

Today is October 1, 2008, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Eddie Enright from the Chicago Fire Department. We are discussing the 1973 Forum Cafeteria Fire, where three Chicago firefighters died in the line of duty.

AG: Can you tell me about your history with the Chicago Fire Department?

EE: Sure, Adam. I joined the ranks of the department February 1, 1967, serving as a third generation firefighter from my family. Spent two months in the fire academy, and I was assigned to Engine Company 98 at 202 East Chicago Avenue. I spent four years there as a firefighter, and I transferred to Snorkel Squad 1 at 1044 North Orleans Street, and I stayed at that assignment just about seven and a half years. And I made lieutenant, was promoted to lieutenant, and was assigned to 1st District Relief. I floated in the 1st District for a little over a year, and I had an assignment at Engine 18 at 1121 West Roosevelt Road, and I just had that assignment a short time, brief, a month or so, and I was promoted to the rank of captain.

With that promotion, I was detailed to Truck 5, when it was a straight stick, before it became a tower ladder, and I served there for a couple of months, and then there was interviews for assignment to squad companies they were forming. So I applied for the squad and received the assignment, and I was assigned to Squad 3, which was running out of Engine 112's house at Grace and Damen on the North Side, and that would have been around September of 1980. Spent about two, two and a half years on the squad, and the company was taken out of service. So I floated as a captain up in the 3rd District for a while, and had a long term detail to Engine 30. And then a vacancy list was posted, and I put in for Engine 98, where I started out as a candidate, and I received that assignment in, I believe, 1984, following in the footsteps of my dad who had served as captain there thirty years before me, almost thirty years to the day on assignment. I spent about six years at Engine 98, and I was promoted to battalion chief. I floated in the city for about a year with headquarters, and I was assigned to Battalion 3 at 1129 West Chicago Avenue with Engine 14-Truck 19.

I remained at that assignment for five years, and I was appointed to the position of deputy district chief. I again floated with headquarters throughout the city for close to a year, and then I was assigned to the 6th District, out at 105th and Hoxie, at Engine 81's quarters. It's ironic, before I went on the fire department I'd been a tile setter, and my boss, I called him for work one day, and he said "go to the firehouse at 105th and Hoxie," and I still remember saying to him "where the hell is Hoxie?" and found it. So I thought it was ironic, being assigned there. What they did, they had put an addition on the original single engine house. But that assignment, I was there a couple years, and the administration changed, the commissioners changed, and I was transferred to the 1st District, downtown, out of Engine 42's quarters at Illinois and Dearborn. And I stayed there for about five years til my retirement. Come on the job February 1st of '67, my last work day was 28th of November of 2004. So I was just about two months shy of thirty-eight years with the department.

AG: Okay. What was the department like at the time of the Forum Cafeteria Fire?

EE: My memories as a young firefighter, I had about just nearly six years on the job, four years on the engine, two years on the snorkel, things that I can remember are the apparatus, the equipment, the basics. My first rig I was on was a '54 Mack. You can remember the old back step days, no enclosed cabs. Get detailed to a truck, you're riding on the side, and stuff like that. So it was a different era, different times. Dangerous, thank goodness for enclosed cabs and what have you. But things like that. I can remember it was pre-mask day. Some of the modern technology was coming in on the job, like Hurst Tools and stuff like that.

There was always training, the established drill manuals for the fire department. A lot of the people that you worked with: World War II veterans, Korean War veterans, people that had gone through the Depression. They had the strength of a good day's work for a good day's pay. Things seemed like obedience came, like, naturally. Obedience, following orders, things like that. I sort of learned to sit back and listen. Keep my eyes and ears open, and listen and try to learn from the seasoned vets that they had. They were coming out of a different era, too. A lot of them had worked "one day on, one day off" platoon until they got to the three platoon system. And then the, when I came on, there was a three platoon system where you worked one day on, two days off, and then you'd come back. There was no "Daley days." And somewhere around '68, I believe, "Daley days" come in, where they had a series: you'd work, like, five days and instead of coming to work on the sixth day you had five days off. So that was the cat's meow.

There was a couple of good pay raises at the time. I want to say, entrance wages probably, rough guess, six grand a year or something like that. They had an across the board raise right around there that made everybody pretty happy. So, things were going along. So those are what I remember. The strength of the individuals you worked with and the beliefs that they had, and the devotion to duty. I remember things like that. Proud of your company, proud of your tools and equipment, proud of your performance and stuff like that.

AG: Okay. Can you please describe the Forum Cafeteria Fire?

EE: What I remember about the Forum, Adam, is you'd get a lot of runs and stuff. I don't remember responding, I knew we had a run there. I remember, the first vivid memory I have is going in, and it had to be, without researching it, minimum fifty foot wide. It had an open, the first floor was wide open, it had like an atrium as you went into the entrance and there was a balcony. And they had, of course, the dining tables on the first floor and on the second floor, kitchens in the back, but there was a stairwell on the east and west wall that brought you up to the balcony. I can remember chrome and glass. I can remember the ceiling, the big ventilators up on the ceiling, and it had to be, rough guess, from the first floor to the ceiling maybe forty feet, something like that. Big open area that wasn't accessible to you.

So anyways, when we went in there was smoke, you could smell the fire and what have you. It was pre-mask days. And so we were ordered to pull ceiling. On the “snork” squad that day we had the officer and about six firefighters including myself. Two fellas were assigned to the basket, working outside, and the rest of us were up on the balcony pulling ceiling. What I do remember is smoke conditions, we weren’t down on the floor but we knew we had something. I remember trying to pull the ceiling. Trying to penetrate it was trying to poke a hole in concrete. Whatever they had used in the plaster or something was extremely difficult to penetrate. You tried to open up some of the vents that were up there, the natural openings, we were successful with that. A lot of work, a lot of people up there.

And, as the fire progressed, our lieutenant came up the rear stairs and caught me and he said “Eddie, get the squad outta here, get ‘em outta here now, the roof’s coming in.” And so, he was informed that by our two firefighters in the snorkel basket. “Get the guys outta there, it’s coming through the roof.” So, got the message, got the rest of the guys, told ‘em “get outta here” and the word was getting to everybody else “get outta here.” As I was starting to leave, I was heading toward the east stairwell, and a captain of a truck company said “squad, can you pull the ceiling here?” And I turned around and I looked at him, and at that time, when we were exiting, the big ventilating shafts over the tall atrium area were literally belching solid fire out. It was like breathing fire. Coming out, going back up. And I turned to him and said “Cap, look at this, we’re getting out of here.” He said something like “oh my god, didn’t see it, let’s go.”

So we hit the stairs to get out. I got to the door first or second with the squad guys, and as the last member of the squad hit the door, before he hit the sidewalk, the collapse occurred, the initial collapse, and the force of it blew him out onto the street. And I remember, we’re trying to pick ourself up, you’re nervous, you’re scared, you know there’s guys in there. And one of the fellas from the squad, a little more seasoned, probably the senior guy on the company, he jumped into an apparatus and requested they kick up the alarm. It was either a 2-11 he asked for, or make it a 3-11.

Turned around, and we were gonna take the big show windows out to help the other guys that were still running out. You could see the guys. The partial collapse, what I remember, was like a lean-to. Roof came in, landed to the left on the west stairwell, and the guys on the east side that were still coming out we were gonna try to help them. And when we advanced towards the window to take it out, one member of the department, a firefighter, came running from the back, from under the balcony, and literally just jumped on the table and went right through the window. Just jumped out the window. I can remember the captain of an engine company. He had a candidate firefighter on the company. His candidate, when he hit the first floor, he went to run to the back of the cafeteria. I can remember the captain running after him, grabbing him, pulling him to come out the front door. So those are a couple of vivid memories that I have.

And then, the second collapse occurred, where it covered most of that area. We knew people were in there. We’re trying to account for who was missing. We accounted for all the people on the squad, we were okay, and we’re trying to figure out how we gonna

get these guys. Still collapsed, still trying to get some work done. I teamed up with a fellow firefighter that I had served with on my first assignment, 'cause one of our friends from that company was trapped in there. We couldn't account for him. And so, I can remember working our way up the rear steps, and we're on the roof. I can remember the black tar, the heat, the smoke, and we're trying to find an opening, something to see if we could help these firefighters. We got driven out of there, back in the alley. Somehow our officer told us, "make it down to the basement, they've got a dumbwaiter shaft that they've found." So we make our way down to the basement, and we were ordered to take out the glazed tile blocks around it, in it, and open up the shaft. We were able to get one of the thinner firefighters into the shaft, and he volunteered, and he climbed up the shaft. He ended up on the balcony, under the collapse, and that's where the survivors were at. *[Note: This firefighter also found the body of the fallen firefighter that was the first to be recovered.]*

One fella that we were looking for, that I had served with, he was up there, involved in the collapse, and he felt some fresh air. He felt a gush of fresh air. He borrowed a hand light from another firefighter, found the shaft, and anybody in his immediate area that he could see, or that could hear him, he told them "follow me, come by me" and he got them all over to that shaft. And that's when the rescues started happening there. I can remember being down, I stayed in the kitchen of the cafeteria, and I can remember these guys coming down. I can remember the looks on their faces, but yet the relief to get out of there. And then when our one friend that had found that shaft came down, I can remember myself and this other firefighter just grabbing him and "Are you okay? What can we do for you? Who's left up there?" and things like that.

When those survivors got down, then they had another accountability check, and that's when it was determined there was still three firefighters in there. I can vividly remember one guy on the squad, one of the fellas that was trapped, he had been assigned to Snorkel Squad 1 before I was, and he came down the shaft and I can remember the one guy on our company that was close to him walking with him through the alley, sort of like hugging him and stuff. The one guy had lost, they'd both lost, their helmets in there. I believe that picture made one of the newspapers, getting him out, walking him for help. Another fella that came out, we had worked with. As the squad we covered a lot of companies. We'd cover five battalions, and you'd know a lot of people. And the one fella that came out, he had just been promoted lieutenant, and it was his first day on the job, if my memory is correct, that he was a lieutenant. And as we're walking him down the alley, I can remember him saying, he says "I don't know if I want this promotion," something like that. It was so shocking to him.

Then the search began and a lot of off-duty people had come in. I got a little ahead of myself. I remember two off-duty guys coming in from the squad, and one of them, slender, aggressive, tough guy, he made it up the dumbwaiter shaft. I can remember, in that recovery, we took two of them down. We found two firefighters that were lost. *[Note: The body of the remaining fallen firefighter was recovered later that day.]* And that numbness. And that reverence. And the disbelief. And the shock on the guys, the faces. And the bosses, the chiefs. I can remember the one firefighter on the squad with

us was friends with one of the firefighters that we lost, and I can remember him, the disbelief on knowing the guy. Hard to believe you lose people like that. Lose anybody.

So after that, everybody was soaking wet, everybody was cold, it was a cold night, you got a little relief down in that there kitchen area, but I tell you, not one fireman stopped working. It was quite impressive.

So anyways, we're relieved there, and go back to the station, to the firehouse. It was sort of quiet there, guys were talking and everything. Everybody wanted to get home. Like I said, my dad, he was still on the job. Different platoon. But when this had happened, the radio and the television news. Big, big calming effect on my wife. "Eddie's okay, the squads out." Stuff like that. So anyways, I get dressed and I head home. I don't even think I changed clothes. And I can remember walking in the door. It was '73, the kids were all young. I had the four kids. They were all home. I can remember going home, hugging the wife, kissing her. Hugging the kids, kissing them. Thankful to be home. And I went right to that icebox and I had six beers in there, and I took every beer and I swallowed down every one. If there had been sixty beers in there, Adam, I would have drank the sixty beers. How it impacts you, that critical incident stress. But, just for the sake of God, for inches, where you're assigned, where you're working, and with the blessings of God we got out of there. So I've always been thankful for that.

AG: How did the line of duty deaths affect individuals within the Chicago Fire Department and within the community?

EE: The members of the department, the department, suffer. You feel the sadness of it, you have the concern for the lost firefighters' families. You're thankful for their service. It's a reality where that dedication to each other comes in and how you pay respect to the individuals and to their families and to the department. And the city, I think, recognizes that, too. They had to hurt, a lot of civilians. Firemen are very well respected. And the funeral they had for the guys, how respectful it was for the families, with the apparatus and the flags draped and the respect. And the people standing in line and at attention and saluting, and the respect that they paid for them. I can remember that vividly.

But the thoughts of the firemen stayed with you, and for some reason I don't think we talk about that too much when it happens. I think some military people could explain it better, but you're thankful that you made it through, but yet you're sorry for the ones that didn't. And the reality come in some time and "how come?" Just basically a question: "how come?" And it's just the arena that we work in, things change or can change so fast, and I think that reality came out with a bunch of the firefighters, especially the guys on my company. We had a highly seasoned officer, tough guy, and how he would bring the company back together, 'cause we're going to more fires. We're gonna do our duty. And so I can remember those thoughts. But again, real briefly, Adam, just beside the sorrow and everything, the pride. The thankfulness to have people like that, but yet the tragedy to lose them, and I think the members, the department, and the city recognized that and did them good, did them proud.

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

EE: The memory of the guys. I was always taught we do not walk alone in this fire service. There's a lot of people with us, we just can't see them. Firm believer that those three firefighters are out there. We lost them, but what was learned? And I can remember things that I learned from it, I believe. Serving with the army, I had a brief stint in Vietnam, the reality of a fireground to a battleground became realistic. How things change. How you rely on each other, more so than you can imagine. The value of knowing your tools and equipment. The value of knowing your enemy, studying your enemy, learning something about fire. Struggling to learn about building construction, fire behavior, ventilation. I think that's a lesson for today's firefighters.

And it established that in me, and I'd like to think that awareness, that reality, might've just straightened out my thoughts sometimes. I was always proud to wear the uniform, proud to be a member of it, but the reality of the job, when it happens, it really hits home with you. Again, thankful, I pray for that guardian angel of mine everyday and stuff like that. Realities like that come out. This is the real thing, this is not a game. And I really think that recognition and that awareness followed me throughout my career after that. I think that would be a message for young firefighters of today. You don't walk alone, these guys are with you.

AG: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to share about this fire that we did not cover during the interview?

EE: Yeah, the one thing, memory that I had, Adam. The next work day, a lot of bosses, a lot of company officers, chief officers, firefighters, veterans, there was big trauma. And I'll tell you, when you get scared, when you experience fear, the only thing that brings you back together is teamwork and leadership. The next day, we go back and, yeah, we're still in disbelief. There's still recovery mode going on, but, yet, the bell rings, we're going out the door. We had a strong leader, he'd get our heads back together. That next workday, we caught a fire, a working fire, in a chocolate factory downtown. I can vividly remember the look on every firefighter's face, especially the chief officers with the more responsibility, just in fear this building's gonna collapse, we're gonna lose more firefighters. And everybody looked at each other, and we knew we had to do something, and this black shit is pumping out of there, and I can remember how the bosses were like rallying "let's go, we got a job to do." I can vividly remember one captain say "let's go guys, let's go in," and found the fire, but it took, you had to pull your boots up, but you needed a leader. You had to develop that trust, you're gonna follow his decisions, you're putting yourself in his trust. That was a big learn, and I can vividly remember that. And I can remember the names, I can remember the bosses, thanking guys on the back, things like that. So, that's probably the last memory of it, and I hope it helps future firefighters, and thanks for the opportunity.

AG: Thank you.