

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

John J. Ross
Atlantic Hook & Ladder 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 October 20th, 2004. This is an interview with John J. Ross. My name is Margaret Dildilian. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Library. What is your full name?

John J. Ross: John Joseph Ross.

Q: What company are you affiliated with?

JJR: Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

Q: And when did you join?

JJR: March 6th, 1980.

Q: And how long have you been a member?

JJR: Over twenty-four years; it'll be twenty-five years in March of this year--2005.

Q: Do you have any nickname that's fire-related?

JJR: Yeah, they call me "Rossi." My father was an ex-Captain at Flower Hill, and that was sort of his nickname, and it sort of got passed on to me.

Q: So how many family members do you have that are in the Fire Department or have been in the Fire Department?

JJR: I had my father, which, again, was an ex-Captain at Flower Hill, and my step-father was an ex-Captain of Atlantic, and just myself.

Q: Do you recall anything specific in your childhood that relates to the Fire Department?

JJR: Well, I always remember going to whether it was different picnics or even any kids' Christmas party. And I remember going to the firehouse on Sunday mornings with my father.

Q: Did you go to any actual fires, as a child, with him?

JJR: If they were in the neighborhood or whatever, we would go, and you're always, you know, in the background, and, of course, you didn't want to get too close where you'd get hurt or anything. But I remember going to a couple of them with him.

Q: Did anything specifically happen that made you want to become a fireman?

JJR: Well, because it was just in the family, you know, growing up with it, you know, and you couldn't wait until you turned eighteen to become a fireman.

Q: Did you ever wear your dad's uniform or ...

JJR: No.

Q: When you joined, did you have to fight to get on the back of that fire truck?

JJR: No. Of course, where we lived between Carlton Avenue firehouse and the Avenue A Annex of Atlantic is where my house is, up in that neighborhood. So we had two different buildings going out. So, I was always on one of the trucks out of that building up there.

Q: What do you mean, Carlton Avenue?

JJR: Well, the Carlton Avenue is our main firehouse, and Avenue A is our substation or our Annex. And that's where I responded to from my house.

Q: Why did your father join the Flower Hill Hose Company and why did your step-father join the Atlantic?

JJR: That I couldn't answer you fully because they're both deceased. The only reason why I joined Atlantic was because my step-father plus all my friends were there. That's why I joined Atlantic instead of Flower Hill.

Q: And you were how old when you joined?

JJR: Eighteen.

Q: Did you--were you part of that Explorer Program that they ...

JJR: No, they didn't have that when I was growing up.

Q: What do you remember about any--both of them while they were firefighters? The old firefighting versus what you do today?

JJR: Well, back then, you know, you didn't have as many rules and schools and everything that you had to go to, which we come to find out now are really life-saving for us. And I remember hearing stories, you know, they go into a burning building with no air pack on or anything like that and coughing up smoke and soot and everything. And now, you know, it's much better, because you have a set guideline that you have to follow, and that's what you do if you want to be a fireman.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your training compared to your father's training.

JJR: Well, definitely the fire schools are a lot more advanced now in Bethpage. And, plus, we have Department drills here in town. And many, many hours now compared to what it used to be. And even a new rookie coming in now is faced with ten weeks of the basic training course, and that's at least three nights a week. Three hours--excuse me, three hours, at least one night a week. Then, you have work nights and other drills-- Department drills--that they have to attend. Because it's definitely come a long way, for the best.

Q: Now, during your training, what was the hardest thing for you?

JJR: The hardest thing for me is the first time I ever went out to Bethpage, which was the Training Academy. There was a member of Protection named Eddie Baker. And I was a green kid, and I didn't know anything about doing anything. They told me, "Just follow Eddie, and do what Eddie tells you." Well, Eddie and I, we went up on the tower, on the fire escape, which was, at that time, was a six story building. And we had no air packs or anything. And Eddie sent me in through the window. He says, "Look for the dummy in there. That's that victim." I said, "Eddie, there's smoke in there, and I have no air pack." He says, "Get in there and take a look around." Well, I look around. Well, P.S. we didn't find anything in that room; we go up to the next floor to find the dummy. I take the dummy, and I give it to Eddie. Eddie proceeds to throw the dummy off the fifth floor

balcony. So, P.S., our victim was now deceased--if the fire didn't get him, the fall did. Right? We got down on the ground, and the Chief wanted to know why we threw the dummy. Well, I don't know. I just gave it to Eddie, and Eddie took care of the dummy. And so that was the first thing you--I learned: You don't throw the victim off the fifty floor balcony.

Q: (Laughs). Were there any reprimands?

JJR: I sort of got a little bit of a chewing out. But, being a new fireman, I didn't know better, and I had an experienced member that I was told to follow ...

Q: And what was Eddie's remark?

JJR: Eddie didn't care about anything, and Eddie was a good fireman, and he was the type of guy that you would not mind going into a fire with. He was a big guy. I guess six-seven. Built like, you know, a brick whatever and didn't care much about anything. And he had his way of doing things.

Q: Do you feel that's a good quality for a firefighter to have (laughs)?

JJR: Well, sometimes yes; sometimes no. After he got us both in trouble a little bit for that incident, I learned. And before I did anything else with Eddie, I thought about it and what the consequences would be.

Q: So who was your prime buddy that taught you the most when you were young?

JJR: Oh, there was a bunch of them. We had a bunch of schools, you know, that were in the firehouse itself. You know, we learned different things. My step-father taught me a lot. Ex-Chief John Salerno taught me a lot, you know. So ...

Q: When, you say "a lot," like what? Give examples.

JJR: Well, different tactics and whatever, as far as the Hurst tool, the Jaws of Life, cutting people out of cars or whatever, you know, and making sure when you pulled up to the fire that the building was properly laddered and things were done just the way they were supposed to be. That's my memory as far as, you know, mentoring me on a little bit, if you would.

Q: So when you say putting up the ladders, how do you put up a ladder?

JJR: Well, it's not just putting up the ladder; it's proper placement by the windows and making sure that there is at least one on each side, you know, in case when the fireman get

trapped or a victim hanging out a window, we had a ladder that was in reach, you know. And then there's hose line stretching and everything else, which, at the time, we really didn't do that much of. But the way it is now, everyone rolls together, which means I could be on a pumper--the pumper or an engine, if you would. And what would happen, we'd learn how to stretch hose and different things like that. Which is better, because, you know, well, I mean, we were shorthanded, especially during the day, and everyone pitches in and does what we have to do.

Q: What do you do when you stretch a hose?

JJR: What do we do when we stretch a hose? Well, hopefully, there's no water in it to begin with, because that makes it a lot easier to handle. And then, once it gets charged, it's something that's not very easily--just picture your garden hose, but only about ten times larger and heavier, and it doesn't like to bend too easily when you're going around stairs or getting in tight spots. So ...

Q: Has anyone ever been injured from the hoses?

JJR: Yeah, a bunch of guys, you know.

Q: Have you?

JJR: No. I've been very lucky, knock on wood. The only injury I ever had was when--they call it quick bar. It holds a fan.

Q: They call it what?

JJR: A quick bar. It's like a spring-loaded bar, but it has a fan and it gets smoke out of the house. The thing came down, and it just cut me above my eyelid. But that was it. And that was the only injury that I had so far, not that I'm looking for one (laughs).

Q: You were also a truck driver?

JJR: I've been driving trucks for the firehouse. I'm not a truck driver by trade, but I learned how to do that shortly after I first got in, and I became what I thought was pretty good at it, because a couple of our Captains have even asked me to train our rookies that were coming up. And I'm a little bit cautious, and when you're driving something with that type of weight on it, it doesn't stop like someone's Volkswagen, and I try to teach that to the younger guys when we have our driver training. That it's not their car and that they have to have a great deal of respect for it.

Q: Have there ever been accidents with the ...

JJR: Yes, there has. You know, luckily, in the last couple of years, they've been such a minor sort of ridiculous things. That a door flew open because the handle broke or something and, you know, hit a car. But way back when, well before my time, there was a couple of accidents on Main Street, or whatever.

Q: What were the stories about those accidents?

JJR: As far as I remember, there was a gentleman--I don't even remember his name. He was driving on Main Street and some woman just crossed right out in front of him, and he couldn't stop in time. So, that's another thing that I'm always looking out for. And sometimes they say that I drive too slow, but, you know what? I always get you there and I get you home.

Q: Of all of these skills--throwing ladders, hoses, driving--what do you like the most?

JJR: I like driving. I really got into it, and I think I know as much ...

Q: What is it about it that you like? Can you explain?

JJR: I don't know. It's just, when you get behind the wheel, the adrenalin starts going, and you know that you have to take your time with it, but at the same time you have to get there

because someone needs your help. When they call in for a fire, you know that there's something going on.

Q: How heavy is a truck--a fire truck?

JJR: Many tons. The normal passenger car is maybe a ton, two tons maximum. And we're talking a lot of weight, and especially with a ladder truck. The total tonnage, I couldn't tell you, but it's in the thousands of pounds--the one hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Q: What was your first experience at an actual fire when you were a rookie? Can you remember?

JJR: I think my first fire was on Harbor Road. It was early in the morning. And I remember pulling up and seeing the smoke coming out of the house and whatever, and again, it was pull the ladders off, and let's get ladders up against the building. And that was about it. I think that was 1980.

Q: Were there any injuries or ...

JJR: No.

Q: In the past twenty-four years of your service, what are the more memorable fires you've been witness to?

JJR: Sands Point Bath Club. That was a bad one. I had gotten off of work at three-thirty. A call went off shortly thereafter, and I drove to our substation, the Annex, and I had our tower ladder, which is an elevated platform. And just when I pulled out of the firehouse, I could see the column of black smoke. And they called for me to get down there as soon as I can and everything else. And that fire lasted right through to the next day. I remember going home, taking a shower, and then going right back there, and we were still there till about three-thirty the next day. You know, hosing down hot spots and whatever.

Q: And was there loss of life?

JJR: No. And something scared me, and scared a bunch of guys that day was the platform, the tower ladder, there was two gentlemen up there, you know, directing the hose stream. And there was propane tanks down there, and they decided to go flying up in the air. So, I just started making sure that I was swinging them away from it, and I know they had to have been scared, because I was. Because all I could picture was my bucket coming over with them missing on it. And ...

Q: You had to swing what over? I didn't understand that.

JJR: The tower ladder, it's an elevated platform. So, it would be like working in an elevator instead of trying to work off a ladder, where you have a solid base where you're standing on. And just I was concerned for them to make sure that they were all okay. Once I got them on the ground, then we just regrouped and started all over again.

Q: How do you deal with your fears at a time like that?

JJR: A lot of times, the fear just, you know, goes away, because you know the job you have to do. And you're responsible for those two guys that were up there, in that case, and you don't worry about it until they're down on the ground. And then, afterwards, then you think about it.

Q: Have you ever thought about dying?

JJR: No, I haven't. Because I know there's a lot of great people around me, whether they be another fireman, a medic, or whatever. They would be there to take care of you, and that's the Department brotherhood. You know, we all look out for one another.

Q: Do you happen to carry any lucky charms with you into fires?

JJR: No. That, I don't. I'm not really superstitious, if you would. And don't worry about Friday the 13th or three leaf clovers or whatever, anything like that.

Q: Were there any other major fires over the years that were as memorable?

JJR: Well, we had one over here on Main Street where Lieutenant Bobby Dayton perished in.

Q: Were you at that fire?

JJR: Yeah. And that's one that you just--you know it happened, but you just try not to really think about it all the time, you know.

Q: What offices have you held throughout the years?

JJR: Okay. Well, I started as the Assistant Engineer, and then I went up to Chief Engineer. And then, from there, I went on to the administrative side, which was a Trustee. I was Trustee for a number of years, then I became President. I was President for three years. Then, I went back to being a Trustee ever since. I took one year off in between the President and coming back as a Trustee.

Q: Out of all of those offices, what did you enjoy the most?

JJR: President was nice. It was. It was a lot of work, and you had a lot of things going on at the time. And you had our building, which was in plans of being constructed, so there

was a lot of dealings with that. Different things as far as, you know, setting up banking and loan, or whatever.

Q: Could you tell us a little about the building of the new Atlantic's building?

JJR: Well, the old building--there's really a lot of history. If we go back, I'm sure we even have it here. Because it was Liberty Hall at one time. And that was like the centerpiece of Port Washington, you know. You had dances there and everything else. This is going back--listening to the old-timers, as, you know, they called themselves. And it's just that the old building just couldn't fit the newer trucks. The newer trucks were much bigger. We couldn't do any more addition to it, as far as raising the doors or floors or anything else, and we had other problems--plumbing and everything else. So we just decided that it was time for it to come down. And it had stood up for a very long time, for over a hundred years. So, it's served its usefulness.

Q: So when was the new building dedicated?

JJR: It was dedicated in 1994. It was official.

Q: And what particular--what particular part did you have, as President, in this?

JJR: Well, by the time the building was done, I was back as being a Trustee. And when I had first--I was President when we first started the project. You know, I was just another committee member on the committee. It's just that when we went for our bonding for the loan and whatever, there was a bunch of papers to sign. So I got writer's cramp, but it was all worth it.

Q: What were some of the financial red tape you had to go through? Was it ...

JJR: Oh, we had lawyers with us and everything else, and they had everything all cut and dry.

Q: As Trustee, what are your particular duties?

JJR: We're in charge of paying the bills, making sure of the upkeep on the building. If the Engineer or the Captain, the Lieutenants need anything, they come up to us, you know, and then they justify the need, if you will, and, you know, if it's something that's going to make our job easier, no one really has a hard time with it. And if it's something, that's, you know, just because "I want it because they have it," we usually question it. And that's about it. It's dealing with different creditors and ...

Q: Who are you responsible to for the budget?

JJR: Well, each committee submits their budget. They have a budget allocation committee, and they meet with the Fire Department. And they hash everything out, and nine times out of ten, everything gets knocked down, which is right, because we're all taxpayers in the town, too. And then it goes up to Port Washington Fire Department and gets voted on, and then it goes to the town of North Hempstead the different villages. And ...

Q: Now, you were present for the hundredth anniversary of Atlantic and was that a big celebration?

JJR: Yeah. Oh, the hundredth anniversary. Yeah, that was 1986.

Q: And did you have a major part in that or ...

JJR: Well, I was an Engineer at the time, you know, and we all pitched in. We did whatever had to be done, whether it was setting up the parking lot for the block party after the parade or making sure the trucks looked just right when they came down Main Street that night.

Q: There was a Nassau County parade and drill in 1994. Was that a major event?

JJR: Yes, it was. Tom Murray--he's an ex-Chief from town. He went in as President of the Nassau County Fireman's Association, so we, in turn, hosted the parade in town, and the

drill was over in Garden City Park. And then everyone--they turned out to --Denton Avenue and the Town of North Hempstead complex..

Q: And was this the parade at which Peter Zwerlein gave a speech?

JJR: I don't know. It's quite possible that he did.

Q: And what was special about this parade? Was there anything particularly different from the others?

JJR: Well, it was a lot of work. It was something that, you know, I'd never really done before, as far as learning how you would have to line up and make different divisions and set up bands, and trying to get the one band that was in the first division back for the Department that was using the same band in the sixth division. And, you know, it was a little bit of a nightmare, but it was a learning experience.

Q: What do you think about the parades?

JJR: I like them.

Q: What happens to you when you march in the parade?

JJR: When we march in a parade, you get a good feeling going down the road, you know.

And the thing is, when you're in a parade, or it's the drill team or whatever, you meet a lot of nice people and you have friends for life.

Q: What is it about this brotherhood that has meaning for you?

JJR: Well, it's just knowing that if myself or someone in my family, or vice versa, if it was someone else that I knew, we all stick together. We're there to try to help each other. We want to do all we can.

Q: And you're also on a drill team.

JJR: Yeah. Well, I don't really jump a truck or anything. They actually put John Salerno, the ex-Chief--and he doesn't race anymore; he used to--well, on the drill team. We're taking charge of feeding the guys when they come back from the drill, you know, or during the drill. So they--so then, that's the drill team, they stay on the drill team.

Q: But what do you--what does the drill team do for the firefighters, particularly? What is it that they try to instill, in a drill team?

JJR: Well, what the drill team is teaching as far as the concept of hooking up the hoses and throwing a ladder, and stuff like that.

Q: Is there any particular moral teachings or cohesiveness that is a part of that?

JJR: Well, the one thing it does teach you, it teaches you to do it as togetherness kind of thing. You're not going to do it by yourself, because if you try to do it by yourself, you're going to get hurt. And so it's teamwork, you know. You have to work as a team.

Q: Does it build other things, like morale?

JJR: Yeah, it does.

Q: You're sort of in the middle generation in the Fire Department. You're not the real young; you're not the old. How do you relate, as the middle generation, to either end?

JJR: Well, I don't know. I seem to lean, like I'm towards like the older generation. Maybe it was the way I was brought up with it and whatever. And even though I'm not, like you put it, old, a lot of my friends are the older members, and we really get along really well. And I have their respect, and, of course, I give them respect, and that's the way it's supposed to be. And I even got a comment not too long ago that I was an old man. So ...

Q: From whom?

JJR: One of the rookies.

Q: And what does that mean to you?

JJR: Well, it just meant that I was thinking the same thing when I got in almost twenty-five years ago. There's that old man over there telling me to do something. And I guess what comes around goes around.

Q: What do you think is lacking in the younger generation of firefighter?

JJR: That's a good question. A lot of times, like when we had first got in, you know, we had our rebels, if you would. But now, the younger generation, sometimes they don't seem to care as much about anything, you know. If you try to give them an order, it's like, "Why?" When we were given an order, you did it. Then, if you didn't like it, after everything was said and done, then you went back and questioned it. Now, they want to question everything before they do it. And, to me, that's not the way to do it.

Q: So what does that mean for the Fire Department, then?

JJR: It just means that ... [INTERRUPTION] ...

Q: Well, after hearing your pager go off now for the fire alarm, let's continue where we were. I was asking you about what that meant for the Fire Department.

JJR: Well, it sort of makes it a little bit harder on the officers, as far as the Chiefs and Captains, Lieutenants. You know, we're just brought up, you did your job and then you talked about it afterwards. So it makes it a lot harder on them trying to, you know, get their job done.

Q: Do any of the older generation try to speak to the younger generation?

JJR: Yeah, we try. You know, and even like you said before, I'm caught in the middle. We try. We try to teach the younger guys the same way the older guys taught us when we had come in, you know, different ways of doing things. And sometimes it's accepted; sometimes it's not. More than likely, most of the time, it is. You know, you always look for a little advice here and there.

Q: Are the younger generation more prone to dismissal today than they were in the past?

JJR: No, not really. The only thing that we have now more is that a lot of the young kids that we have, they go on a leave. They're here during the summer, and then they go to college, which is great, you know. This way, they're getting their education, well, they can get great jobs and everything else. But, when they're back, they're good. It's just that you have to pick up the slack a little bit when they're away in college. And that's when

us oldtimers come in. That's when we have to come back around a little bit more than what we normally do.

Q: Does that breed any resentment, that they're going to college and perhaps ...

JJR: No, none at all. School is not for everyone. And I think a lot of people feel that way.

Q: ... [SIRENS] ... There goes the ...

JJR: Yeah. There goes my truck.

Q: So there aren't feelings of resentment then ...

JJR: I don't really think ...

Q: ... that they're getting the schooling, and we didn't get the schooling.

JJR: I don't really think so, because it was there for us, too, if we really wanted it at the time.

Q: How do you socialize outside the Fire Department?

JJR: Outside of the Fire Department, I have plenty of friends that are not firemen. Just like you would go out, and, whether you'd go out to dinner or a movie with your friends, or concerts, or whatever.

Q: And then when your fire alarm goes off in the middle of the movie or at the restaurant, what happens?

JJR: Well, it depends. When I was a rookie, I was always going, you know, and leave for everything. But now, you seem to play it by ear a little bit, because you know somebody else is going to pick it up and go do it.

Q: How does your family--when you were younger, how did they respond to your firefighting? Like the women in your family. If you left dinner, how did they respond to that?

JJR: Oh, I remember being a kid and my mother and grandmother got very upset at my father because it was Thanksgiving. The turkey was just coming out of the oven, and they had a fire somewhere. And my father left, and I guess it was a really good one, because he didn't come back for four hours plus. Turkey was cold and everything else. And it was a little bit cold inside, too, because nobody wanted to talk to him (laughs).

Q: How did the men deal with the verbal silence (laughs)?

JJR: Oh, I don't know. I guess he just dealt with it. The next day, they were talking again, and that was it. He had cold turkey for dinner; he had cold turkey for lunch. So ...

Q: What is your mother's view of your firefighting?

JJR: Oh, my mother still gets upset every time she hears the Plectron go off. She says that she heard that thing for so many years, and she can't wait to get rid of it. But she always says that, but then again, she's the first one if I turn it off or lower it, she'll want to know what was going on. So I say, "Mom, I'm leaving the radio on, and that way you can hear it."

Q: Hasn't she done any malicious mischief (laughs) when you were gone?

JJR: No, that she wouldn't do. Because she does like to find out what's going on, as much as she complains about it at times, she likes to know what's happening.

Q: What kind of socializing do you do with the firefighters?

JJR: Oh, we have all different things, you know. We have--in my firehouse, Atlantic, we do a Trim the Tree party.

Q: The what?

JJR: We trim a tree. A Christmas Tree party. So that's like a little something that we just started, like that. Then you have the cocktail party, and you have an installation dinner, where we install all your new officers, and ...

Q: What is the ritual at your installation dinners?

JJR: Well, the installation dinner, you have usually the ex-Captain and ex-President, they try to go out at the same time for a term. And you present them with a gift, and, you know, a little bit of what they've done over their term. And then you introduce the new Captain and new officers, and usually the Chief of the Department would swear them in. And then, from there, you go on to service awards, you know, for high point. Each category has a different, you know, set standards. So, it's like between two and five years, and five and ten, and so on. You usually give them like a nice little, you know, plaque or a little statue, or something like that. You know, it's a little incentive, you know, to try to make somebody else go a little bit faster, because they want one, too.

Q: Have you received any of those?

JJR: Yeah, I've received a lot of them. I have ...

Q: What were they?

JJR: ... a lot of high point. I have a lot of high point plaques, and I don't even have any more room to hang them up. So, a couple of years ago, I asked my Captain who was Captain again--Tom McDonough--and I said, "You know, you should really find something else besides these plaques, because I don't have a fireplace to burn the wood." And that got a little chuckle. And that's when they came up--they found these nice little statues. They're nice. It's a different fireman in different positions, as far as with a Hurst tool or with a hose line, or standing on a ladder. It's little different things.

Q: How new is this?

JJR: This started--giving the awards, I guess, was back in 1985. And we just started giving the statues three years ago, 2001. So I have a bunch of them.

Q: How many statues do you have?

JJR: The statues, I have three, and I have about nine or ten plaques.

Q: How does your mother (laughs) feel about all those?

JJR: Well, a lot of them I have no place to hang up, so I have them all in a box stored away.

Q: Tell me a little about your day job. How do you work that in with your firefighting?

JJR: Fortunately, I work for the Port Washington School District. And there's an understanding that if there's a fire, as long as it's not impeding on our job, we are allowed to go as long as when the fire is over, you don't hang around, you go right back to work, and whatever. But if you're right in the middle of doing something, you don't go.

Q: And what do you do for them?

JJR: Supervising groundskeeper.

Q: So, but they leave it to your judgment?

JJR: And no one ever abuses it. Never.

Q: What is it that you love the most about firefighting?

JJR: It's not just firefighting. It's friends that you make that you have forever. When you go a parade or a drill, you meet people from different departments, and you just hit it off and you just have friends. I have friends in the departments all over Long Island. And I'm in contact with them all the time. So it's something that you really, you know, there's a good bond there.

Q: What is the--when you hear that horn blow, and I just saw you look at your pager--what is the rush that you get? What happens inside of you?

JJR: Well, first you're curious, first of all, where it is. I guess (laughs) you want to make sure it's not your house. Then, you just want to find out, it gives you a little bit about what the call is, whether it's an automatic alarm or a car fire, or, you know, an ambulance call. And I guess it's all different things like that.

Q: Yeah, but that's the analytical part. I mean, what happens to your feelings. What goes--what's the rush inside of you? What does it feel like?

JJR: I guess, you know, it sort of gives you like the feeling like the adrenalin rush, because you're going to start moving, you're going to start getting to the truck. You've got to grab your gear. And you start thinking on the way there, what is it? What are we going to be doing? I guess it's a little bit of a rush like that.

Q: Are there any traditions that are passed down from your father or your step-father that you were told when you were young, that you do when you go to a fire?

JJR: No. The best thing is is just make sure you get home.

Q: What has changed the most since you were a rookie and now, at the Fire Department?

JJR: Well, definitely the training aspect of it. It's a lot more hours than what we had. And it's all for the best. So, certain new and different techniques and everything else that we never knew about. You know, we used to a lot of things, you know, the old way. And now we know better, and if we would have known that twenty-five years ago, we would have been doing it.

Q: Do you remember something about the old way? An example.

JJR: Well, it's like just the different ways that you go in about doing your job. And now it's accepted you have different positions and that was your job to do it. Sometimes, back then, it used to be almost a free-for-all where, you know, you had one guy doing this when you thought he was doing something else. You know, it's all a chain of command, and that's really come into play, and that's all, I would say, for the best.

Q: And has anything changed in your Department since 9/11 happened?

JJR: Yeah.

Q: What has changed?

JJR: There's a lot more security end of it, making sure that things are not left open, as far as when you go out on a call that the doors are not left open, because you never know what's

going to happen. Somebody could grab one of these shiny new trucks, and they could go anywhere they want and do whatever.

Q: Do you have one person guarding a truck, then, or while the others are ...

JJR: No. That's why we make sure when we leave the firehouse that the doors are closed. The next fireman that comes in, he's in there, if he opens the door, he's there. At least someone would be in the firehouse.

Q: Has Atlantic put in a surveillance system since 9/11?

JJR: No, we had it before 9/11. And that was just for security purposes.

Q: In your new building, what are--the facilities are quite different. I understand there may be even a work-out room for the men and so on, that wasn't there.

JJR: Yeah.

Q: Can you explain a little what's new?

JJR: Well, what it is, it's different gym equipment, as far as treadmills, weights, and whatever, you know. It's something--it's like a give-back for the guys for giving their time, but in a

way it's also good for us, because if they're working out and the horn goes off, they're right there, and the truck is out that much quicker, and plus it's keeping everyone in shape.

Q: And what else do the men do in the recreation room?

JJR: They watch TV. Have, you know, the usual--I don't know how you would want to put this--bull sessions (laughs). And, you know, it's a place to meet. You can go and talk over events of your week and what happened, whatever, and stay in there for a little bit, and then usually go your own ways, whether a bunch of us are getting together for dinner or just going home.

Q: How have the women changed the atmosphere of the firehouse, as firefighters.

JJR: We only have two women firefighters. And none of them are in my company, so I really couldn't answer that one too honestly.

Q: Why do you think that they don't come to your company (laughs)?

JJR: I really couldn't tell you. Well, the one girl that's in Flower Hill, she does. I mean, she's not there often, but she--she's nice, you know. She seems to be able to do the job, and that's what counts.

Q: And how are the feelings of the men toward these women?

JJR: The way I see it, it seems like it's okay to me. I don't have anything against them, and matter of fact, if there's a couple more come knocking on the door.

Q: Are evaluation sheets written up for each firefighter at the end of a fire, or a year, or ...

JJR: What it is, they have records kept as far as the schooling that you've done through the year or whatever. It's all put in your personnel file.

Q: And who reviews your personnel file?

JJR: Maybe the Captain and the Lieutenant.

Q: Who's the Captain now in your company?

JJR: Tom McDonough.

Q: And who was it when you were a rookie?

JJR: When I was a rookie, it was my step-father (laughs).

Q: How long was that?

JJR: For one year, and then he passed away. And then, but it was fun, you know. You had to make your schools. You had to make your work nights and your drills. And if you didn't, you were called into the office and you were told you're lacking whatever and that you'd better pick it up before the next evaluation. When you become a new member, probationary member, you're on probation for two years. So, for two years, you really got watched with a magnifying glass, to make sure that you did everything.

Q: Were there any problems for you in two years?

JJR: Me? No.

Q: Which firefighters influenced you the most in the past twenty years?

JJR: Well, I'd have to say a lot of them. To me, when you're just a new member, and of course everyone knows a little bit more than what you do, and you just put all that information together. Little different things.

Q: Can you think of anything humorous that has happened to you over the years in the Fire Department?

JJR: (Laughs). I'm sure there was a couple of them, but I really can't say it on this tape.

Q: It can't be that bad (laughs).

JJR: I just don't want it to get out... all I can remember, and I'm never going to live it down again. So ...

Q: You mean, you don't want to share it with us?

JJR: No, I think I'm going to pass on that one.

Q: Who are the real cut-ups in your Department? People who always play pranks. So, you want to pass on that one?

JJR: Yeah, I'm going to pass on that one.

Q: Why do you think humor is so important when you're dealing with tragedy in the Fire Department?

JJR: Just because you see a lot of things that, you know, I mean, you see death sometimes, you know, if it's a vehicle accident, or, God forbid, a house fire. And I guess it's a way of

dealing with it, you know. Maybe if you make fun of something else, it's taking your mind off of what you just saw.

Q: What do you think makes a good fireman or a bad fireman?

JJR: Well, what makes a good fireman is a guy that really has his heart in it that wants to help other people in the community. And a bad fireman's a guy that's there just along for the ride, to get whatever he can get and go along with his life.

Q: Have there been any of those in your Department?

JJR: Yeah. There've been a couple of them; they're no longer with us, though.

Q: What do you think is the future of the Fire Department?

JJR: Well, hopefully, I'd like to see it last a long time. There are manpower shortages, and especially during the day. But that's being addressed by the Chiefs, and they're doing a very good job at addressing it, and things are turning around. And I'd like to see it last a long time. Whereas if this town ever goes paid, I know I'll be the first one moving out, because we won't be able to afford it. It's a big burden on the taxpayers for a paid department. But when you're giving back to your community as being volunteers, it just

gives you like a little bit of pride, too, that you're doing something that you're not getting a salary for. And if I had to get a salary for it, I wouldn't do it.

Q: Excuse me while I turn this tape over ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... To continue now, why do you think the newcomers to Port are not easily volunteering for the Fire Department?

JJR: Well, the first thing that we see--or I should say, I see--is that a lot of people come to Port Washington from the City. And there they use the FDNY, which is a paid fire department. And a lot of people think that that's what we are, and we're not. And then they have recruitment drives and everything else to try to get new members, and they come in, "Yeah, I want to be a fireman." And then, when they find out what it's all about, what's entailed as far as schooling and everything else, most of the time we don't see them again. And it's the old Port Washington, which, you know, were born and raised here, you know, we're here; we're not going anywhere. And we try to explain to them, you know, why--why we do what we do. And you also try to explain the money aspect to them, as far as if it was a paid department, as far as what your taxes would be--this, that, and the other thing. And they hear all that, and, like I said, like most of the time they never come back.

Q: Where are you getting most of your recruits these days?

JJR: We have the Explorer Program. Just this past month, in my company alone, we had three members come in. One of them was a product of the Explorers. And next month we have another one coming up, which was also from the Explorers. So it is a good program. It's teaching kids, you know, about fire safety and what the Fire Department does. And, it also keeps them out of trouble, you know, because it's a structured training thing for them. And instead of walking the street, getting into trouble, we can sort of keep an eye on them.

Q: What do you think was the best qualities of the older generation? Your father and step-father's generation?

JJR: I think what it is, because like nothing was ever handed to them. They had to work for what they got. To the positions that they achieved. You know, a lot of times now, with the younger generation--and I admit it, as I'm one of them because some of the guys in my age group, too--think that they're owed everything. And the way I look at it is you work for what you have. You work for the position that you have, and then you get the respect that way. It's not handed to you.

Q: What about the funerals and that tradition? There've been several funerals this past month.

JJR: Yes, there have. The way I look at it, even if I really didn't know the older member, or a member, they're still a member of the Port Washington Fire Department, well, you go there and you pay your respects. And that's the way I was brought up.

Q: Do the younger men feel that way?

JJR: Some of them do; some of them don't. Some of them, you don't see at any of them, and some of them, you know, you do. I guess it's hit and miss. But even if I couldn't do it as a fireman, I always made sure that, in one way, shape, or form, I stopped by and at least gave condolences. And that was the way I was brought up to do things. And you don't really see that now.

Q: What would you like to be remembered for?

JJR: Well, I put a lot of time and my heart into Atlantics for almost the past twenty-five years, as far as the different offices and different things I have done in the building, as far as updates and making sure that they have the newest, best equipment that they can have. And that's what I'd like to be remembered for. Not like, you know, a fireman that didn't worry and spend the first dollar that he ever had. That's the way I look at it, and if we were buying something new and spending to make our job easier and it's going to save somebody, I'm all for it. So I'd like to be remembered as, you know, being a little innovative, looking into the future and getting the best equipment for us.

Q: Did you feel some sense that the other generation were a little stingy?

JJR: Yeah, we had, when I had first got in, it was like pulling teeth to try to get something, you know. But now, it's more relaxed. Because they're starting to really see that we weren't just coming up to say that we need this new tool, just because it was new and shiny. We needed the new tool to do our job. And they're seeing that now. So ...

Q: What were some of the other qualities the older generation had that you feel has improved with your generation?

JJR: When what I like about the older generation, they have a lot of stories to tell us about the way things used to be. And if any of the young guys would just sit down and talk to them for a while, not figuring that they're going to bite their heads off, then they could learn something. They could learn how Port Washington was back in, you know, the '30s, '40s, and probably even earlier if they talk to some of the real older generation.

Q: Can you remember any of those stories from your father's generation? What it was like?

JJR: Well, between my grandfather--and he was not a member, but he was old time Port Washington--and my father and his father, you know, it's just the way things were, you know. They were called clamdiggers, and that was it, you know. They were--everybody lived together. You know, it's not like now where everybody wants to bite your head off

because you took their parking place on Main Street.. You know, you used to, from what they were telling me, you walked down the road and just about everybody knew your name and waved to you. Now, nobody even wants to really look at you sideways. It'd be nice if we'd go back that way.

Q: Do you think that that small town quality will ever be again?

JJR: I wish it would, but I don't see it happening. I really don't.

Q: What would you like to add to this interview? Is there any stories that you could recall that you might like to add, or any ...

JJR: No, I really think we've covered a lot. And I appreciate your time in interviewing me for this project. I was very honored in doing it when I was, when I got the letter from Peter Zwerlein. And then, when I got your phone call, I was very much looking forward to doing this.

Q: Has Peter Zwerlein been a mentor of yours?

JJR: Peter was in Protection. And Peter was the Chief when I was a fireman. But Peter was very innovative in terms of ways he went around doing things. And only thing I can say is thank God we had him.

Q: What do you think of this project? The oral history project?

JJR: I'm very excited about it. I think, you know, it's a lot of old things that people won't remember. At least now, it's going to be, whether it's recorded or in written form, it's going to be something for our grandkids and future generations to look at. The way things used to be. Because who knows what's going to happen tomorrow?

Q: Would you want your grandchildren to be firefighters? Or your children?

JJR: I don't have any children yet, but yes, I would, because it's a great thing. You know, it's great. It's like having a whole other family.

Q: It's been wonderful talking to you. Thank you.

JJR: Thank you very much for having me.