

Answering The Call:  
The History Of The  
Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Anthony Augustino  
Atlantic Hook & Ladder Company No. 1

conducted in association with the  
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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is July 12th, 2004. We are at 50 Crescent Road in Port Washington. My name is Margaret Dildilian, and I am interviewing Anthony Augustino, a sixty-three year member of the Port Washington Fire Department. Mr. Augustino, describe what your childhood was like in Port.

Anthony Augustino: Well, to tell you the truth, I was born in Port Washington and raised in Port Washington. My childhood was--makes--my father came from Italy, and my mother was in Brooklyn. And they were married, and they moved to Port Washington. And--and it was a so-and-so childhood. I went through the schools, to all the schools in Port Washington. The old high school that was in Main Street now; it used to be a junior high. But then, when they built the other school, high school on Port Washington Boulevard, we went to our old schools. But now, the new school that's open now, the Superintendent [Paul D. Schreiber], that was newer, we never went to that one. It was always the one on the Boulevard. After I got out, they rebuilt the new high school, and from then on that was the high school .I was nineteen...I graduated from that high school in [June],1938. I took a ... course, because I wanted to play an extra year of basketball. And then I went to--I went to caddying. I was caddying at North Hempstead Country Club most of my childhood. And ...

Q: What do you mean by a so-so childhood?

AA: Well, a so-so childhood was, you know, I didn't know what to do. We were--we didn't have any money. My father, he came here. He didn't have that much money when he came back from Italy, and he worked--he worked for the town. Port Washington--he worked for the town. And it was a so-and-so. It was just--we had enough to get along, but I mean, we were ... [n't?] ... rich. That was the main thing. And we were--we just had enough to get along, and then that was it. I used to caddie, like I told you. I used to caddie at North Hempstead Country Club to make a few extra dollars. And that was about as much as I could do, you know. And then we started school, and that was it. I went through the whole school system--kindergarten, grade school, grammar school, and high school. And that's about it.

Q: What influenced you to join the Fire Department?

AA: Well, a lot of my friends joined the company, and they says, "Why don't you join? It's a nice outfit, if you can get in." They had a quota of 125 men. And you couldn't get in, if they had a quota of 125 men, you'd have to wait until somebody retires or somebody quits, or somebody was thrown out of the company. But I got in. I had enough of--I got in just right for 125. And that's the way it was, has been. You had to be--our quota at Atlantic's--Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company--was 125 men. And we couldn't go over that or we couldn't go under that. So that was the question there on the Atlantic's

firemen. My buddies were in, so I went in. Now, I was working at Grumman. To be an officer, it was too much for me. I swear I never went for an officer's job. I worked from Grumman out of town, and it wouldn't be fair for people--members of the company that worked in town that wanted the office, because they were already in town and they could make the day-to-day fires. I made practically most of the night fires. That's the only ways I could make it. During the day, I couldn't make it because I worked in Grumman's.

Q: What was the character of Atlantic Hook and Ladder in those early years you were there?

AA: What was it?

Q: The character of the company?

AA: Oh, the company was very great.

Q: I'm talking about Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

AA: Yeah, just Atlantic's. It was good. Very good. Yeah ...

Q: Like what do you mean by good?

AA: Good, the members, the officers, and they treated you right. You had to go to fire school.

We went to fire school, and they showed you how to do this and how to do that, and how to work out a fire and report to a fire, and everything. Everything was fine. The officers was good, and we--we were very good at it. We went to fires. We reported to the truck, and then they Captain, or the foreman at that time--it used to be foremen at that time, but now it's the Captain--the foreman at that time told you what to do. If there was a small fire, when to go in and do and everything else. That was the general procedure of the fire company at that time.

Q: What was your specific skill that you did at that fire?

AA: Well, it--it extended to everything. In other words, you get to the--to turn to pick up a ladder, you went in with a ladder, with a few fellows to bring the ladder up to the building, and then if they told you to go inside the fire with an axe and all the equipment on, and you'd go into the fire. And then, if it's a real fire, it's the same thing. You know, you climbed the ladder and checked the roof and make sure that you opened the roof so the flames and smoke can come out. And that was the general idea of the fire.

Q: Can you tell me how it feels to throw a ladder?

AA: Oh, throw--it was pretty hard, yes, at first. But we practiced on that. We did a lot of practicing on that to make sure we did it right. There was always a couple of guys that

flipped it up against the roof, and then one guy would run up the roof, you know--run up the ladder and get to the roof. It was very, very exciting. It was very exciting.

Q: Did you ever work on the aerial ladders?

AA: No. I never worked on the aerial ladders.

Q: When you were trained for the job ...

AA: They had basic training, yes.

Q: ... how did you absorb your knowledge? Through practice, or through your friends in the Fire Department? How did you learn what you learned?

AA: I learned through--through the Captain and the engineer, and schooling. That's how you--in the beginning, that's how you--how you worked the fire company. And it was very, very--well, at first, it was--was a little, you know, you got to learn. But after a while, you go down there and everything was fine. Everything was fine.

Q: So, how did you feel about your training?

AA: Very good. I trained very good, and I was very proud of myself, to tell you the truth. I was very good, and I--I did everything I could to help, in other words when a fire is on.

Q: What was the most important thing you learned while training?

AA: The most important thing was to make sure that you didn't get caught in the fire building. Make sure that you got out in a hurry, if you went in the fire, and make sure you help anybody that was in the fire, the fire house, to bring them out. And that was the--that was the procedure that we went through.

Q: Was there any great, memorable fires that you ...

AA: Yes, there was. Yes, there was. There was two fires that I really, really, really--really can't connect--can't forget. One was on Main Street. We had a fire at a store, and then in an apartment above. We lost a Lieutenant from Flower Hill--Hayden. Dayton--Lieutenant Dayton from Flower Hill. He got caught in the fire, and we couldn't get him out, and it was a shame. All the firemen just couldn't do nothing. They--the fire wall went too fast. They couldn't go into the fire. It was too much. We lost a good man. I'll tell you, we were very, very sick over it. Very sick. That was--that was one. Then, there was one on North Maryland Avenue. I was sleeping, and it was at night. I heard a plane overhead, close over to my house. My house is on South Bayles and North Maryland is only right down the street. You know, off of Main Street there. And I said to my wife, I said, "My, that--I woke up, and that plane was pretty close." I said, "I better get up."

And then, when I got up, all of a sudden, the whistles were blowing. The fire whistle was blowing; the alarm was blowing. I got up. I changed. I went to the fire, and it was a piece of a plane crashed and hit the house. The whole family--the whole family died in that blaze. One--some of the parts that came off the airplane hit the house. It went up in flames. By the time we got there, it was--it was all gone. It was very bad. That was another one that I was really, I don't know, I was like that, you know, shaking. I just felt so bad for the family that we lost, and the Lieutenant from Flower Hill, that was a shame. A shame. That was--that was the only two actually that I remember that was bad. Some of them weren't that bad, I mean, because we didn't lose anybody. But the house did burn, some of them, but we got out--everything was fine. But those two comes to my mind as the two worst in Port Washington that I had.

Q: At these fires, did you--what did you learn from your elders? What wisdoms did you learn from your elders in the Fire Department?

AA: Well, ... [they're the ones that say] ... they told--they explained to us, they told us, they told us how the work--how to go in, and how to do everything. It was like a routine that you made sure that everything was working outside. The--our supervisors was the ones that told us how to do this and how not to do it. And not to do this, because you'll get into trouble, and what to do as the right way and the wrong way. And that's it.

Q: What would you say is your key skill as a firefighter? What do you do best?

AA: Well, what I did best, I--I would say that I--I was a--I was mostly with the ladder. I would put up the ladder. Sometimes I would jump up ahead of everybody else and go up on top. But, outside of that, I think that the ladder was the main thing for me. And what else? I don't know. The next would be maybe just stay by the fire truck and wait for the Captain to tell me where to go and what to do, and that was it.

Q: How does a ladder feel when you're dealing with it? How does it feel in your hands?

AA: Very heavy. Very heavy. Very heavy. It was a heavy ladder. That's why you needed a couple of them to throw it up.

Q: What do you mean by a couple of them?

AA: Well, a couple of men, a couple of firemen besides yourself. You know, you've got to--somebody's got to hold it, hold the bottom down, while they throw up the--throw up the ladder. And then ...

Q: How do you hold the bottom down?

AA: With your feet. With your feet and your hands. You hold it down to make sure that it's on the ground, so it can flip up. Now, with the new one, the new ladder, with the, you

know, the reversible ladder, it's much more easier. They just hook it around and shove it up, and then you just climb up the ladder. It's better with the new equipment. That's the difference between the old equipment and the new equipment.

Q: Can you explain a little more about the difference between the old and the new?

AA: Well, the old one was, like I said, you had to do it by hand. Throw the ladder.

Q: How long were these ladders? How long and how heavy?

AA: Oh, well, I don't know. By the time you got to the--to the ladder truck, unhook it, and then run to the fire, well, you figure about thirty seconds, forty seconds. Pull it down, hold it, putting it up. Now, with the new contraption, they got the machine. They just turn the machine on. They swivel all the ladder, and they just send it right up to the fire.

Q: But is the ladder then on the truck?

AA: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It's always--yeah, yep. Very good.

Q: Can you remember anything during the--what year did you join, did you say?

AA: I joined in nineteen---June the 1st. First week in June, 1941.

Q: And what happened--what was the fire company like in 1941 when you joined? Was the--when the War started, what happened?

AA: Well, I went in in 1941. I got my--I got my Selective Service thing from the Army after December, 1941, when they declared war on Japan. I went--I was keeping company at the time, and I had planned to get married on Easter Sunday, 1942. So, I went into the draft, and they told me that you will be--probably would be going in in April. That's right around the time that I was going to get married. I had plans about it. We had set it all up. And they said it could be around that time. So I said, well, I says, "Okay." What happened? We got married on Easter Sunday. Then, we took a trip to Atlantic City. I figured we're going to go for a couple of days, because they said that pretty soon you'll be going around that time. So we went--we went to Atlantic City, and then my mother calls Atlantic City and tells me, "You=re drafted. You got to go report. You got to go into the Army on Thursday." And this was Monday when we got the call in Atlantic City. And Thursday, I was supposed to leave Port Washington to go to Fort Dix. So what we did, then we stayed another day--Tuesday. Then, we came back Tuesday night, and then Thursday morning, in a little snow storm--we had a snow storm then (laughs)--and I boarded the train with all the other--all the Army recruits. And then we went to Fort Dix, New Jersey. 1942--April of 1942. In fact, it was April 9th. It was April 5th, I got married, and April 9th--it was a Thursday--that's when I went into service. I was four years in the Army. I went through all of Europe--all the European countries. I got out in

November--in fact, I was in New York--New York Airport--New York--on a boat in New York Harbor for Thanksgiving. We had Thanksgiving on a boat. Right after, the next day, we got off, and we went to Fort Dix, you know, to get out of the Army. And that was it. Then, I came out of the Army, and that was it. I came home, 1945.

Q: You came home when?

AA: 1945, November.

Q: No, you left in '42.

AA: I left in--oh, yeah, that's right. I'm sorry (laughs). 1942, April, I came back in November--end of November, in 1945. Almost four years.

Q: Can you tell a little bit about your experience in the War?

AA: Oh, boy, I tell you. It was rough. Very rough. I was assigned to--in Fort Dix, I was assigned to the 25th Armored Engineer Battalion, the 6th Armored Division. Yes, there's a lot of things there I could tell you that, that really, I'm telling you, was just very bad. We were--we went overseas. First of all, we went down to the Colorado River, because the Rhine River and the ... [Wesso] ... River was really just like Colorado. And we were the engineers; we had to put pontoon bridges up, so the tanks and all the infant--

everybody can go over it. And that's what we did. We hooked up the tanks, I mean, the floating bridge, and with the tracks on top of it that went through the whole thing, and we were the first ones to put up the bridge on the Rhine River where all the tanks and everybody else went into Germany. It was a--it was a lot of ... [???] ... and we see a lot of airplanes coming over. We ducked down there ... [under] ... under our trucks. I was an assistant. I ran down the hill, and I saw a hole, and I jumped in the hole. And ... [over there] ... there was a driver of mine; he jumped on top of me. Believe me, when I said I--we got missed by about that much, by getting killed. After the planes left, we got up and we saw a big hole right above our, where we were laying down. Into the dirt was a big hole like that. And that was meant for us, but we were lucky. We were lucky. We were lucky--very lucky. And that was an experience. It was--boy, I'll tell you, never realized that. Then, we kept rolling along. We went in through Germany, and all of a sudden, we were on a road in Germany. We were parked--all our trucks were parked for a while, and we got out and we were talking outside to get a break. All of a sudden, a vehicle, another truck, comes running down. All of a sudden, I'm seeing--I mean, I scream ... [Hey Jimminy!] ... He crawled over; he stopped the truck. It was a friend of mine from the Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company from Port Washington. And we met on the Autobahn. That was the--that was the--I think you would remember it--that's Germany's big strip, like our expressway. It's the Autobahn. He stopped and we greeted each other. I says, "Oh, Holy Gee!" What a surprise! And that was it. That was the last time I saw anybody from Port Washington. It was wonderful to see. Very good. It was really good.

Q: Can you remember his name?

AA: James Salerno, yeah. He's a--he's ahead of me. He's a sixty-four year member. Did you get him? James Salerno. Sixty-four. He was here already? No.

Q: Tell me what you learned in the Fire Department that helped you in the War?

AA: Well, what helped me in the fire company was--was getting the material--getting the material out between the fire company and the bridge company. In other words, that's two different things--a fire and a bridge--but, as it is, you remember what to do with the fire company, then you did the same thing with the equipment, for the bridge. And it was more or less easier to do. More work, I mean, faster and everything else. That was--that was the idea of that. But between the fire company and the War it was almost--well, it can't be--you know, it was like you pick up stuff in the fire company and you do it, and then you're doing the same thing for the engineers with the bridge and putting it together and everything else to go down to the water. That was about it.

Q: Can you remember any specific stories related to the fire company when you were in, before you left?

AA: What do you mean ... .

Q: Stories. Any stories?

AA: Stories? Fire company? No, there's not too much--wasn't too many stories in the fire company. It was more or less you had to do--you had to do the work in order to put the fires out, and you had to cooperate. That's number one. You had to do--maybe help one another, and if you didn't, you couldn't put the fire out. Everything worked together. It worked on time, and it worked together, and everything was fine. With the other outfits came in, you had to do everything together. It was all one department, back then, that went to this fire. And you had to work together.

Q: How did you build confidence in yourself, when you first went in? Who, around you in the Fire Department, was your mentor?

AA: Well, first--first it was the Captain. He was the one that was instrumental in telling us how to do it and what to do and how to work it out and be careful. And my brother-in-law. He was--he was in the company. And then, when we practiced--I'll tell you, when we practiced going up on the roof of the firehouse, we went down to Daly--the Daly High School. Do you remember Daly High Sch--I mean, Daly ...

Q: The elementary school?

AA: Daly School down here. And we would throw up the ladder, and my brother-in-law--I would be up on top, making believe that the fire was up there. And my brother-in-law

would climb the ladder, and he'd pick me up and he'd bring me down. That was the practices that we went through. So, it was fine. It worked good that way. And then I remember how he told me, if I had to do that. If I had to pick up a small baby or five year old or eight year old that's stuck, he showed me how to do it and what to do. And that ...

Q: Did you have many other members of your family in the ...

AA: Yeah. I had my brother-in-law, Joey Caruso, my brother-in-law Mike Caruso, my brother-in-law John Dettori, and my brother-in-law Joe--Joseph Falque, [and Anthony Grillo]. There's five of them. Five brother-in-laws in the same company as I was. They ...

Q: So were there a great many Italians in the Atlantic Hook and Ladder?

AA: Yes. Yes, there was. There was--there was quite a bit, yes. There was a mixture, but I think that the Italians had a little bit more. But it was a mixture of everybody. Oh, Italian extract and Polish extract, and, you know, Americans, and everything else. It was a good--good group. Atlantic was a nice group. I would say the other companies were a good group, too, but, you know, once you're around--you're with your own, you always say they're good, you know. "They're the best." But Atlantic's was a good company.

Q: Did the ethnic groups stick together in their own little group, or did they ...

AA: No, they mixed in. Everything mixed in good. Everything was fine. They mixed in with us, with all different men, very good. Yeah, it was nice.

Q: What was your first day experience as a rookie?

AA: My first experience as a rookie. Oh. Well, it's hard to say. Well, yeah, all right. That one was when I--there was a fire on Baxter Estates. There was a fire on Baxter Estates. I was--I went down. It was like a--I was home from my work, and the whistle blew and I went down. It was about five o'clock. One of the houses, the tip of the roof was burning down, and so when I got there the guys are throwing up the ladder. So I put my equipment on, and I was a rookie, in my rookie year. I went up the top with an axe, had all my equipment on, and I broke the part of the roof so the flames could come out. And that was my rookie sensation.

Q: What was the clothing like then ...

AA: Oh ...

Q: ... when you first went in, compared to now?

AA: Now? Well, you had to put these heavy, heavy equipment on. Heavy raincoats. Your heavy boots. And heavy boots and everything else. Heavy hat. And a mask. But then, they weren't as good as they are now. And that was it. That was the equipment. The equipment is much better. Ninety-seven--better now than it was when we first went in.

Q: Can you tell me about how much these things weighed? How heavy they were and what they felt like? What they smelled like?

AA: Oh, it was--they smelled awful. But they were heavy. I couldn't measure how much pounds they were. But, you know, it's a heavy raincoat, a heavy hat, and heavy boots, and everything. It was very heavy. And an axe that you carried up there, and all heavy stuff. All heavy stuff.

Q: Did someone train you to use that axe properly?

AA: Yes.

Q: How do you use that axe?

AA: Oh, yeah, that was in our work. That was in our pre-fire, fire school. They showed you how to use all the equipment. Yes.

Q: When you first were in the fire and you went to your fire, what went through your head?

AA: Well, you know, you always think something might happen. But you never--you always think about it. "Now, gee, I hope everything turns out. Don't let something happen to me." Something like that, you know. You're always thinking about that. But that's the only thing you do, is go there and do your best.

Q: Did you carry any lucky charms or ...

AA: No. Yes. I have it here today. I have it on my pants. My mother, back--way back in the 1930s--it's an old Italian custom, I think it is--put a piece of my hair, her hair, my father's hair, and everybody's hair, and something else, in a little something--you can't see it--inside. You can't see what's inside. But then, you go to put that piece and a piece of--let me show it to you. It's not--it's sewed on, right. I put pins on it. When I went to war, got married, in case of anything, it's supposed to help on. And it did in the army.

Q: Can you explain what that is?

AA: This here, this part is sewed on to the one I told you. You can't see it. It's all--all ... .

Q: And it's in a little ...

AA: It's like a lucky heart. If something should happen ...

Q: It's a little what? It's a little material around a box.

AA: Yes, around--it's a material that that--they say that--that it would help you if you were in any danger, in an accident or in a War, or if something happened. Now I was in--I was in an automobile accident, it would choke me, right. I was lucky I was asleep or else I would have been dead. Now, we were in an accident coming out of a 25A coming from Grumman's. I was in the back seat with my brother-in-law. And the other fellow that lives on--lives on Main Street, he was in the front with the driver. He was the one who got killed. There was a truck, with no flares behind it. And he was coming up, he didn't see the truck because there's no flares, and he hit it. And the car tumbled all the way down, all the way down to the bank near Roslyn there, coming up on 25A. There was a big bank. I was asleep. They said I was lucky I was asleep. That saved my life. My brother-in-law got hurt. Then the fellow in the front, he died. And the driver, he got hurt. And I was in the hospital. I've still got a scar here. You can see the scar. And my teeth, oh, what a mess. And it helped me in, like I said, in that hole where I was almost shot. And it was lucky that this thing, I guess, must have helped me, you know. And I have it since. All these years. And I--I'd never get rid of it. I never, never got rid of it. I had it all the while, and I'll tell you, it's helped me even overseas. Even overseas, when we were coming in. We were coming in from Germany, and we went into this little--this little car. One of my soldiers, he grabs the driver, and he hit a bump. And the car went

over. We didn't get hurt, but we were lucky. You see, it was one of--you know, you always go back to this sense of, you know, "a good thing I had that on," you know, because that was my lucky piece. That's the way it is.

Q: The lucky charm has your hair in it as well as who?

AA: My father, my mother's, my brother's, and my sister's, and something else that I don't know, whoever she got it from, put a lucky--some lucky thing in there or something that's--I really don't know. But she told me to always wear it. Always wear it, because it'll help you, and I did. And I--about five or six times, I would say that it helped me very much.

Q: Now, what Italian city is this a custom? From what Italian city?

AA: Well, my--that's--well, Naples, actually. Naples.

Q: Mr. Augustino, how did the Fire Department change when you returned from the War?

AA: Well, I don't think it had changed too much. It was the same--the same set-up they had, same office, and everything else. It changed years and years ago, but no change then. There was no change. Everything was the same.

Q: What years ago did it change, that you say?

AA: Oh, it was about--it changed from--used to be the foreman that was in charge of everything, and then the engineer. But now they have a Captain. They changed it to a Captain, and he is the foreman. They got rid of the foreman's name, and they use it as a Captain now. The Captain is in charge. And that was the--see, that's the only--that was the only change they made since I remember, since I've been in the company. From a foreman to a Captain, and that was just changed recently, about maybe six, seven years ago. I don't know, something like that.

Q: The uniforms were changed. Can you tell me a little about that?

AA: Oh, yes. The uniforms we had were beautiful. Red, white, with the ladder--hook and ladder--a ladder across with red. Oh, we won so many prizes for the best dressed company in the parades. Every time we would go to a parade, we used to be number one or number two. But it was really terrific. But then, all of a sudden, they changed it to all one--all, you know, one uniform, which is blue. And then we had to change it to blue, and that's the new uniform right now.

Q: How do you feel about the change?

AA: Well, I hate it a little bit, because we were doing so good with the red and white one. But then, I don't know why they changed it, to tell you the truth. I never did find out. But they changed it, and that's it. We had to go with it. They put it through the by-laws, and then they changed it. That was it. I liked the red and white, instead. In fact, I've still got my--my belt. The big belt there that goes onto the--I got rid of the red shirt, though and the white pants. It was wonderful; they were nice. When we paraded, boy, everybody--it was a real, real clapping and everything else for us. But that's it. They change. Everything changes, as you go along.

Q: What did you like the most about the old uniform? What was it about it that you liked?

AA: I tell you, the old uniform was snappy. It was nice. It was good. And then, it felt real good wearing the red and white. It was nice, and I'll tell you, it was--you were walking down Main Street or any street on the Island, when we went to the fire, when we went to a parade, it was terrific. The people were clapping all over the place. But it was nice. It was good.

Q: Tell me a little about the parades.

AA: The parades? Well, as far as I know, I've gone to parades almost continuously, all of them. See you had to make points to stay in the fire company. Like we'd start at the beginning. You had to have points. And the parades, you get one point for the parade.

So I used to like to march, because I was in the Army, you know, I used to march in the Army, and I felt good. I felt good marching with the firemen. It was very nice. And I made as many as I could.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the rituals of your department? Like the funerals. What happens at a fireman's funeral?

AA: What happens at a fireman's funeral? Well, fireman dies, we go full uniform the night before he is buried. We go to, say to Knowles. The whole Department goes. Not just Atlantic's. Whoever goes goes in full dress. And that's another thing that you get points on. Going to funerals, you get a point. And you go to a funeral dressed up in full uniform, and they have some sort of a--the chaplain's there, and he gives a--what the fireman accomplished, you know, while he was in the Fire Department. And it's all one-- it was really nice. It's good for firemen to go to these things.

Q: Why is it good? What does it do for you?

AA: Well, you feel honorable. Honorable to go to them, because he was a fireman, and you want to go to his wake and stand at attention and--and greet his people, greet his family. It's just something that's good for firemen to do. To go to a wake for a fireman.

Q: What does it do for you personally, inside of you?

AA: Well, I think, in here in my heart, I always try to make every one of them, unless I'm out of town. But it's just, you're losing a buddy. That's what you're actually losing, you know. You're losing a friend. Just like in the Army, you're losing a--in the Army, you know, and it's the same thing as you're losing a fireman. And it's a good thing to go to the wake and stand at attention. Yeah, that's why.

Q: Did you ever think you were going to die in the Fire Department work?

AA: No, I didn't. I didn't think I would, but, you know, things do happen. You never know. That's why I say they gave you so much--so much assurance on how to do things at a fire that you should be able to come away without any accident, or anything like that. The training that you got.

Q: Why do you do--or what made you do this hazardous work?

AA: What what?

Q: Why did you do such dangerous work?

AA: Well, I don't know. You belong to a fire company, you don't, you know, you're thinking it's nothing, you know. But then, all of a sudden, everything, sometimes it gets

dangerous, sure. But you got to live with it. You've got to do it, and that's it. Once you're in the company, you've got to go to it. You've got to go to the fires. If something happens, it happens. That's all. But you got to try to prevent that thing from happening.

Q: And who advised you the most in your company? Who gave you the most advice? Who did you turn to?

AA: Well, everybody. All the officers, actually, put in time to give all these rookies what they think is the best way to do it and not the best way to do it, and, you know, make sure that everything is okay. But mostly the officers are the ones that give you the answers.

Q: Did you ever make any moving rescues yourself? Did you ever rescue someone?

AA: No, no I didn't.

Q: And what is the primary focus in yourself when you're doing this work? What do you focus on inside of yourself?

AA: What do you mean by focus on?

Q: I mean, what is going through your mind? What's inside of your spirit?

AA: Oh, all you're thinking--do your work and make sure that you come out of this all right, but don't get all excited, because that's what makes things bad. Just do the work, like you were assigned to, and make sure that you come out, and everything is fine.

Q: What was the most unusual situation in a fire you were in?

AA: Unusual? I don't think I had any unusual thing at the fire company, firehouse. No, nothing.

Q: You were in the Department in the ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... You were in the--to go back again, you were in the Fire Department in the '50s and '60s. There was social upheaval culturally. What was it like in the Fire Department? In the '50s and '60s, did you have, you know, hippies that joined, wore long hair?

AA: I don't know. I didn't notice that much change in the '50s and the '60s, as far as I remember.

Q: When you were in the firehouse, there wasn't television in the '40s. What did the men do for recreation?

AA: Well, we had--we had a play room downstairs. Had a pool table and a card table. That was about it.

Q: Did you ever do kitchen duty?

AA: At the firehouse? No. No.

Q: And how has, for instance, during the War years, there was rationing. Did that affect the fire company in any way?

AA: What was that?

Q: Food rationing during the War?

AA: Rationing?

Q: Food rationing during the war, did that affect the firemen in any way?

AA: Well, I don't know. I wasn't there. I was in the service, so I don't know. It probably did. It probably did, because--and I can't say, because I wasn't there. I was in service.

Q: Did you have any mottoes when you were in the Fire Department? Did you have any mottoes? Sayings? In the Fire Department? Particular mottoes?

AA: No.

Q: Did you have any mascots? Like animals that were your mascots?

AA: No, no.

Q: Were you part of the drill teams?

AA: No. No, I never was on a drill team. But they still have it.

Q: When you go to firemen's dinners ...

AA: Firemen's what?

Q: Dinners.

AA: Yeah.

Q: The dinners. What happens at these dinners? What do you--what's the reason for them, and what happens at the firemen's dinners?

AA: Well, I guess it's an old routine they have. Every year they have a firemen's dinner. They have their own--each company has their own dinner. But then, the Department has one dinner every two years. That's because they're bringing in a new Chief, and the old

Chief goes out after two years. That's why the Department has one every two years. And the companies have theirs every year. Once every year.

Q: And how is the ritual at the dinner? What's the ritual?

AA: Well, at a firemen--the firemen's dinner is the new officers come in, actually. They have the new officers coming in, they introduce the new officers. And they--and then, they have dinner. That's more or less what they have. And it's not much. Just like changing over the guard, like the firemen. Every year there's a new Captain comes in. Or, if not, if he gets re-elected, then it's the next two years that they bring in the new officers. But that's what it's all about. It's not--it's more or less a yearly thing.

Q: What do they generally serve at these dinners?

AA: Well, it all depends. All depends what the--all depends what the, who's in charge of the dinner, what they have. They could have roast beef. They could have chicken. They could have everything. They could have anything, you know. It's all up to the head of the committee.

Q: Do any of these rituals, like the dinners and the parades and the funerals, what emotions do they inspire in you? What are your emotions when you partake of these rituals?

AA: Well, my emotions is the same--there's nothing--as far as the dinner's concerned, you go, you relax, you talk to the fellows, you talk to your friends' wives, and everything else. You get together, as well as--you get together and you have a little fun. And that's all. That's about it.

Q: Did you have a retirement dinner?

AA: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about it?

AA: Twenty-five year retirement dinner. We had it at--what's that? Glen Head there? I forgot the name of the place, but it's in Glen Head. That's where I had my twenty-five year dinner there. They gave--Nassau County, they gave me plaques, all different plaques. Twenty-five year member. And it was nice. For dinner, you have--you have, I think they give you ten guests. You could take ten guests with you. Then, they give you all these different things, being a twenty-five year member. I got mine in my den--all my plaques--hanging all over the place.

Q: Did you have any kind of humorous incidents that you can remember?

AA: No, I can't. No.

Q: Can you remember any particular wisdom that was passed down to you from your elders?

AA: Well, they told me, to be a good fireman, they said, you got to pass your tests and then do what you're supposed to do, and then everything will come out all right. If you do what you're supposed to do it will be okay.

Q: How do you feel about women in the Fire Department?

AA: I don't object.

Q: Was there any feelings of racism in the Fire Department, early on?

AA: No. No. No.

Q: Did you have any physical stresses during your time as a fireman?

AA: No.

Q: What do you consider to be a good firefighter? What are the qualities?

AA: Well, a good fireman is you make your meetings, make your fires, make your parades, and make everything else that they require for you to do to be a good fireman. And that's it.

Q: Have you ever disobeyed any orders?

AA: No. No. No.

Q: What about what makes a bad fireman, in your opinion? Who would you not want to be in a burning building with?

AA: I don't think there's anybody. They're all good, as far as I'm concerned.

Q: How are the individuals critiqued about their skills? When you were a rookie, who told you if you were doing something not right?

AA: Well, that would be the man in charge. Either the Chief, or one of the other Chiefs, or your company commander. They're the ones that tell you if it's wrong.

Q: Were you ever called in and ...

AA: No.

Q: What do you think are the greatest strengths of the firefighting culture? What are the greatest strengths that they have?

AA: Greatest strengths?

Q: Strengths. Or weaknesses, in the Fire Department?

AA: None. I don't know. That's a hard question.

Q: Okay. Well, who were the most interesting characters for you, and that you met in the Fire Department? Did you meet any interesting people that were eccentric?

AA: (Laughs) no. They were pretty good fellows, firemen working with me every time we went in the fire. They were all good.

Q: How do you think things have changed the most for you over these years in the Fire Department?

AA: Well, over the years? To me, you see, I've been in--after you're in twenty-five years, you don't have to make any more points in order to stay in the fire company, and you don't have to go to fires. You don't have to go to the parades. You don't have to go to anything that has to do with it. But most of us--I do--I still go to meetings. I still go to

wakes. I still go to parades, but I don't march. And that's the difference. See, I don't have to go into any fires anymore, now. After twenty-five years, you're exempt. In other words, you don't have to take care of those.

Q: When you hear that fire alarm go off, still ...

AA: Yeah.

Q: ... what happens inside ...

AA: What happens to me is I could--now, I don't think I could go. I've got this thing with me here, I says--I--sometimes, though ...

Q: What's that thing?

AA: My cane. Sometimes when the fire whistle blows and it's close by, you know, maybe I'll get it. I'll get the cane, and I'll get in the car, and I'll go down, just to see what it's all about. But I can't participate or anything. But it's nice to go every once in a while, once that horn blows.

Q: What memories come up to your mind when that happens?

AA: Memories coming up? When that horn goes off, I'll tell you, especially at night when you're sleeping. And I'm still not--I'm still a fireman, not a twenty-five year man. My wife makes me laugh. She says, "What are you doing with your pants hanging? Your shoes?" That's what I do. I slip on my pants, my shoes, my shirt, and I'm off. She gets a big kick out of that. But that's the way you get out fast, because at that time we didn't have any--now they have these little things at the house where it comes in through the--alarm comes into the house before the alarm goes off. So we already got the message, and you're all ready to go before the alarm goes off. Makes a big difference.

Q: How did you used to set your clothing out?

AA: My clothes? Oh, I set them up the night before, all the time. What I'm going to wear.

Q: Tell me about that.

AA: Well, you got to make sure you got the right pants if it's wintertime. You got to make sure you got the heavy pants, you know. Of course, it's cold. If it's the summertime, you've got to make sure you have the light pants on. So, it's all set up for you to get in it. And the shoes. Get your keys. Get the car and go.

Q: When you say "set up," what do you mean by set up?

AA: Set up? It's all set up. The shoes.

Q: Where.

AA: Right where the pants is. You put the pants on, then you slip on your shoes, and then you're off. With a shirt you go on down. Get the key on the counter. Your car was already facing out, got it backed in. So you jump in the car and off you go. But that was--that was the system we used.

Q: And what do they do now?

AA: What do they do now? Nothing (laughs).

Q: What do you mean, nothing? (laughs)

AA: Well, I don't know. Well, because I'm--now, I don't have to go to any fires, so I don't do anything. I just--I just hear the whistle. Then, if I want to--if I--especially at night, you can't get up. You know, you're--once asleep, but then you, all of a sudden, you hear the alarm, and you're laying there, you're wondering what's going on now? Where's that fire? you know. You're thinking, "I hope everything's all right." Then, all of a sudden, about fifteen minutes later, you hear the trucks coming back, so as you say everything is fine,

nothing happened. Or you don't hear the trucks coming back, then you know it's a big fire. That's it.

Q: Tell me how it felt to be a firefighter in the rank and file over all those years.

AA: Very good. I was--it just happened, it happened to be very good with the fire--firemen in the rank and the file. But, let's see. It seemed that everything was okay as far as I know. It's a long time to remember things, you know. But, outside of that, I'm all right, and it should be good. Fight a fire all these years.

Q: What are you the proudest of?

AA: Huh?

Q: What are you the proudest of, in firefighting?

AA: The powers?

Q: Proudest. That you're proud of what you did.

AA: Well, I was proud to be a regular fireman for my first twenty-five years, and I was very proud to be a fireman for my extra years. My other, up to sixty-three years. I'm still very

proud of being a fireman right now. And, like I say, I go to all the fire activities, and I am still a good fireman, as far as I'm concerned.

Q: And who are the Chiefs that you enjoyed working under?

AA: There were a lot of them. There were a lot of them. Almost all of the Chiefs were very good that worked under me, who was over me. All the Chiefs were very good.

Q: Can you remember your very first Chief?

AA: Oh, I think it was Lawrence [Geoffrey] Cole... I think it was. Yeah. That's a long time ago, too, to remember. Either him, or it was a McCarthy. Either one of those two.

Q: Is there anything you would like to say or to add to this session that you'd like to say about the Fire Department?

AA: I think the Fire Department is the best outfit for what they have to do and accomplish what they have to do. It's one of the best things that ever happened to me, being a fireman. Being in this Fire Department, it's one of the best. That's all I can say.

Q: Thank you very, very much, Mr. Augustino.

AA: All right. Now, what happens to this ... [END OF RECORDING] ...