

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Lawrence R. Bergun
Fire Medic Company No. 1

conducted in association with the
Port Washington Public Library Local History Center

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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is December the 14th, 2004. My name is Margaret Dildilian, and I am interviewing Lawrence Bergun of the Port Washington Fire Department. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Could you pronounce your full name?

Lawrence R. Bergun: Sure. It's Lawrence R. Bergun, and everyone calls me Larry.

Q: And the R stands for ... ?

LRB: Richard.

Q: Richard. Did you happen to have a nickname associated with the Fire Department?

LRB: Yeah. My last name is Bergun, and my nickname was Bergs--B-E-R-G-S. That used to be on the back of my turn-out gear and the back of my helmet. That was my nickname. And on my car license plates. So that was my nickname.

Q: Is there a certain ethnic ...

LRB: No, it's--I had it since high school. So it carried me--to this day, it still carries me.

Q: And which fire company were you ...

LRB: I was a member of Fire Medics Company Number One.

Q: And you came in as a fireman?

LRB: Yeah. I went in there--yeah, I joined them in March of 1984.

Q: And who was instrumental in your becoming a fire medic?

LRB: It was actually Pam Monfort who was an ex-President, head of Fire Medics. She was one of my old high school teachers. And I found out she was there, and once I found that out, I went under her--under her wings, I would say, and she was very instrumental in me joining in there.

Q: And what year did you join?

LRB: March of '84.

Q: Is this the Monfort that the Monfort Street is named for?

LRB: Yes. Yeah, it's all--yeah.

Q: How long were you a member of the Fire Medics?

LRB: I was a member of them from March of '84 until April of 1997.

Q: And what made you leave in '97?

LRB: Things changed in my life, and I wanted to have a change of--I wanted to get out of Port Washington Fire Department and join Manhasset Lakeville, which was always a lifetime dream of mine. And, in the beginning, I couldn't join Manhasset Lakeville, due to me going to school, and things like that. So ...

Q: What were you going to school for?

LRB: I was going for engineering management positions over there, and it just didn't--just didn't work out that I could join them, and I joined afterwards.

Q: Now, when you joined in the Fire Medics Department, it had only been going for a few years in Port.

LRB: They were five years old.

Q: And can you remember what those days were like ...

LRB: Oh, yes.

Q: ... with the Fire Medics?

LRB: Vividly. Very close-knit. Great organization. I joined them in March, and by that September, I became an officer, an Assistant Engineer--the lowest, Third Assistant. And there was--I was very proud of that. And very close-knit; it was a family.

Q: Now, when you say ...

LRB: Very big family.

Q: When you say Engineer, is that the same as the firefighting engineers?

LRB: It's like that, yes. As an Engineer, you were in charge of the ambulances. Made sure the building was kept clean, the ambulances were stocked, the ambulances were maintained. It was a--we had an engineering staff of four--the Engineer, First Assistant, Second Assistant, and Third Assistant. And me being so young in the company, they appointed me Third Assistant Engineer in September of '84. Being only in the company six months, I flip my hat that they trusted me, and it worked out very, very well.

Q: How old were you?

LRB: At that time, I want to say twenty-one or twenty-two.

Q: Now, how did you train for the Fire Medics?

LRB: When I first came in, I had a little bit of EMS background. Nothing much. They first made you become--getting you CPR certified. And right after that, then you became a driver on the ambulances. You qualified--back then, there was only two ambulances, so you qualified on two of the ambulances. Then, they put you in an EMT course, which I went and did right away. And I became an EMT. I think the course started--it started in September. I became Engineer at the end of March, so I was an EMT within a year. And then, right after that, I went for my AMT--Level Three. I was an AMT, Level Three, right--one year after that. You have to be an EMT for one year; I became an AMT.

Q: So you were able to do what more as an AMT?

LRB: As an AMT, I was able to administer drugs. The only drug I could administer as an EMT, at the time, was oxygen, and then I would be able to, as an AMT, to administer cardiac drugs, drugs for diabetics, drugs for overdoses--things like that.

Q: In your training, where did you go to do this?

LRB: It was the Fire Department's--the one for my EMT training we did in Williston Park. It was a six month course. I think there was about--I think about a group of fifteen of us that did it. And it was one night a week, and it was fun. It was great. It was a good license to have under your belt, to have. Plus, it was also college credits for me, too. When I was going to college, I didn't need to take a gym course, because I told them I was in EMT training. And it was good being--learning it and working with it in the streets here in Port Washington.

Q: So, were you going to school, to college, at the same time?

LRB: I was going to college at the same time, yes.

Q: And where was that?

LRB: At that time, I was going to Nassau Community.

Q: Did they ever give you any of the medical training in any of the hospitals, where you had to go to ...

LRB: Well, we did--we did clinical time. We went to the firehouse--to one firehouse in Williston Park. Then, when we had to do our clinical time, we did clinical time in the hospital.

Q: Which hospital?

LRB: I did my clinical time for my EMT I did in Glen Cove Hospital, then my clinical time for my AMT course, I did in North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset.

Q: And how were those hospitals, or how did you compare the two?

LRB: They both were good. Very good. And it was--they were both very good hospitals.

Q: You said that it was a family in the Fire Medics.

LRB: Oh, yeah. Big family.

Q: Can you explain what you mean by that?

LRB: Everybody watched out for each other. You became very close--very close friends back then. It was like brothers and sisters. You knew everybody's business. Sometimes that's good; sometimes that's bad. But it was--we worked on ambulances together. We went out for dinner together. We sometimes went away together. Vacations. But it was a big, big family.

Q: Did you meet your wife this way?

LRB: Yes, I did.

Q: And (laughs) what was her name?

LRB: Her name is Lori.

Q: I understand you were friends with Beverly Reese.

LRB: Yes, very close.

Q: What were your schedules like?

LRB: I--well, I was going to school during the day. Then, when I first started, I was going to school during the day, and then I would normally take duties on Saturdays from ten to two. For a while I did that. And then, lives change, and then I started doing what they call night duties, where I would sleep there at night, from nine at night till six in the morning.

Q: What was that like? I mean, how did that work in your--do you actually sleep when you're in a strange place?

LRB: Yeah, you sleep. You get accustomed to sleeping, and, you know, you try and make the best of it, and then you--you know, if you have a call in the middle of the night calls or you're up all night, you do what you have to do, then leave there and then go to work and put your full day in at work. Yes, are you tired? Yes you are (laughs). You're beat, you know. But you're doing something you thought was good for yourself and what you enjoy doing, which I did.

Q: Can you recall--well, first of all, I want to ask you, you were on many committees.

LRB: A lot of committees, yes.

Q: What committees were you on?

LRB: I was on the truck committee. I was on the building committee.

Q: And what do you do when you're on the truck committee?

LRB: Truck committee, myself, I designed four of the ambulances for Fire Medics when I was in there. I designed that one--they had a Sentinel, which I came in, there, towards the end, being the chairman. Then, they bought three Horton Ambulances, which I designed--all three.

Q: By design, what do you mean?

LRB: I worked with the committee. We all had input, and we all decided, designing the ambulance, how we wanted the equipment laid out, what type of box we want, their compartment sizes, the coloring, the cab. I was the first one to institute having--I was the first one to be in charge of having three ambulances. We used to have two.

Q: Why did you need three ambulances?

LRB: The call volume was going up. Ambulances were going out of service to get repaired. Then, you know, we'd be down to one ambulance, so we couldn't provide the appropriate EMS coverage for the town. So, I was the one that says, you know, we need to put in our budgets for having a bigger--you know, we need a third ambulance so that when one goes out of service, we could, you know, at least give the town the coverage that they're supposed to have. and I was one for making the ambulances unified, where if you go to one--if you're in one ambulance, you're in the other two ambulances. All the equipment's in the same spot, where you don't have to worry, "Well, what ambulance am I in today?" You know, "Where's the K.E.D.?" "Where is the Hare Traction? [device to immobilize the knee.] "Where is the back-board?" Everything was all in the same spot in all the ambulances. I was the one to ask the truck committee chairman to start that process.

Q: What is a K.E.D.?

LRB: It's a device that immobilizes the spine in an auto accident victim or someone with a back injury.

Q: Can you remember what some of the major fires that you ...

LRB: Sure, oh, yeah. A number of fires. A number of house fires I remember. Another big fire we had was the Shields fire. The other fire was the Main Street fire where Bobby Dayton died.

Q: Were in the ambulance there?

LRB: I was on the first due apparatus to pull up that morning.

Q: Can you tell us how that happened, and what happened?

LRB: I remember, we were just getting ready, getting up to leave. In fact, I was on with Beverly Reese that morning. And my other two partners--then it was Amiee Fenton and Roy Barnaby who now to this day got married, and they're husband and wife, living in Maine. And then we're putting on our shoes, and I hear a signal eight comes over, and so my partner Roy who was a member of Flower Hill, but he was a squad member of Fire Medics, we drive down Main Street at seven o'clock in the morning, six-thirty that--I think it was on Saturday morning. And we see smoke coming out of the building like

crazy. And then, you know, it all evolved into the Main Street fire, which firefighter Bobby Dayton died, who I've known--I knew all my life when I was a kid, because I used to play with him.

Q: Were you the one that took care of him in the ambulance?

LRB: I was one of the ones that--I was the Lieutenant in charge as soon as we got there. I was one of the ones instrumental--I was up on the roof, helping him--pull him out. There was also Phil Poullada who was on that call, I remember distinctly, because he got the Valor--the Medal of Valor award, and he always said that I should have gotten it, and I said, "No, I don't go for the glory. I'm just there to do my job." And I remember ...

Q: What was his name again?

LRB: Phil Poullada. Because I was the officer that told him, "Get up on the fire escape. Put a pack on. Get in there." Because they had--him and I were one of the first Fire Medics trained as firefighters. And I was up on the roof, helping pull the Stokes [basket] up to get Bobby off the roof. I remember that distinctly.

Q: Now, did you also then train as a firefighter?

LRB: I trained as a firefighter. The Port Washington Fire Department offered ...

Q: After you became a medic?

LRB: Yes, after I became a medic. It was--it was all at the same time, where I was an EMT, and they wanted us to learn--they decided that, you know, some of the Fire Medics should be fire trained, if they have to go in. They never were--and I was one of the--I was one of the first ones to be fire trained, Fire Medics.

Q: So what was that training like compared to the EMT?

LRB: It was same thing. I went out to fire school with the Department and the different companies when they went out to Bethpage at the Fire Service Academy, and I trained on hose operations, ladder operations, auto extrication, HAZMAT, officer's training. I have a number of courses under my belt.

Q: Which was the hardest training for you? The firefighting or the medics?

LRB: EMS. The medics. Medics was harder.

Q: Medics was harder.

LRB: Yeah. Learning to become an EMT--and AMT, especially. That was the hardest. You know, you're dealing with somebody's life, and you've got to know everything.

Q: Can you recall any particular instances that were memorable to you in the Fire Medics Department when someone's life was threatened and you were there?

LRB: Not off the top of my head, no. I mean, I can remember times when we--I remember helping deliver two babies.

Q: And what was that like?

LRB: I was very, very scared (laughs).

Q: Had they prepared you for that in school?

LRB: Oh, yeah. No, through our training, they prepared us, yeah. Oh, yes. Yep. And then ...

Q: What was the circumstance? Where was this person?

LRB: I don't remember. Somewhere here in Port. And back in the ambulance, the woman's screaming and saying, "It's going. It's coming. It's coming. Oh, no, no!" And I was like this is--this is life happening. It was life. So ...

Q: And who helped you with that?

LRB: I remember, I was on the call with, at the time, was Captain Demeo--Glen Demeo--myself, and that's all I really remember.

Q: And did you deliver the baby safely?

LRB: It was crowning. We got to the hospital. And by the time we got in the hospital, the baby was delivered in the hospital.

Q: And how many experiences like that have you had?

LRB: There was two. I believe there were two.

Q: What other instances have ...

LRB: I remember auto accidents that we had. I remember distinctly the one that was right here in front of the Library. It was July 4th weekend. A woman got run over by a car. And I remember I was the Lieutenant, and we had to--we flew the chopper and landed in, at the time, it was Main Street School. The chopper landed right in front of Main Street School, and I remember putting this woman into the chopper and looking at this tire tread right over the front of her body, and just being amazed that like, you know, the woman lived through that. So--and it was a car that knocked down a couple of the parking meters here on Main Street on the hill. And we put the woman in the chopper and ...

Q: Now, what kind of first aid do you administer to someone like that?

LRB: It's trauma. You did, right away, your A-B-C's--aerate, breathing, circulation, oxygenation. See if there's any type of, you know, internal damage. If there is, then you have to--at the time, you learn how to apply the MAST suit back then.

Q: What's that?

LRB: It's Military Anti-Shock Trousers, which take the blood from your lower extremities and bring it up to the vital organs.

Q: Is it like a tight ...

LRB: A big balloon, tight balloon, that pushes all the blood up to your vital organs.

Q: And how ...

LRB: Wraps around your legs and your waist.

Q: And when do you decide to do that?

LRB: When somebody's--well, back then, when somebody's systolic blood pressure went below 90.

Q: Were you in any particular car rescue ...

LRB: I remember the--we could probably sit here all night and talk about the ones I've been involved in. One that comes to my mind was when there was a police officer going down to Manorhaven, and he had an accident right in front of the old Baskin Robbins right in front of the high school. I remember working on him. Pulling him out of his car, being in the back of the car, taking his gun belt off, giving it to the other PD that was there, and transporting him to the hospital, taking care of him.

Q: Have you had any deaths right at your--when you were administering the ...

LRB: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q: And how do you deal with that emotionally?

LRB: You just put it out of your mind. It's--the only type of deaths that I had trouble with, or type of calls I didn't like were children calls. Working with children. That's--I didn't like that. But the normal death, there's a death, you know, yeah. You work on them, you try and revive them. You do what you got taught and do what you have to do to try and

revive them and get them back. And as long as you know you did everything by the book, did it right, you tried your best. And you--if it didn't work, it didn't work.

Q: Do you remember the Avianca Airlines crash?

LRB: Very much. I was Captain then.

Q: Can you tell is some experience that you had?

LRB: I remember that Thursday night, we were--we had work night. And after work night, we always go up to The Library [a restaurant] and have dinner. And I remember we were watching on the news, a plane crashed, and we're going back to the firehouse, the night duty crew, they said, that, "Well, we're not going to go. We're not going to go. They're not going to call us." And I remember going home, getting into bed, and they said--as soon as I got into bed, they said we're next to get called. I said, "Okay, I'll drive over to Port. At the time I left, I was still living in Manhasset. And, on the way over there, I had the Captain's radio, they called me, they said, "We're going." I said, "Well, pick me up in the cul de sac in front of St. Francis, and I remember going to Avianca that night and working inside the plane, helping pull live people out and pull dead people out.

Q: What was the traffic situation like? I understand that it was very bad.

LRB: We had to park about a mile away and lug about a hundred--about two hundred pounds of equipment up into the site. And it was chaos. Not chaos, but controlled chaos, I'd call it.

Q: And what could have been done better that you learned from that?

LRB: Nothing. Everybody was working--the only--everybody was working well together. The only thing that could have been done better is it should have happened in a place where you can get more vehicles in instead of the one lane road that was up there. But everybody worked well together, in between Nassau, Suffolk, and the city.

Q: When you're at the Fire Medics building, I understand there's more than one.

LRB: No, there's only one Fire Medics building.

Q: And what's the address on that?

LRB: 65 Harbor Road.

Q: What is the schedule of the Fire Medic. For instance, if you were going to have to sleep there overnight ...

LRB: Well, but when we slept there overnight, the crew would talk ahead of time--who would make dinner, maybe, that one night, or we'd all make it together. And we'd get down there about eight, eight-thirty, get ready. We'd start cooking our dinner; we'd have a nice dinner. And then we'd clean up, and by eleven, eleven-fifteen, we'd like to be sleeping, because we all had to get up in the morning to go to work. And we would, you know, watch TV. Some people--the other two partners, they would go into the bedroom to sleep. Ninety-nine percent of the time, myself and like Beverly would sleep out in the-- what they call the Duty Room and watch TV all night and fall asleep, and that's how I fall asleep to this day.

Q: Watching television?

LRB: Watching TV. The TV's on all night.

Q: Did you ever--were you ever on cooking duty at the Fire Medics?

LRB: Oh, yeah, I cooked. Oh, yeah.

Q: And how does that work?

LRB: We all took turns.

Q: And how do you decide what to cook for your ...

LRB: We all decide. One person may ...you know, now it's going to be your month--decide what we're going to have for dinner. Okay. If I decide to have hot dogs, we have hot dogs; if I decide to have hamburgers, hamburgers. So, you know ...

Q: And no complaints?

LRB: No complaints. No. No, we all talked about it, and we all got along great.

Q: Did you happen to work with a Cathy Godfrey at one point?

LRB: Yes. Yes.

Q: Is she still with Fire Medics?

LRB: No, she's an exempt member, like myself.

Q: And how do you become an exempt member?

LRB: After five years of service, you're allowed to leave your duties as a fire medic and just-- "exempt member" just entitles you to receive all the mailings and still be invited to their gatherings, their social functions.

Q: So five years is considered what? You're burned out by then?

LRB: No. It's considered you're eligible to, in New York State, eligible to apply to exempt status. It's a New York state law.

Q: But now, exempt status gives you what privileges, for instance?

LRB: Really nothing. Just that if you want to, as they say, retire from the Fire Medics, you retire with the Department, and they use the word "retire," but that you're putting in five years of service.

Q: Now, the firefighters have to do it for twenty-five years. Isn't that ...

LRB: No.

Q: No?

LRB: It's same thing. Same ...

Q: It's the same thing?

LRB: ... five years, yeah, they can become exempt.

Q: When you instituted this third ambulance, what does that equipment cost?

LRB: To outfit an ambulance with equipment, you--back then, you were looking at about a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. They get eight to a hundred for the bus and seventy-five thousand dollars of equipment.

Q: And what--do you think it's more now?

LRB: Probably now, yes. Probably now.

Q: Now, you then went on to what Manhasset?

LRB: Manhasset Lakeville, yes.

Q: And you went into their Fire Medics Department?

LRB: No. I went to a--I'm in a truck company over there.

Q: And what did you do for the truck company there?

LRB: Right now, I'm--right, as soon as I got in there, I was a firefighter. Then I became a driver. And then I also became an officer in that company, where I'm the secretary in the company. I'm on numerous committees there--the building committee, house committee, concession committee, engineering committee. I'm chairman of the engineering committee right now.

Q: Now, but when you were in the Fire Medics here in Port, you lived in Manhasset.

LRB: Yes.

Q: Now, how did you answer calls from Manhasset?

LRB: I got up out of bed, and I drove my car over here.

Q: And how long would that take you?

LRB: Not long at all.

Q: Now, what made you go into the Manhasset Lakeville Department?

LRB: My grandfather [Nick Iliaszuk] was in that company for thirty-seven years.

Q: Manhasset?

LRB: Yes. Family.

Q: You had no family here in Port, though.

LRB: No, no. But I did enjoy the medical field. Because when my grandfather passed away-- long story short--I was one of the ones--first one there. Then the county police showed up. I tried to help revive my grandfather.

Q: What happened to your grandfather?

LRB: He had a heart attack. It was the middle of the night.

Q: In Manhasset?

LRB: In Manhasset, yeah. So I was one of the ones, yeah, and I always wanted--when Manhasset was going to start up a Medic program and then it petered out and they didn't. And Manhasset gave my name to Port, and that's when Port contacted me. And ...

Q: What was your grandfather's name?

LRB: Nick Iliaszuk.

Q: Nick ...

LRB: Iliaszuk.

Q: So, he was actually instrumental then ...

LRB: Yeah. I was a firehouse rug-rat since the day I was in diapers. He used to bring me down there Sundays. I'd spend all day Sunday down there with him. Memorial Day.

Q: In Manhasset ...

LRB: In Manhasset, yes.

Q: ... Fire Department. Well, was there anyone in Port, in the Port Fire Department that influenced you in any way?

LRB: Well, once when they sent my name over, and Pam Monfort was the President at the time, and she was the one that kind of pushed me to go over there, once they got my name and number. She knew I wanted to join, and it was her.

Q: Now, when you hear the fire horn, when the horn blows for the firefighters, do you anticipate that you're going to be called?

LRB: Yeah, back then, we always went out on calls with them, yes.

Q: So you went out when they went out ...

LRB: Yes.

Q: ... regardless of--before you knew what the situation was?

LRB: Yeah.

Q: What went on inside of you when you would hear that?

LRB: You have to size up the call in your head, what you're going to do on the EMS side, what you're going to prepare for--depends on the call. For an auto accident, you get there, you find out what you're going to need, what's going on. If there's a car you need to get cut

open, you've got to work with the team that's going to cut the car open--tell them where they can and can't put the tool that would compromise patient care. You want to work on the patient. Patient priority was number one. Patient care was priority number one.

Q: You were in the Department about four years after they initially began in Port. I think they began in '79.

LRB: '79, yes, and I joined in '84.

Q: And they had older--they had older equipment then ...

LRB: Oh, yes.

Q: ... in the trucks. Can you remember what those were like, or were they gone by the time you got there?

LRB: No, I remember some of the old equipment, although off the top of my head I can't say now, but I remember some of the old equipment. Then, when the newer equipment came in, then everybody saw it was better and it was easier to work with--user-friendly.

Q: And what are the differences between the beginning of the Fire Medics and now, medical training and now? Has it improved?

LRB: Well, now, I can't--I don't know. I've been out of there since '97, so I really couldn't answer that. But back then, it was a great improvement. On the EMS training side, you were trained a lot more, trained a lot more extensively in patient care and using the equipment and the different type of equipment that they were buying.

Q: Did you ever think of actually becoming--going into the medical field itself, becoming a doctor?

LRB: Well, from Fire Medics, I was going to join the--I was accepted and joined the Nassau County Police Department. I was going to become a medic with them. But at the time, I was working for corporate America, and they, in turn, when I told them I was leaving, they saw the company I was with for fifteen years--well, at the time I was only with them for, I guess, about--I was with them for about eight months. They saw me, and they saw my work ethic, and I told them I was leaving to become--because I wanted more money. I was going to get married. And then they made me the right offer, and I stayed with them for another fifteen years after that.

Q: Which company was this?

LRB: I worked for First America Title Insurance Company.

Q: But when you were working as a fire medic in Port, you were not paid.

LRB: No. No one is paid. They're all volunteer.

Q: Now, is it volunteer in the Manhasset Department?

LRB: Yes, all volunteer.

Q: Were you considered, when you were in the Fire Medics, when you were beginning, were you considered rookies like the firefighters?

LRB: Oh, yeah, all rookies, yeah. Probies. Had your probationary period. Had to make sure you make all your probationary points.

Q: Aside from Mrs. Monfort who was apparently your mentor, were there any others in the Department that were helpful to you?

LRB: Yeah. There was a couple of others. There was Carol Swiacki, Beverly Reese, Glen Demeo, Dave Fenton, and Phil Spinnato.

Q: And are most of these people still with the Fire Department or ...

LRB: I know Phil is; Beverly is, yes.

Q: What do you do now during your day job?

LRB: I am a supervisor for the engineering department of New York Hospital Queens in Flushing.

Q: And what does that job entail?

LRB: I'm in charge of--I assist my boss who's the director, and he's just director, so I'm the number three man in charge of the campus at New York Hospital Queens, of the engineering department. All operations of the hospital, anywhere from the boilers to the grounds, to the maintenance of the hospital. We have a staff of fifty men that I'm in charge of over there.

Q: So you don't answer fire calls anymore, in terms of ...

LRB: Not during the day, no. My job is number one.

Q: Your job is number one. But do you answer them at night?

LRB: Oh, yeah. Then I go to work the next day. I'm forty-one years old, and I--yeah, you're tired, but I'm doing what I do for the good of the community.

Q: And how does that make you feel on the inside?

LRB: Very good. Because I know I'm giving back to the community what it deserves, and I'm very proud of the volunteer tradition here on Long Island and New York State. And it's just like, do what's right.

Q: You were involved in the building move--was that the Fire Medics building move?

LRB: Yeah, from ...

Q: What was your position?

LRB: At the time, I was Captain of the company. Also, for my regular job at First American, I was their director of facilities. I was in charge of all their offices from Virginia up through Rhode Island. And my--I guess, you can call it forté, was office moves. I could take an office, shut it down at three o'clock on a Friday and have it running by the following Friday--I mean, by the following Saturday, the next day, by three o'clock. So I was instrumental in moving the Fire Medics down to their new building, by not having any down time.

Q: Can you tell us exactly how you do that?

LRB: How you did it? You got the bodies. You had everything pre-packed. You had everything pre-planned before you moved in, to make sure that your communications were up, your electrical was done, the furniture was in. You had bodies there to move the furniture, the books, the supplies--everything. All--and we did it all in one day. Of course, there's cleaning up afterwards, but ninety-eight percent of the work was done in one day. But it was by team effort.

Q: Now, when you're working in the Fire Medics, who orders all the medications that you stock up?

LRB: The engineering staff was in charge of that. Anything you ever needed, you would go--we would order it through outside vendors. The normal things--your dry sterile supplies, things like that. Then, anything else--any drugs that you need--you'd go up to the hospital, and you'd have to get them signed for, and we'd have supply in the back locked up.

Q: Which hospital do you get them from?

LRB: Oh, it was from St. Francis at the time.

Q: So, how do you know ahead what drugs you're going to need?

LRB: You have an inventory sheet. You had a book, that we had. And it would say, you have x-amount of drug A, x-amount of drug B, like that. We went by the inventory book, like that.

Q: Have you ever handled diabetic cases?

LRB: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Q: And can you give us an experience?

LRB: A quick scenario: You walk in, you see a patient that's out, incohesive, doesn't know anything. And you start--you find out from the history that they are diabetic. You start an IV on them. You push your two amps of D5W, and three minutes later, they're talking like nothing ever happened.

Q: But how do you know they're diabetic if they're not ...

LRB: From the history. You find out from the history, from family members--things like that.

Q: And if you don't have family members?

LRB: Then you look at the signs and symptoms and if I know them off the top of my head-- cherry red face, alcohol smelling breath. So you would start IV--Nassau County protocol and talk to Medical Control. And they would always give you the okay to administer one amp of D50 or two amps of D50, I remember. ... [???] ...

Q: Did the older generation--was there an older generation in the Fire Medics Department to help younger people at the time you came in?

LRB: When I came in, yeah. There was--don't forget, it was still brand new.

Q: Yeah, that's why I wondered.

LRB: The first five years. And then, with myself being there, I kind of like jumped in on the bandwagon with them and got accepted, and I was considered one of the oldtimers, even though I was there new. I was there, you know, young. And I was considered like an oldtimer there.

Q: So how did you feel by the time you left in '97? Were you considered the guru of the Department in some ways?

LRB: Yeah. I was on a lot of committees in the Department. I was very instrumental in the Department. I was well liked from a lot of other members of the companies of the

Department, because I was on numerous committees with them and worked with the Department. I was one of the ones that helped bring the Fire Medics together with the Department, like keeping us as one where we all work together. So that was one of the things I was very instrumental in.

Q: Did you ever partake of any of the rituals of the Fire Department? For instance, like initiation dinners, the installation dinners?

LRB: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah.

Q: And what did you enjoy the most of those rituals? The parades, the dinners, the ...

LRB: I liked going to the parades. We had fun going to parades.

Q: Did the Fire Medics, or do the Fire Medics wear a different uniform or ...

LRB: No, we have the same uniform, just a different badge--different hat badge. All wear the same uniform.

Q: Would New York Hospital in Queens allow you to answer a call, if you were still in the Fire Medics?

LRB: Yeah, my boss probably would allow me, but, you know, when you're running a campus of three thousand employees, four hundred and eighty-six-bed hospital, you know, it's-- the job comes first. And if I'm late to work, my boss has no problem. You just don't make it a habit.

Q: How does your family feel about--did they feel about your involvement in the Fire Department?

LRB: In the beginning, my mother wasn't--when I was single, my mother wasn't happy, but ...

Q: Why wasn't she happy?

LRB: She thought it would take time away from school. And I showed her it didn't and ...

Q: Did you complete your school?

LRB: Yes, I did. Yeah.

Q: Was your wife ever involved with the Ladies Auxiliary since you're in the Fire Department?

LRB: No. No, she was just a fire medic.

Q: Were there--how did you feel about the women that were in the Fire Department, aside from the ones that were in the Fire Medics--the ones that were firefighters?

LRB: I only knew, I think, there was only one or--there were like two, maybe three, that I--I don't remember all their names off the top of my head. Treat them just like another person.

Q: Do you feel that they were able to carry their weight?

LRB: No.

Q: You don't think so?

LRB: No.

Q: Why?

LRB: Just different things at different calls. I don't remember off the top of my head, but I ...

Q: Just felt that they were not able to do the job as well.

LRB: As well, yeah.

Q: They weren't.

LRB: Yeah, I didn't feel that--that's my own what I think, yeah.

Q: Were there any grumblings in the Fire Department about the way the women ...

LRB: Oh, yeah. There was always grumblings.

Q: About how the women ...

LRB: They grumbled about everything.

Q: For instance?

LRB: Oh, off the top of my head, I--they could tell you that that book is brown and they would say, "No, it's purple." And, you know, everyone has their own opinion.

Q: Can you tell me about some of your experiences using the Jaws of Life? Have you ever used it ...

LRB: Oh, yeah.

Q: ... it or like the Hurst tool?

LRB: I was trained on it. I have certification on it. I remember using it at calls, working when I was Captain working calls on Roslyn West Shore Road with the truck company, telling them, "Look, put the tool here because the door's going to pop open here, and the guy's leg is right here." Yeah, I remember that--times like that.

Q: Did they have the Jaws of Life in '84 when you went in?

LRB: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q: Do you ever carry any charms to a fire call?

LRB: I used to wear a necklace which is--I've been meaning to get repaired, that I haven't worn in about three months, that, yeah, I have all--good luck charms that people have given me that ...

Q: What were they?

LRB: One's a little fireman. One was a medical caduceus when I was a medic.

Q: A medical what?

LRB: When I was an AMT, when I got my license.

Q: What did you call it? You called it something. Medical something.

LRB: I called it a "caduceus" It's called a "caduceus" It's like the star of life. Another one is the Fire Medics emblem. We had them done up when I was there. It's a small round pendant that I wore on my chain. I had another with a fireman with a little hydrant, or a truck. Yeah, I have different--and if there's something big going down, I sometimes touch them and pray I get out of whatever I'm going into.

Q: Have any Fire Medics been injured that you know of?

LRB: Nothing major that I remember. All minor.

Q: Or loss of life in the Fire Medics?

LRB: We had one--Ingrid Sowle--when she was killed on Roslyn West Shore Road. Back then, I was Captain. Unfortunately, I was away for the weekend. I remember it was Washington's Birthday weekend, and I can't recall the year--maybe '98. Again, I don't remember the year. Not '98; it was maybe '88. But I remember I was away in Pennsylvania for the weekend. Coming home to that, it was tough.

Q: Did you feel that you were appreciated when you were working with the ...

LRB: Oh, yeah, oh, yes.

Q: Port Washington Fire Medics?

LRB: Very much well appreciated, yes. I was highly regarded, well liked here in the Port Washington Fire Department. I was sorry to leave, but people's life change and I had to make a change for myself, and found it for the better. I still keep in contact with a lot of my friends here in Port.

Q: What were your responsibilities as a Captain, and then later you became President.

LRB: President. I was Captain for two years. And responsibilities of Captain is I had to run the company on the line side, making sure the ambulance got out, make sure it got out for all calls, making sure that the engineers kept the ambulances maintained. Being a glorified babysitter, if you call it that.

Q: And being President was like what?

LRB: Running a business. I was running the Fire Medics on the monetary side. Going over the budgets and seeing ...

Q: And what did you have in your budget for the Fire Medics, aside from drugs and ...

LRB: The drugs, the mortgage, the lighting, the phone. Any construction we were going to be doing around the building, I was in charge of that.

Q: Can you remember any humorous Fire Medic calls you were on?

LRB: Nothing I want to say on tape, really.

Q: Why? It can't be that bad.

LRB: No, it was--yeah.

Q: You mean, you don't want to tell us something that was hilarious?

LRB: It was comical. Humorous. Just the normal, you get a call for--a person's sick, and you come up, and here's a young, fifteen, sixteen year old Port Washington resident that was out drinking all night. They've vomited all over themselves, and their parents are going, "Oh, he's very, very ill. He must have a bad flu." Yeah, he's got the flue; he's drunk. And, you know, things like that.

Q: So how do you break the news to the parents (laughs).

LRB: You be straight, truthful, and honest.

Q: And are they believing?

LRB: Ninety-nine percent of the time, no, but you try.

Q: How do you treat someone like that?

LRB: Just get them up to the hospital so that they could put the tube in them in through their nose and take out the alcohol that they ingested.

Q: In other words, it's an overdose of alcohol.

LRB: It's an overdose of alcohol, yes.

Q: Can they go into shock with that or ...

LRB: No. They can die. They can become so lethargic and then vomit and then regurgitate on their vomit, and then that would obstruct their airway and you'd have to be careful, and watch out for things like that.

Q: You certainly wouldn't want to do CPR on them (laughs).

LRB: No.

Q: Were there any great pranksters in the Fire Medics Department?

LRB: Oh, we ...

Q: Did you play jokes on each other?

LRB: We--yes, I was one of them.

Q: Oh, really. Can you tell me what were some of the jokes you played?

LRB: Oh, when we had different functions, different parties, just making fun of people doing different things.

Q: Fun in the sense of their names or the way they walked, or ...

LRB: The way they walked. If you had a pool party, somebody would get thrown in the pool, and you know, three of us would go over there, throw them in the pool, the person, you know, the woman, whoever it was. And she had her hair done that day, and then her hair turned green from the chlorine, and start her crying. So then we'd bring out the rolls of toilet paper and wrap it around. Just things like that.

Q: Is that how you met your wife, doing pranks like that?

LRB: No, no. Actually, I knew my wife, she was married to one of the ex-Captains, and then we were good friends, and then we lost friendship, and then we became friends again through going to a dinner there, and she was going through a divorce, and then we got married.

Q: What was the greatest advantage to you of being a fire medic with the Fire Department? What did you feel was really ...

LRB: I did a lot for the Fire Medics company in accomplishments that some people didn't think that they could achieve, and I was very proud that I worked hard to get them where they are.

Q: Who was your partner in this, or were you basically the chief ...

LRB: No, well, no one can ever do everything by themselves alone. It's your officers that were under you that were the ones that made you also look good, and your members, too. So it was a group effort of everyone. I mean, not--I wouldn't say everyone in the company, but it was a lot of people--ninety-eight percent of the company. It's a group effort.

Q: Going back to when you first went in and became a fire medic and your installation, can you remember what your installation was like?

LRB: Yeah, I mean ...

Q: Was it memorable?

LRB: Yeah, new guy up there, saying that you are, you know, they install: "This is our new member. Stand up." And that was it, you know.

Q: Have you ever experienced any hostility from the people you were trying to help in the Fire Medics Department, when you answered the call?

LRB: You mean patients?

Q: Yeah, patients.

LRB: Oh, yeah. We always get that.

Q: What happens.

LRB: They can become violent.

Q: Can you remember an example of what happens?

LRB: No, off the top of my head. The only thing you'd be allowed to do is you mainly restrain them.

Q: How do you restrain them?

LRB: Back then, we were allowed to, like I said ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: This is side B, and to continue, you were explaining how you restrain them. Can you explain that again?

LRB: Yeah, I'm saying you humanely restrain them, by tying their arms down and their legs down to the stretcher, with the triangle bandages, and that was it. And any other type of violence meant that we would call the Police Department ambulance to transport them.

Q: Did they have straightjackets then ...

LRB: No.

Q: What are the most valuable words that you heard from your elders in the Fire Medics Department when you were first a member?

LRB: Fight for what you think is right.

Q: What do you think would be lost if the Fire Department became a paid department in Port, along with the Fire Medics?

LRB: Camaraderie. Friendship.

Q: How do you feel about this oral history project?

LRB: It's something I was very not shocked, but I thought this was something good that they're doing. And the Port Washington Fire Department has a lot of roots in it, a lot of great accomplishments, and I think it's--I think it's the right thing they're doing. I don't know much about it, but it's, again, preserving the history of the Port Washington Fire Department, which I thought myself as being a very big part of when I was a member there.

Q: What do you think were the basic differences between the Manhasset Lakeville Fire Medics and the Port ...

LRB: Well, I couldn't answer for that, because, again, Manhasset Lakeville didn't have a program. Now they do. Nothing compared to what Port--Port was the elite. They had--

when I joined, they said that they were number one in the State, and I still feel, to this day, that, from what I see, they're high up there.

Q: So they, you are just a firefighter with the Manhasset Lakeville. You were not a fire medic?

LRB: No, I was not a fire medic, no. I was a little--I'm a little fireman.

Q: Which do you enjoy really the most--being a firefighter or a fire medic?

LRB: Back when I was a medic, I loved being a medic, you know. But after a while, you get burned out of looking at sick people, dead people. I love being a fireman. Probably more towards that. I love being a fireman.

Q: But you were also a fireman in the Port Department.

LRB: Yes, I was a fireman in Port. Yes. Which I enjoyed very much. And being one of the first fire medics that were fire trained.

Q: So, if you were advising, say, your children, would you advise them to be a fire medic or a firefighter?

LRB: Do both. That's what I did.

Q: If you had to do it all over again, would you do what you did?

LRB: Oh, yeah. I had great times. Great times.

Q: Do you have anything, in particular, that you would like to add to the interview or to say about either your experiences, about the Department, or ...

LRB: I think it's a great Department. There's a lot of great talent in the Port Washington Fire Department, at least back when I was in it. I wouldn't even say great. It's fabulous talent. And I enjoyed my experience. It made me grow up a lot. I grew up a lot. Big-time. By learning how to be a man.

Q: Can you tell me if it helped you in your career in any way?

LRB: Oh, yeah. It helped me in my corporate career, growing up with the company I was working for and with Fire Medics, because I grew with both of them at the same time. I started out low on the totem pole in the leadership of Fire Medics and in the leadership of the company I used to work for. And I grew both of them up to becoming a corporate executive and being proud of that and also being--coming up to I call it an executive in the Fire Department in Fire Medics, being both the President and the Captain.

Q: Do you have any words you'd like to leave for future generations of Port firefighters or fire medics coming up the ranks.

LRB: Do what's required of you. Instead of putting in a hundred percent, you put in a hundred and fifty. Always--that little extra always helps out.

Q: Well, thank you very, very much, Mr. Bergun.