

Today is August 2, 2007, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Mike Morrow from the Peoria Fire Department. We are discussing Vernon Gudat who died in the line of duty in 1983.

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

MM: Basically, Peoria Fire Department became a professional fire department in 1875. The city's grown, obviously, throughout the years, like all cities have. At the time of, in 1983, the city was probably forty-four square miles. Captain Gudat was a captain on Engine 10. I was a firefighter on Engine 2. At that time, we had about five engines that were two man engine companies, the rest were three man engine companies, and we responded to fire suppression, rescue, and medical calls.

AG: Okay. Can you tell me anything about Captain Gudat and his career?

MM: Time of death, I believe which was thirty-eight years old. He had fifteen years on the fire department. Again, he was captain on Engine 10. Worked his way up through the ranks, was very respected by everybody on the fire department. For me personally, I looked at him as a mentor because he was the kind of guy that he was an aggressive interior firefighter, he was the kind of guy that when I was a young man then, I was on a vacation relief position, where I would go to different firehouses and it was always a special deal to be able to go to Station 10 because Captain Gudat was there. You knew that if you got a fire, you were going to grab onto his coattails and you were going in that fire. I mean you just, everybody learned a lot from him and he was just he was an excellent firefighter.

AG: Do you remember any other interesting or unique anecdotes about him?

MM: The one that anytime I'm asked about him that I always remember was I probably only had a little over a year on the fire department, and at that time he was on Engine 12. And I got called home because there was a noise in the basement, and when we got to the basement it seemed like there was some kind of animal in there, and I can remember that as we went downstairs, Butch goes "You don't have a ball bat or anything do you?" And we're kind of slinking around in the basement, looking for what ended up being a squirrel, we didn't find it then. But I mean that just epitomizes the way he was always, I mean he had fun. We built a firefighter's club that had burnt down in Groveland, and he was over there helping us, I mean it was just, it was countless, the guys that had fun with him on their off day. And, one of the big things was, I always remember about him was, he's got two children, Michael and Michelle, and I mean they were everything to him. He went to all their games, all their school things, just he was just an awesome guy.

AG: Okay. Can you please describe the incident in which Captain Gudat died in the line of duty?

MM: It was January 23, 1983, and I believe an alarm came in about one in the morning. It was a two story building, multiple-use, one end of it was apartments and then there were three businesses on the first floor and then apartments above those businesses. When I responded on Engine 2, we had what was then our regular response of two engines, a truck, a rescue squad, a battalion chief, and an assistant chief. My first assignment was to go in, with my captain, and we checked upstairs apartments. It elevated to a second alarm, and then a third alarm, which was when Captain Gudat responded. We were in the process of moving from an alley in the rear of the building when Engine 10 arrived. Captain Gudat came around to the back of the building, and was advancing a two and a half inch hand-line because those businesses were fully involved and there was just there was like a firestorm in the whole bottom of that building. Probably no more than ten or fifteen minutes after he arrived, the ceiling collapsed and forced the walls out, and the walls, the wall in the rear of the building crushed Captain Gudat and myself. And, we went to, the guys that were there, I mean it was obviously a panic because somebody that was working an aerial ladder saw us go under the wall and they were frantic trying to dig us out. And once they got us out, we went to separate hospitals, and so a member of the executive board, union executive board, had come up to check on me, and that's when they told me that they pronounced him dead at the hospital, but in all actuality he died at the scene.

AG: Okay. And you touched on this a bit, do you know anything else about the on-scene reaction of the other firefighters when the wall collapsed?

MM: I know that the several that were in the front didn't know that we were in the collapse. The ones in the rear, and this is all from recollection because I obviously can't remember, but they frantically started digging out. Firefighter Fred Sepp was in the aerial basket in Truck 3, and he pinpointed us and used a wide fog stream to keep fire off of us. Word spread rather quickly, and anybody that could respond and dig us out came back around to dig us out. Obviously they kept, had to keep some lines on the fire, and it was pretty much chaos and panic because it was just something that thankfully doesn't happen everyday.

AG: And aside from that was, did the wall collapse have any other immediate impact on the emergency response operations at the incident?

MM: They, I think, for the only time in my twenty-eight, now twenty-eight year plus career, that was the only time they called for a general response, where everybody in the city, all the apparatus responded. They were already in the process of having a call-in, because it was at the three-alarm stage, but I mean all the manpower that could be there was there.

AG: Okay. How did Captain Gudat's death affect individuals within the organization and community?

MM: Obviously it was a tragedy and there was a great impact on the department because of the sense of loss. I would say the community, the City of Peoria, the citizens, rallied

around the fire department and supported us. Firefighters from throughout the state and some from other states showed up for the funeral to pay respects. Firefighters from everywhere showed up, we left one firefighter in each station to help guide people to alarms, and there was just a massive outpour of people to come man our stations for us, to be in part of the funeral. It was overwhelming, probably would be a good word.

AG: Okay. How did the Peoria Fire Department or the City of Peoria memorialize Captain Gudat? Can you describe the funeral any further?

MM: The day of the funeral, actually I guess that would be kind of an anecdote, too, because I was in the hospital and the doctor was refusing to let me go to the funeral. A local company that transports people in wheelchairs volunteered to provide a vehicle for me, but my doctor refused to let me go to the funeral. So some of my brother firefighters showed up and we let the doctor know that if he didn't let me go to the funeral, there would be two-hundred firefighters and police officers who came up and volunteered to help take me out of the hospital and I was going to the funeral. So they took me to the funeral, put me in this wheelchair van, and the procession went throughout the city, past every fire station, which was practically all of them at the time, that Butch had worked at. And, there was just massive outpouring of citizens that lined the route showing respect, firefighters. We received mountains of mail, sympathy cards, support. It was awesome.

AG: Can you describe any changes within the fire department as a whole following this line of duty death?

MM: Well, our department along with other departments, and not right at the time, but we all went to the, finally, thankfully, to the Incident Command System, which gave more accountability for firefighters and helped with our safety. Later on that year, 1983, they hired additional firefighters and that led to, finally, Peoria manning all fire machines with three people instead of two. So, I think it was, that was it wasn't directly changed immediately, but I think that was the catalyst for us having three man, on which we still feel are inadequate, but that made quite a change for us.

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

MM: Well, kind of talking about the Incident Command System again, at that time nobody was really using incident command, and it was, the accountability wasn't in place like it is now. So, firefighters now, I think, have a better degree of safety because of incidents like this. And I think that was a thing that led to finally having incident command was this situation along with countless others throughout the nation.

AG: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to share about Captain Gudat or the Peoria Fire Department that we didn't cover during this interview?

MM: Yeah, there is. We have, as a union, we have memorialized Captain Gudat every year since his death, and we've made special efforts on, like, five year, ten year, fifteen

year, twenty year. We've always had his children there. His Mom and Dad would come every year, and his sister, up until the time, and they've all passed. But, this year we had our memorial, and this was the twenty-fourth anniversary. I talked to his son, Mike, and his daughter, Michelle, and after that, a couple months after that, they didn't want to let it out at the time of the memorial, but now they're, they have the "Butch" Gudat Fund, which is set up to provide scholarships for firefighter, active and retired, volunteer and career, for scholarships for their kids. And, also, as it grows it's going to provide grant money to fire departments for safety equipment. It's just in its inception. The first scholarship is going to be awarded about right around the anniversary, the twenty-fifth anniversary, of his death. So, his children were proud that we memorialized him over the years, and this is just a different step going in a different direction, a way to keep his name alive and give back to the fire service.