

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Richard Wood
Protection Engine 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 June 11th, 2004. We are at the Port Washington Library. My name is Margaret Dildilian. I am interviewing Richard Wood of the Port Washington Fire Department.

Richard, we would like to know early years and background.

Richard Wood: Okay, I was born in the Port Washington Nursing Home, right here in Port Washington. It was down by the town dock. And I grew up on Covert Street and then Pleasant Avenue. And then in my high school years, we moved to Adams Street, which the house that belonged to my grandfather and grandmother. And my kids are in that house now—well, they all moved out, but they were the fourth generation at 13 Adams Street.

Q: What are your earliest feelings about firefighters?

RW: Well, my father was a firefighter. He belonged to Protection. And he was a fifty year member also. I will be a fifty year member next year. But I remember when I was little, he used to run out of the house and go to fires. And growing up, that's all I wanted to be was a fireman. So, when I became eighteen, I filled out an application to Protection and I joined Protection.

Q: How did you feel when your father used to run out of the house to go to a fire?

RW: Well, I felt kind of proud that, you know, he was a fireman. And that's all I dreamed about growing up was being a fireman. Now, I have two boys that are in Protection. They're firemen. Scott and Glen, and Scott's also a police officer in town. And Glen works for Verizon. So, I had a nice family. And I also have a daughter in there, but she's not a fireman.

Q: When you became a firefighter, who really influenced you the most?

RW: My father.

Q: And how did you feel on your first day as a rookie?

RW: Well, the night I'd sworn in, you know, you received your badges and your by-laws, and I was very proud. And I started going to fires right away. And in those days, there wasn't too many fire schools. We just learned by experience, you know, going to fires and everything. And I remember one of my first big fires was a boat fire down on Shore Road. And in those days we had rubber coats and rubber pull-up boots. And I happened to go to the fire in my bathing suit. And I had on this rubber coat, and one of the older—I had the nozzle. One of the older firemen was pushing me into the houseboat, and I remember me burning up under that rubber coat. So that's—I remember that fire very distinctly. That's one of my first big fires.

Q: And your emotions after that?

RW: Just excitement and, from then on, all I wanted to do was on the nozzle. I loved being on the nozzle going into fires.

Q: What particular skill is there to being on the nozzle?

RW: Well, you actually get into where the fire is and, you know, put it out. And, I don't know. It's just a thing I had in me. That's why I really didn't want to become an officer, because I wanted to be on the nozzle all the time. So—and to this day, I wish I could still be on the nozzle, but I'm a hydrant man now and a hose packer.

Q: So what are the differences between being on the hose and these other two areas that you mention?

RW: Oh, I guess it's the excitement of the fire. You know, trying to save property, save lives, and whereas hooking up the hydrant and picking up the hose, you're on the outside of the fire. It all has to be done; it's an important job. But when you get older, that's what you go into.

Q: Were you ever injured when you were on the hose?

RW: Yeah. I was overcome a couple of times. In fact ...

Q: What was that like?

RW: I don't know. One of the firemen tripped over me and carried me out, and another time I fell down a flight of stairs when I succumbed to smoke and I was carried out then. I made the *Port Washington News* on that. But that's not something to be proud of, but, you know, in those days we didn't have the Scott Air Packs we have today. The breathing apparatus. We had the MSA masks which are self contained, and you went through them very fast. So the heavier you breathe, the sooner you used up your—what was in the mask. And I guess that's why—I used to breathe real heavy. That's why I ran out of my mask most of the times.

Q: What went through your head when you—what went through your mind when you were injured?

RW: Nothing, really, because you just go boom no brackets and you just pass out. And it happened to me twice. A couple of times we were in tight spots, and the fire's going over your head. And one time it was in the basement, and the stairs burned off behind me, but we were able to get the fire out. And I was in a lot of, you know, tight spots.

Q: Did the dream of being a firefighter match the actual being a firefighter?

RW: Well, growing up, I really didn't know what it entailed till I got in there and saw what was going on and, you know, how we helped the community and saved lives and property and tried to do as little damage as possible on the way. So, but I always wanted to be a firefighter.

Q: What is the mystique about being a firefighter?

RW: I don't know. I think, like it runs in a lot of families. We have a lot of father-son-brother firefighters. So, I think if your father was in, then you just automatically wanted to be a firefighter. That's about all I can tell you.

Q: Have you ever made a mistake on the fire scene?

RW: I guess everybody makes mistakes, but I really couldn't pinpoint any. You know, maybe running in too soon, or getting in too deep, you know, involved in it too deep, or—but I really can't remember any mistakes.

Q: What goes through your head when you're on a fire truck heading towards a fire?

RW: Well, you wonder what you're getting into, you know. What it's going to be. And most fires are nothing, but there's always that big one that comes along. And one time going

down Shore Road, we were going to a boatyard fire. You could look across the bay and see all the boats burning up, you know. Then, the adrenaline builds up inside you, you know. And I guess there's a—there's a little bit of fear to it. I mean, if you don't go in a fire and have fear, then something's wrong (laughs).

Q: Did you ever think you were going to die?

RW: No, but one of the worst days of my life, the fire up here in 1988 where we lost a fireman, my son was in that fire and he got trapped in there. And he was only a rookie then. And the fire burned up behind him and this guy Bobby Dayton. And when they were inside, they—it just got too hot, and they got separated, and Scott, my son, he happened to see a window and he dove out. And it was the only window that had a fire escape. But the fire escape was red hot; they couldn't even go up and get him off. It was cherry, glowing. And Bobby, he never made it out. And it was kind of sad, you know. And I always worried more about my two boys when the fire whistle blows than I used to worry about myself. But that was kind of traumatic.

Q: Is it more difficult when you have a whole family involved, rather than strangers?

RW: Yeah, I would say, because like I just explained it, I never worried about myself. But now when I hear the whistle, I know my two boys, they like the nozzle too, so I kind of worry about them running into fires.

Q: And how do you deal with that stress of worry?

RW: It's just something you have to put with. I know. My wife goes kind of crazy, because of what happened with my older boy. But it's just something that you go there and you hope they come back out. Well, I hope everybody comes back out, but, you know, you're a little more personally involved when you have two boys in there. And they have no fear, my two boys, so that's what worries me. You know, they always want to be the first ones in, first ones on the nozzle. So, I guess the older I get the more I worry about them.

Q: When that horn blows, what goes on inside of you? What are the emotions?

RW: Well—when I live on Adams—I still live on Adams, but when I was on Adams Street one block from the firehouse, the emotions were get dressed as fast as you can and get to the firehouse so you make the truck, because the trucks get out very fast. So the emotion was just get up, get going, and make the truck. So—but you really—you're not thinking about things, you know. You just want to get there and see what the fire is and get to it.

You're not sitting there thinking, well, what's going to happen, blah-blah-blah. You know, once you get there, you have to see what you have to do and what kind of fire you have and, you know, where the hydrants are and stuff like that.

Q: What scares you the most about this job?

RW: Well, I don't think it's a matter of being scared. It's a matter of being—should be more cautious than what I was or what my two boys are. But I don't think anybody that's scared could do it, you know. You should have some fear, but to be just downright scared, that's—you have to, you know, have the right feeling for the job, I guess you should say.

Q: Getting back to your experience as a rookie when you were injured ...

RW: Uh huh.

Q: ... how did you deal with the injuries?

RW: Well, they just took me to the hospital, checked me out, and checked my lungs for smoke. But one time, I remember we had a fire up on Reni Road. And it was in the middle of winter, in January. It was like ten degrees out. And then we had another call; it was all the way down in Sands Point. And I was riding up in the hose bed. And when we got down to Sands Point, my jaw was frozen. It was locked frozen, because I was wet from the other fire. And, well, they brought me back to the firehouse. I was the butt of some jokes and everything, and they gave me some hot tea and hot soup and thawed my jaw out (laughs).

Q: What were the jokes?

RW: Oh, you know, "Now you got to keep your mouth shut," or, you know, "keep your mouth closed." Stuff like that, you know. Firehouse stuff. We always joked around. You make a lot of good friends in the firehouse over the years. There's a lot of camaraderie. So, but I haven't been injured too many times. Broke my toe once, but that's about it. I was lucky. I didn't receive too many injuries.

Q: Did they give you a nickname?

RW: Well, my last name is Wood, so my father is "Woodie." I'm "Woodie." My two sons are "Woodie." And they even call my daughter "Woodie." So, the whole family is "Woodie." So that's our nickname.

Q: Did any other nicknames evolve from the frozen jaws?

RW: No. No, none. No.

Q: Have you ever disobeyed orders?

RW: Not really (laughs). Not that I can remember. I guess in my fifty years, I disobeyed some orders, but I can't remember any orders I disobeyed. I would never disobey a direct

order from an officer at a fire scene. You know, maybe staying in the firehouse after hours, or stuff like that, you know. Driving to a fire too fast or something like that, but nothing major.

Q: What gives you the most pleasure about being a firefighter?

RW: I'd have to think about that one a minute. Pleasures would be hanging out around the firehouse with good friends. And once a year we have a dinner dance, and the wives get to go and we have a good time. And then we have some picnics and other socials. And just getting together with everybody. And then, we have the racing team. I always wanted to be on the racing team. So, when I was eighteen years old, I joined the racing team. And I'm still active with the racing team, to this day, helping them out and giving them some advice and stuff. But, I was captain of the racing team back in the late '60s. And it's a competitive sport—the racing teams. You climb ladders and you jump off trucks, and hook hoses up and hit targets, and it's very competitive. It's all through New York State. And we competed against the other teams from Nassau County and Suffolk County, you know, and once a year we go to the State tournament. And when I was captain, we won the State tournament in 1969. First time ever for a Port Washington team. And then we won it again in 1973. So I was kind of proud of that, but I always loved the racing team, which took up two, three nights a week. So, between the racing team, my job, working all the time, and doing my firematic stuff, it was pretty busy all these years.

Q: Getting back to training, how do you—how do you instill the skills necessary, for instance, for the hose that you were ...

RW: Well, when I first got in, the officer and the old-timers took you out and taught you how to handle the hose and hook it up and pump the trucks. And we used to set fires in the sand banks—oil fires. Or have a—set fire in the bulrushes down at Manorhaven. And you learn by experience. Now, they have very intensive training. They have a training center out in Bethpage. It's taught city firemen, you know. And they go two or three nights a week, and it's very intense training. It's not like when I first got in. A young fellow getting in the firehouse today, he's got to donate a lot of time, maybe two or three nights a week, for quite a few years. But the, you know, the training's very good.

Q: How do you feel people look at u as a firefighters?

RW: I think the town appreciates the volunteer firemen. And then when we march down Main Street, Memorial Day parade, then we get cheered and people are waving, and you feel kind of proud in marching down in that uniform, and you feel very proud for what you do. You really—if you want to join, you really have to be into it, help the community and spend the time there. It's just—it's hard to explain. But I feel proud. To this day, fifty years, I still feel proud, and I still go to fires. So, that's about it (laughs).

Q: Do you—how do you feel that the media treats you? The news when you are ...

RW: I feel the Port Washington press treats us very good. I haven't seen anything negative about us. They always seem to be behind us, as the town people are behind us. And I would say the media treats us well.

Q: What are preconceptions of the firefighters in terms of public.

RW: Let me see. How can I answer that question? I think they expect us to be there when they need us and respond quickly and maintain the equipment properly. And I guess that's about it. We established the Fire Medic Company, I don't know the exact date. But I guess our ambulance is running over three thousand calls a year now, and that's a lot of calls. And they try to provide service twenty-four hours a day. They try to have somebody in the firehouse. And as the town grows, the more ambulance calls we receive. Years ago, we used to keep an ambulance in the garage, and we'd get an ambulance call, run up, take it out of the garage, throw a person in there, in the ambulance. Take them to the hospital. Now, they treat them right in the ambulance. Stabilize them. And there's a lot of training there, too. I think they go through like nine months of training to become an EMT. So they're doing a good job, and they're very busy.

Q: The firehouse is the cultural center for firemen. How do you view it?

RW: Sometimes when you have nothing to do, it's a place to hang out. And years ago, we used to have the bar rooms and the parties and stuff, but there's no more of that, especially with we're getting sixteen, seventeen year olds now. So, there's no more bars or drinking or stuff like that. But, in fact, we just started a few years ago, an Explorer group, to bring these young kids in their teens, get them ready to become firemen when they're seventeen. And they're doing well, but a lot of them graduate high school and go to college and don't come back to the town.

Q: Is there such a thing as a routine fire for you as firemen?

RW: Well, when the alarm goes off, you never can say they're routine. You always have to think that you're going into a working fire till you get there and see what you have. But now we have a lot of recorded alarms, and there's a lot of alarms in houses and factories and buildings, and sometimes the wind'll set them off, or something will set them off. So we respond to a lot of recorded alarms that aren't anything. But you still have to go, because it could be that one time that it is something. So, there's really—I wouldn't consider anything routine till you get there and see what you have.

Q: Your worst day—getting back to your worst day, how did you control your emotions?

RW: Well, when I—I happened to be—that was the day after Thanksgiving, and I was sick

that day and I didn't respond to the fire. And then, I heard over my radio, I heard that the fire was really bad, and then I heard a May Day from Bobby Dayton who was in with my son. And my son was home at the time, and I knew that he was going to be in that fire, too. So, I ran up the hill. I lived on Adams Street. I ran right up the hill, and my son was already out and in the ambulance. And I sort of felt relieved, but I put my gear on and did what I could to help out at the fire. And then my wife came up, and she went to the hospital with my son in the ambulance. And then I found out later that Bobby Dayton had died in the fire. It was kind of—well, it was really very emotional, because I don't think we've had too many, since I can remember, volunteers that died in a fire. A couple of guys had heart attacks, but I think he was the first one that died in an actual fire. And—but when I was—back in the '60s, I think, we had a fire on North Court, down off of Plandome Road, and three children got burned up. The fire was very late at night, and the whole top floor went out. And when I got down there, I was going up the stairs and another fireman was coming down. He handed me this young child, and I took him out on the lawn and I was giving him mouth-to-mouth CPR. But he was gone. And we lost two others that night. And after it was all over, the excitement, the next day, the next morning—the fire lasted all night—we were cleaning up, and all I could think of was my own children I had at home. And, you know, I just kept thinking thank God it wasn't them. It could happen to anybody. And that was—that was kind of bad, too.

Q: Has it taken a physical toll on you?

RW: I think more in a mental toll. You know, that fire's still set in my mind. And I think that fire was way back in the early '60s. I don't know the date, but that's the fire I remember the most besides the one on Main Street where my son was in. But then, we had that— had a fire up on Reni Road where a woman came out of the house, and she says, "My husband. My husband. He's over in the left bedroom." So we went into the left bedroom, and she meant the right bedroom. And when we got him out, he was gone from smoke inhalation. And there's been a few other deaths. Over on Bayview Avenue where a couple of guys got caught in a basement fire. Not firemen, but, you know, residents living in the basement. And they were unable to get out. And when I was very young, Christmas day we responded to a car fire up on Port Washington Boulevard and Stonytown Road. And when we got there, the car was totally involved, and the guy was pinned in and he just burned right up. And that was how I started my career out. That was the first death I can remember.

Q: And how did you feel with your first death?

RW: I just felt, wow! This—you know, I never thought at all why, you know, since joining, you know. I guess I was in about eight or nine months, I didn't think I would ever see something like that. And as the years went by, you do see a lot of stuff that, you know, that get to you. But when it's a child, it bothers me the most. That's about it, I guess. Now, we've had some big fires. Renga Brothers. It was a building up on Port Washington Boulevard across from the old A&P that burned down, and then the

Manhattan Food Store. That burned down. A lot of big houses in Sands Point, you know. They went up. And in all sorts of weather. You're out there freezing, or in the summer you're perspiring, you're hot. But you seem to remember the big fires. I guess it's natural, more than anything else. Especially the ones where there's a death involved. You respond to a lot of car accidents, you know. A lot of fatality car accidents and stuff like that. It's not—it's not nice to see, but you have to do it.

Q: How do you objectively see yourself as a firefighter?

RW: Now?

Q: Yes.

RW: I see myself as a fifty year member who wishes he could still run in with the nozzle, but he can't. So I'm proud of what I accomplished, and I'm proud of being an active fireman all those years, because we have a lot of fellows that, you know, after ten, fifteen years, they move on or move out of town or lose interest. But I'm kind of proud of what I accomplished.

Q: What is the difference between you and those that leave?

RW: Dedication. That's what it is; it's dedication. And a lot of people, you know, a lot of

guys, young guys, they get married and they have families, and their wives don't want them to spend all their time at the firehouse. And so I guess for family reasons they—they leave. But, you know, my wife, she was nineteen when I married her. I was twenty-four, and she--that's her way of life, our way of life. And, you know, besides working and running out to fires and being on the racing team, I wasn't home too many nights a week. But we had a good marriage, and it lasted forty-three years (laughs). So, I guess you have to have a good woman behind you to stay in fifty years.

Q: How did your children see it?

RW: Well, my children were like me. The two boys growing up, they wanted to be firemen. But they—you know, when they were kids, they went to the racing team tournaments, and they went to the parades, and they went to the picnics, and they went to the firehouse on Sunday mornings with me and climbed all over the trucks. And then, it was part of their life, too. So, growing up, they had no problem with it, you know. Even though Dad wasn't home all the time. But I guess they were kind of proud that Dad would run out and go to fires. That's about it, I guess.

Q: Did you feel you missed their youth?

RW: No, not really, because I spent time with them. We got involved in sports with all three of them. And all my kids played sports, and we traveled on weekends. And I probably

missed their youth from Monday to Friday, but on the weekends, the whole family was together, and, you know, I'd come home at night and we'd play and, no, I don't think I neglected my family.

Q: What makes a good firefighter? What makes a bad firefighter?

RW: Well, I don't know. Like I said before, a good firefighter is one that's dedicated, willing to donate the time. And I would say a bad firefighter is a guy that comes late to a fire so he doesn't have to go out on a truck. He just signs in. Or one that just does enough to stay in. Like we have a point system. You have to make so many points. Or one that just doesn't care at all, and they usually get thrown out.

Q: How many have been thrown out?

RW: Oh, I have no idea. We've had fellows thrown out, though. We've had quite a few thrown out. Everybody gets voted in, but, you know, they have a probationary period. If you don't make your probation, you get thrown out. And then, there's—you're in like one to five years, there's the point system. And as you're in longer, you don't have to make as many points. But we have a point system that keeps, you know, guys that want to stay in, it keeps them in.

Q: How does the point system operate for you?

RW: Me? Right now, I don't have to make any (laughs). After fifty years, I don't have to make any points. So, I pride myself on making the points, you know. And I beat out a lot of the younger guys in points. But I live close to the firehouse, too. So, I'm always available, you know. But fifty years, now I pick and choose. Sometimes when it's ten degrees out and I know it's a recorded alarm, and I'm hoping it's not anything, I sort of skip that fire. But I think I'm entitled to that.

Q: What makes the difference between the young men that are now coming in and your generation? What are the differences?

RW: I hate to say this, but I think, me being an old-timer, I think we just had more dedication in those days. We were willing to give up our dinners, running out on Christmas or Thanksgiving and New Year's. And giving up parties and family stuff to go to fires. Whereas now, I don't know whether they have that in them anymore. Don't get me wrong. We have a lot of good young people in the firehouse, but I don't think the dedication is here now that it was fifty years ago. But that's only my opinion.

Q: How do you see the younger volunteers in the firehouse culture as against the older ones in the firehouse culture?

RW: Well, we sort of mingle pretty good. I mean, the older guys accept the younger guys, and

the younger guys accept the older guys. And, you know, we joke and kid around and attend meetings together. And I don't think really there's a separation there.

Q: Do you have any good jokes to tell?

RW: No, not really (laughs). I don't have any jokes (laughs).

Q: Do your trucks have nicknames?

RW: No, not really. They're all numbered. And years ago, our Protection Engine Company was the Protection Rangers, so they put the rangers on the trucks. That's—actually, the Rangers, that's Protection's nickname. Atlantic's is the Rowdies. Flower Hill is the Runts. We all have nicknames, and they put them on the trucks. But each individual truck doesn't have a nickname.

Q: But do you have any nose art like airplanes do? You know how they put some word on the airplane?

RW: Protection doesn't. Atlantic's has a—well, they have a picture of a fireman with a hose and a long shirt and a helmet over his ears. Flower Hill has pictures of a runt, because they're the Runts. But I don't think we have any special pictures on the trucks.

Q: No art on the truck?

RW: Well, we have gold leafing with "Protection" and, you know, "Fire Department," and stuff like that. And then we have flags on the trucks, but there's no particular pictures that I can remember (laughs).

Q: So you have no other art in your firehouse or in the fire trucks?

RW: Well, in the firehouse, we have a big mural of the Willowdale lumberyard fire. It takes up the whole wall.

Q: No, I meant art, in terms of nose art, such as ...

RW: No. A lot of pictures and trophies, but no nose art.

Q: Have you ever been interviewed for your firefighting capability?

RW: Well, I was interviewed about the racing team, the tournament team. We formed the Road Runners, which was a combination of all three companies to form one team, because we had three different teams, and we decided to get together and form one team and build a strong team. And that was back in the—'67 or '68. And you meet a lot of people over the years from other departments throughout the state and the county. And

about two weeks ago at Flower Hill, we sent out letters about anybody that used to race or be on the racing team, we're trying to form an alumni. And one of the fellows came there from one of the TV stations. I think it was channel 21. And he interviewed us—once again, the old-timers—about the, you know, the drill teams and what happened in years past. And we just—it was like we sat around at a round table and we just kind of threw out stuff, and about two weeks later it was television, so I was on television. But that was all for the drill team, the racing teams, and everything. Which is—it's very competitive. And you mentioned skills before. That's where you have your skills. You have to jump off a moving truck, hook the hose to the hydrant, and then the truck keeps going, laying the hose out. Then two fellows jump off on the other end and they bring the hose. One fellow puts a nozzle on, then he hits a target about fifty feet away. And then there's you jump off a truck, dig a ladder into the ground, and you have a ladder climber that climbs to the top. And then we have a bucket team, where you run up. Four guys go up, one guy and the top three on the ladder, and you hoist buckets up and fill a fifty gallon drum, and they time that. So it's very competitive, and it's been going on for years and years. And, to this day, the tournaments and the drill teams are big, especially in Nassau and Suffolk County. And they get maybe four or five thousand people at these tournaments and they have stands, permanent courses. And I was involved in that ever since I joined. Like I say, I still help them out now. So that was—I was very proud to be on the drill team. And that's—growing up, that's what I wanted to do too. Join the Fire Department and join the drill team. So my father, he was a driver and a ladder climber. And then, we had the softball teams, and we had a lot of championship softball teams. In

fact, our team won—last year, they won the New York State championship. The New York State tournament they have up in Hudson where the Firemen's Home is. And my oldest boy is on that team, so we won that State about seven or eight times. We always had good athletes in Port Washington, and we were very competitive, both in softball and the drill teams.

Q: Are your sons now on the drill teams still?

RW: No. My oldest boy was on for a while. And he's an officer in Port Washington. He's a policeman in Port Washington. And he plays softball, and he's played hockey all his life, so he's pretty busy. He didn't have time for the drill team. And my little guy never got involved in the drill team. But he's involved in a lot of other stuff, but he never joined the drill team. And he's getting married, so I think that's one of the reasons he doesn't go on the drill team to the state.

Q: How are the individuals appraised of their skills, their individual skills, when they're training? And how have you been appraised?

RW: Well, I think you're appraised by what you do. And naturally the point system. If you don't make your points, you don't stay in. They appraise you with the point system. But, I really don't know how you're appraised. I think nowadays, the rookies, it's all, you know, when they show up, and the points and fire schools. And I think there's a lot more

appraising going on today than there was when I got in. When I got in, you just responded and went to fires and made your points. And there's a good social life, too. It's not all work.

Q: Can you explain the point system?

RW: No, because it keeps changing. But you get so many points for a fire, so many points for a meeting, so many points for a fire school, so many points for a parade, so many points for a funeral. And you combine all those points to make what you have to make. But you have to make a certain percentage of fire points. You can't make it all on parades and, you know, other events. You have to make so many fire points, which is the way it should be.

Q: What is the maximum points you have to get?

RW: I don't know what it is now. I'm not familiar it. See, I'm ...

Q: When you were a fireman?

RW: I think it was a hundred a year. You got two points for a fire, one point for a meeting or parade or something. But don't quote me on that. It's fifty years ago.

Q: Are they still point—assessing you with points now?

RW: No. At Protection, after twenty-five years, you're exempt from everything, which I don't believe in, because I was forty-three years old when I had twenty-five years in. And, you know, I was still very active and still running into fires. So I don't think somebody with twenty-five years should be exempt ... [WHISTLE BLOWS] ... There goes the whistle now (laughs). In fact, I have my pager, and we'll see where the fire is in a few minutes.

Q: So you still jump up from the dinner table to go, if it moves you?

RW: Yes. Yes. And my wife is still used to it. I mean, many a Thanksgiving dinner, I left the table. And Christmas. And, in fact, St. Francis had a big fire one Thanksgiving Eve. And one Easter Eve and it went into Easter because it went after midnight, the Sands Point Golf Course burned down. And we spent a lot of holidays, a lot of Sunday dinners, but it was just like normal. It's something you did. Your wife, you know, put the dinner on hold, and when you came home she had it waiting for you. The kids ate, and they went to bed (laughs), but just part of the thing. Never gave it a thought.

Q: What are the major differences today as opposed to when you, in terms of the changing technique ...

RW: Well, the trucks are more sophisticated. The breathing equipment is better, and the turn-

out gear—the coat and pants and helmet and boots—they're terrific now. I mean, they offer five hundred percent more protection from heat and flames than we had. And things just keep progressing. And, I mean, you know, if you sit in the cab of a truck now, you'd think you're in an airplane cockpit. There's so many gauges and valves and this and that. And, you know, it takes quite a bit to learn to pump these new trucks and everything, which I don't do anymore.

Q: Are there any eccentric characters in the firehouse culture?

RW: Yeah, maybe I'm one (laughs).

Q: And how do you view yourself as being one?

RW: No, I was only kidding. I don't think there's anybody that's eccentric. I mean, everybody has different personalities. You want to know where the fire was? That was a Signal 8, which means—Signal 8 is one truck from each company. And it was an automatic alarm on Briarcliff Drive off of Luquer Road. And this print-out we have on our pager gives us where the hydrants are and everything. But a Signal 8 is one truck from each company. Signal 9 is an ambulance call. And a general alarm, everybody responds. All the trucks go. So the—and a horn will blow three times for an ambulance call. And I think they cut it back, but I think it's eight times for a still alarm or a Signal 8—what they call a still alarm. And then the general, the sirens and everything blows. A lot of people in town

don't like to hear those horns going off all the times. But I have a funny story. You asked me for a funny story. My neighbor at the top of the hill on Adams Street, he moved in, and, you know, the firehouse is a block away and the alarm blasts everybody out. So he complained, and I think he complained to the Chief that we shouldn't blow the horns because we have a paging system and blah, blah, blah. So one night, right around dinnertime, general alarm went off and it was 2 Adams Street, which was my neighbor's house, that was complaining about the horns and the sirens. So I just ran right out of my house and ran right up the hill. I didn't bother going to the firehouse. I ran into the house, and these people were coming out. The kitchen was full of smoke. Well, the wife burned chicken in the oven, but the house was filled with smoke. So, when we took care of that, got the smoke out of the house and everything, I said to him, "I bet you were glad to hear that horn blow now." He says, "You're right, I was." So, that sort of, you know, settled that. But, you know, these days we have more alarms than years ago, so the horns are going off a lot more often. And I guess it bothers a lot of people if you live close to the firehouse, but really you should have them. But that's my horn story. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: How do you feel about the tradition of the horns perhaps being something of the past?

RW: Well, I feel that we should maintain the horn system, and even though we have pagers and we have Plectrons, which is a radio at home, a lot of times when you're out of the house or you're out in the yard and—or you're in the supermarket or you're anywhere and

you hear the horns, you know to respond. There's a fire going on. But there's a lot of controversy over the horns. Even a couple of our members. You know, one fellow had a small baby and they lived up, I think, around Avenue A somewhere, and they were complaining about the horns and everything. But every time it came to a vote in our Department meeting—Department meeting is when all four companies get together once a year and hack out everything that's for the Department—the horns always pass, so we keep them. But it's been tradition. It really has. But I feel they're still serving a useful purpose and they're here for a reason. And I think we should keep them. And I live one block away, so nobody hears the horns any louder than I do. You know, I had small kids, but most people, I think, go along with the horn system. Every once in a while, you see in the paper people start a campaign. But then you get other people that respond and say, "Well, we've had the horns. We should keep them. They shouldn't—we need them." So I think we should maintain them.

Q: How do you feel about women firefighters since they've joined the Fire Department?

RW: Well, I think the first woman, I don't know, a few years ago, and myself, I always thought that a woman couldn't do what a man does, carrying hose, running into fires, putting up ladders. But this one girl we got in, she could keep up with us. And then, in fact, now she's the secretary. She does a lot of work around there (laughs). She does a lot of work that nobody else wants to do. And she's very good. And then we just got another woman in now, who goes out with one of the firefighters. And she was in the Fire Department

upstate New York. And she's very good. So that kind of changed my opinion. But I think, when push comes to shove, and you got to lug a two and a half inch hose into a burning building and up flights of stairs, I think—I don't think it's a woman's job. But I have no problem with them getting in the Fire Department.

Q: How does your daughter feel about it?

RW: She has no interest in joining. She's a career person, so she's got her own thing going and everything. So ...

Q: Do you have any Afro-Americans in the Fire Department?

RW: Yes, we have—I don't know. We have quite a few now. And we have one that got in a few years ago, which there was no problem. Got accepted. We have Spanish, and, but years ago, going way back Atlantic's was all Italian. Protection was like Irish. And Polish joined Flower Hill, and, you know, they would like split up, you know. And if an Italian guy joined Protection instead of Atlantic's, he got ragged out a little bit, you know. We kidded around and everything. But now, everything is one. There's no more separation of the companies, and we have a lot of different cultures in there now and they all get along and they do a good job. And myself, I have no problem with it. No problem at all.

Q: What is your ethnic background?

RW: You know, I'm a Heinz. I think I'm a little bit English, a little bit Welch. I really don't know what the heck I am. My wife's Scotch. She came over from Scotland when she was twelve years old. So our kids are half Scotch and half whatever the heck I am.

Q: Do you believe that religion plays a part for you in this—doing this type of hazardous work?

RW: No, except that I used to miss a lot of church on Sundays, and my mother wasn't too happy over that. And I sort of—I sort of drifted away from—I didn't drift away from religion, but I drifted away from going to church every Sunday after I turned nineteen. But I don't think religion plays a part. But years ago, we had no Jewish people in the Fire Department. Matter of fact, my boss now, he was one of the first Jewish people to join, like maybe thirty years ago. And, you know, he was the brunt of some jokes. I mean, not nasty jokes. You know, but, now, there's Jewish and, you know, Afro-Americans, and Spanish. And all sorts. There really is. And there's no problem at all. I mean, it's not taken into consideration when they're voted in.

Q: How—how harshly do you critique yourselves after a fire?

RW: The officers get together, and they critique the fire, and they report back to the

membership that it went this way, or this should have been done, or we did a good job.

But the officers critique the fire and then tell us, you know, if we made any mistakes or if we did a good job. And that's mostly up to the officers.

Q: The rank and file say nothing?

RW: Well, when we get the report back, I mean, you know, if something goes wrong or something happened, we'll say, "Hey, why didn't you do this?" or "Why didn't you put the hose on the other side of the hydrant?" But it's not really being critiqued, you know, that harshly.

Q: What would you say are the major annoyances between firefighters? Either at the fire, number one, or, two, in the firehouse?

RW: Well, years ago, there was competition on who's getting to the fire first—Protection or Flower Hill or Atlantic's, you know. Each company thought they were the best, and each company wanted to be first. And then the other company would have to come, support the company that was there first. But now, I mean, we have trucks in each different firehouse from each company. But now, over in Atlantic's on Carlton Avenue, we have one truck from each company, and everybody responds there. And the kids don't know Protection, Flower Hill, and Atlantic's anymore. It's all the Port Washington Fire Department. Where when I first got in, it was one department, but competition among

the three companies at that time. So, but right now, I think we all get along, and we all do our job and we all work together.

Q: At the firehouse? Annoyances?

RW: The TV could be too loud, or it's—there's really not that much. I mean, it's the way guys go to work and hang out and chew the fat, and I can't think of too many annoyances at the firehouse.

Q: How do you deal with a slob in the firehouse?

RW: I would just come up and tell him to clean up after himself, pick up his pizza pie box or his soda or his leftover coffee, or, you know, if I know who did it I would just ask him. But we don't have too many slobs. I mean, it's not that—it's a not a problem.

Q: Have you fought in any wars?

RW: No. I—I was—I just missed Korea when I was in high school, and I was too old for Vietnam. And I guess I was fortunate, and my boys were the same way. They fell in between the wars, and they didn't have to go. But, even my father, too, he was too young for World War I, I guess, and too old for World War II, so our whole cycle never had to go to war. But we have—well, we have this one fellow over there, George Mahoney, he

was in the Battle of the Bulge, and, you know, he just had his sixtieth anniversary there. But we have a lot of—we still have a lot of World War II vets that saw a lot of action. But they're like sixty year members now. Sixty-five year members. But we had a—we had a few killed during the war. We have a plaque in front of the firehouse for them. And then we have—Mr. Zwerlein's in our firehouse, and he has two brothers—or two sons, Peter Zwerlein and Bill Zwerlein. And they lost a son in Vietnam on the Forestall when it went on fire. So it was kind of a sad thing there.

Q: How did 9/11 affect you?

RW: Well, just listening to the radio that morning. And one of the sports casters—I listen to Imus in the Morning, you know. But one of the sports casters that called in, that saw the plane hit the World Trade Center, at the time he didn't know it was a terrorist attack. And he was broadcasting live to Imus about the fire and the flames and everything. And then I heard him say, "Oh, my God! Here comes another plane." And then we realized that—what it was. But Port Washington, they responded immediately, and they set up station centers, and we sent guys down to the World Trade Center. I don't know whether it was that night or the next day. But my two boys went down, which I didn't want them to go down. But they did. And we spent—I didn't go down, but our Department spent about, I'd say a week, down there, digging out and pulling bodies out and stuff like that. And they brought back some pictures you wouldn't believe of the devastation. It's unbelievable. And we were really moved by that. And I'm a little worried about them,

because now they're getting all this—these lung diseases and stuff like that. And my oldest boy, he always ends up—he was in *Time* magazine. He was—he always gets his picture in the paper. He's not trying, but it just ends up. And he was on the—in *Time* magazine, raising one of the flags at the World Trade Center. And then, do you remember the plane crash? Both my boys, like I say, they spent, I guess, three or four days down there. And they came home, they were full of dust. You wouldn't believe it. You wouldn't believe it. But, like I said a couple of seconds ago, the pictures of total devastation, you know, was mind boggling what happened down there. And, you know, the New York City Fire Department, that was the biggest rescue in history. All those people they got out of there. And the Police Department. And the special EMS units and everything. But it was a tragedy. It's the biggest loss that the New York City Fire Department had in their history. And it was a bad day. It was a bad day. And I was very nervous with the—my two boys going down there, because there was still fire shooting up out of these holes and still cave-ins and everything. It was really dangerous work. And they went down there twelve, fourteen hours a day for four or five days. I mean, they weren't the only ones. I mean, we had a lot of Port Washington firemen, but they are my—like my special interest.

Q: Do you think they're going to have health problems?

RW: I hope not. But they're all registered. I mean, they would be covered, you know, through our Department and everything. But I think that people that were down there for months

are the ones coming down with the breathing problems and lung problems now. So, I hope, you know—you know, they had masks, but the masks are only those cotton things. I just, you know, hope everybody is all right from that experience. But it could happen years down the road. That's the only problem with that.

Q: When you're rushing to a fire, do you memorize the street locations through years of practice?

RW: Well, I grew up in this town, so I know all the streets. So, you really don't think about, you know, street locations. You know, we have a fire on Slocum. You know, you're going up, you know, Harbor Road and up Valley Road. And that really never was a problem, finding out where the streets were, for me. But we do have maps in the truck, and when the fires are broadcasted over our Fire Com System, they give the cross streets, and they give the fire hydrants, and they're pretty well mapped out. If a driver doesn't know, he just pulled out a Rolodex, looks up the street, and off he goes. So, there's always somebody on the truck that knows where the street is, so that's not a problem. And all the new streets, you know, we keep up. You know, we update the maps, and so it's not a problem finding the streets or anything.

Q: If you were ever Chief, what would you have done differently?

RW: That's a hypothetical question. Yeah, you know what I mean. But anyway, I, never

being a Chief, I can't say that I would have done anything different. Because, you know, I don't know what I would have done. I mean, we had different type of Chiefs. Some are a little easier; some are stronger. Some are more vocal. But all in all, to be Chief, you have to be on your toes and be a good fireman, be very dedicated. It takes a lot of time to be Chief. You have to work your way up from the engineers to the Lieutenants to the Captains. And you're six years before you become the head Chief, you're in the Chief's office like nine years or—No, I think it's—I'm sorry, it's two year terms. So it'll be four years. It'd be six years you're in the Chief's office. And like we have a Chief, Geoff Cole, who recycled himself and he went back through the office, starting at the baby Chief's job and working his way up again. But most of the Chiefs have been very good that I worked under. No complaints at all. But I couldn't tell you what I would do different, you know, not being there. I couldn't say.

Q: What are the major changes you've seen in the last years of being a firefighter?

RW: Well, like I say, the updated equipment, the more modern equipment, and the response to the fires going to one firehouse whereas we used to go to three or four different firehouses. And I would say the major change was putting three different trucks at one firehouse and having firemen from three different companies respond to that one firehouse to roll those trucks out. I mean, we still have trucks in the other firehouses, but Atlantic Hook and Ladder is the main response firehouse now. Especially in the day, when people are working and response, you know, is a little less than it is at night.

Trucks are always out on the road right away. So, it's a system that—that I guess the old-timers wanted to keep their company identity, which we still do. But it's working, and whatever's best for the public is what I'm in favor of, and this definitely—this response system we have now—is definitely a plus.

Q: Would you do it all over again?

RW: Oh, yeah. I wish I was eighteen again, running into fires. I have no regrets at all. No regrets.

Q: Do you have anything you would like to add or discuss?

RW: Well, like I say, I—I never had the desire to be an officer, but I was trustee back in the '60s and trustee, you know, take care of company business, pay the bills, maintain the firehouses. And I did that for three or four years, and I was very proud of being captain of the drill team and organizing the drill team. And right now, I'm Vice President of the Port Washington Exempt Association, and that's an association we have that helps indigent firemen and their families. And, you know, it's kept under wraps. Nobody knows who we're helping. They apply through us, and we investigate the cases, and if need be, we'll give them funds or help them out in some way. But we help a lot of people, and I'm very proud to be an officer in that organization. I guess I've been in it about ten years now. And I get a lot of satisfaction out of helping people.

Q: Did you start the organization?

RW: Oh, no. The organization's been going on for, I don't know, maybe back in the '40s. And they get their funds from other state insurance companies. It's called two percent funds. All the Departments on Long Island have Exempt Associations. And it's a pretty good thing to belong to, because we do help a lot of people.

Q: Mainly people who are financially destitute?

RW: Yes. And sick. And then, like—well, like my father, when he died, they helped my mother a lot because she was just living on Social Security, and she was having a tough time. So, they helped her. So they help the family of firemen, too. They do a good job.

Q: And what is the most important lesson you've learned as a firefighter?

RW: I don't know. I think it makes you a better person. Being able to help the town and help people. Plus the people you meet and all the different personalities and cultures you meet, and I just think you're a better person for it. And, you know, like I say, I'm very proud to be a Port Washington fireman. I'm still proud, after fifty years. But, I wouldn't change it for a heart beat.