minutes, whoever's inside is going to be a recovery, not a rescue, and we have to remember that in the back of our mind.

Understanding when that building is under fire. Getting your personnel out to look at the different structures that you protect and see what's underneath that roof line. Is it bowstring? Truss? Is it heavy timber? Is it lightweight construction? Is it a steel structure, and once it hits 1,000 degrees for five minutes, what happens to that steel? It expands. What does it kick out? What's the collapse zone? Where do your nozzles and hoses need to be? Where do your personnel need to be? Engine and aerial placement training. Not training to train, but training to survive. And the biggest thing that we took from it is the more knowledge we have, the more power we have to make sound decisions and make them in confidence, and not be limited to guessing and freelancing. Those are the things that got us in trouble that day.

But training together, understanding, not only within our community, but the other communities that come in. Because it could have been one of those rural departments on

the back side of there. We'd have lost something, someone, that, it wasn't their fire, they were there just to help out. And, so, when people come into your town, make sure you're trained to protect them also. And sometimes the political system kind of gets in the way of that, but shame on us as a fire service if we don't stand up and make that happen.

So to the new young people and the young officers: understand your buildings, know what you can do and can't do. Tour them. Get out of the firehouse. You can only watch so many videos, you can only train at so many towers. You've got to get out and walk through those facilities, so that when you're in there at two o'clock in the morning, or at five-thirty in the morning, and smoke is all the way to the floor level, you know how to get in and you know how to get out. And that's what was our learning experience at Monmouth.