

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Salvatore Zimbardi
Protection Engine Company No. 1

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

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Interview with Salvatore R. Zimbardi
pk

by Sally Olds
December 7, 2004

Q: Today is December 7th, 2004. This is an interview with Salvatore R. Zimbardi. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Can you please say your name.

Salvatore R. Zimbardi: Sal Zimbardi.

Q: And which fire company are you affiliated with?

SRZ: Protection Engine Company.

Q: How old were you when you joined the Fire Department?

SRZ: Eighteen.

Q: And what made you decide to join?

SRZ: Well, my friends were in high school at the time, and some were firemen. And it was just all about being a fireman. That was it.

Q: You went--which high school did you go to?

SRZ: ... [Florida]? ...

Q: So, then how many years have you been a member?

SRZ: I'm starting right now my forty-fourth year.

Q: What are your childhood memories about fire?

SRZ: Childhood memories about fire?

Q: Yeah, or fire or fire engines, firefighting ...

SRZ: As a little kid, I mean, you always wanted to be around the fire trucks. The horns and the sirens, just the excitement of it all. Just seeing a fire, of course, when you're young, you don't realize the danger or the damage that's being done. You just see the glory of it, if you will. I just remember always being interested in fire or fire engines and the fire.

Q: And do you remember who was the Captain of Protection when you joined?

SRZ: Wow.

Q: That's okay (laughs).

SRZ: 1961. No, I don't. I'm sorry.

Q: Or the Chief of the Department?

SRZ: The Chief of the Department was probably, Chief Morrison--John Morrison.

Q: And what do you remember about your first days in the Department?

SRZ: First days in the Department. Well, back in those days, the Department was almost the center or the home of your social life, back then forty-some years ago. And I remember being very dedicated to it, every spare minute I would go down to the firehouse, and I was washing the trucks and polishing the trucks, and cleaning the equipment and learning how the trucks pump and so forth. I always wanted to become a chauffeur or a driver. That was something that you've got to earn the right to do that. You had to be in the Fire Department a number of months before you could..so you could learn to touch a truck as far as driving was concerned. Today, of course, it's much different. Today, with the economy and the world being the way it is, you just can't find volunteers. And those who do volunteer, we kind of push them immediately into fire service--training, driving, that kind of stuff.

Q: Do you remember the first fire that you fought?

SRZ: The only early fires that I DO remember is Bradley's, you know, right down here on Lower Main Street. It was a bar and grill. It was an all-nighter. And--But I was still--I wasn't married at the time; I had a job. And I remember distinctly, they asked for volunteers to stay the night to do a, quote, "overhaul." That's when you go through all the timbers and be sure there's no hot spots. So, I volunteered to let the married men with families go to work, and I stayed, being a single person, all day and all night to fight that fire.

Q: And what did you do all night long?

SRZ: Just keep putting water on the fire and checking the hot spots. It was a very stubborn fire, as I recall.

Q: Was there anybody in the Department who particularly took you under his wing at the beginning, to show you the ropes?

SRZ: Actually, not. We had a staff of engineers and assistant engineers. These are people who are responsible for maintaining the trucks and teaching you how to operate, and in those days everybody was very helpful trying to teach you and show you the ropes. Plus we had, you know, fire schools, our training, and many of the officers at the time were experienced and could show us the ropes. They were firemen.

Q: What was the hardest thing about the training?

SRZ: Getting up in full gear, going through a smoke-filled room. It was dark, and you had to feel and poke around and just you had to get used to it. It was difficult. But we enjoyed it. We did, definitely. Go through a burning building at the Academy where they set the rooms on fire with gas and oil, and it was very smoky and dirty, and, of course, you had your mask on. There was always a ... [??] ...

Q: How do you get over that instinctive human fear of fire?

SRZ: I think you never do. You just learn to respect it. Once you learn what fire can do, and in a fire building, what to look for, and how to get out, it was fire safety. You had to keep your whole face covered possibly have something ... [?] ... on your face. You try and remember all those little things that make you survive. That's the key to surviving. That kind of thing.

Q: And when you say what to look for, what kinds of things are you trained to look for?

SRZ: Well, you go into a smoke-filled room, first thing you do is put your hands on the doors to be sure, is there heat. You don't want to just open the door and something called "back flash" where the room is full of gases and it just sucks all the oxygen to ignite. And you

saw the movie "Back Draft" some years ago?—It was a movie dealing with the fire service, and it's actually a fairly good movie that showed pretty accurately what fire can do. You just have to learn to respect it. You know the old saying, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." And you got to find the fire up into yourself [?] ... so you kind of feel your way around, you know.

Q: Was there anything about the training that surprised you?

SRZ: That surprised me? Well, it was intense, very thorough, very complete. And the trainers that trained us knew what they were doing. And they wouldn't let us get hurt, but they trained us well. That surprises me.

Q: Can you tell me about the offices that you've held?

SRZ: I've held every line office in Protection Engine Company--Fourth Engineer up to Third, Second, First, Chief Engineer, Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant, and in 1973, I was Captain. So, every line office in the company. And, of course I'm currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Port Washington Fire Department.

Q: So what were the most challenging aspects of being, say, Lieutenant and then Captain?

SRZ: Being Lieutenant is--you're dealing mostly with personnel. You're dealing mostly with

personnel at the fire scene. You assist the Captain at all times. You take his place when he's not there. You're involved in most of the administration part of the fire service. As Captain, you're more involved with the personnel. You're all volunteers who get paid the same, which is nothing. Just self-satisfaction. And dealing with personalities sometimes becomes a challenge. And, so the Captain is just has to deal with his men. And women. Of course, we had no women then. Now, we do, of course, and you're dealing with the personalities. You're ultimately responsible for the whole operations of the company. And just making sure your men respond to fires and your trucks are in running order and the building's in good shape. Just total responsibility.

Q: Do you remember any particular incident where it was difficult handling personalities?

SRZ: Yes. There are many times, especially in meetings. We have the monthly meetings, and sometimes things get hot and heavy. There are some controversial topics that are discussed, and some people just lose control. As Captain, you have to try and keep them in control. We had one meeting in particular, I forget the topic, but I had the Chief of the Department in my company at the time, and I had to expel him out of the meeting. I had to ask him to leave, and he did leave. He was so out of hand. That was not a terribly good time, but it was something that had to be done, because that's what it's all about. We're all volunteers. We all get paid the same As I keep on saying, we've got to respect each other, you know. The majority has to rule. You're entitled to your opinion, but in a group like this, the majority rules, and a certain decorum has to be there, be maintained in

the meeting room.

Q: So what happened after that, in terms of the Chief?

SRZ: Well, he came back and apologized eventually to me and, of course, some of the guys said, "Sal, that was a pretty bold thing you did." It was something I didn't want to do, but it's something I had to do. Otherwise I wouldn't be fit for this job. I was [?] what I had done, got an apology-from the Chief. I wasn't proud to do it; but it was something that I had to do, and I did it.

Q: What were some of the controversial issues that would come up?

SRZ: Well, today, looking back, it's mostly nonsense things. Should we buy this type of truck or this type of truck? Should we get this equipment or that equipment? Should we have this type of a membership drill and dinner dance, or this type thing. Where should we go? How should we do it? Those types of things, which of course are meaningless. But this was back--remember in those days it was a different world. I was Captain in 1973; that was what? Thirty--thirty-one years ago. And thirty-one years ago, it was a different world back there, so ...

Q: In what way? What do you see as the differences between then and now?

SRZ: Well, it's just tougher living today. I think people have to work more hours to survive, especially here in Port Washington. It's a great town; better than any other place, but it's expensive to live here. Taxes are high, and it's a town where people are educated, they're very involved in the community. And as a result, you know, being part of the community, which I am, I'm involved in many, many organizations in many parts of this town. So, you really get the feel for what makes it tick [???] .

Q: So what was it like back then, as opposed to now?

SRZ: Well, back then, of course, you were thirty years younger, so thirty-five years younger. Biggest thing was the firehouse in those days. That was it. You went down to the firehouse. When I joined the firehouse back in 1961, I had to wait, for example, eighteen months before I became a member, because there were no openings. The only way you could become a member is someone had to die. And when a man died, you took his spot. Today..difference today is we advertise in the papers. Or we have a membership drive, just to come in and join. It was different back then, as opposed to the way it is right now. You know, you just can't fill the spots, because today, as opposed to thirty-four years ago, it takes a lot more to survive here in Port Washington That's why most volunteer organizations' membership is dwindling -- even the Lions Club is down. I'm sure the Rotary is down. Just membership is down. People are just too busy surviving, their families, and so on and so forth.

Q: What do you find is your most effective way to recruit new members?

SRZ: What the Department's been doing has been advertising, obviously. We have a billboard sign in front of headquarters and they're trying to get members. And word of mouth. If you have a friend that you think might be interested in joining, you kind of contact that friend, bring them to the firehouse, show them around, and see if they're interested. Again, today, one of the--I don't want to say drawbacks--but one of the problems with recruiting is that the fire school is so demanding, with OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration], the occupational hazard rules have changed. The equipment is different. You need so much training; it takes so much time. And the young kids now just coming out of high school who are trying to plan to go to college, you can't put that time in. It's impossible. I wouldn't let my son join because I know the time that it takes. It just takes too many hours of time to commit to fulfill the educational requirements and the training requirements. And it's going to take away from the college. So, those rules didn't exist forty years ago. Now they do. The world has changed. I mean, things are more technologically advanced, and I guess the fire service has to keep up with it. So recruitment's a problem. It's because of those things.

Q: So what do you think is going to happen to the Department?

SRZ: You want my true feeling?

Q: Uh huh.

SRZ: Ultimately. We have some paid members right now. I think there are approximately six paid members who are maintenance people and EMS [Emergency Medical Technician] people. And my view is that in years to come, the whole township will be a paid Department. Every town has the same problems I've been discussing here with you today. It's recruitment, retention--it's just very,..virtually impossible to go back to the way you did things thirty, forty years ago. So that it's going to be about consolidation. I think—you'll probably have one Department covering two or three towns or villages. That type of thing, which will be a paid situation. And you're not going to have the manpower that we have right now. You're not going to see fifty or sixty men at the fire scene, because you just can't do it anymore. So I think that's the way it's going to go. Out of necessity. Out of survival. I think one day you--all the powers to be, in town government, they will realize that and they'll be forced to try to consolidate, pull things together and revamp the whole fire service. Our EMT squads now are running about 3,000 calls a year. That's a lot of calls. (laughs) And, again, we're all volunteers. So..we all have jobs and we have families, and it's difficult. It's difficult. So it's a big problem.

Q: How have you been able to integrate your firefighting responsibilities with your paying work?

SRZ: Okay, good question. I don't really respond to fires anymore. Nor do I drive the trucks

anymore.

Q: Wait, but let's go back to when you did. Were you employed then or ...

SRZ: I was employed. Matter of fact, I was employed in the building which I now own at 223 Main Street. I worked for an accountant who permitted to leave the office when the fire whistle blew. So I was very fortunate that he let me go, and I would go and come back as soon as I could. Today, of course, because of my age, I just can't do like I did years ago, so I don't respond to fires anymore. Until recently I was doing some fire police work, and I'd be at the scene, just directing traffic and then directing trucks in, but as far as fighting fires anymore, no, there's more administrative work now. The Chief [?] opening up the--what's the word I want to use?--the Service Award Program, dealing with some issue there. Because I have experience with insurance, investments, and that kind of thing, they asked me to look over things, join the committee —and that's what I do. Or when they're building. I serve on building committees, financing. I'm also a licensed mortgage broker, so I know about financing. And I worked with the powers to be in town whatever on financing and budgets. So, I do this type of work now, more administrative work than actual firefighting duties. I just can't anymore. I just can't. But I enjoy it. I enjoy it. I, you know, enjoy it. I find the time and just get it done. I still enjoy it, I really do.

Q: What's the Service Award Program?

SRZ: That's where the New York State legislature let the fire departments have what's called pension plans ... [???] ... but you have to earn it. You have to work a certain number of points per year in different categories, and if you do, the maximum you can get is \$800 a month every year for the rest of your life and a small insurance policy of 25,000. That's about it. But you have to qualify each year.

Q: So do some of ...

SRZ: Yes.

Q: ... our firefighters get this kind of pension?

SRZ: Many of them are on a pension now. Our older guys maybe are getting 200 a month, 250 a month, and the life insurance policy of 25,000. That's about it.

Q: About how many would you say are getting pensions?

SRZ: Now?

Q: Yeah.

SRZ: I think there's not more than maybe twenty-five or thirty. That's an educated guess.

Q: And do all of them who are eligible apply for it?

SRZ: It's automatic, if you have time in the fire service, especially the senior men, you're given credit for five years automatically. That's worth a hundred dollars right there. Then you have to earn by making fire service points and so forth each year, another twenty dollars to get to 800. So, the older fellows obviously aren't as active anymore, so they don't really qualify. So they take the five years they've got, plus their pension. So many of the guys are getting, you know, 120,140 dollars a month, maybe \$160 a month ... [?????] ... The fund has only been around for about maybe ten years now.

Q: Oh, so the older firefighters couldn't apply any points that they got before the program went into effect.

SRZ: No one could, no one could. Everybody ... [came after five???] ... five years of service. Then, each year you have to earn the right to have another year credited to you. How do you earn it? By performing fire service, fire duty, schools, training, meetings--that type of thing. So it's--while it's in place, you have to earn it.

Q: Do you still go to all the meetings yourself?

SRZ: I go to many meetings, yes. Not all but many.

Q: Do you go to the work nights?

SRZ: No. I don't go to work nights now. My work nights consist of read the newspaper, things that I do. But not work nights. No, I've been washing and polishing trucks for years and years and years, I don't have to do it now. But I like doing the other type of work--the administrative work and, you know, problem solving and getting involved. Not really problem solving, but getting involved with the new issues and just working with ... [??] ...

Q: Isn't that sort of a best man's holiday for you, because you deal with financial issues in your business. Can you describe what you do professionally.

SRZ: I was an accountant for twenty-five years. Then I became a Certified Financial Planner, and that's what I do now. My practice is dealing with people pre-retirement. Retirement. Senior citizens. And people who want to preserve and maintain their wealth. Estate planning. That's basically what I do. We deal with investments; we deal with insurance; we deal with annuities. All these products that help people to achieve their desired goals.

Q: So it's similar or very different from what you do for the Fire Department?

SRZ: Well, it's different, because the fire company's not concerned with estate planning and

retirement planning. All right. So the concerns are just finance issues and budgeting and that type of thing, and that's really different. Budget and planning.

Q: Well, what's been the biggest challenge to you in terms of your financial help to the Department?

SRZ: Biggest challenge? Biggest challenge was the Service Award Program. The Service Awards Program. That was something new to us, and we were getting various proposals and bids. And just to analyze the insurance companies involved and analyze the impact on the taxpayers and the impact on the minimum contribution, it really took a long time to review that and to analyze it. And that was challenging. And that process lasted for the better part of a year before we finally made a decision. And so it was challenging. It was rewarding; it was good. And ...

Q: Did you ever consider standing for Chief?

SRZ: Well, that's a good question. Everybody said I should run for Chief. "You should run for Chief. You should run for Chief."

Q: Since you kept going up.

SRZ: Yeah, right. But here's what was happening. The family came along. And my practice

started to grow. And remember what I said about the time and..well, here it is now. I had a practice really starting to grow, a family coming along. We had three children. And the commitment for Chief is a commitment for six years. And there are meetings department-wise, battalion-wise, county-wise, state-wise; training. All kinds of things. Yes, you get a little red car to run around with, and that's a nice little perk. But I said to myself, "Sal, you've got to be realistic." And I'm the type of person that when I make a commitment, I commit to it. And I just discussed it with my wife, and there was no way I could do that. There was actually no way I could do justice to my family and my practice and the Fire Department. So I decided not to do it. Put me back in ... [in the ranks instead??] ... Because the Chiefs, today--I don't know how they do it today. The Chiefs are, today, as opposed to years ago, they're constantly on the go. The administrative work and the paperwork with OSHA. Again, back to OSHA. And the requirements are intense and time-consuming. Hats off to these people. I mean, these men--so far, they're men who've taken these jobs--do a great job. And it's a great service to the community, and they put in an awful lot of time. I would say it's almost a full-time job today.

Q: And you said the Chiefs have to be involved with all the paperwork. Isn't that what the trustee ...

SRZ: Well, they're responsible for it.

Q: Yeah.

SRZ: So, right now, we have a full-time office manager who's paid, and an assistant who's paid. Back thirty years ago, he did it himself. We just didn't have it. And so, that's how this paperwork, these rules, these laws have changed. And so--but ultimately they're still responsible for it. They've got to make sure it's done right, and they've got to be sure that deadlines are met. And attend various meetings. And it's hard. And deal with the towns with the budgets each year, the different villages, you know: "Why is it so high? What's the justification for it?" And you're always having to explain it to the mayors and the boards of trustees, and I understand that, you know. Volunteer organization, and the alternative would be go all-paid, and would be a disaster. So, we practice prudence, we think before we buy, and we do--now we do central buying.

Q: How does that work--central buying?

SRZ: Central buying is, for example, let's say that we wanted to buy some Scott Air Packs. That's the self-contained breathing apparatus. Well, years ago, each company on their own would buy their own. Some from this supplier, that supplier and that supplier. Now the Department buys them. So you put your request in. So, instead of buying, let's say ten units separately, we buy thirty units from one spot and you bid it out and you get the best price. So that's central buying. I call it central buying.

Q: For all the different companies.

SRZ: Yeah, that's right. So it saves money, and it's more efficient. So that's a good thing. That's always a good thing. You can buy right and save money.

Q: What was your involvement with the Fire Department block party?

SRZ: Oh, the block party. Okay. I was the co-inventor of the block party. Charlie Lang, a good friend of mine, high school buddies. He was, you know, became Chief. He and I were Captains together back in '73. And do you really want to know how it happened? How it started?

Q: Oh, I do.

SRZ: Oh, okay. Charlie and I, one work night down at the firehouse, at the firehouse, after work, got together, having a beer. And we said to each other, "Let's have a block party." "Yeah? What's a block party?" "Oh, you know, a block party where we have dancing in the street. Have music. You have food, you have rides for the kids and the family, and try to raise some money for the drill teams." So, we talked about it. And we said let's see if we can sell it to the Department. And we did. And the first year, I remember, was--we just shot from the hip. We didn't know what the heck we were doing.

Q: What year was that?

SRZ: That was nineteen--1970. That's the year we adopted my daughter, 1970. That's right. That was the first year. And we put it together. We had rides, and we had a carnival guy come in and we had some of the old-timers cook homemade clam chowder, which was in a big, forty, fifty gallon vat, open the clams and cut the veggies up, and that type of thing. And we had gambling. the wheels, that type of thing, very simple, and a band. Dancing in the streets. It was fun. It was a two-day event. It was over a Friday and Saturday. It was a Father's Day weekend. And that lasted for about twenty years. And throughout those twenty years, of course, the block parties got better and better as we got more experienced at it. And later years, Charlie and I can do this thing by telephone. From the office. Matter of fact, another fellow, another Chief--Tom Murray--came on board some years down the road. So he ... [??] ... co-chairman for this block party. We raised quite a bit of money, for the drill team, to maintain the equipment, et cetera. and then it got to be old hat. One of the things that happened through all those twenty years, we never had rain. Never got rained out. I remember distinctly one party, it rained all day; AT five o'clock, it stopped, and the sun came out and dried everything up, and it was amazing. So we never had a rain-out. So, it was good. Brought people together. It brought the Department together. The town loved it. This is where King Kullen was built down there. That place was the dancing area and the band was there, and just blocked off the streets. It was an old-fashioned block party. And since then, now you see all kinds of followers. The Knights of Columbus doing it. Other fire department doing it. Matter of fact, Charlie and I used to go around to other fire departments and actually explain to

them or help them or teach them how to do a block party, because ours was so successful.

He went around to various departments to help them to raise some money. It was good.

It really was good.

Q: Why did it end?

SRZ: I think the men lost interest in it. See, back then, it was always on Father's Day, and a lot of them had other commitments, and one year, the turnout was terrible for the cleanup. So, as far as I was concerned, I said to the fellows, "You have to make – "I said, you know, it's an awful lot to put this thing on, and then if you're going to ... [??] ... it's just enormous. And I said "This is it if you're not going to help clean it up. This is it." I just was ... [??] ... But good memories. Good times. You can ask anybody who attended the block parties they were a lot of fun. They were fun. But, like everything else, it gets stale; it gets old. And people get tired of it. There's twenty years there, a different group comes in, times changing, you know, the commitment's not there as it used to be. It's just evolution. Nothing's forever.

Q: What are you doing on the anniversary committee?

SRZ: We have a hundredth anniversary committee set up.

Q: This is for the Department or the ...

SRZ: Well, let's go back. Protection. Protection had a seventy-fifty anniversary; I was on that committee. Then it had a hundredth anniversary. I was on that committee. Again, setting up the block party type thing. We had bands and music. We had ... [???] ... so forth and so on. And I enjoyed doing that. I really do. Our Department's starting one, and I'm on that committee, again. And Charlie Lang--my friend Charlie, Chief Charlie Lang was, actually ex-Chief, he was chairman. And I'm on it, and a few other guys are on it. And we'll be getting together to plan something very nice. Probably maybe a parade or a dance or something, maybe a carnival type thing--I don't know. We'll have to see what we want to do. But it really will be nice. It'll be a nice thing. If it's a parade, it'll be departments all over Long Island coming in. And on our the hundredth anniversary, we must have had fifty departments here for our parade. It was just fabulous. And I remember after the parade, we had a small block party down on Channel Drive. We had two bands there. Had a country western band called Six Gun. Very famous. In the '50s, we called it Jukebox Saturday Night, the '50s type music. So here we have country western and '50s music, all night long. And towards the end, they both got together--this is--I believe they were on two separate stages--and they played together, and it was fabulous. I mean, we went through fifty barrels of beer in three hours. That's how many of the firemen we had there that day. Nobody got hurt, nobody got silly -- just a great time. Great fun. It was good.

Q: Was it held outdoors?

SRZ: Yes, it was held at Channel Drive at the Thomson Publishers parking lot, down there.

That's where it was held. We've always had great rapport, very good anniversary parties for all the companies in the Department. We had great participation of the firemen. The departments, the community loved it. Loved it. And look forward to this one, too. This should be a real nice one.

Q: How do you think the community perceives the Fire Department?

SRZ: I think they love the Fire Department. I really do. You know, response time is important. We have an education program for the public. We're always promoting safety exits from a house. Smoke detectors. And we try not to do damage, you know. We take tarps and cover things up around the fire scene. So we try to protect people's property. And I think they respect that.

Q: Do you think most people realize that it's an all-volunteer department?

SRZ: No. I don't think most people realize that. You know, Port Washington now, as you know, has changed quite a bit. It's more of a transient type of town. We should use the word, "Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department," because it is all volunteers. In the city, of course, it's a paid department. But I don't think the majority of our people here know that we're volunteers. That we volunteer our time 24/7. But nevertheless, I think

they love their Department. That's what I think.

Q: When you said Port Washington's more of a transient town ...

SRZ: Well, years ago, I mean, when I was growing up here, I mean, people never moved. They just stayed there. The young children, the second generation stayed here in town. Of course, today, it's almost impossible because of the prices. So transient means constant flow in and out. Check with the real estate people and they'll probably tell you the same thing . There's a certain percentage every year moving out of town. And many of our young people we're losing. You know, my daughter moved to Rockland, Pennsylvania, because she just couldn't afford it. My son went to Huntington. It's changing. That's why I call it transient.

Q: How did you integrate your firefighting responsibilities with your family life?

SRZ: In the early days, the family was part of the Fire Department. We had dances; we had parties. We had just social events; my wife and kids came along. So they were part of it. They were part of the life of the Fire Department. They really were.

Q: Would you consider the social aspect a big part of the Fire Department's attraction?

SRZ: That's what it was in those days. The social benefit, absolutely. That's what kept it

together. That's what made it so strong years ago. And without that, what else was there? There was the common thread to keep it together. So definitely.

Q: Well, how about now? Do you think the social aspect is still important?

SRZ: It's important, but not as strong as it was years ago. I think because people are trying to do their own thing in their own different ways, and the commitment is not there as it was years ago. A real community was developed. So it's just different. It's just different things, obligations to do with school and work and everything else. It's can't be as strong as it was years ago.

Q: When did you first feel part of a team, in terms of the Fire Department?

SRZ: When I first joined. That's how strong it was. I felt very privileged to be elected as a volunteer fireman. Because everybody worked together in those days. It was so strong. It was just a feeling of unity. And I felt it right away. I felt it right away.

Q: And did you form close friendships?

SRZ: Yes, oh, absolutely. Very close friendships. Friendships I still enjoy today, with a lot of the guys. Absolutely. Oh, sure. I've formed lifetime friendships. Absolutely.

Q: Are many of the men who joined when you did still in the Department?

SRZ: Yes, they're still there, and they're still very active. Each doing different things, but they're very active. And some have become friends, clients; some of them, it's just a nice thing, you know. It really is. Really is, yes.

Q: The *Reader's Digest* used to have a feature called "My Most Unforgettable Character." And I wonder, are there any people in the Department that you would think of like that?

SRZ: Well, there was one. Is it proper to name names? I don't think it is proper. But there was one fellow. He's older now. He's about eighty years old now. But I always remember him as a very different person. Heart of gold, but could get away with anything.

Q: Like what?

SRZ: Well, try and insult you. He could get away with it. Try and do foolish things--pranks or something and get away with it. That's a special type of person that can do that and get away with it. And everybody loves him for it, and there's nobody who hates the fellow. But that's--I always remember him.

Q: Now, you'll have an opportunity to edit this transcript if you change your mind. But would you like to say his name?

SRZ: I'll say his nickname.

Q: Okay.

SRZ: "Dirty Harry."

Q: What was it like when women first joined the Department?

SRZ: Wow. Okay. The first woman in our company was, I think, Janet Kimmerly. I'm trying to think. And she was the daughter of a fireman. Her father was--I knew him by his nickname. What's his first name? He's now deceased.

Q: What was his nickname?

SRZ: "Coot." What was his first name? I gave a eulogy at his fire service.

Q: Was it George?

SRZ: First name was —Yes, it was George. Right. And I'm trying to think. When it was first--we knew that she would be coming in, there was an anti-thingunder discussion But, I think, as time came to the vote, I think she made the first shot with the Department. And

she was very good. She's a good person. She serves as our secretary, and she gets along well with the guys.

Q: What kinds of objections did the men raise?

SRZ: Just the fact that it was a female and starting to let females how could she carry all this equipment and do all this strenuous work and this type of thing. You know, that's what it was. But she proved them all wrong. She went to our fire schools and went through training, and she's still active with ... [something about "getting dressed"??] ... She proved them wrong. And she's accepted now. She 's like one of the guys. It's good.

Q: What about the entrance of firefighters from other ethnic groups? You know, what was that like when people from different groups started to join?

SRZ: Okay. As I remember, we had a blackball system, as far as having people vote, electing the membership. In those days we had black marbles and white marbles. So if the man got--if the person got proposed for membership, you went to the voting booth, box. And there was these marbles, which if three black balls were in the tray, automatically out. That's no longer true. Now we go by secret ballot. It's either yes or no, the majority rules. So. Was it discriminatory years ago? I don't know. I don't remember any minority person applying for membership being disqualified . I can't remember. Do we have minorities in our Department now? Absolutely. We have Hispanic. We have Afro-

American. We have Italians, Jewish. It's open--it's good. The way it should be. The way it should be.

Q: And is there any dissension around that?

SRZ: No, no. Whatever kidding is, I mean, it's all in good fun. And sometimes it gets out of hand. If the person, "Enough," then people respect him. It's all in good fun. It's all like a fraternity, the Department.

Q: What would you say was your worst day as a firefighter?

SRZ: My worst day as a firefighter. Coming upon a dead body in a fire. That's the worst.

Q: And where was that? What was the fire?

SRZ: It was in Manorhaven. Person died of smoke inhalation. The body was bloated and swelled up. It was just--it was awful. My second--that's probably my second. My first one was on Christmas Eve. It was an auto accident. On Port Washington Boulevard and Stonytown Road. I'll never forget it. I was due to play Santa Claus that night, the next day. The impact of the accident--the car ... [it blew ??] ... ignited and burned. And the person behind the wheel was only a skeleton, and that was it. And the County came along and actually shoveled him out into a metal box. Just to see the condition of that

body was --I still can see it. It happens today. Each time I cross that intersection, believe it or not, and coming down Port Boulevard going North, turn up to Stonytown Road, if I'm not driving ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: Okay.

SRZ: That was my most vivid gruesome memory of my time in the fire service

Q: Is that how the accident happened, that ...

SRZ: I don't know how it happened, but ...

Q: ... he was making a left turn or ...

SRZ: It appeared that way. Someone was making a right turn, somebody was making a left turn. Whatever happened, happened. But I just--I can still see it today.

Q: Do you ever dream about it?

SRZ: I did in the beginning. I was very young at the time. And it just stuck with me, and it's amazing. Every time I cross that intersection, it's like I'm double, triple careful because I don't know, it's something sticks with you.

Q: Did you ever do anything for good luck? Carry anything or ...

SRZ: Good luck? I used to carry a St. Christopher's medal here.

Q: When you went to fires, or all the time?

SRZ: All the time.

Q: Do you still?

SRZ: No. I did that when I was fighting fires, when I was young and really active. It was in my pocket, 24/7.

Q: Were you ever injured yourself?

SRZ: In a fire?

Q: Yes.

SRZ: No.

Q: Did you ever have a narrow escape?

SRZ: Well, one time, I took a lot of smoke.

Q: Could you tell me about it?

SRZ: Yeah, going into fires, we have what's called an MSA canister. It was type of a breathing apparatus. And my tank ran out. And I started getting smoke and coughing and got a little panicky. And I was able to get out, and I was fine. So, plus the [?] he ... [go up to the ???] ... But that was about it, my only close call, routine smoke. And--but that's the least of it, you know. I've actually never had a problem where a roof came down on me or fell through the floor. That's never happened, no.

Q: Did you ever effect a rescue?

SRZ: No. I was never involved in an actual rescue per se, no. Not that I can recall, no.

Q: What was your best day as a firefighter?

SRZ: Best day? Let's see, what was the best day. At a fire scene, or just as a fireman in general?

Q: Anything in connection with your firefighting connections?

SRZ: Really good days for me were the successful block parties. Because we put a lot of time and effort into it. We really did. And just to see that thing go off. You're at a [?], people having fun, smiling, dancing, enjoying each other's company, etcetera. Those were a lot of fun. And those were really good days. Those were the good days. Actually, you know, my whole career in the fire service was actually good. I really did enjoy it. In the early days, working very hard as a rookie, polishing the trucks and washing the trucks and those kind of things, and going to the schools, looking back, it was--I enjoyed it. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have stayed around so long if I didn't. I enjoyed it. I enjoy it even today. I enjoy being called for this challenge or this particular whatever-it-may-be. Dealing with the insurance financing, new buildings, parades, or this kind of thing. I enjoy that. So it's been good for me. I really have enjoyed it.

Q: And you've been very involved in a lot of other community activities.

SRZ: Yes, uh huh.

Q: Can you tell me just a little bit about some of those and how you've been able to find the time to do so much.

SRZ: Well, I've been--on occasion called a "workaholic." I like to work. I have a very

understanding wife. My accounting and tax practice that I had some years ago required quite a bit of my time. And my wife was always there with me. And she encouraged me. Matter of fact, she used to--she still does work with me. I just found the time. I don't know, somehow it works out. And sometimes, very seldom, put in a few extra hours at night. I mean, you know, I'm self employed. I own my own building, so ... [??] ... to work. And I can do the type of work that I do after hours. It's really not a nine-to-five job. So, it works out. And, you know, I just like helping people. I just enjoy people. The town's been great to me over the years, in my business, and I just want to give back. And I serve on various boards of directors and various [travel?] organizations here in town, and I enjoy it. I enjoy it, so to the extent that I have the strength and ability to do it, I'll keep on doing it until I can't do it anymore.

Q: That's great. What are you proudest of, in terms of your Fire Department service?

SRZ: Proudest of? I guess my longevity (laughs), after so many years and still--still have the fire in me to continue, and to get involved and to just be there for them, whenever they need me. Of course, I'm not involved in the everyday firefighting any more, as I said earlier. But I'm there for them for administrative things that come up and questions that come up. And just pleased to be there. And so I enjoy it.

Q: You mentioned before some of the pranks that ...

SRZ: Uh huh. "Dirty Harry" did.

Q: Yeah, "Dirty Harry" did. What kinds of pranks would he or other people--you don't have to identify him with this.

SRZ: Well, you know, Harry was the type of guy-- always doing a prank. Harry has false teeth. Some of the things he did may sound gross. He had a habit of taking his teeth out, he'd put them in a drink, you know (laughs) and put them back in his mouth. And, of course, your drink is finished, and then, most people would, you know, start a fight about that.

Q: You mean he'd put them in somebody else's drink?

SRZ: Yeah. (Laughs). Then he'd kind of make a joke about it. The average person, that would start a fight. But that was Dirty Harry, and you expected that. ... [????] ... And he had weird sayings -- just funny things that were funny. And I can't describe it on tape, but people would say, "Well, that's Harry. That's Dirty Harry," and ... [Oh, he did it?] ... Or he'd try and insult you in front of your wife--that type of thing ... [????] ... That's Dirty Harry. Just accepted it. It was good, clean fun. He didn't mean anything by it. But, there's only one "Dirty Harry." There were so many things he did, I really don't want to get into detail. But that type of person. He was a great guy. He just lost his wife ... [????] ...

Q: Did you have a nickname in the Department?

SRZ: Well, I had a couple of nicknames, I guess. I got a car one time. I had a 1963 Corvair Monza. It was a black three-speed floor shift. I loved that car; it was a great car. In those days they used to call me "Monza." Especially, my good friend, Bill Zwerlein, Chief Zwerlein. And Billy Brant, and couple of the guys ... [????] ... in those, and kind of like--it's mostly, it's just, you know Sal, and that's--that's all.

Q: Did you ever save objects from a burning building?

SRZ: Save objects?

Q: Uh huh.

SRZ: No. You're not supposed to do that.

Q: No, I mean, take--as you were fighting the fire, did you ever remove, you know, like property from the family, or photographs or anything special that you thought were ...

SRZ: There were many times I fought fires, just the Chief ordered certain things out of the building. We'd form a line and pass it out. Sure, we always did that. It wasn't a decision

I'd make on my own, because I had no authority to make it. But, as I said earlier, the Department tries to really protect property. We're not there to swing axes and wreck things that do a certain damage. And if the Chief or chief officer feels that there's something needs to be saved, we save it. And we go in, and get it out. Sure.

Q: How did you happen to become Police Commissioner?

SRZ: Oh, okay.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

SRZ: Yeah. For many years, I attended the Police District meetings. They're public meetings once or twice a month. And I became concerned on the manner in which they were attending to their finances. You know, being a finance person. And how they did their budgets. And what they contained in the budgets. The games that they were playing with their budgets and I said, "Fellows, that's not ..." I said Let me run. And then I ran. The financial shape of the district was in pretty bad shape. This it my third term. Things are cleaned up. We had law suits. We had discrimination suits up there. We've had commissioners who, I just think that this badge that they get kind of went to their head; they really didn't think the way they should be thinking. This is a responsibility. We have all the powers of the town board, which means you hire and fire and make policy. And you're responsible to do what's right for the community. It's not for yourself – the

community. So these law suits were predicated upon some discrimination, some favoritism. And it was proved in court that that's what was going on. That was a problem. The PBA [Police Benevolent Association], the Union, and the commissioners are always at odds. Grievances filed all the time for various reasons. I dare say--this was last year, for example--there was one grievance filed. That's a lot. We came in and changed things. We changed the way we do business. We bid things out. We have real true open budget workshops where input from the community is encouraged, and we listen to it and we evaluate it and they participate. We have a chain of command. We are streamlining administration. We're now hiring civilians to do the administrative work rather than police. It saves money and puts more police on the street. And we're better on track with the unions. We had more dialogue with them; we had more meetings with them. We don't always agree. But at least we agree to talk about things, and that's a good thing. So, the result is now we're in pretty good financial shape and we're just doing things in the interest of the community. We have community traffic safety committees out there. General Council of Homeowners gets involved when they complain about speeding on the Boardwalk or U-turns or cell phones. We've increased our traffic safety enforcement unit by one person. We now have radar units on the road. We've increased the number of violations that we give, because we're focusing more on speeding as a result of community complaints. So, we're really working with the community, and let the community--after all, as I keep saying, This is *your* police department. We are here to represent *you*, so what do you see out there that needs to be fixed? And we meet--the chiefs and staff--and talk about it and we get it done. And it's great. It's working very

well. A nice group of commissioners. Commissioner [James] Duncan and Commissioner Maureen O'Rourke. Commissioner Duncan's a retired Nassau County police officer. Commissioner O'Rourke is an attorney. We call some of the captains a CFP [certified financial planner]. So we have that experience. We have a financial guy; we have an attorney type person. It's working much better. And we don't agree. You know, we try to do different responsibilities, different liaisons, and it's really--it's really good. We haven't got the problem like we had years ago. And we hope to keep it that way.

Q: So you said you had just one grievance in the past year compared to how many ...

SRZ: Oh, gosh.

Q: ... would you--were there before you came on board?

SRZ: Lots. I mean, lots. There was too many. We had one, maybe two in the last year.

Q: Have there ever been any law suits against the Fire Department?

SRZ: Not that I know of. Not to my knowledge. No, wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. Yes. I remember years ago, when I was younger, I was on the ambulance squad. This is before we had the fourth company--the EMS [Emergency

Medical Services]. And I was in the back with a patient, and someone else was driving the ambulance and got involved in an accident. Somebody hit us. And there was a law suit. I don't remember what the outcome was, but it wasn't--but that type of thing. A law suit for improper fire service? I don't think so. Most of it was vehicles. Sometimes a fire truck would, you know, hit something, or someone would hit a fire truck. It's tough to stop these things once they get going -- and so there may have been some of those type of law suits, but I don't think there were any because of improper fire service. No, not at all.

Q: Did you ever serve in the military?

SRZ: No. It's funny. I went down to Whitehall Street with a bus load of people. This is weird, but I was just married. I got married in October, and I think it was January. So, I went down to Whitehall Street ...

Q: What year?

SRZ: Probably '62. Yeah, '62. We were being processed. We were taking our shots right arm, left arm; getting examined. And then this sergeant said, "All married men fall out." "What's he talking about?" "Just get dressed and go on home." You could sign something that you were a married man and you wouldn't get drafted in those days. We got dressed and went home. We're all ready to go, and making plans to go, and I guess after that

there was a rush to the altar: people got married right away. So, —no, I never served. No. Was I ready to go? Yes, I was. I was being processed. I already had my shots.

Q: What would you say the impact of 9/11 was on the Department? And on you personally?

SRZ: Well, I lost a good friend on 9/11. So, everyone counted. I used to work with him part-time during tax season. And he died a very miserable death, I think he never knew what hit him. He was on the 97th floor of the first tower I think it must have killed him just like that. As far as the fire service is concerned, of course we're aware of it. We've gotten more and more equipment--safety equipment and that type of thing. The Police Department's done the same thing. We've gotten some new anti-terrorist gear.

Q: What kinds of equipment did the Fire Department get?

SRZ: Special suits. Breathing suits ... Breathing apparatus. Special suits. Same for police. You know, the special outfits the fellows wear.

Q: Special in what way? How are they different from the other, the turn-out gear?

SRZ: Biohazard-proof, chemical- proof. They're chemical suits. Never had them before. That's the chemical suits. Because of the ... [??] ... and the gases that can be used. ... [??] ...

Q: What would you say is the most important lesson you learned in firefighting?

SRZ: Most important lesson I learned? Just to respect fire. Respect fire. When you go through the schools and the training, and you see firsthand what fire can do, you learn to respect it. I guess when you're young, it's glory, but then you think now there's guys in there. We've got to put this fire out. They're really risking their lives to try to contain this stuff. And you learn that where there's smoke, there's fire and to be careful. And to this day, you know, when I go into a strange building the first thing I look for is the exits. Where's my way out? I go into a hotel in the city someplace: where's my way out? That's all in my training. I remember that. Over floor, out and down; once you're out, you stay out. These are things you learn, so you respect fire. And we try to teach the kids in school the same thing, to respect fire.

Q: Would you say there's anything you learned in connection with your firefighting experience that has helped you in a general way with the rest of your life?

SRZ: Yeah. Well, as it turns out, when you're a firefighter, you're helping people. As it turns out, my career has been helping people, whether it's business or as a volunteer. So I guess I learned early on that helping people is a good thing. And so, yes, I learned that very early on.

Q: What do you think the value of this oral history project is?

SRZ: I think it's good. I think it--I think what you're trying to do is to get the history of the Fire Department. Is that idea? So that people coming into town know what the Fire Department's all about. It brings out what your volunteers have been through over the years, to show how it evolved. I think someday when this department goes paid by virtue of the county or the town taking over, people can look back and see what it was years ago and this is very important, I think, for our history, for our community, for the fire service. I think it's a very good thing you're doing, and it will be valuable.

Q: Do you think the Department would consider changing the name officially to the Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department?

SRZ: I don't know.

Q: Would you be in favor of that?

SRZ: I would be. It more clearly describes what we are. We are volunteers, and I think the more the public knows that, the better off we are. Some people may think that we're paid, and that we're paid firemen, but they might want to volunteer a few hours. So, it couldn't hurt.

Q: Is there anything else about your involvement with the Fire Department that we haven't

talked about that you think is meaningful?

SRZ: Well, I mean my big thing in the Fire Department, of course, was coming up the line as Captain and dealing with the block party, which in those days was a huge thing for the community and for the Department. And just by my staying and being available. As life changes, I've changed. From firefighter to truck driver, to pump operator to now administrative. And there's just a whole evolution, and I'm happy about it. Do I miss it? Yes, I miss it. But, you know, I just can't do it. The brain says yes; the body says no. You know, and the body doesn't move. (laughs). But I enjoy other things. And so I've had a nice career there. I really have. I enjoyed it. I still do. I still do. And I recommend anybody else with free time, contact the Fire Department or one of the line companies and get involved. It's a good thing. While we still have the volunteer fire service like we do today.

Q: Okay. Thank you very much.

SRZ: My pleasure.