

Today is June 29, 2007, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Chief John Sowders from the Alton Fire Department. We are discussing Captain Gary Porter and Firefighter Timmie Lewis who died in the line of duty in 1992.

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

JS: Yes, the Alton Fire Department, City of Alton was founded in 1818. The formal charter was in 1837. We had a couple of volunteer fire companies, pretty typical and common of those days. The fire department was actually formed into a paid fire department in 1881. So it has been a paid, fully paid, fire department since 1881. Do you need to know about the configuration of it or anything like that?

AG: Sure. Yes, that'd be great.

JS: At the time, in 1992, we were operating out of five separate fire stations. We had five engine companies, one aerial company, and one rescue squad, and then we had a command officer who would also respond.

AG: Okay. And are there any other details about the department at the time of these line of duty deaths? Do you know how many people were in the department?

JS: I believe about, at that time, there were probably sixty-five firefighters in the department working twenty-four hour shifts. Twenty-four hours on, forty-eight hours off.

AG: What can you tell me about Captain Porter and Firefighter Lewis and their careers?

JS: Well, Captain Porter was a fourteen year veteran. He actually started on the department about a year before I did. He was a paramedic, one of the first paramedics on the department, when we went to ALS service. He was active in the local firefighters' union. He was one of the executive board members for many years. And he had been a captain for a couple of years before this incident happened. So, he had a promising career, in fourteen years he had risen to the rank of captain, and was eligible to be taking the next assistant chief's test. So. And, Timmie was a probationary firefighter. We have a twelve month probationary period. He had been on the department approximately nine or ten months at the time of his death. So, he was just beginning in the fire service.

AG: Do you remember any interesting or unique anecdotes about Captain Porter or Firefighter Lewis?

JS: Well, Gary had, as far as anecdotes go I don't know, but Gary was, as I said, a very active member of the department. He was active in the union. He had suffered a rather serious back injury a few years before on duty and had recovered from that and came back to duty. At that time people had speculated that possibly he would want to take a disability, but he wasn't interested in that. He wanted to come back to work and was looking forward to moving up in his career. He had very high aspirations. I can

remember sitting around the fire stations talking with him and planning when we were the chief this is what we would do and this was how we would change things. So, his aspirations were to move as high up the ladder as he could and to make as big a difference in the community as he could. Timmie was actually my probationary firefighter. At the time of his death, I was off duty on vacation the night that they were killed, and Gary was working in my place. He was just a fantastic young man. His aspirations were to do good for the community. If you talked to him, he was the typical "I'm here to help people, this is all I want to do, I just, it's all I've ever wanted to do, if it's a way I can give back to the people of Alton," that's what he wanted to do. He had already made plans to go to paramedic school so that he could become a paramedic just as soon as he was off probation. In fact, if we'd have let him go to paramedic training before he was off probation, he would have done that. He, too, was going to be a very fine attribute to the department.

AG: Okay. Can you please describe the incident in which Captain Porter and Firefighter Lewis died in the line of duty?

JS: They responded to a structure fire, October 24, early morning hours of October 24, 1992. The alarm came in at 2:57 AM for a structure fire. They were on the engine company that arrived first or second on the scene, I can't recall off the top of my head. They would have arrived pretty much the same time as the first two engine companies. What they found was a two story structure with fire, the back half of the structure was fully involved in fire. We had fire on the first and second floors and it was coming through the roof. There was a second structure approximately fifteen feet to the side of this structure that had also caught fire. The exposure, it looked like there was fire up in the attic of the exposure and the eaves were burning. So, that's what they faced when they arrived on the scene. The initial companies arriving were two pumper crews with three men each, and a rescue squad with two men, and an aerial tower with two men, and an assistant chief who was the on-scene commander. Very early into this incident, Captain Porter and Firefighter Lewis, along with a couple of other firefighters, had positioned themselves between the two structures, so that they could protect the exposure. We had another crew that was actually inside the exposure house. They extinguished the fires on the exposures and were turning their attention to the main fire structure, when it all the sudden, the house shifted toward, or actually the first floor just sort of collapsed. The house shifted right over the top of them, hit the exposure structure, and dropped down on top of them. It's a fairly typical collapse pattern that the first floor gave way, the house shifted and moved over, and the entire second floor, they ended up underneath the first and second floor. At that time, there were four firefighters between the two houses. One of them managed to just barely escape the collapse. Three of them were trapped underneath the collapse. Captain Dan Walter was fortunate enough. He was trapped in a void created by a second story window and he ended up suffering some severe injuries to his legs. Captain Porter and Firefighter Lewis were both trapped underneath the bulk of the rubble.

AG: Okay. And what was the immediate on-scene reaction of the other firefighters when the structure collapsed?

JS: As very predictable, I would assume, all of the firefighters immediately moved towards the collapse. They knew immediately that we had firefighters trapped. The ones operating in the exposure fire vacated it and immediately started trying to dig through the rubble, see who they could locate. They made voice contact with Captain Walter and with Captain Porter immediately. They could hear them, they could communicate with them. Everyone started frantically trying to dig and get tools. It took 30 seconds to a minute for the incident commander to sort of gain control of it, to get everybody organized into a little better rescue operation, make sure that we still had crews fighting the fire, because obviously everyone wanted to leave the fire and go to the rescue of their comrades. But, well, a very short time, probably thirty to sixty seconds, it was a very well organized rescue effort. They got the saws and the tools, and within fifteen, twenty minutes we had the city backhoe there. So, actually, it was much better than you would think. The initial reaction is always the same-- everybody drops what they are doing and runs to where the guys were trapped, but in a very, very short time they got it organized and did it in a proper manner.

AG: And, what effect did these injuries immediately have on the emergency response operations at the incident?

JS: Well, as soon as the structure collapsed, the assistant chief called for an "all call," which is basically to call all off duty personnel and bring everyone either to the scene or to man, we have two standby pumpers. So, he had everyone else on duty at the time, which were three other pumper crews and then the fire chief himself would have been notified. That was done immediately. Then they started calling people out, all of the off-duty firefighters were called out to man whatever other standby equipment we had. Really, no lapse in response as far as the rest of the city went. We were fortunate there were no other calls within that time period. It was three o'clock in the morning, four o'clock in the morning, but really no problem in getting personnel in to man extra equipment and continue the regular, normal activity of the department.

AG: Okay. Can you share anything more about the recovery and rescue of the firefighters trapped by the collapse?

JS: The rescue and the recovery, actually, if you look at the timeline now, it actually went fairly quickly. Everyone on scene felt, of course, like it was dragging out forever. Just felt like they couldn't, weren't able to do anything. Everyone was very hesitant to make the first cuts with the saws. We were unable to locate the victims. We could make voice contact. We could hear them under the rubble. The building materials and all the rubble were too heavy to just pick up with your hands, so everybody was frantically trying to get what they could out with their hands. But we knew that we were going to have to start cutting, and without knowing exactly where the men were, that was a difficult first decision. Those first rescuers that made that decision just took the bull by the horns and knew that, hey, if they don't get them out, nobody's going to live, we've got to start cutting this timber away. That's the initial, when I talk to everyone, that was the initial fear. Everybody was hesitant to make those first cuts. Once they started using

the saws and getting the debris cut up and gotten out of the way, then everything moved relatively fast. We located the one survivor, Captain Walter was in a void, as I said earlier. He was located fairly quickly-- ten, fifteen minutes. Then lying next to him was Captain Porter. So, he was located just about ten minutes after we got Captain Walter out. By the time we got to Captain Porter and extricated him from underneath there, there were no life signs. He was immediately transferred on a back board out to a waiting ambulance company who started ALS treatment and transported him to the hospital. Firefighter Lewis was not found for probably another fifteen or twenty minutes after that. Timmie had apparently taken the brunt of a large structural member. We actually were not able to cut him free, we had to get the back hoe to lift that structural member off of his body in order to free him, and then he, too, was rushed out to the ambulance and rushed to the hospital, but he was absent of life signs when we got him out.

AG: Okay. How did these line of duty deaths affect individuals within the Alton Fire Department and within the city of Alton?

JS: It's unbelievable the effect that it has, it truly is. Initially, the entire department was just devastated. I mean, the emotions are just hard to describe. You expect being hardened, veteran firefighters that people would be able to react through this thing a little better than they do, but it's such an emotional thing. The department immediately comes together as a family, and it doesn't matter what fire department you're with, you're a family, and that is evident more at this time than I ever saw in my entire career. We supported each other. We prayed together. We got together. We supported the families. It was almost a circle the wagon type of thing, and anyone who said any criticism or any comments in any derogatory manner, everyone took offense to it. The community came together unbelievably. I was never more proud to be a firefighter in this community than during this incident. It was the worst time in my career, but it was also, I evidenced or witnessed some of the best things that I'd ever seen. We got support from every level of the community that you can imagine. People called, people stopped by the fire stations for weeks and weeks and weeks afterwards, dropping cookies, brownies, contributions off. We started a memorial fund. Captain Porter had two young children. In fact, his daughter had just turned two, I believe the day he was killed, and he had a young son who was four or five years old. And the community just made an outpouring of support and contributions for them. Timmie was not married; he was engaged, had a fiancée. Once again, just unbelievable support from the community. They really came together. The firefighters, interesting to watch the evolution of the firefighters. Critical incident stress debriefing was just at that time starting to become a popular notion. We had never had any use for it here or never had any occasion to use it here, but a neighboring city over in Belleville did have a critical incident stress debriefing team put together and so we called them and had them come in. All of us were extremely skeptical. No one wanted to participate in it. The chief at the time, David Boulds, had the foresight to order everyone to participate in it, and we were all very disgruntled that he thought he could do that and, in fact, we were really upset with him just to make us do that. And, I learned at that time how important a critical incident stress debriefing is. When they got us all together in a room and everybody fighting back their emotions, everybody trying to control themselves and be macho. And some of the older, senior firefighters, senior fire officers that I had

looked up to all my life started it off and opened themselves up a little and cried in front of everybody, it was like a flood gate. The younger firefighters then could let it out. It was a tremendous help, and I have preached it ever since to any firefighter organization that I speak to, that nobody wants to do it, everybody thinks it's a crock, nobody wants to be the one to open up and cry in front of anybody, and it was just an unbelievable help to heal everybody on the department. It made such a difference to know that everybody felt the same way. We hear a lot of talk about survivor guilt with the New York thing, but it didn't happen, survivor guilt didn't come about in 9/11, I think that's in every line of duty death. Everybody on the scene feels like they should have seen something, they should have done something differently; there's something that they could have been better at and made a difference. Everyone who wasn't on the scene feels guilty that they weren't there, and if they were there maybe they'd have been able to do something different. So, working through the grief process has been a very long and tedious process, and in all honesty there are people, it changed people's lives forever. I mean, we've got fire officers still, firefighters now that are still on the department that we noted very prominent personality changes, and it never changed back. I mean, some people chose to go and get counseling, and others chose to ride it out and just rough it out themselves, and we've got individuals that have never been the same, they're just a total different personality than they were back then before that incident.

AG: And, can you describe the funeral for these firefighters?

JS: It was an incredible display. We had firefighters come to the funeral services from over a hundred and thirty different fire departments. I believe we counted something like thirty five or thirty seven different states that were represented. Firefighters and fire apparatus coming from all over the country. We had firefighters come from Canada, come in for the funeral. We had never experienced anything like this before. The Illinois Fire Chief's Association sent a committee down, they sent a crew of two or three fire chiefs, and what a help. We were just devastated. Our chief had no clue what to do, all of us were just in a state of shock and just a mess. And the Fire Chief's Association guys came down and they just basically just said, hey, let us take care of things for you and they did. And the local funeral director, we had one of our local funeral directors, Rod Elias, stepped up and said "I'll take care of everything, they'll be no expense to any family members, I'll do it all." Without those Fire Chief's Association, that funeral committee that they have, and our local funeral director, I don't know what would have happened, because none of us were in any kind of condition to handle anything. Timmie and Gary's families were just devastated. They were at a total loss of what to do. And, the Chief's committee just did a fantastic job of organizing the entire service. The funeral, there were over a thousand uniformed firefighters showed up for the funeral service. Which, to me, was at that time, and still is, an incredible feat, to get that many people together in that short of time, because the funeral was a few days later. But, the fire service does that, as we've seen on countless occasions. I mean, it truly is a big family, and it was a very impressive thing. We had two separate funeral services, but what we did was we had a funeral service for Timmie in one of the largest churches in the city, and it was just one block away the funeral home. So we went to the funeral service for Timmie and then from there over a thousand uniformed firefighters marched the

block up the street to the funeral home where we held Gary's service, and then from there we had a procession that stretched over two miles of fire apparatus and vehicles to the two different cemeteries. Just an unbelievable sight. The streets were lined with people. I think every citizen in the city of Alton was there. The citizens came out and lined the streets. The entire police department was in uniform, at every intersection that we came to we had half a dozen police officers saluting. I got to tell you, I drove, or I was riding in the pumper with Timmie, we were carrying Timmie's body, and it was incredible. I just had tears in my eyes the whole time, little kids standing out there saluting and waving flags. The entire procession, the whole route was lined with people. The St. Louis City Fire Department, Chief Neil Svetanics was the chief at that time, he sent two engine companies over with full crews and a battalion chief to man our stations so that all of our on-duty personnel could attend the funeral, which I just thought was incredible. They sent their entire probation class. They had a busload of probationary firefighters lining the procession. It was just really an incredible sight to see, and, it went the entire way to both cemeteries. And people stopped and pulled off the road. You watch a funeral go by now and nobody even bothers to pull out of the way. You see people crossing the intersections. This was just incredible. There was not a car moving. Captain Porter's cemetery was in Bethalto, a neighboring community about five miles away, and the ride between Alton and Bethalto, not a car moved. Everyone of them, every person on the streets pulled over and stood out and bowed their heads and put their hands over their hearts or saluted. Really an incredible thing to see.

AG: And, how else did the Alton Fire Department or the city of Alton memorialize these fallen firefighters?

JS: As soon as the funeral was over, we formed a committee, the department did. One of our firefighters, Brad Sweetman, sort of took charge, and Brad, myself, Ricky Orban, the chief at the time, David Boulds, formed a little committee. And, we started collecting up the memorials that were sent in, because money was coming in from all over the community unsolicited, nobody asked for it. So we set up a memorial fund for Timmie's family and one for Gary's family, and the money that came in we divided up that. And then the department started a memorial fund so that we could actually erect a statue and build a little memorial garden, in memory of not only these two, but two other firefighters who were killed in the 1940s in Alton, and so that we wouldn't forget. And within about a year we had commissioned a Denver, Colorado, firefighter named Jo Cipri to make a bronze statue, and one of our local businessmen donated two large granite stones and did all of the carving, and we put together quite a nice memorial that sits right outside of our headquarters station. Hopefully as a reminder. Not only do you not want to forget Timmie and Gary, but we want our firefighters to remember at all times how easy it can happen. So, that's what we did as a department. That's the tangible thing. Now, the intangible is that the attitude of our fire department changed tremendously. It was interesting to note, when this was all over, the interviews that were done by *American Heat* came over and did a video interview, the news people would come and interview, and the command officers that were interviewed and the firefighters on the scene all had the same sort of comments. Looking back on it we watch it and the comments were "buildings don't collapse this way, this was a freak occurrence that, they just never

happen this way, there was no way to predict this.” I took over as fire chief about six months after this incident. We started opening our eyes a little bit, doing a little bit of research. We started reading books by Chief Vince Dunn from New York who’s considered the fire service expert on building collapse. And, lo and behold, you look in his books and this is a textbook building collapse. And we realized that we as a department were not very smart when it came to this sort of thing. And that’s a difficult thing to do, because as I said earlier, you tend to circle the wagons, you tend to say “no one was at fault, we’re not blaming anybody, this was an accident.” But the truth is we were all at fault. And as time passed, we came to recognize that we were all at fault, that we as a department were not well trained in building structures and structural collapse, and so we rectified that. We have, in the years since then, we have a very intensive training program on building structure, on structural integrity, on building construction, on how buildings collapse, and on self-rescue techniques and rapid intervention teams, as far as if they do collapse how do our firefighters survive and get themselves out. From every bad thing, from every tragedy, comes something good. I like to think that that’s the good that’s come from this. We walked around, I can remember being, at this time I was a captain on the department, and I can remember how it changed my life, because I felt, had always felt, invincible. I was a big, strong man. I was good at my job. I laughed when things, when you had a close call, something fell, and you went “Ha-ha-ha, boy, that could have killed me.” But you never really felt that it could kill you, until this happened, and this changed my life, it changed everybody’s life. You realized all the sudden that you’re not invincible, and in the blink of an eye, your brothers or your sisters can die. And, you’d better know what you’re doing, and you’d better do it right. The job became a lot more serious for the sixty five firefighters in Alton after this incident. And, we like to think that we drill this into them all the time and make sure it stays serious for them. It’s one of the reasons we have Gary and Tim’s pictures in the lobby. We have the memorial out front, so that firefighters as they come through the door will understand that this can happen at any time. If you’re careless, if you don’t know what you’re doing, you’re not paying attention to training, this can happen to you, and I think that’s a very positive effect that came out of this whole thing.

AG: Can you describe, were there any other changes, you talked at length about some of the changes within your organization. Anything else from there?

JS: Not structurally, as far as how we do things. We continue to do things the same way other than we became a much more defensive department. This particular fire, there had been four arson fires in this structure in the four months prior to this incident. It was a known vacant building. Our firefighters knew when they arrived on the scene that this was a vacant structure that was an old rental property that had had four other fires, known arson fires, attempts to burn this building down. This fire should have been backed away from. The exposure should have been protected and let this thing burn. But we didn’t do things like that back then. We were the aggressive, we go in, we put it out, this is how you do it, this is how firefighters do things. We’re tough. We go in and we fight everything interior. We make that interior structural attack. That was our mentality and that had been drilled into us by previous chiefs. And we don’t do that now. If it’s an abandoned vacant building and it’s fully involved, it can burn down. That’s a good thing

to happen, let it go. We protect exposures and we keep our people safe. So, that's another change that has come about because of that incident.

AG: Is there anything from this incident that would be helpful to today's firefighters? Aside from you talked at length about...

JS: Yeah, I mean, it's the same lesson. And it's been learned not just by our department. One of the things that also came of this for me was that after it happened to us, I started paying attention to line of duty deaths everywhere. You know, which hopefully, I'm not the only one doing it or you wouldn't be here doing this interview. This is something that firefighters all over the country are starting to learn. Don't watch *American Heat* and *FETN* and all those things and just laugh about it. These are ways you're gonna learn. And we have to learn from each other. But I still see the same thing. I still read the same thing all the time, when firefighters die, they die in collapses of buildings that are vacant structures. Things that they go into that they have no business going into. They get between buildings. Why would you get between a building with only fifteen feet between you? I look at that now and I can't believe we did that. It was common practice back then. So, the lesson to young firefighters is everyone that came before you wasn't an idiot. Try to learn from them. Listen to what they did. Look at the mistakes they made and learn from it.

AG: Is there anything else that you would like to share about Captain Porter or Firefighter Lewis or the Alton Fire Department that we did not cover during this interview?

JS: Captain Porter, they both, both of them, left quite a legacy in our department. Gary's wife, or widow, is still a telecommunicator at the police department. She changed the way that operates down there, little things that you don't even think about, but in our department, the police department runs the dispatch center, and they dispatch the fire department. And before this incident, it was pretty common that once they kicked out an alarm they switched back to their police frequency and they never paid any attention after that. That doesn't happen any more. We have telecommunicators monitoring what's going on on our fire scenes all the time, and that was a direct result of that. There was a closeness that has, is still there between the city departments. I'm sure that our city is no different than others. Police and firefighters tend to have an animosity towards one another at times. That went away after this, and it's still gone. We came together as a public safety community and we work together and we have fun together. Those are benefits that came about from all this. You never get over something like this. I mean, you just never get over it. I stop by Timmie and Gary's grave at least once a month, and I'm not the only one. I go there and I find fire department patches and things on the gravesite. So I know that I'm not the only one that stops. It's just a terrible loss, and you just hope that some good came out of it after all these years.