

*Today is September 21, 2010, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Tom Roate from the Springfield Fire Department. We are discussing Joseph Rotherham, who died in the line of duty in 2003.*

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

**TR:** Well, I mean, ironically, some of the good history I've heard is from you. I mean, from the articles that you've shown me, from newspaper articles. The fourteen line of duty deaths. I know, I'm a huge buff on where the fire stations are, and I love driving around town and finding out this stuff from one of the older guys that just passed away, Dick Hall. He was talking to me about where old #1 firehouse was, well, old #1 firehouse to him is three houses removed from what I consider to be old #1. And Dick had just passed away but unfortunately as far as the history I can't recount anything right off the top of my head as far as the history of the Springfield Fire Department other than just the old pictures that I've seen. And knowing that it's all I'm doing is carrying on the legacy that started long before me.

**AG:** Can you talk about your career in the fire department?

**TR:** I am a 17 year, been on the job 17 years. Joined February of '94. On Engine 1 downtown. Shift: black shift. I've been a captain I want to say almost 5 years. Let's see, with the department I was union president from 2003. Ironically, the evening before Joe passed away I got sworn in as union president. And I stepped down, I didn't run again, I didn't step down, I finished my term, my second term, so I was four years as union president with Springfield Local 37. Prior to that I was secretary-treasurer for four years, and prior to that trustee for several years. And currently, I am secretary-treasurer of the Associated Fire Fighters of Illinois, if that has any bearing on anything, which is the statewide organization based out of Springfield that handles legislation, collective bargaining, and all kinds of issues for all 206 union locals in the State of Illinois.

But, I'm currently assigned to Engine 1. I've been assigned to Engine 6 for probably four of the years. I was assigned at Engine 5 as firefighter and then again as a senior firefighter and then again as captain for approximately three years, and assigned to #3 as my first in-house company in '94. Absolutely hated it. It was quiet, dead, a call every third shift. Unbelievable. It's obviously picked up out there, but, it's not a bad house to be at now, but basically I've been assigned at #1 firehouse downtown most of my career.

**AG:** What was the department like at the time of Joseph Rotherham's line of duty death in 2003?

**TR:** Ironically, not much different than probably it is right now. I mean, obviously, the guys don't seem to change, faces may change, but the members don't, I mean the brothers don't. Firefighters don't really change much. We were having some trouble with some older rigs in 2003. I remember some of the apparatus that we had, there was some funding issues, it was just managerial type stuff, and obviously some of the fleet, I guess, was a little bit older than what it

is right now. We enjoy some really nice rigs, thanks largely to Chief John Kulek, that just retired last year. We had twelve engine companies, three truck companies, two battalion cars just like we do now. So there really wasn't much difference in the department layout. Responses were pretty much the same, we were districted the same way as we are right now. There's really not much change in the department since then.

**AG:** What can you tell me about Captain Rotherham and his career?

**TR:** Joe and I were stationed together, first time we got stationed together, was shortly after I moved out of #3 firehouse my first year on the job in '95. In '95 I moved over to, I was able to get, we didn't have job bidding at the time, which basically meant the only way you could get out of an engine house and move to another engine house was to know somebody and/or get lucky. And I just happened to get lucky because a firefighter at the time, Chad Rentz, who is now a captain, as well, at #9. Chad Rentz actually had been assigned at #5 and was ready to move out and get out of #5. And so he had called me up, he knew that I wanted to leave, and he said hey, he was getting transferred and since he was getting transferred he was going to open up his spot.

So I met Joe for the first time. I was the junior firefighter, he was the senior firefighter at #5 engine house. We stayed together, I think, I want to say almost two and a half years, and so I worked with Joe for that period of time and got to know him very well and got to know who he was. I mean, I was still pretty young and new to the job, and still excited. Don't get me wrong, I'm still excited now, but I mean I just had a different perspective on things. Especially with my background, coming from kind of a small town, Pike County, graduating class twenty-eight people, Barry High School. I mean coming into the Springfield community like this and especially being stationed on the east side of town is quite an eye opener. And Joe was integral. He helped, he was tremendous in helping keep perspective on the job. But that's when I met Joe.

From that point, I left there, we ended up getting job bidding . Once we got job bidding, I moved downtown to #1 firehouse and Joe stayed. No, Joe didn't. Joe moved to another house, I don't remember which one it was. We ended up hooking back up again when I was a senior firefighter at #6 and he had made driver, and we moved out to #6 together. That was actually, I know that was 1999 because a group of thirty had got hired on and I was forced out of my downtown spot. So I moved out, and I look at it, at the time I was upset because they moved me out of that house, but now I look at it and see it as what it was, which was a blessing to be able to spend some more time with Joe and continue our friendship. But we had Bart Zaborac, Jay Fritzsche and Mark Ballinger, three guys that are currently on the job right now. Ironically, two of the three are captains as well. So. Good guys, every one of them.

So we went through that process, and Joe helped me through a lot of different things, from my grandfather passed away during that time frame and he was a tremendous support for that. Just a lot of memories, late night discussions and that type of thing with Joe. We spent, probably, I want to say, I stayed there another two and a half years at #6. And we went through the remodel

of #6 engine house, which they gutted it, and completely cleaned it out, so we went through that together. And that's basically my history with Joe.

Joe was a unique individual. I remember when I was first, I don't even remember what fire we were on, I have no idea, but I just remember being, ironically, I mentioned this as I stated I not too long ago I just read the newspaper article from when Joe had passed, I'd found it in some clippings, and during the time I remember going on a fire, I think I was buffaloeed out to #1 firehouse or something at the time. We went on a fire and #5 had already been there and Joe was the senior firefighter at the time. I wasn't stationed there yet, but I was buffaloeed from #3 downtown, so I actually got to go to the east side and fight a fire. We got there after the fact, and they had already torn out the ceiling, the fire was pretty much out when we got inside there, and it was all smoked up and I remember the smoke clearing and looking up in the rafters because they'd torn all the ceiling down and there is Joe up there. No airpack at the time. He'd had it on, but it was in the overhaul stage, so he wasn't wearing it at the time. It was kind of a graphic picture of what I pictured a firefighter would look like. He wasn't a massive man or a muscular man or anything like that, but I mean he was just working and I mean he was just filthy, and I thought it was kind of impressive to see, and that was my first memory of Joe.

Anything after that, we got all kinds of stories in the firehouses. At #5, Joe and I, he used to be on the treadmill. One day in particular, I was up front in the day room, and somebody knocked on the door. It was a couple, a man and a woman, and they were selling, allegedly they were selling school supplies or stuff for the school, like cookie dough, I don't know what they were selling, subscriptions to magazines. I didn't want to be rude, I said "All right, hold on a second," I took the brochure back to Joe and I said "Do you want any of this?" kind of jokingly. He said "Absolutely," and he meant it. Well, we never saw them again, they took our money, they were gone. I'm getting irritated, and upset, and basically pissed off during the time frame, waiting for these people to come back and bring me my stuff. Joe just smiled, he knew it wasn't coming back. Talking to him about it, and he said "you just need to relax," because he did the right thing, I did the right thing. Joe was a tremendous person when it came down to having faith in the individual and in the person. He trusted everybody. It was up to you, I mean it was up to you how you were going to lead your life, and he pretty much had faith that everybody was going to do the right thing. Don't get me wrong, he was no goof, he pretty much knew when he was getting screwed. He knew it, but he still did it. He said he did the right thing. And it was a pretty good lesson, I guess, for me, in my career, and even as an adult, that he was right. He was absolutely right, you have faith in the human being.

I mean, at #6, we checked plugs. He'd always turn the plugs. He always said that's his workout, he'd turn every plug. I loved it, hell, I never had to turn a hydrant. It was great. I'd just basically get off, and hand him a tool, and he'd do it, and he'd turn every plug, and some of them were monsters, over there, to start them up.

At #6, when we were stationed together, we used to play “Jeopardy” every night. Final “Jeopardy” for a soda. I don’t know that I ever bought him a soda, he won a lot of them. It was amazing how much worthless knowledge the guy was full of. He was really sharp at all that stuff.

I remember walking out into the rig room at night, two o’clock in the morning or whatever. We were both night owls, up late at night. And even call or no call, he’d be sitting out in the rig room on the couch prior to the remodel. And cigarette smoke, basically a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, sitting there, his shirt hanging open, reading either his Bible, in his sock feet, reading either his Bible or reading some western book.

Let’s see. Joe hated aluminum. He wouldn’t eat or drink, he wouldn’t drink out of an aluminum can and he wouldn’t eat out of an aluminum pan ‘cause he said it would give you Parkinson’s. And he believed it, he believed it, and there may be some basis to that, I don’t really know. He used to read a lot of libertarian type stuff. He was very much libertarian.

And just great times. But he was sharp. He was an extremely intelligent man. He did things that, I realize we’re still on anecdotal stuff, but I can tell you about the guy, he just was an amazing person, and he did stuff in his life that most people sit there and go “yeah, there’s no way he could have done all that.” After you talk to his family and his brothers, and one of his brothers since passed on, and talk to his son, and he’s got pictures. He did this stuff, from working on an oil derrick to he built a cabin, using pipes, up in, I don’t know whether it was in the Rockies or where the hell he was, and actually was able to woo, I guess you say woo, his wife Sandy. She’s a wonderful woman, too.

All kinds of stories, I think about him often. Sometimes, some things trigger memories of him and you just never realize how close you get to somebody when you’re living him like that and just how much they mean to you until they’re gone.

Joe used to eat. Just about anything, I swear to God. He used to make this stuff called Kabuku Tea, or Kabuki Tea, I don’t know what it was, but it was nasty looking and I actually tried it one day and I’ll never drink it again. He used to drink it because of some of its healing powers, not spiritual type stuff just like a concoction that he’d worked up that he’d read in some health magazine or something like that. So that’s what, he used to drink this stuff. It was interesting, he was a lot of fun, never a dull moment.

He was quick to listen to you on, when you’re having a bad day. He was also quick to kind of set you straight, but he never did it in a, never yelling at you or anything like that, it was just a perspective he would give you just by talking to you.

I think he was 45 or 46 when he passed away in 2003, and here it is 2010 and I’m 45 years old. He had a wealth of knowledge that a lot of people don’t realize and I think a lot of people that don’t know him, and didn’t know him, didn’t understand. But as far as his political beliefs, a lot

of times something would pop up on TV, and he'd say, and he'd bring up some conspiracy theory and he was just hilarious. He wouldn't rant and rave about it, it's just, he'd bring it up and he'd smile. And some stuff he'd bring up and I truly believe he believed a lot of that stuff, which in some cases, I'll tell you what, I'm not too sure he was too far off, but there was no arguing and all that stuff. Unless you wanted to talk to him about it and then he'd be glad to debate the topic, it was a lot of fun. That was Joe.

**AG:** Can you please describe the incident in which Captain Rotherham died in the line of duty?

**TR:** Well, I wasn't there, but what I do know about the incident, Andy Sandhouse was my firefighter last year for some time, and Andy and I have talked about it, just briefly. Andy told me was that they rolled up on this house, it was a two story house. Andy had said that they had deployed the line, got the line inside, there was some pretty good smoke in the building and some heat, but they hadn't located the fire yet. He said that what seemed odd was Joe seemed somewhat agitated, and that's not Joe. Joe was calm, cool, collected. Joe was competent as well as confident in his skills as a firefighter. There's no doubt about it, I mean I would've gone with him in any fire, in anything. He kept his head. And Andy said that Joe seemed agitated and kind of wound up, and it was just unusual, and especially when they're not finding any fire or anything. Joe sucked his bottle down, he said, he went through his bottle real quick, which was extremely unusual again. They exited the building together and Joe, though, took his pack completely off, which he never did. He always basically left his pack on like most of us do after the first bottle. You leave it on, you slide a new bottle in, and then you go back in. Or you take a break with it on because it's a pain to put the thing on sometimes, especially when you're wet and tired in the first place, you don't want to take it off, you just find a position of comfort. He said that Joe had basically told him, he said just "go on back in, I'll be right behind you." Bill Gilman was the safety officer on duty that day. I'm not too sure who the battalion chief was that day, but Gilman was the safety officer and Bill had seen Joe sitting over on the front of the rig, and Bill and Joe were good friends, really good friends. Bill walked over to him and asked him if he was okay, and Joe gave him the old "yeah yeah yeah, I'm fine I'm just catching my breath," that type of thing. Bill still, I think it bothered him and did bother him because he felt like he could've maybe done something if he'd recognized or forced the issue, but there wasn't nothing he could've done about it. Bill walked away, shortly after he walked away, Joe spilled over, just went face first right in the street.

A.L.S. [Advanced Life Support] was just a half block down, they were watching, it was one of those nights where they heard the call, they came in. So they're half block away, and they saw him go down, and they immediately, they were on him. They stripped his shirt open, put pads on him, stripped him down, got him clean. Padded him up and he was asystole, I guess, right out of the gate, no room whatsoever, and they did what they could.

But it was at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Stanford, I'm pretty sure it was Stanford. That street's closed off now with the Stanford overpass. Not sure whether it was closed off in 2003 or not, but the

house is no longer there, it's an empty lot and I drive by there once in a while and think about him. But right there in the street.

I know we had critical incident stress debriefing after the fact, and that's basically what I know and obviously since I wasn't there, I don't know how factual it is, but that's the story, what I tried to gather as a friend and what I tried to gather as, at that time, the union president, what I knew to be factual.

**AG:** Okay. You briefly mentioned the critical incident stress, can you tell me some more about how the line of duty death affected individuals within the department or within the community as a whole?

**TR:** Yeah, the community turned out, I was pretty impressed with the turnout for Joe's line of duty death, I mean for the funeral anyhow. It was pretty impressive. And the number of firefighters that came from throughout the state, again, I was reviewing that article and I looked at the number of guys that showed up, and I was like "wow, that's pretty impressive."

But, as far as the effect on the department, I know I sat in on the critical incident stress. And Molly Burns, who's one of our dispatchers, had been very close friends with Joe as well, and she's still working today, and she's got a birthday coming up Sunday, as a matter of fact. So, it was, she was there, Bill Gilman was there, myself, Andy Sandhouse, a few other guys that had actually had knew Joe and were extremely affected. And I think the department actually did a good job on the critical incident stress, I mean they had them in there. And as much as I'm not a big fan of somebody telling me how I feel, how I should feel or anything like that, I think talking to everybody about it and talking about Joe and listening to the stories of what had happened that night, and how things had...I think it was good. It was really good for, I think, everybody to get that out and talk, but it was, it affected everybody differently. I mean, I can remember breaking down, talking about Joe and my experience that night, after the fact, and going to get Sandy, his widow, and pick her up and bring her to the hospital.

**AG:** Can you tell me how Captain Rotherham was memorialized? Can you talk about the funeral?

**TR:** Sure. My strongest memories are mostly not so much the procession, as I think I was kind of numb. It just, kind of, it just really sucked. Walking in there. I just remember a lot of people lining the streets, a lot of guys behind us. We walked next to the casket, I mean next to the family, next to the limo, and then we got to the armory. I just remember a lot of guys, a lot of blue, a lot of uniforms from throughout the state.

I was cold, I remember sitting in there, I was sitting right next to Dave Foreman, who at the time was the state president for the Associated Firefighters, and is a very good friend of mine. I remember shaking, I was just shaking really bad and nobody else seemed to be having that problem. But I think it was a lot of nerves, a lot of everything, emotions and everything going on

with me. And, I mean, having that place full and knowing that I was going to get up there and talk, too, that was a little nerve-wracking and maybe that had something to do with it. But I just remember being physically cold. And walked up, and I walked past Joe's casket, and gave my eulogy. Paper, I had my things written out on a piece of paper, and was just kind of going at it, and took my hands off the podium and the paper fell on the floor. I think I remember making a snide comment that it was Joe messing with me. He just loved to joke around. But Sandy, his wife, and Jeff were sitting in the front row, and I remember looking down at them and they were just, I wouldn't say stoic and I wouldn't say stone-faced, they were just calm. And I gotta admit that seeing their strength through the whole thing helped me through the whole thing as well because it was tough. Just talking about him and everything else, just trying to just speak. But they did a great job, I mean they were fantastic, and then I asked them afterwards, I said "What the hell? How can you do that?" They said that was Joe's wish. He said if anything like that, they weren't to cry, they weren't to be upset, they weren't to be anything. He lived his life and that's it.

But as far as the, I mean, I guess if you want to go back to, that was basically the ceremony, but going back to the night it all happened, if you want, I can go even past when he was pronounced dead. Do you want to end to that, or do you have more questions coming up that will lead into that?

**AG:** I guess if you wanted to share something now.

**TR:** I got the phone call at 3 o'clock in the morning. I had been out with some guys celebrating because I had just been elected union president, and, actually, had just been sworn in that night, the night before, and Joe died just a few hours later in the middle of the night. It seems like it was around 3 o'clock in the morning I get the phone call. I was extremely upset, and drove down to #1 firehouse for Captain, now Battalion Chief, but at the time Captain, Phil Harris. Came in. Phil was part of our honor guard, plus he was just a good guy, you could always count on Phil for everything. Still can.

Phil and I drove out to Sandy's house, Sandy and Joe's house. Was it Greenview? Yeah, Greenview, north of town. He was living out there, restoring a house, and I just remember knocking on the door. Knocked on the door and looking through the window and seeing lights come on. Sandy came down the steps, and she saw my face through the window, and just immediately just looked like somebody had just kicked her right in the gut. And she came to the door, and she goes, just asked me. I told her Joe had had another heart attack. Joe had had one prior and was able to get back to work, ironically, and the doctor's cleared him, and the whole thing. But I said Joe had had another heart attack, he was in the hospital. She was asking me all kinds of questions as to whether or not Joe had, and since then I've had time with Sandy and I've apologized to her for not telling her the truth. It's just I didn't want to talk, I didn't want to tell her. I didn't want to be the one. It's like I wanted to give her that little bit of extra hope during that drive from Greenview to Springfield. I didn't know what the right thing to do at that time. I

was nowhere near qualified to deal with anything like that. But Sandy had told me, too, I do remember, too, her saying that if anything ever happened to him, to call me. Ironically, I was the one that was the one calling on her when something did happen.

We got her to the hospital, once we got her to the hospital, I had already been in to the hospital before we even went out there, and I knew Joe passed. I mean, I knew he was gone. Soon as she walked in the door, Rich DeLee was another real good friend of Joe's. He embraced Sandy, she knew at that point. Rich and Joe had a real good relationship, too, he thought the world of Joe. And then Sandy went in and spent her time with him. And that's pretty much, that's the night, everything else from that point on was just trying to get our ducks in line for, trying to regroup and figure out what we needed to do to take care of Sandy, make sure to take care of the benefits. We just went into protecting his family, as much as we could. So, but, pretty much that's the night, that's what happened that night.

**AG:** Is there anything from this incident that you think would be helpful to today's firefighters?

**TR:** I'd like to, I personally think physicals for the firefighters would be good. Lot of departments do have them, and they have been able to identify problems long before it becomes so catastrophic like this.

But, if, anything to learn from it? I don't know. Joe, he had early signs, obviously. But everybody gets their days when they're peculiar and everything, it just so happened this one happened to be a catastrophic event, where there was no turning back from this one. It was not a matter of he was having a reaction to some seafood or anything, you know, and acting kind of funny or swollen up. This was something that happened that as much as Bill Gillman, the captain, the safety officer that was on duty that night, kicks himself, nothing he could have done. There was nothing anybody could have done.

Joe, I think, may have even known that something like this may have been in his future. He may have known it was going to happen. But Joe was the kind of person that, he was a firefighter, that's all he knew, that's all he wanted to do, he loved the job. With his heart disease that he had, he would have just as easily died shoveling snow at home that winter. And that would've been a tremendous waste, in my personal opinion, because we would have missed out on a lot of who he was and what he did for the department. What he did, and the influence he had on people like me. So, it was, I don't know whether it's the right thing to say or not, but I think it was apropos that he go this way, and I think he would've wanted it this way. Period.

**AG:** Is there anything else that you would like to share about Captain Rotherham or the Springfield Fire Department that we did not cover during this interview?

**TR:** I am tremendously proud to be a firefighter, and to be on the Springfield Fire Department. It's a great job, it's a great bunch of guys to work with. I mean, I get frustrated with them, we all do, in crews and individuals and everything else, but Joe was, Joe was one of the classiest guys



that I've ever known in my life, and I think if I gained anything from that, it's just that I always try to take the high road in my comments, in my discussions, in my thoughts. Not easy to do, and I can't say that I'm always successful, but a large part of that is watching how he reacted to people and listening to him and how he led his life.

Tremendous memories in the debates and the discussions we'd have out at #6 until the wee hours of the morning until the point where either one of us either forgot what we were arguing about or completely changed sides. I mean it was just, I say argue, but it wasn't argue, I mean there were no arguments. There was always smiles, and back and forth, and debate. It was logical debate, discussion back and forth, logical debate based on what we knew to be factual.

Tremendous family man. Loved his family, I mean he really truly did. From his step-children to his blood children. And he was very proud, and spoke a lot about his son, Jeff, when he was going through Navy Seal training, and he ended up being E.O.D. [Explosive Ordnance Disposal]. Speaking of the phone calls that he'd had with Jeff, very, very proud of what he did. And loved his wife, Sandy.

And often times I think back to Joe and his perspective on stuff. And it's just do the right thing, treat people right. It wasn't just the golden rule, it was above and beyond that. He didn't just treat people the way he expected to be treated, he treated them better, and that is absolutely no shit. That's the kind of person Joe Rotherham was. Hell of a guy.