

*Today is August 2, 2007, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to John Stanko from the Canton Fire Department. We are discussing Howard Strube, Jr., who died in the line of duty in 1997.*

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

**JS:** The Canton Fire Department actually started as a volunteer fire department back in the 1800s, and there were about three different efforts to have volunteer fire departments, several of which were unsuccessful for various reasons. In 1906, the city council decided that it was time to establish a career paid fire department and they hired the first firefighters and chief at that time to be a career department and stay on duty twenty-four hours a day. In the early days, they worked six and a half days and had a half a day off, so it was a rather commitment to the job. And we celebrated our 100th year then, of course, in 2006, and then now have passed 101 years.

**AG:** Okay, and what was the department like in 1997 at the time of Howard Strube's line of duty death?

**JS:** The department had progressed, obviously a long ways in those years. We had hired a new chief in 1995 who was from outside the department and he was beginning to make great strides in the updating of equipment and apparatus and things of those nature. Shortly before Howard's death, we had just taken delivery of a new hundred foot aerial platform which was unlike anything we had ever had before. At that point in time, the aerial ladder that we were using was fifty years old; it was a 1947 and was reportedly one of the first ones that was built by American La France after the war ended. We had started to engage in new technology. Howard was the driving force behind a fundraising effort to raise \$25,000 to purchase a helmet-mounted, thermal imaging camera, which at the time was the Cairns Iris, and was the only thermal imaging camera on the market. It was very expensive, and, in two months time, he and a citizen's committee raised the \$25,000 to purchase that camera, which unfortunately did not arrive until after his death. But he was instrumental in getting that piece of technology for the department and we were one of the first ones in the state of Illinois to have one.

**AG:** And, what can you tell me about Howard Strube and his career?

**JS:** Howard was a very interesting individual. Very energetic. A lot of fun. He was always up for a good prank and thoroughly enjoyed his job, particularly with working with children. As I said before, he was instrumental in getting our first thermal imaging camera, but he was also very involved with other fire prevention activities, particularly in the schools. He was assigned as one of our fire prevention officers working on a shift, and dealt with the schools and the children and the fire safe house and just all aspects of fire prevention. There was one young man in the community that used to come to the fire station and hung around a lot just because he didn't have a particularly good home life, and Howard kind of took him under his wing and spent a lot of time with him, and that young man spent a lot of hours at the fire department. He came to the department in

1995 and, of course, he died in 1997, so he'd been here a little over two years, but he left his mark on the department in the short time that he was here.

**AG:** Do you remember any other interesting or unique anecdotes about Howard Strube?

**JS:** One of the things I remember was when our fire chief had a birthday, and, of course, he was in his fifties so they put a lot of candles on his cake, whatever the amount of candles was for the fire chief. And prior to giving it to him they stretched a line up the hallway, an inch and a half hoseline up the hallway, and Howard was in full turn out gear when the chief came in and the candles were lit and they were prepared to extinguish the candles with the hose line should that become necessary. And as I said before, he was always a fun loving guy, always up for a good prank if he got the chance, and sometimes would go to great lengths to see that those were successful.

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

**JS:** We had received our new aerial platform truck probably a week or so, maybe ten days, before his death, I don't remember the exact date, but it had not been placed in service. The manufacturer had come and done training on the aerial truck and then we were doing internal training to learn its operation and to practice its use and all that kind of thing before it was placed into service. For some unknown reason, during the training that day there were two people in the platform that were operating the truck, Howard was on the turntable as the safety person, and as they were retracting the platform he somehow became entangled in the ladder. Nobody really knows for sure how or why that happened. They felt a hesitation in the ladder and turned around to look to see what was happening. There was two way communication between the platform and the turntable, but I'm not sure whether they had communicated they were retracting or not. But when they turned around and they saw firefighter Strube lying on the platform seriously injured, of course they stopped what they were doing and immediately descended the ladder themselves and notified the on-duty firefighters and the dispatch who called for an ambulance and they gave immediate aid to him. He was transported to the hospital where he subsequently died from his injuries later on.

**AG:** Okay, was there any other on-scene reaction of the other firefighters when Howard was injured?

**JS:** Of course everybody was very upset. They knew the injuries were serious. They took every step that they could possibly take to provide injuries [*sic*] as did the paramedics when they arrived. Some of the firefighters immediately went to the hospital in the ambulance with him and they paged the entire department and notified everyone that there was an injury and that we should respond to the fire station. I was personally off-duty that day and came to the fire station to find out what was happening. I did talk to a dispatcher briefly by phone. She was quite upset, knew that someone had been injured. She wasn't sure exactly what happened. He had been transported at that point in time to the hospital.

**AG:** Okay. How did Howard's line of duty death affect individuals within the Canton Fire Department and also in the City of Canton?

**JS:** It was just a serious shock. It's one of those things that nobody thinks it'll ever happen to you. And, it pretty well devastated the department, I think, for a period of time, for a few days. It was hard to come to grips with. We immediately requested mutual aid from surrounding departments to man our fire station because we were essentially, at that point in time, not capable of operating. Some of the people that came to the scene, came to the station after we were paged, did take over prior to us knowing what the outcome was. They did take over to run the calls because the on duty firefighters some had gone to the hospital and the others, of course, were just very emotionally distraught. And they manned the station for a short period of time until we knew what the outcome was and then, at that point in time, we paged other departments to come in and assist us. And they actually manned our fire station around the clock for about three days, til after the funeral was completed. Our firefighters were working with them, but they were there to support us and augment us in our duties because people didn't sleep well and it was just a very emotionally difficult time.

**AG:** How did the fire department and the community memorialize Howard? Can you describe the funeral?

**JS:** It was a very large funeral, of course. There were a lot of firefighters from other cities that came in; a lot of people from the community. We received a lot of support. People brought things to the fire station; people sent things to the fire station. During the procession they lined the streets. And the local newspaper had a lot of pictures, a lot of articles, both of the services as well as about Howard and his time here at the fire department. So it was an outpouring support from the community.

**AG:** Can you describe any changes within your organization as a whole following Howard's death?

**JS:** I think we were much more safety conscious after that period of time. Like I said, you always think it happens to somebody else. You read in the trade magazines, and now, of course, on the Internet, of line of duty deaths and it was kind of one of those abstract things that you always thought would happen somewhere else and always happened because someone was careless. And, while there may be an element of carelessness in some line of duty deaths, I think it enhanced our perspective on safety, how we operated at fire scenes, how we operated during training. Just the overall attitude of higher level of safety in all of our operations, and I think that attitude still carries over today just for that reason. I think some of the standard operating procedures that we've implemented since that time directly address safety in many aspects, not just directly related to the accident itself, but in our operations and how we operate.

**AG:** And is there anything from this incident that would be helpful to today's firefighters?

**JS:** I think just operating in a safe manner. Always having that extra person watching, looking, paying attention to what's going on. We did add a fourth person to the operations of the aerial platform, which their purpose is to stay at ground level, on the ground off the truck and just watch to make sure that there's nothing going on that could be unsafe: high wires, trees, somebody being someplace where they shouldn't be while the truck is in operation. And I think that's true in any type of activity you do in the fire service. That sometimes there needs to be somebody specifically assigned just to watch for those unsafe acts or to watch for those insurances were maybe a procedure is being done incorrectly and could be done in a safer manner and bring that to whoever is performing that operation so that nobody gets hurt.

**AG:** Is there anything else that you would like to share about Howard or the Canton Fire Department that we have not covered already?

**JS:** I think he was just a great individual that left his impact on the department in his short time here. And, I hope, even though that was a very difficult situation, I hope that we did learn from it, and that he's not forgotten into the future. This Saturday, which will be August 4th, since Howard's death, ten days after his death, his son was diagnosed with leukemia. And so, our firefighters have been very involved in a fundraising run from Canton to Peoria to support St. Jude, where Kyle was treated. And this Saturday to mark the tenth anniversary of Howard's death, a number of the firefighters are going to run the first three miles in our turn out gear. Just to provide a public display of remembrance, I guess you would say, of Howard, so that he is not forgotten.