

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Walter Martinek
Flower Hill Hose Company No. 1

conducted in association with the
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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is December the 8th, 2004. This is an interview with Walter Martinek of Flower Hill Hose Company in Port Washington. My name is Margaret Dildilian, and the interview is taking place at 50 Crescent Road in Port Washington. How do you pronounce your full name?

Walter Martinek: Walter Martinek.

Q: Do you happen to have a nickname in the Fire Department?

WM: No, I don't.

Q: Which company are you a member of?

WM: Flower Hill Hose Company.

Q: And why did you join Flower Hill?

WM: A friend--couple of friends of mine were joining, and at the time it seemed like a good idea, and also my uncle Walter Symanski was a member, and when I mentioned it to him, he was thrilled. And he's the one who got me into the Company. He's the one who got all the papers, and he was willing to be the sponsor to get me in.

Q: Your uncle on your father's or mother's side?

WM: My mother's side.

Q: What is your family background?

WM: My mother's side is Polish--all Polish. And my grandfather and grandmother from my mother's side came from Poland on the ships coming over. And my father--I don't know the full extent of his background, but it's all Czechoslovakian.

Q: How instrumental was your uncle. What did he say to you to make you want to join the Fire Department?

WM: Well, he didn't want me--not that he didn't want me to. He didn't come to me at first, but when I told him--I used to work for him when I was a teenager. He had an auto repair shop in Port Washington--Walter's Auto Service. And I started working for him after school when I was in junior high school. And then a few of my friends were going to join. Their fathers and relatives were members of the Fire Department, so we got together and said, "Yeah, let's join" type of things. You know, what guys do when they get in a group. And then, so we decided on Flower Hill Hose Company. And I said, "Oh, that's great," because I worked right up the street. I worked at Mike's, it was an

Esso station up at the end of the block at the firehouse. And I happened to know a lot of the guys in the firehouse, because they came for gas all the time to fill up the fire trucks. So, it developed that way. Then I went to my uncle, and he goes, "Oh, I'll get you in. There's no problem. I didn't know you were interested," you know. And then it just, from then, it just was no problem. You just signed up, you get all your paperwork together, and get your sponsors. You had to have four sponsors to get in. And, after that, that was it.

Q: How old were you at the time?

WM: Eighteen.

Q: And what year was it?

WM: I got in the company in 1968--December 1968. It takes--it takes like three months from when you start your paperwork till you get in--actually get in, voted into the company. I got in in December '68.

Q: And how long have you been a member?

WM: Thirty--I believe it's thirty-six years.

Q: And you were born and raised here in Port Washington?

WM: In Port Washington, yes.

Q: Can you remember what your childhood was like back then in Port, before we go into your Fire Department experiences?

WM: Okay. Well, in the beginning, actually I didn't live here all my life. I moved away when I was about four. I came back when I was in--when I was like twelve. So there was a few years I wasn't here. But from then on, I lived in my--the same house my grandfather built, with the family. I lived with my mother.

Q: The ones from Czechoslovakia?

WM: From Poland.

Q: Oh, Poland.

WM: And lived on Avenue B in Port Washington. And most of the people that lived up there had all Polish descent. And we belonged to the Polish club in the local area, so I was very fortunate to have a lot of friends and people and neighbors that they knew me better than I knew them--the old people--because they knew that I was Ann's son and daughter--

I had a twin sister. I have a twin sister. So, then, so we were the twins. "They're the twins," you know.

Q: What was your mother's maiden name?

WM: Ann Symanski.

Q: Were most of the people--the firefighters in the Flower Hill Hose Company--of Polish descent?

WM: It sort of--it sort of leaned over that way. But it was not a hundred percent. I wouldn't say it was fifty percent. But there was a good portion of Polish people in the Flower Hill Hose Company. It seemed to work that way. Because, when you joined the fire company in those days, you either had a family or you were friends, or you knew somebody, and so it was the same circle all the time. You know, same circle of people. And if you didn't know anybody, back in the old days, you didn't get in the fire company. You had to know somebody.

Q: And how were your--how was your initial initiation into the fire company in those days?

WM: When you first got elected to the company, it was--you kind of just were quiet and you sat back and listened, because the rest of the--the next year or so was all training and you

had to really get to know who was in charge, who knew what to do, who don't listen to, and who to listen to. You know, it was a--it was a big group of people, and everybody was pretty friendly.

Q: Who was your mentor? Who did you look to for advice? Who did you learn the most from?

WM: Well, I was lucky to be living across the street from an officer of the company at the time--Fred Smith who moved away to Florida; he retired. And he--since he was being my neighbor, he really helped me out with a lot of--lot of things, you know. "Do this," "Don't do that," "Don't worry about this," type of stuff. And so, I sort of clung onto him a little bit, and that made it a lot easier.

Q: When you were first in the fire company, did you ride on the back of those fire trucks in those days?

WM: Yes. When I first got in, that's the only type of fire trucks we had. We had--you had to ride--the crew of the fire truck, you had a driver, an officer in a seat. And then most of the fire trucks had steps on the back, and one stood on the back, or on the top of the truck in the hose bed. There were a few trucks where you could stand on the side of the truck, which was--wasn't very--it was quite dangerous around the turns, because you had no protection from all the--if it was a tight turn, the telephone poles and trees.

Q: Were there any accidents?

WM: There were accidents. I really don't recall. I remember hearing, you know, so-and-so had an accident years ago, and there was a bad accident here. I really don't recall at the time that I was in of any really bad accidents, anybody getting hurt on a fire truck.

Q: Now, when you were on the back of that fire truck, how did you feel? What was it like inside of you?

WM: Probably the first few times, it was very exciting, very scary. And then, after a few times, it got very--it was more like second nature, because everybody helped each other. You'd be--you jumped on the back of the truck if you--you'd be getting dressed on the back of the truck, as the truck was going down the road. People would be holding onto your arm. While you were pulling your right-hand boot up, people would be holding your left side. And, you know, everybody helps each other. One guy would get dressed first, and then everybody'd hold the other guy and let him get dressed. So it was a real brotherhood, and everybody helped each other. It's like no matter who you are--you didn't even have to know each other's name. Because you didn't know everybody's name, especially when you first got in. It was just a--it just happened, and then you learned really quick that these guys are here to, you know, to help you out, and let's get together and put the fire out.

Q: When that fire horn went off and you'd hear it ...

WM: Right.

Q: ... what went through your mind. I mean, what were your initial ...

WM: Well, I don't recall it exactly, because it was so long ago. But I remember in the beginning it was "I have to get to the firehouse." Because things have changed since then, as far as response to the fire company calls. Back then, we--it was all alarms. The only way you got called was if you heard the alarms go off--the sirens and the air horns. You had radios. They gave us certain big--these big Plectron radios that would give you information. But they were very big, and they were at home. If you were out somewhere, you had to hear the horns to respond to a fire call. Nowadays, everything is--everybody has a personal pager. You have a personal Plectron that goes on your hip. You can listen to all the fire calls. It tells you where the fire is, what kind of fire it is, and actually what firehouse to respond to.

Q: What was your initial training like back in '68, when you--did you go to Bethpage to ...

WM: Well, it was a lot different than it is now. I'm involved with training now, and I remember, back then, it was you joined and it wasn't long before you were riding on the

back of the fire truck. Training has evolved to be a very serious operation right now. You have OSHA laws, State laws, need to know more about fire situations, and education. Just everybody needs to have a better look out--outlook on fires. Because--and that's what happened. It evolved over the years since I've been in. In the beginning, the training was mostly in-house. We'd go out to Bethpage--the Fire Training Academy out there. And it was basic, and I remember not knowing a lot of stuff. The new members that get in nowadays in 2004, they get--start to get trained right away, and they go out to different classes right way. Forty hour classes--essentials, primaries--and then it's a complete training program all the time. Where back in the old days, it was more just a little bit here, a little bit there, and you learned from the old members. The old members would teach you a lot, which they still do. But there's a lot of technical stuff that is done at the Academy.

Q: How did you gain your knowledge from your elders? When did you talk to each other? What did they tell you?

WM: Well, the big night in the firehouse for training was Thursday nights, our work night. Everybody gets together; we clean the fire trucks, we wash them. Just being around the equipment all the time, checking it, is an education, because you learn what the equipment is. You learn the name, you know where it is on the truck. So that's a big, big thing right there. At a fire scene, knowing where if somebody asks for a certain tool and--you have to know where it is. You can't say, "I don't know" (laughs). So you learn, just

from experience. It's an on-the-job training, and it's an ongoing thing all the time you're in the fire company.

Q: Do you value the book learning less maybe than the knowledge that you learned from your elders?

WM: I would say the actual physical on-the-job training and the elders telling you what to do and what not to do was the basics of my good training.

Q: Do you feel that's missing in the younger generation?

WM: No, not at all. Although we have a smaller amount of members now than we used to years ago. Members that are there are always there for the younger members, to teach them. It's an ongoing thing.

Q: Can you tell me how you rose from the ranks to Engineer and then Lieutenant, and then Captain? What were your ...

WM: Okay, I was ...

Q: Any outstanding experiences?

WM: I was a regular fireman for a long time. I didn't have--I didn't go into being an officer of the company. I didn't have a lot of time to put in, because it does take extra time when you become an officer. So it wasn't--I can hardly remember the year, but it would have had to be when I was in, maybe, oh, twenty years, that I started to decide to get into the officer--work for the company as an officer and be more of a member that way than ...

Q: What made you decide to go into that?

WM: Well, unfortunately, there was a death--a fireman's death--in the fire company, in the Fire Department--Bobby Dayton. He died in a fire, and I was very active at the time as a fireman. But I remember Bobby was--he was an officer, and he was always striving for better things, and helping the company out and helping the members and always being there. And big on training. And he died in a fire, and then it kind of seemed, after that--not right away; it was after that--my company was--well, they needed some people to help. So, I wasn't officer material at first. I took some schools, and I decided then that I was going to maybe help fulfill Bobby's, you know, style.

Q: What do you mean you weren't officer material?

WM: I wasn't thriving--I wasn't looking to be an officer at the time. I was just a fireman who knows how to go to a call and just do as I was told, you know. Things like that. It's just, when you're an officer ...

Q: But that was because you preferred being a firefighter to being an officer?

WM: I just didn't make the time. To be an officer of the company--any officer--it takes time. You have to want to do it. You have to be able to spend time up there, more time than a regular member, in the back room. You're doing a lot of things all the time. Stop by the firehouse every day, see what's going on. Then yo get--the Captain tells you to do stuff--pick up trucks, drop off equipment. It's just an ongoing thing.

Q: So, when you first became a Captain in 1996, what was it like compared to your previous experiences?

WM: Well, before you become Captain, you have to remember, you're an officer, you're a Lieutenant--First Lieutenant, Second Lieutenant for four years. And before that, you're an Engineer. You're in whatever engineer spot you're in for a couple of years probably. So, you're already grooming, you're grooming yourself up. Once you make the Captain's spot, it's sort of like a real proud feeling. And especially you get the backing of the members, because it's a--it's a funny thing. When you have a good Captain in the company--all Captains are good; they're all--but when he leaves, he gets out, he's--he rolls out and a new one rolls in, and the members are glad to see a new Captain, but they don't want the old Captain to go. But the old Captain doesn't go anywhere. He becomes an ex-Captain, which has a very high status in the Fire Department.

Q: And what do they do as ex-Captains?

WM: Well, they basically fall back as regular firemen again, but at any given time, they can take over as an officer of the company in the absence of other officers. So they're always--you know, you go to a fire call and there's no Lieutenants, and the Captain's away on vacation, an ex-Captain can take over and run the company's operation at the fire scene.

Q: So, who was the previous Captain before you became Captain?

WM: Previous Captain was Andy Bellini. Andy Bellini was Captain before me.

Q: And did you learn anything from him, or ...

WM: Yeah, you know, you sort of look at--as an officer, you sort of sit--I did anyway--I sat back a lot and listened and learned from actions and words from the higher officers, as I went up. I would see--and I would look to see how the company would react and other members, to certain situations, and who kind of did it the right way, who got it bad, marking on what they did. And I'd say, "Hmmm," and I'd look around. And then you talk to ex-Captains and you ask them certain questions. Sometimes, there's big, big--might be a problem in the fire company or fire and a decision has to be made. Doesn't

have to be on the spot, so what you do, as I learned, you'd take your time, you ask other people. You ask people a little older than you, especially the older firemen, older members. They know a lot. You learn a lot from older people. And you'd ask them. You'd ask ex-Captains that have been in there before and now they're sort of like going back--you try to ask them, and they'd give advice. You take it. You take all the advice, and then you make your decision. The Captain's decision is his decision, and that's it. So, that's the way you learn from their experience.

Q: What kind of decisions do you make as a Captain? It's basically what you do on the fire scene.

WM: Well, a Captain is in charge of the firehouse, at all times. He's in charge of all the apparatus, what happens to it, when it gets repaired when it breaks down. Other officers--other members, if they have a problem--if they're late, if they're not making their points, they're not fulfilling their obligations, the Captain has to look upon that stuff. Now, the fire scene's a whole different--a whole different thing. The Captain is like a--like a general in the Army. He has to give all the orders to the first company. He also has to take orders from the top general, which is the Chief. Then you have other companies that have other Captains, and you have to, you know, organize all this together at one time at a fire scene, and with your regular communication and what you know, you do the job that you're trained to do.

Q: Were there any problems for you, going in as an older Captain, with the younger generation?

WM: No. Actually, we used to--we look back--I've talked to a few people over the years, and I think they were happy to--at the time, especially when I got in, they were happy to have a mature, older Captain that was--I felt that I was outgoing and I was--I knew all the members, and they all liked me, so I was able to move right in, and it worked out very well. In fact, it worked out so well that I was Captain twice.

Q: Tell me about that. How did that happen?

WM: I was Captain the first time; that was two years. And, well, actually at the time, too, our firehouse was being renovated. So we didn't have a firehouse when I was Captain the first time. We had four fire trucks and all of our equipment, but we had to move. We moved--we separated our whole company--all the equipment--between the other firehouses in town, and we would work out of their firehouses for two years.

Q: What was that like?

WM: Well, as Captain, it was kind of hard a little--well, it wasn't what I was looking forward to, because you want your own firehouse. But just as I got out, we actually moved in the firehouse, so I had a few months that I had my own office. And then, Glen Pedersen who

was the First Lieutenant after I got out after two years, he became Captain, and he--and he was Captain for two years, and I was just an ex-Captain. Which is okay. That's the way it works; it works that way. The new--two new Lieutenants coming up--Tommy Cygan and Matt Schiller--were kind of young and new at the job, moving up from the engineer's spot. They didn't have a lot of experience for the fire grounds. So they came to me, and they--when it was time for the new Captain to be elected--a few months ahead, before that--and they--because I was still very active and very friendly with everybody--they asked me if I would maybe consider running for Captain for a year and just to fill the spot to let them have some more time as a lower officer's spot. So, I said, I'll look into it. And the first thing I did is I went home and asked my wife. And then she said, "If that's what you want to do, fine." She knows how much time it takes at night--not being home three times a week, sometimes at night--meetings and fire. Besides the fires, just the meetings and meetings. Then, I asked my kids, and they were thrilled, because they loved being the Captain's kids, because they sort of get--they have that upper edge on anybody else, you know.

Q: How many children do you have?

WM: I have two.

Q: Are they boys?

WM: Actually, I have three. I have an older daughter, Maggie. I ... [hope she never] ... listens to this. Maggie, she's married. She has--I have two grandchildren with her. And I have two younger kids. Natalie is eight, and Gregory is ten. And they're firehouse kids. Even Maggie was. They know the firehouse; they know everybody; they know everything. They learned ...

Q: So did you take them out ...

WM: All the time, to fires.

Q: And on the fire truck?

WM: Well, for rides once in a while when it's appropriate, you know, things like that. Not on fires. On fire calls, you don't bring the children. But, I used to go to the firehouse on a Sunday afternoon for a few hours and hang out. That's where we had the big hall and the big TV and pool tables and things to do like that. We had fun.

Q: So your wife said it was all right to go back into it?

WM: My wife said it was all right for the second time, yeah.

Q: Going back, when you were young, did your uncle take you on the fire truck?

WM: When I was very little? No. No, I didn't--I wasn't involved with my uncle like that way.

Q: Did anyone ever take you, as a young child, out firefighting?

WM: No. Actually, I was--I didn't really get that close to the Fire Department then, when I was young.

Q: But you knew while you were in high school that you wanted to be a firefighter?

WM: Yeah, towards the end of high school, yes, I did, because my friends were talking about it, and one of my friends' fathers was a member, so it was always in the back of my head. It was just--and then it was one of those, "Okay, I'm going to do it."

Q: What was the hardest thing for you when you were a rookie, training? What was the hardest part of that, when you were young?

WM: Probably the hardest part was, it was more--it wasn't a hard thing in the fire company. It was just more personal. I worked a lot. I worked at night after school. I worked Saturdays and I worked Sundays at a gas station. So, the Fire Department has a lot of--lot of things to do. They have a racing team, which you need Saturdays off, and stuff like that.

Q: So what did your mother and father think about all that?

WM: My mother thought it was great. She--it was some place for me to go and be, you know, with other people and an organized operation, which the Fire Department really is. It's very organized.

Q: What is the hardest part, or what was the hardest part for you being Captain versus being a rookie, now being a Captain. What was the hardest part for you?

WM: The hardest part being a Captain. It was probably making sure you keep the respect of all the members. And it wasn't--I don't want to say it was hard, but it was something that I always made sure I did. I always respected--I respected everybody else first, and then that's why I wanted respect back.

Q: Was that some of the lessons you learned from the older ...

WM: Oh, definitely. You know, bits and pieces here and there. What you learned from the elder members. What you learned from your mom and dad. It all comes out when you're in charge of something.

Q: And in the Fire Department, how do you show respect to your fellow members? What

constitutes that?

WM: Okay. You respect all members at different situations. You know, first of all, I learned not to yell at anybody. Talk things out. Give everybody a chance equally, whether it's driving the fire truck, doing something special around the firehouse that is prestigious instead of cleaning the floor. You know, spread it out. Talk to people. Let everything out in the open. One of the biggest things I learned, and we push it all the time--and I learned this a long time ago--was--and we always say it; I think it's in any paramilitary operation--is you don't--you don't yell or, you don't tell somebody that they did something wrong in front of their peers. You bring them to the side, bring them to another room. Especially you're not going to have an officer, you don't tell them that they did something wrong. You bring in the room away from everything, and you talk to them. Then you tell them, "You did something wrong."

Q: What do you enjoy most about being a firefighter?

WM: Most? I don't know. There's not too much--there's not one most thing I enjoy the most. It's a combination of everything. I like to see the little kids, when you--I go to schools all the time, and little kids are very--"Oh, you're a fireman?" They, you know, my kids are very proud of me, and that'd probably be the biggest thing, that my kids are proud. And their friends. You know, I bring their friends to the firehouse once in a while. They think it's the greatest thing in the world. And there's too many things to--for that list.

Why I'm so proud to be a fireman.

Q: And what do you enjoy the least about being a fireman? Is there anything?

WM: Enjoy the least? Well, the job itself, it changes. You've got fires. You have clean-up. You have--I guess, if somebody gets hurt. A fireman gets hurt, a fireman gets sick, the person in a fire--the personal property gets damaged and you see people crying. You know, their house is--they're going to lose everything in their house. It's--a little bit of all that sad stuff is all mixed up, you know.

Q: Was there a particular skill that you had as a firefighter when you were a rookie that did you--did they learn--like, did you have one skill that was your main skill?

WM: Well, I was kind of young. Eighteen is kind of young to have a skill. I was in the automotive field at that time, which I still am. I was--I worked on ... [cars at the] ... gas station, and I knew--you know, I was going to school for that. So, a few times, I was asked to check this, check that, on some of the fire trucks, and it still stuck with me. As I go on now, to people I'm the mechanic. So if something's wrong, I can look at it first before the truck has to be sent out for repairs. So, yeah, I guess I'm kind of looked into as to mechanic and repairs.

Q: Now, can you remember any outstanding fires that you were at during your years?

WM: Yeah, well, the first one I went to, first fire, first--I won't say first actual fire, but it was a fire in a house. Because we had a lot of fire calls where there's just this, you know, not a fire, just an alarm, or a false alarm.

Q: Was this when you were a rookie?

WM: When I was a rookie. It was within the first two weeks. And it was--I remember it was in the middle of the night, and it was very cold. And it was around midnight. And the radio went off in my--I had a radio in the house, and it came over as a house fire on Washington Place. It's a small--well, I didn't even know where it was. I had a hard time finding it. Of course, by the time I got up and got dressed, I wasn't very speedy at the time. I was kind of like, "What do I do now?" type of attitude. And I drove up to the firehouse, and I found myself going in a--I didn't have any insurance at a time. When you first get in, you can't drive the fire truck until you have insurance. So, I had to hop a ride in my car up to the fire scene. And I remember standing there, and it was cold. I couldn't do anything, so I ended up just staying on the side of the truck with one of the other members, pumping the truck and just watching. And it was like, "Oh, my God. I can't believe all this action that's going on here." When you stand back and watch, it's like firemen going in, firemen going--the water's shooting out of the windows, and smoke pouring out the back window, and it looked like it was never going to end. And then, all of a sudden, it just sort of like everything quieted down and the fire was out. And that

was--my first call was how I remember that very vividly.

Q: How did you feel about all that?

WM: I felt--well, I couldn't do anything, and I felt kind of helpless, because I didn't even know how to do anything. You know you're new; you don't know. These guys going in a house with the hoses and it looks like they're working as a team, and everybody knows what they're doing. And that's what it was. And, from then on, that's when you start learning that it's all team work. Your brother firemen are always helping each other.

Q: Did you wonder if you were getting into something maybe rather dangerous?

WM: Yeah, that it seemed to be very exciting and like, "I can do that! I can do that."

Q: Did fear ever play into your decision at all?

WM: Not right away. In the beginning, you really don't get into major interior firefighting. You sort of like, when you're a rookie, you have to stay outside and wait to be called upon, and you're not--you're not ready yet, and they know you're not. It takes a while to get--before you're an interior firefighter.

Q: Now, you said something about you had to have insurance before they'd let you on.

What did you mean by that?

WM: Every member is insured through the town of North Hempstead for Compensation insurance. It's Workers' Compensation. When you're at--when you go to a fire call, you're a worker. And if, God forbid, you get hurt or anything happened, you can collect--it's compensation; it's insurance. If you don't have that insurance, if you're not enrolled in it and you get hurt, then you can--you know, it's like a law suit type of thing. You're not supposed to do it, till you get the insurance. That's the way it is.

Q: Well, when do they put you on those rolls? Is there a set ...

WM: Oh, it takes--when you first get in, when you first get elected to your company, at that time, maybe even now, it probably took anywhere between three to four weeks. You had to wait for the Village or the Town of North Hempstead to have their meeting, and your name had to come up on the rolls, and then it was okayed and then you had your insurance. So, it just was whenever the village--the town meeting was. You had to wait.

Q: Were there any other fires in your later years that you were--can remember, that were memorable for you in any way?

WM: There was a pretty heavy fire going up at the Bullitt's Restaurant on Port Washington Boulevard. And we were first--we were at the firehouse at that time. I think it was a

Thursday night. And we were first due engine. First due means the first apparatus that's going to be there. And we pulled up, and I remember heavy--very heavy black smoke pouring out of the windows of the place. And our engine, we hit the fire hydrant, and I remember helping to take charge of dropping, bringing some lines to the front door. And we had to--we crawled into it, down the hallway, down to the bar, through the barroom area and all the tables and chairs, and I remember you couldn't see a thing, but it was very hot. And they said the fire was in the back kitchen. And I kind of knew the place, from being in there, so I knew where we had to go kind of. But with all the tables and chairs and people, you know, the firemen in the pitch black, knocking them over. And you get--everybody gets disoriented. Well, anyway, we couldn't make it--we couldn't make it to the kitchen, because of the--it was so hot. So we had to back out, because of the high intensity. We were afraid the fire was going to come rolling over our heads. And so we backed out, and at that time, an engine crew from the back went in the back door and was able to make the kitchen. But I remember that, for like what felt like an hour--it was only a few minutes that we were in there--but we were kind of helpless, not being able to see. Heavy black smoke with a lot of heat. And all you could hear was crackling and feel the heat on your gear coming through--through the gloves.

Q: So how do you deal with the fear at that time?

WM: It's very scary. How do you deal with it? Just you take your senses--senses that are coming in. You have the heat that you hear and feel. You know the guys that are in front

of you, the guys who are behind you on the line. You have water. It's almost like you want to say, "I want to get out of here. Let's go guys. Let's do something. Either move in, or let's move out." And that's why we ended up backing out. And that was the officers--the Captain on the line--that was his choice at the time, and it turned out to be a wise one. Because no way would we have been able to make the back of the restaurant through the way we went in.

Q: Now, you've assisted battling Suffolk County wildfires, I believe.

WM: Uh huh.

Q: What were those experiences like? What happened at those?

WM: That was completely--really a completely new experience doing the wildfires. We have small brush fires in town up in the Sands Point area, but it's usually very small, centrally located in areas. The wildfires were actually ... [more on fire then] ... They were really raging, moving very fast. And to see the operations out there, we had so many fire trucks and so many members from all over Nassau and Suffolk County. Even New York City brought fire trucks out there.

Q: Where is this precisely?

WM: The main body of fire was--that we were, was on Sunrise Highway out by the Hamptons. And there was fires--fires on both sides of Sunrise Highway on the north and the south. Our main job was to protect the houses and the businesses in the town, and areas, because the fire--some of the houses were very close to the woods. So, we ended up--what happened is they ran up--all the fire hydrants were being used up. There was no water pressure, so we couldn't use the fire hydrants to put any fires out. So we--we have a portable pump on our truck. So we ended up siphoning water, pumping water out of people's swimming pools and running lines and putting fires out. And we weren't really putting fires out as much as we were holding back. We were keeping--protecting people's houses and businesses. So, we were one of the very few engines that had portable pumps on our trucks out there. So it was kind of unique being, in Port Washington we had boatyards and docks and stuff, so we used portable pumps, and we have the water to pump water out of the bay, whereas departments that are in the middle of Long Island don't have portable pumps. They don't need them. There's no place for them to get water from. So it was pretty cool.

Q: How did these wildfires start?

WM: Exactly, I don't know. I heard it was somebody started them--arson. It could have been an electrical storm--lightning. It was very dry that year. It was very, very dry. Because it never rained all summer long. So it didn't take much to start a brush fire out there. The area, the pine barrens are very big, and if everything gets dry, fire really rages through

the woods.

Q: Now, in 1968, were you part of the Viet Nam--were you in the ... [forefront of that] ...?

WM: I was in--I was in the Air National Guard. And, of course, we served.

Q: When did you join the Air Force?

WM: I got in the Air Force back in 1969. I was nineteen years old. I had just gotten in the firehouse. I think I was in there about a year, and I got my draft notice to go in the Army, to go for my physical. And a few months before that, I had taken--gone up to the National Guard office and taken Air Force tests and didn't think I was going to be called in for the Reserves at all. So I got my draft notice. A week after I got my draft notice, I got a letter from the National Guard saying that I was accepted. So I had to make a decision whether I was going to go in the National Guard, the Air Force Reserves for six years, or go in the Army for two years in the draft. So, I went over to the National Guard, and he kind of talked me into going over there. Then, they sent me to repair and heavy truck school, and then I was going to be stationed in Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois for six months for training. And it seemed like a pretty good idea at the time instead of going into some type of a combat outfit. Maybe learn something about what I was doing anyway. So that's how it worked out, and that's what I did. And I happened to be stationed right over in Roslyn. They had an Air National Guard station over there.

So, when I got home, after being away for like nine months, I had to go to the National Guard base on a monthly basis--one weekend a month and two weeks every summer for six years. And there I did all auto and heavy truck equipment repairs. And I went through that, and I actually got out a year earlier than my enlistment, because I was nationalized by President Nixon for the mail strike. I forget the year it was. It had to be around 1970-something--early '70s, I believe the mail strike was.

Q: So you were a mailman?

WM: No, no. We helped--the mailmen were on strike, so we had to help deliver the mail. We didn't deliver--actually deliver mail. We were a truck outfit, so we used the trucks to carry personnel to the main mailing--central mailing district house over in Hicksville. And we stayed there for a few days. Every day we would go there, and all I did was just stay by my truck. I didn't have to do anything but just stay by the truck and make sure that--because there were strikers and people were like yelling at us and things like that (laughs).

Q: So were you consider scabs?

WM: Yeah, we were scabs.

Q: And what happened?

WM: Nothing. It took a week. It was a week that went by, and the postmen settled their strike and we went back to our everyday life.

Q: So you used the Air Force trucks then to carry the mail.

WM: Right. No, carry the men.

Q: Oh, carry the men.

WM: We--they--I don't know who carried the mail. I don't know if it was--they use, oh private companies or something possibly. I don't know.

Q: So, you then used the training you received to go into your own business.

WM: Well, it certainly helped. It was a repair business. Yes, it was training, it was schooling for ...

Q: Is that how you decided to go into that?

WM: I was--no, I was already in that ...

Q: Oh, you were before you went in the ...

WM: I was in that field. So it just helped out even more.

Q: So the lessons you learned helped.

WM: Oh, sure.

Q: Helped in your career, as well.

WM: Uh huh.

Q: And what is the name of your auto service?

WM: It's Walter's Auto Service, and everybody says, "How'd you get that name?"

Q: How did you?

WM: Well, it's me. My name's Walter, obviously. And my uncle Walter Symanski, the one who helped me in the firehouse, was my uncle, and he was in the auto repair business, had his own business. So he took me in as a partner. And we picked the name as Walter and Walter's Auto Service.

Q: And where is that located?

WM: It was located at 320 Main Street, Port Washington. And I was there for twenty-five years. After a while, my uncle got out of the business. I bought him out. But I kept the name the same. At the time, it was easier to keep the name, and it was--everybody knew the name, so that's the way it still stands. And now I've moved my shop to 103 Harbor Road in Port Washington to a bigger building. But I'm still working (laughs).

Q: Still enjoying your work?

WM: Still enjoying my work, yes.

Q: Do you have a lot of the firemen come to you?

WM: I have a lot of the firemen. I have--I do a lot of work on the fire apparatus--not the big fire trucks, but the smaller units. The Chiefs' cars and some Suburban pick-up trucks and things like that. I do a lot of work on those trucks--maintenance.

Q: Do your children help in your auto repair shop?

WM: Not very much. They're still kind of young. Gregory comes up to the shop and ...

Q: How old is he?

WM: Natalie's eight and Gregory's ten. Gregory gets into working a little bit on some projects he has to do--Boy Scout projects. And he does--he has a tractor. I have a gasoline powered tractor that we cleaned up and I got it from a brother-in-law of mine. And we got it running. I put him a battery in for him, and he drive it around the shop and around the local front of the parking lot. So he gets to work on it all the time. It's kind of like working.

Q: Do you think he's interested in becoming a firefighter?

WM: Well, it's--I don't want to push him into it. He loves to go to the firehouse. He could just hang out there all day long. But when I ask him, or some of the other members say, "Oh, you're going to be a member soon," and he'll say, "No, not me," you know.

Q: Why do you think he says that?

WM: Because he's a little bit shy, and I guess it's still his answer at the time, you know. But he knows a lot about the fire apparatus, the fire trucks. He knows all the numbers. He knows, you know, the truck, how they're built. Because I mean, he asks me all the questions about how they work, pumping the truck ... [how the ? designed] ... He knows

all the gear. He knows more of the gear than some of our younger members do when they first get in. Because he's there. He spends time.

Q: How does your wife cope with your being away when you were a Captain?

WM: Okay. Well, she does--most of the time, there's no problem. She understands, and she knows, and she backs me up a hundred percent. Sometimes ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: ... on Side B. As you were saying about your wife, sometimes ...

WM: Well, it's overwhelming sometimes for both of us. But she stands by everything that we need to do. It gets a little tough when you have a meeting on a Monday night, fire school in Tuesday night at Bethpage, then a special board meeting on Wednesday. Then you have work night on Thursday. And you just hope there's not a fire call on Friday (laughs). It can be a very busy week sometimes. And then other times go by, a week will go by, and there's nothing. So it works both ways. We try to work it out, and so you have a calendar, you know. You look forward to the calendar, you know, who's doing what next week and the week after--special meetings. Because she needs to get out, too.

Q: And how do the children feel about maybe not seeing their dad so often?

WM: Well, we try to work that out where most of the meetings are--on the weekdays, start at eight o'clock. So it's not like I'm not home. So, I do get home, then I have to hurry up, get ready, cleaned up, boom, and out the door.

Q: How many hours do you put in for your auto repair shop?

WM: Well, I'm there seven, seven-thirty in the morning. I usually work till five or six o'clock every night five days a week. And I work at least half a day on Saturday, if not all day.

Q: So, if there's a fire call during the day, do you leave your auto repair place?

WM: I really can't too much. I can't leave it for any extended amount of time, but I will leave if there's a major fire. I will do it. I'll just close my doors and do what I have to do, then come back. That's what you do.

Q: Has your wife ever been part of the Women's Auxiliary?

WM: Yes, she is. She's a member since we got married.

Q: When was that?

WM: Oh, boy, now you're asking me a question.

Q: Sorry.

WM: April 12th, twenty years ago. It was a while ago, but anyway. So, she's a good member. She does--she's very active in Women's Auxiliary. She helps run and she organizes the kids' Christmas party every year, which is a very big event. We just had that now actually.

Q: What happens at the Christmas party?

WM: We have a--she started it years ago. She has Christmas breakfast with Santa Claus. So, all the firemen get together, we get a crew, and we make breakfast. And about ten o'clock, everybody shows up for breakfast. And ...

Q: At Flower Hill?

WM: At Flower Hill. But the other companies have something similar, but, you know, we're the only ones that have a breakfast. They have like just a lunch type of thing. We have breakfast with Santa.

Q: And when is this usually?

WM: This is a couple of weeks before Christmas, some time in December. And we have one of the firemen always--we have a Santa uniform. He gets dressed up, and he comes--and we bring him in a fire truck, and he pulls up in front of the firehouse and he comes up. And any members' kids or grandparents--or grandchildren of members are allowed to come, and they get presents by Santa Claus. He reads them a book--"The Night Before Christmas" book. And then he hands out presents, and then he talks to them a little bit, take their pictures, and we usually have some type of entertainment for the kids--a clown, or some type of children's entertainment for an hour. And everybody has a good time. You know, everybody helps, and it's a lot of work, and it's all done; the kids have a good time.

Q: Have the Women's Auxiliary or is it as active as it was at one point?

WM: The--not as active as it was as that I remember years ago where the women were needed and expected to come out where the major fires were, to help make coffee, bring them sandwiches. The Fire Department has changed a lot over the years, and we have regular members that do that operation, from refreshments, food. If there's--if we're in an extensive, long-time fire. Not that we don't take the Women's Auxiliary's help, but it's gotten away from that, I think, mainly because most of the women can't get out. They have kids at home. They really--not too many of them came anyway. But the women back us up, and the Women's Auxiliary backs us up, and we're able to do a lot of charity things with the use of the firehouses, the housing itself, and do charity work and collect

money and do their thing. It helps the community.

Q: Have you been involved in any major programs with the Fire Department you can recall, where they were building a new building, it's your firehouse. Were you involved?

WM: Well, I was involved with, as an officer. I was on the Board of Directors, so I was on part of the planning and the overall overseeing of the operation. I was a big part of that. I knew what was being done and how, when, and how much it cost. And, yeah, I was a big part of that.

Q: How much more extra time did that ...

WM: More meetings. More weekly meetings?

Q: What goes on in these meetings? Are they amicable, or are they stressful?

WM: Most of the meetings are, depending on what they're for, have to be done. And usually a meeting is done by, if you're on a special committee and the committee has a job to fulfill for the company. A committee might be formed for to buy a new fire truck. And, just for instance, a truck committee, it might take a year to two years to finish its job and then you buy the fire truck. Just the planning, the development, the engineering and design of the fire truck takes a long time. Each fire truck is made special, different, custom made.

Q: And you have an input on that.

WM: I have input on that, yes.

Q: Basically because of your mechanical background?

WM: My mechanical background, plus I've been around a long time. And I've been on a couple of the truck committees. So, you know what to do. Experience is very important in the fire service.

Q: So you're able to save the company a lot of money that way.

WM: I would say most of the things done by the fire companies are done by--are all internal. It's not--they don't go out and, not except for legal type things, to get lawyers.

Q: You don't have in-house lawyers?

WM: Even if we did, it probably wouldn't be in the best interest to use an in-house lawyer, you know, just for--just sometimes could be--you know, he might not want to get into that legal stuff between members and stuff like that. But ...

Q: So where do you go for your legal help?

WM: We have a lawyer that we have for the company, and we pay a fee for any type of services.

Q: What do those fees run these days?

WM: I don't know. It depends. It's not really something we--we don't use them too often. But there's always some type of--you know, if there's any type of legal thing, or a change in our bylaws for the fire company--what we can or we can't do as far as membership--you might need some more legal advice. And usually we have a lawyer that we have that we pay on an annual basis, a blanket-type payment.

Q: When you became a member of the Flower Hill Hose Company, was the blackball system in use then?

WM: No. Blackball system was not in use. I believe that went out some time in the late '50s, I believe. We always talk about it.

Q: What do they say about it?

WM: Oh, you kid around. You know, "We can blackball you any time we want," type of thing.

"You're not going to get in early." Always, or with some of the new members, might be a member's son or something that everybody knows, because he's been coming around. Like my son, when he gets older, if he decides to join, everybody's going to know him. They might rib him, you know, give him old, like "We're going to blackball you. You know, three black balls in the pot and you're out." I mean, now, it's a whole different thing. You get voted on when you get in, and it's a majority type thing. And very rarely--matter of fact, I can't remember when anybody wasn't voted in. There might have been some votes against them, for whatever reasons, but the members are asked at the meetings before they get voted in, to bring up any of their problems with anybody. "If you see any reason why this person shouldn't become a member, let it out now." ... [Just to oppose] ... someone you don't want to do it, then it's your prerogative. Then usually the other people will vote no. If they really don't like the person. They don't maybe think he's for the betterment of the company. But that's the way it works. But usually, it works out.

Q: You were talking about ribbing. Tell me about the real pranksters in your company. Who are they and what kind of jokes do they play?

WM: Well, they--pranksters come and go. As you get older, you might tend not to be such a prankster, because you're, you know, more mature. Usually, it's in the younger crowd, the younger guys that get in, and they do pranks, and go as far as a simple thing as "Let's all line up against the side of the firehouse and take pictures for Memorial Day, after

working hard all day on the fire trucks, and somebody's up on the roof, and then as soon as they line up, they line up all the rookies, they pour water on their heads from the top of the roof. You know, simple things like that. But then you can't do it all the time, because you have to wait for new people to come in. Our Department's full of pranks.

Q: Can you think of some real good ones that have happened?

WM: One year we took a--we had a new--one of our fire trucks was an engine truck. And it was the only fire truck in the town that was able to pump water and drive at the same time. Mechanically, the other trucks can't do that. This one was made a little different. So, at the time, we were having a battle with the other firehouses off and on for months about coming in and using water cans and hosing down their truck room with water cans and spraying the guys with water. So we got the bright idea, let's go down with the fire truck. It has five hundred gallons of water, and we can pull up to the front and just open up the line. And that's what we did, and we drowned the whole truck. We ran out of water--Atlantic's firehouse, the one downtown. And we were the only ones able to do that.

Q: And what happened?

WM: They got back at us slowly, you know, with ...

Q: So one fire company gets another one (laughs).

WM: Yeah, yeah. It's a constant thing. It always--there's always something going on, somebody doing something.

Q: So what makes the Flower Hill Hose Company different from the other companies? What characteristics?

WM: We are basically--all three companies--actually it's four companies with the Fire Medics are all the same. The line companies are, there's the two engine companies--Protection and Flower Hill--and Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company are three fire line companies.

Q: What do you mean by fire line?

WM: We're the ones who battle the fire. Whereas the fourth company, which is the Fire Medics, they don't battle the fire. They just do the ambulance stuff, when somebody gets hurt. ... [INTERRUPTION] ... We'll just listen as we go along. It's an automatic alarm, so hopefully, it's not a real fire. If it's a real fire, there will be more calls.

Q: About your Flower Hill Hose Company and what's different about it, why would you rather be there than maybe the others?

WM: Each fire company gets its own personality. It always had. When I first got in ...

[INTERRUPTION] ... It's sort of the members make their own personality, their own--
they're all independent from each other as far as running their own fire company.

Q: So you need to leave that out, in case it's a general fire and you have to go?

WM: Yeah, uh huh.

Q: Your alarm? Okay. ... [INTERRUPTION] ... What was your alarm saying?

WM: It's an automatic alarm. The alarm system's going off.

Q: Oh, so you don't need to go.

WM: No, if the first--the Chief gets there and then sees the flames coming out the window,
then I'm going. I'm sure--I should--basically, if I was home, I'd be going. I'd be out the
door already.

Q: And, as a Captain, how did you evaluate your men? What is it that you do for that?

WM: They have constant training. They have their attendance at fire calls--have they attended
fire calls, how many they attend, what they do. You have the work night and the ... [?] ...

at work night for fires. How they respond and how they get into doing thing. So, if they--in other words, if you're not active, then you're not a good fireman. You know, you have to be active; you have to be a hundred percent all the time. With the help of the two--the Lieutenants, with their input, and they'll tell you what's going on, if you're not there. So--and-so is doing a good job. So--and-so is not doing a good job. Somebody gets it; somebody doesn't get it. Somebody can wear an Air Pack; they've been trained. Some people don't feel comfortable ... [INTERRUPTION] ... So it's an ongoing thing, the training.

Q: How have procedures changed since thirty-five years ago? Anything--major differences that you ...

WM: Procedure has changed. One of the big procedures we did years--not too many years ago, three or four years ago--is firehouse response. Who goes to what firehouse. Because we have a number of firehouses. We have three main firehouses and two annexes with fire trucks. Now, at any given time during the day or night, if there's a fire call, all those firehouses were open to go, so people would go to this firehouse, that firehouse for all fires. There might be one person in one firehouse, three in another, two in another, and five in another. And maybe not be able to roll a truck. So, during a slow response time, which would mostly be during the day when people are working and you don't have a lot of people to respond, they opened up on firehouse--Atlantic's firehouse was the biggest one. And we put two engines and two trucks in there. So everybody can respond ...

[INTERRUPTION] ... together at one firehouse and get all those units out first, instead of being spread out all over town.

Q: So everyone now goes to Atlantic's?

WM: During the day. It's called daytime response, and it's working out very well.

Q: And what happens at night?

WM: At five o'clock in the afternoon, they change till six o'clock in the morning ...

[INTERRUPTION] ... It goes to open house policy, where you can go to your closest firehouse.

Q: Who would you say are the most interesting people at your company? Who are your best pals.

WM: Well, you sort of make good friends as you go along. The most interesting people have always been the older members that have been around a long time and have been there, seen that, done all that. They're the best people at the meetings, after you're talking to them, everybody hanging around. That's the people you talk to. And it's very interesting. You talk to people that know everything.

Q: And as a middle generation person, how do you observe the young firefighters relating with the older ones? You're kind of in the middle. How do they relate to one another?

WM: Well, we try to instill in new members, as they come in, to respect and to gain knowledge from the older members. We try to tell them right away to, you know, to use your head and talk to the older members. They know. They've been there. Even though we have newer fire trucks and newer gear, they've been around. The whole operation is basically the same as it was fifty, sixty years ago.

Q: Do they do that?

WM: They pretty much do. Yeah, everybody-respect for older members is a--we instill that system in them right away as they come in. The membership committee makes sure we have a good talking to about it. I mean, that seniority is very big in the fire company, in the firehouse. In other words, if there's only one seat left, and there's an older member, there's not even a thought about sitting down. You just--that's his seat, you know. That's the way it is.

Q: What's the most enjoyable Fire Department ritual for you? Is it the dinners? The installations? The parties? The parades? What is it that you enjoy the most?

WM: There's so many things, as far as the recreational part--the parties and things to do

outside. I'd say the installation at--when you are an officer and you get installed as a new officer and everybody's there and, you know, they clap their hands and applaud you, and that's probably the most enjoyable time, as far as that--going out and have a good time.

Q: Do you remember when you were installed as a Captain, what that was like?

WM: Yeah, it was--well, when you get installed as a Captain, you get to help pick your place there where you want to go to dinner. We were going out to the Chauteabriand at the time. It was out in Westbury. And it was a really nice place. And when you're the Captain, you're being installed, you're like the main attraction. It's very--it's a lot of fun.

Q: How has 9/11 impacted your company, or you?

WM: 9/11 is a very strange--to me, personally, it was very--it came out very strange. I remember, because I work in town, and when the radio--the information came over, and I could see the smoke and stuff. I think everybody in Port Washington looked, and then you could see the smoke, and just the peak of the towers with all the trees in Port Washington. At the time, it was like you didn't know what was going to happen. And then, the Fire Department kicked in and started organizing. There were calls coming over the radio to respond to your nearest firehouse, and then they started setting up. Nobody really knew what was going to happen next. They knew that the City needed help. They didn't know to what extent. So, between the fire companies, everybody

getting ready, and Nassau County fire organization sending out memos, everybody was ready. Everybody wanted to pitch in. Everybody wanted to give help. And that's basically what we do. We do that every day. Just that this was on a much bigger scale, obviously. But we had--every member that was there came to help just to see what we could do. Either going to ... [??] ... going to the City. But it was later found that they had enough personnel. They didn't need too many people in there. Too many was no good.

Q: What do you feel is the greatest advantage for you in being a firefighter?

WM: Biggest advantage is to keep my family safe at home.

Q: And do you think there is a future for the Port Washington Fire Department as a volunteer department?

WM: There is a future as long as we can maintain the membership from the community. That's the biggest thing that we have problems with right now.

Q: And why is that?

WM: People have to work more. Young--the younger kids that get out of high school go to college right away, and they, most of them, don't come back. They go, they move out of

town. They can't afford to live in town. People that live in town are working so hard, it's they don't have time to get up three times in the middle of the night sometimes and go to fire calls or to go to these meetings, or just get involved period.

Q: How do you do it and then keep your auto shop?

WM: It's part of my life. And it's something that I'm not going to let go. I can't let go right now. It's not something I can--I can't sit back and not go to fire calls.

Q: Why is that, do you think?

WM: I just ...

Q: What happens to you when you hear that fire--like just now, when you got that on your pager?

WM: I come to attention.

Q: You lost my attention, but you came to attention at that.

WM: I come to attention. I hear what it is, what kind of call it is. You never know what's going to come over the radio, what kind of call.

Q: And you never want to turn it off.

WM: Never want to turn it off. If you go turn it off, you may miss something.

Q: Would you say that it's in your blood?

WM: Oh, definitely. Yeah. And it stays with you for your whole life. I mean, I think once you're in so many years, you--it's just part of you. Especially when you've been an officer. You just know, because you--you're doing something really good. First, you know you're doing something good for the community. Then you realize you're really doing something good for yourself and your family and everything. My neighbors--I have neighbors that know I'm a fireman, and they've, over the past years, people have said to me, "I'm so glad that you're a fireman, and I know you're right there." I've had people come and ask me, "Can you come over my house? Can you come over to my house? I think I smell something." I've had a neighbor, their child was choking--swallowed something, and she called me on the phone, "What do I do?" So I just rang up there and told my wife to call the ambulance, because you've got to get something in motion right away. You don't wait for something, you know. And not being in the house, I had to run up the street. So, I said, "You call the fire--the ambulance and tell them to go to that house"--and we knew the address--"that there's a child choking." Whether the child was choking or not, I don't know. I'm just going--but, you know what?

Let's get it in motion, because every minute counts. So I got up there, and the child was--didn't--had stopped choking. So I took the baby, and I held it, because the mother was freaking out at the time. She was like running up the walls. It swallowed one of the kid's little plastic toys, or her older brother's. So, obviously, it wasn't lodged in his throat. It must have passed, must have swallowed it. So, the ambulance came and we told the story. But it's just one of those things that--but I was ready to, you know, hopefully take care of the situation.

Q: Now, did you learn that in your basic training when you first went in, that basic ...

WM: Yeah, you get CPR, the Heimlich maneuver, and all that stuff. You get all that. And you don't get it just one time; you get that over the years. You get re-training every couple of years, you go to school.

Q: Do you feel the Port Washington community appreciates the Fire Department?

WM: Definitely. Most of the community. Some of the community, that the people that move in--I hate to say it this way--but move in from New York City, move out here, there's some instances that I remember that people think that we're like New York City, a paid department, and they're paying taxes, they're paying--that we're getting paid, which we're not. And sometimes it's more like, they don't appreciate it. They just think it's a job that we're doing.

Q: And how do you set them straight?

WM: You usually let them know, if it comes up. If it doesn't, you know, we don't make a big deal about it. You know, we sort of say, "Well, we're not--we're volunteer." Tell them that all of Long Island is volunteer. Most of New York State is volunteer. It's only the big cities that have paid departments.

Q: Have you asked the complainers to volunteer?

WM: We've had people that say, you know, "How come you didn't get here faster?" or "How come you broke my door down," and stuff like that, instead of, you know, whatever we did that damaged his property if we had to open up the door. And we tell them and stuff like that, oh, blah, blah, blah, blah, and say, "Well, you know, you could be a member, too. You can join." "Oh, I can?" "Yeah, this is a volunteer operation." But ...

Q: What happens then?

WM: I don't know if we really get, you know, anybody to join that way. But it's only to set them straight, at least a little enlightenment.

Q: What--can you tell me what the LOSAP program is? The Length of Service Award

Program. How does that operate?

WM: Okay. It is kind of like, you ... [don't have to] ... say it, but it's like a pension plan. It's a-- depending on how many years you're in. For every good year you're in the fire company, you get--you obtain a twenty dollar value. So, to have a good year, you have to make a certain amount of points, according to the LOSAP operation, which is fire points, meetings; if you're an officer, you get extra points. If you do certain duties, you get extra points. And you have make points in certain areas. So, you have a good year and you make all your points in certain areas, you get credit for that--for that year. You add up all those years, as it goes on, and when you reach sixty-five, that's--you get that money every month. I don't know the math about it. But if you're in so many years, say, you might, when you're sixty, you might not be able to collect a five hundred dollar check ever month. It's sort of like a pension plan, but you have to work for it, and you have to--we had it--we put it in, because most of the fire companies did that because they wanted people--to retain members. Retain old members and to get new members in. Unfortunately, a lot of the new members we get in are young, and that's the furthest thing from their mind about a pension, or getting money when you're sixty-five. They're like, "Sixty-five! What? Are you kidding me?" I'm fifty-four, so I'm thinking about it, and I'm going to--it's one of the reasons I'm--one of the reasons I'm staying in. It's a little boost to stay in. It's worth it for me to stay in another ten years active to collect and get more money.

Q: Have you ever thought of becoming Chief?

WM: Yes, I did. I was eligible to become Chief, as soon as you're a Captain, once you're a Captain, you're eligible to run for Chief from your company. The company--the three line companies rotate the Chiefs. There's three--there's a Chief and three deputies. They're rotated every two years. So, like right now, Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company's Chief--the member from their company who's Chief is Chris Bollerman. He's going to be getting out in March. He had his--that's the end of his two years. The First Deputy Chief is Glen Pedersen. He's going to become the Chief of the Department. Johnny Walters who is the Second Deputy Chief is going to become the First Deputy Chief. And then Atlantic is going to rotate another member in for Second Deputy Chief. So it's a constant rotation. And it's every two years. To become a Chief, you have to stay in the process for six years. That's after you've been Captain for two years. And before you were Captain, you were usually a Lieutenant for two years. First Lieutenant for two years, Second Lieutenant for two years, and probably an Engineer for two years, and possibly a lower Engineer's spot for just a few years. So it's a lot of years. And you need the experience when you get up there. But I--I didn't have time to run for Chief. It's a big--it's a big, ongoing, time-consuming, very responsible job. And with my business in town, self-employed, I knew I wouldn't be able to fulfill the position really properly, so I just decided not to.

Q: Do you have any help at your shop?

WM: Yes. I have two mechanics, and my wife works in the office.

Q: What are the most valuable words you think you've heard from an elder in the Fire Department that have stuck with you all these years?

WM: Listen, and do what you're told. Listen, and do what you're told.

Q: Have you ever disagreed with what you were told to do, and you thought maybe it was wrong?

WM: A little, maybe some instances. I couldn't even remember. But nothing that I would really be objected to a hundred percent, like, "I'm not going to do that." Never anything like that. It might be something I talked about later on, and maybe, "Hey, we should have done it this way." But that's second guessing. Second guess an officer, you don't do that at the time. You listen to your orders and you do it. You never know why, what the reasons are behind an order.

Q: Do you--when you were Captain, how did you critique what you--what happened when you got back? Can you tell us that?

WM: We would have a--any major fire, or major problem, we would have a meeting, an

officers meeting right away, and everything would be discussed. Any members that were directly involved with the problem, or a big incident, they'd be talked to. Anything really big, all the members were usually able to go--we'd have a special meeting for critiquing, and everybody could talk, or talk about the situation or what happened. If there was any problems, the Captain's office was always open to anybody if they wanted to keep anything private with their problems. They knew they could come to the Captain. Or, if they didn't want to go to the Captain for whatever reason, they could go to one of the Chiefs. There was always an opening for somebody if they're having a problem, or they're having--something went on, or in a bad fire, if somebody got hurt or they really think they need help psychologically or mentally, they can get it.

Q: What do you feel about this oral history project? Do you think it's a good idea? A bad idea?

WM: Oh, sure it's a good idea. I'd like to, maybe when it's all done and finished, maybe get a little piece of it and I'll be able to listen to it, or just see how it operates.

Q: Do you have anything that you would really like to add or to say for future readers of these transcripts? Do you have any feelings about the Fire Department over these years?

WM: Sure, I think, very basically, over the years, a lot of members have come and gone. Either left, they moved away, they died, they got discouraged. They quit because they

didn't have time, that were all--were all regular people, just doing a job that we like to do.

And it's a job that's fun. It's social. It's work. We've done a lot in cold weather operations--freezing at fires. Then you get hot in the fire, in the building. You sweat a lot. You get to meet a lot of new people. I'd do it all over again.

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

WM: You're welcome. ... [INTERRUPTION] ...

Q: This is an addendum. I'd like to ask you about your rescue team work. You belong to a rescue squad?

WM: Incorporated in the Fire Department, we have a confined space rescue team--a technical rope rescue team that does a--it's a small team of people that you use special equipment--ropes, gas meters, high angled rope rescue type operations, to rescue anybody that's in a so-called confined space. That's any place that's not a normal living area. Could be on top of the roof. Could be down in the basement. Could be in a building collapse. Could be up on a tree, somebody's stuck. Let's say, you have to get that picture that it's someplace where you're normally not supposed to be. For instance, you have somebody up on--doing work up on a water tower, painting, and they have a heart attack. And they're stuck up there. How do you get them down? How do you get a limp person down from the water tower? One person can't do it. You can't pick up and carry him down.

You have to go up there with special equipment--ropes and stuff--and tie him up, put him in a special basket, and then properly lower him down with pulleys down the side of the water tank. So we get trained in that. We took a--there was about fifteen of us that took a forty hour special rope course, and then what that enabled us to do is to do more training on our own. The Fire Department itself bought more equipment for us, and we've been training off and on for about five years with that team now. It wasn't long before we got formed we had a call. There was a collapse on Main Street at Shields Hardware Store. It was being rebuilt. And the foundation that they were building fell over and entrapped a man underneath. And we were called in. I happened to be like maybe the second person there, and I started the ... [??] ... with the rescue team. At that time, we didn't have all of our equipment, so we called an out of town rescue team to help us.

Q: Which out of town one?

WM: Bethpage and Syosset. It's called mutual aid. We do that; we're helping each other. And that team came, and it took a few hours, but everyone took their time, you know--I don't want to say took their time. We relaxed and did the right thing. The person--kept the person alive. We had a fire medic down there that gave him oxygen until we were able to dig--tunnel out underneath and get the person out. So it was from that experience of the rescue team, that enabled me to help get the situation started with that particular call.

Q: How serious was the person injured?

WM: Outside of a few scrapes and bruises, he was fine. He was just more scared than anything, having a big foundation roll over on you. He was lucky he was underneath in a hole in the ground that kept him from getting crushed.

Q: What makes you want to work on these very dangerous rescue team?

WM: Well, you go through the school, and you find out that, when you get trained the proper way, that you can do it. Without the training, they found out that there were more rescue people hurt and killed than people that they were rescuing, because they weren't trained. They didn't--they went into someplace too fast to try to make the rescue instead of thinking and using your head and using proper equipment.

Q: So do you plot what you're going to do ...

WM: Oh, definitely.

Q: ... before you go in?

WM: Yes. And every call can be different. You're trained on call. It depends on the call itself. If it's below grade, you have to worry about poisonous gas. Why is a person not

responding down in the sewer hole? Why did he collapse in the first place? Did he have a heart attack. Is there poisonous gas down there? If you throw three or four people down that hole to save him and it's poisonous gas, guess what? Now you have four people that you have to get, you have to rescue.

Q: So you have equipment to test for it?

WM: We have special equipment for testing. We have a rope for special harnesses. We have-- the biggest thing is the training, you know, having the training.

Q: Have you also worked on the jaws of life?

WM: Yes. Auto accidents. Too many to recall. A lot of bad accidents. People have to be cut out of their cars.

Q: And what other types of high rescue experiences can you recall?

WM: We had a--this was before we started the rescue team. But there was a rescue of a little girl that was in her front yard, and apparently there was an old cesspool in the front yard from years and years ago, that was covered over. And finally, the ground broke through, and she went down into this open pit in her front yard. It was about twelve feet deep. It was cold; it was in the middle of winter, and she was stuck down there, and we were able

to, with the help of some ladders across the hole and a few members reaching down with some rope and stuff to get her out. Knowing what we know now with the rescue team, we probably would do that a different way?

Q: Well, how did you do it then?

WM: Well, you just--we link the firemen together by holding each other's legs, and we went down the hole that way, and we were able to pull the little girl out.

Q: Well, what would happen if a fireman fell in?

WM: Well, then he would have to be rescued also. So that's why you get trained.

Q: And how would you do it now, with the training?

WM: Probably would get a--get some ladders and some rope and make a pulley system and then you have to take your time to do the rescue and do it properly and safely for everybody involved. But every rescue call is different. There's no set way of doing anything.

Q: Have you rescued anyone from very--a large height?

WM: Personally, not me, personally, no. We had--what we've had are calls like I wasn't aware of or I didn't go to. We've had people--a workman stuck in a tree--a tree worker that got caught in the tree and couldn't get out. His leg was broken, things like that. He fell. So we do do it. We do go to those calls. Not an every day situation.

Q: And what about water rescue? Have you ever done any of that?

WM: I've been involved in fires in the water. A couple of them were recoveries where you send scuba divers down, that we don't do. In other words, the car was already down in the water. We don't go underwater. We've had some ...

Q: Who does the scuba diving?

WM: Nassau County. In Port, for Nassau County, they have this special scuba team. That's usually a recovery only, in other words, recover bodies.

Q: What about the Merchant Marines? Do they do that?

WM: No. The Coast Guard ...

Q: The Coast Guard?

WM: ... doesn't do that either. That's Nassau County would do it.

Q: Any other experiences that you can recall?

WM: There was one, it was kind of--well, I guess it wasn't funny for the person that needed it. But down off Shore Road, there's an area down there called the Aerodrome. And there's model airplane fliers. They fly the model airplanes. They're not little, too, you know; they're very big planes. And there's a big area in the middle, and then it's all covered by woods on all sides. And this guy flew his plane into the woods and crashed, and he went to look for it. It was very hot, and he was an elderly man, and he got disoriented. I think he was dehydrated, and nobody could find him. So they called the Fire Department. When I got down there, I happened to have water in my pocket, and I gave him some water. And we had to tie him up in a basket just to--couldn't get him out the way he came, because it was through some heavy brush. So we tied him up in a basket. It's a Stokes basket. It's a long basket. You lay him down and you tie them up, so you can turn sideways and he won't fall out. And we had to walk all the way down and up the ravine. So it was--when I say it was funny, it was kind of--he was okay, and he had just got--flying a model airplane, he got stuck in the woods.

Q: Thank you very much.

WM: Okay.