

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Ex-Chief Peter J. Zwerlein  
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 May 26th, 2004. We are at the Port Washington Library's Oral History Department. My name is Margaret Dildilian, and I'm so pleased to be interviewing Peter J. Zwerlein, who is Chief of Protection Fire Company. [He is a member of Protection Engine Company and was Chief of the Port Washington Fire Department between 1989 and 1991].

Peter, you have a long and varied career, and you've lived your whole life in Port Washington. Can you tell me something about what your childhood was like in Port Washington? Particularly, coming from a firefighting background.

Peter J. Zwerlein: Well, of course, it was a lot different back then. No doubt about it. I grew up on Shore Road in the vicinity of Lewis Oil Company. My father grew up in that same area, so we've been there for a long time. I can remember being in the water every day of the summer, because it was right across the street from our house. And when you could walk across Shore Road and not worry about a car coming the other way. Walk across slowly (laughs) and not worry about a car. Still, a nicer time.

Q: That's wonderful. Did anything specific happen in your childhood that made you want to become a firefighter?

PJZ: No, matter of fact, I have very fond memories of growing up, my father being a firefighter, and my uncles. Later on, my brothers. And just knowing the people who

were firefighters. The picnics that we used to have in the summertime, especially July 4th. Every July 4th, we'd have a picnic out on one of the estates in Sands Point. The owners would let us use the beach. And for days before, the members would make clam chowder up at the fire house. You know, just from soup to nuts. They were the chefs, and they had people who had specialties, but it would take actually two or three days to get everything set up, transported down there. It was just a fun time. As I got older, my brother Bill was a member. He's seven years older than I. And he was really into the Fire Department. I was probably in junior high school, if not younger than that, and he was going every day, every night, doing something. And I can remember swearing that I was never going to join, you know, because it takes so much of his time, you know. Why would you want to do that type of thing? And, of course, I ended up joining and being chief, and the rest is history, as they say.

Q: Can you remember your grandfather at all, since he was also a fireman?

PJZ: I remember my grandfather, but when I remember him, he wasn't a fireman. I don't think he was in—he was in Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company. And ...

Q: So, you don't remember any stories ...

PJZ: No.

Q: ... that he might have had?

PJZ: Yeah, no, not when he was in. No, no. I can recall my father.

Q: Your father?

PJZ: Yeah.

Q: You remember stories of what life was like for him as a firefighter?

PJZ: Well, I remember, as a kid, you know, lying in bed at night. And, at that time, the only way of notifying anybody of a fire was the horns and the sirens. And the sirens going off, and him running out to the fire. And, later on if he came back, or the next day, his clothes would be smelling of smoke, you know, just because of the fire and what-not. And that happened quite a bit. And memories like that. Yep.

Q: Was he ever injured? Did he ever ...

PJZ: Not that I'm aware of. No, he used to drive the trucks quite frequently, in my memory. You know, before that, when he was younger, perhaps he did more actual firefighting. But he pumped the trucks mostly.

Q: So the influence on you, was particularly by your brother?

PJZ: Yes. My father—yeah, my brothers more than my father, I guess. Because my father worked a lot. He owned a soft ice cream store called Tastee-Freeze in Manorhaven. And from, I guess, when I was eight years old till I graduated high school, he was there every summer. He had to be there every day. So, it was a little hard for him to do a lot. But I would think probably mostly from my brother. Yeah.

Q: And why did you join the company you did join, because your entire family ...

PJZ: [It was] really the only company I knew, because my entire—exactly, my entire family, except for my grandfather were members of Protection.

Q: And how old were you when you joined?

PJZ: I was nineteen. At the time, there were waiting lists to get into the company, and ...

Q: Is that different from now?

PJZ: Oh, different. Very different. Now, you could walk in any time. I mean, there're openings—probably twenty, twenty-five openings, if not more. But there was just—I was lucky because one of the members ahead of me—the person ahead of me on the

waiting list—had been a member previously. And he was what they call an honorary member. So he had been in, was active, either moved away, or for whatever reason could not remain active so he became honorary. And he either came back or, for some reason, to start to be active again, but he had to be re-elected. And he was ahead of me. But since he was already an honorary member and was more or less in the company, he stepped aside and let me go ahead of him. So I got in. It was a big thing, because, you know, I could have waited years to get in. That's how it was. You had to wait for somebody to die to get in to the company. That's about the only way you would get in.

Q: That's amazing.

PJZ: Yeah.

Q: What was your initial training like in those years when you first went in? And what were you called as an initial firefighter?

PJZ: A rookie.

Q: A rookie.

PJZ: A rookie.

Q: Not a probie, but a rookie.

PJZ: A rookie. And, as far as I know, they're still called rookies. Initial training was in-house training. They would have a training officer assigned, one of the members. Then, as they do today, Nassau County Fire Service Academy has a fire training center out in Bethpage, which we go to once or twice during the fall—spring, fall, and summer. And during the winter the Nassau County Fire Training Academy has classes. They send instructors around to the different fire departments, and that was the training.

Q: And the training specifically is in the pits over in Bethpage?

PJZ: They have pits with flammable liquids. They have what they call a taxpayer building, a simulated—like the stores along Main Street where you'd have a store on the first floor and then apartments above.

Q: And how was the equipment at that time compared to what it is now, when you first went in? The fire trucks? The gear that you wore?

PJZ: Well, of course, there's a lot more gear. Because there's a lot more focus on safety than there was. Big strides in protective gear, as far as non-flammable equipment. That type of thing.

Q: You had asbestos at that time, or ...

PJZ: As far as the gear goes?

Q: Yes.

PJZ: No, it was canvas. And we had some rubber coats. And—but most of the coats were made out of just plain old canvas. Duck. Duck fabric, it was called—D-U-C-K.

Q: And today, they're ...

PJZ: Today, they're made out of Nomex or some fire retardant, space age material.

Q: And it's lighter weight, so that it's not as heavy on you?

PJZ: You know, it is—it's heavier.

Q: Really?

PJZ: It's heavier, because there's layers, and the thermal barriers inside the coats are heavy. Very warm. They're not warm; they're hot. When you're inside a fire, they're hot. And even if you're standing outside on a ninety degree day, they're ... [INAUDIBLE] ... Not



only do you wear boots now, but you wear what they call turn-out pants, which is the same material. Covers your legs from your ankles up to your—I guess up to your chest. Put a coat over that. A turn-out coat, they call it. And—and then you have a hood that you put on. So, it's a lot heavier, a lot more cumbersome than it used to be. But it's a lot more protective, too. Which is one of the problems. Because you're so—you're in an envelope. And you can go deep into a fire without feeling the heat, which is dangerous. You get further in. And, because of all the protection you have, you may not know that you're in too far before it's too late.

Q: Have you experienced that yourself in your initial years? Going into a fire that's—or what was, in the initial years—you were—were you with the company when they had the big lumber yard ...

PJZ: Yes, I was a first lieutenant—a second lieutenant. Yes.

Q: You were a second lieutenant at the lumber yard fire.

PJZ: At the lumber yard fire. Yes.

Q: That was in '75, I believe?

PJZ: '75, '76.

Q: Yes.

PJZ: Somewhere around there. Yes.

Q: So, that was a rather dangerous fire.

PJZ: Dangerous fire. Not so—not so much because it was—it was dangerous, yes. But it was a wide open area. You didn't have to worry about crawling into buildings and rooms and stuff. But it was—I was on the—one of the first two trucks out of Protection Main House on South Washington Street. And, being the officer in charge, I was in the front seat. And we pulled into the lumber yard, and, of course, the whole thing was roaring. You could probably see it two, three miles away.

Q: Was there loss of life?

PJZ: No loss of life, no. But it was so hot that it cracked the windshield on the truck. I always joke that's how we knew we were close enough, because the windshields cracked. But that was ...

Q: Amazing.

PJZ: ... that was a big fire. But again, not so dangerous, because it was a wide open area.

There wasn't confined spaces or anything like that.

Q: Right, right. And any other particular, during the initial years, that are outstanding?

What were you thinking as a rookie on a fire truck screaming to a fire?

PJZ: It was exciting.

Q: What goes through a firefighter's mind?

PJZ: Well, at that time, it was just the excitement of, you know, being a fireman, number one, and after waiting all those years to become one. I can remember wanting to wear the jacket with the company name on it, but at that time, the only time you could wear it is if you were a member, you know. And I was—they wouldn't let me have one, you know. ... Finally, I could wear one. But it was exciting. At that time, you could ride on the back step of the truck. Now, you have to ride inside of the enclosed cab.

Q: Why was that done? Because of safety reasons?

PJZ: Safety reasons. Yeah, people falling off the back type thing, which I think maybe it happened here once years and years ago before I was ever in. Very exciting. Very exhilarating. And just exciting.

Q: And what is it inside of you that—and your entire family—what are the qualities that make you want to serve your community in this way?

PJZ: You know, coming up through the ranks as chief and stuff, people say, you know, "Why do you do it?" you know. "Do you want to help your fellow man?" Stuff like that. No. Really, that never entered my mind. It was just my family was in it. I knew what it was like. I knew the camaraderie. I knew the excitement of it, just seeing my brothers and my father and my uncles and stuff involved in it. That's why I joined. I think that most people join, they say because, you know, to help my neighbor. I think it's because they might know somebody who's a member there, or you know, they say, "Boy, you seem to have a good time when you're at the fire house. I think I'll join," or something. Things like that. Later on, that—but later on, you—even if you join not for the right reasons—quote, unquote, "the right reasons"—I think later on as you see what's involved and you get involved and you see the attitude of the other men, women, that your feelings change and you are there for a specific purpose.

Q: So you don't really think that it's any religious calling particularly. It's basically your gut reaction to the excitement of the fire?

PJZ: Yeah. I'm not saying—I'm not speaking for everybody. But I think for the majority, I think, yeah, the excitement that, you know, it looks good. It looks like fun. Let's try it.

Q: But does it ever cross your mind that you may die?

PJZ: It did once, when I fell through a floor.

Q: Well, tell us about that. When was that?

PJZ: That was—I'm not sure the year. But I was probably captain, at the time, of Protection, so that was in the late '70s.

Q: Yes, you became captain in '78.

PJZ: Yeah, '78. And there was a fire in the Park section. And I was probably on the second or third truck in. Went through the back door to search. They were already they had already made entry through the front door with the hose lines to get at the fire. And myself and, I believe, Donald Kurz who's a lieutenant—was a lieutenant at the time for Flower Hill Hose Company, we went in the back door to begin a search in the back of the building. And what we didn't know was the fire had burned through the floor. So there was a big hole in the middle of the room. And the fire was out, but there was still a lot of smoke. So we were crawling around, and all of a sudden I just felt myself in mid-air, falling down from the first floor into the basement on my back. I had the air pack—Scott Air Pack—on my back. And luckily for me, the house had duct work in the basement,

for the hot air heat. And I landed on my back, but on the duct work, so it cushioned my fall.

Q: So that was a very harrowing experience.

PJZ: Yeah, it was. Yeah. Sure was. Couldn't see anything. You know, didn't know. There was nothing under your feet all of a sudden, and then you're just falling through space.

Q: Was that one of the worst incidences in your career?

PJZ: You know, it wasn't, because it happened so fast, you know. I was—I was through the hole, on my back, and I was jumping up, yelling, "Okay! I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay," you know, probably within twenty seconds. So, yeah. At the time, it was ...

Q: Now, when you go into a building and there's a fire, do you have to leave your dog tags outside in order to know how many people are in the building?

PJZ: Yeah, now there's a, what is called, accountability. The Chief Incident Commander or the Chief Officer, who's ever in charge of this fire, is supposed to know at all times how many people, and who, are in the fire—the fire building. So there's a system now where there are dog tags with—we use dog tags. Many different systems. You're supposed to leave that in a specific location when you go into the building, so that, you know, if

something happens and you're missing, or someone is missing, you can at least get the dog tags and account for everybody. And hopefully everybody's accounted for.

Q: Right. Have you—have you witnessed any of your fellow firefighters getting trapped?

PJZ: Yeah, there was Bob—Lieutenant Bobby Dayton from Flower Hill Hose Company died in a fire Thanksgiving. I was First Assistant Chief at the time, here, I guess, 141 Main Street, I think, was the address. I'm not—don't quote me on that. It was an automatic alarm. The fire came in as an automatic alarm. And I responded from home in my Chief's car, and Charlie Lang at the time was Chief. And he was working, and he came in his work truck. So I pulled up, and I was directing the operation until Charlie got his gear on. Then he took over the command post, and as I was walking to the rear of the building, Bobby Dayton and Scott Wood of Protection said, "We're going to go upstairs and check for, you know, people who may need help." I said, "Okay." So I proceeded around the back, and the hose lines were stretched and we were in operation in the back. And all of a sudden, over the portable radios, you heard, "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!" And I remember my heart just sinking, because that's the worst thing. And it turns out, Bobby got trapped up there. He got trapped. It was like a maze of apartments and hallways. And I believe a big piece of furniture fell down on top of him, and the furniture was against the windows. So he couldn't tell where the windows were. And he died. Scott Wood made it out. I remember standing at the back of the building looking up. And they had fire escapes. And all of a sudden, he came crashing through the

window. And I just remember saying to him, "Stay there. You're okay. Stay there. We'll get to you." And that was probably the worst.

Q: At that time, did you ever consider not being a firefighter?

PJZ: No. No.

Q: No?

PJZ: No, but we were concerned that other members would. We were very concerned that younger members, particularly, would say, "Hey ..." And he was a career firefighter in New York City—Bobby Dayton was. We were concerned they would say, "Hey, he was a career firefighter, and he got killed. What chance do we have?" you know. "I'm not going to do this. This is crazy." But luckily, it—we may have lost one or two members because of it, but not many. And I don't believe it stopped anybody from joining after that either.

Q: But that says something about the staying power, doesn't it?

PJZ: Uh huh.

Q: Now, when you became Captain from '78, for ten years when you became Chief ...



PJZ: Right.

Q: ... what changed for you, in terms of what were your responsibilities versus when you were just a rookie?

PJZ: Well, I knew I wanted—I knew I wanted to be Chief.

Q: So you had that in your ...

PJZ: I had that in my mind.

Q: sight-lines.

PJZ: My brother Bill had two brothers. Bob was a couple years older than me. ... I would say ... three or four. Billy's seven years older than me. And Billy was Chief. My brother Bobby died in Viet Nam, if he was around he probably would have been Chief when I eventually became Chief. I was assuming that he would want to be Chief, also—but I knew I wanted to be Chief. I just enjoyed it. It was a challenge for me, and I enjoy managing things. And that's what it is. It's a management position. So I kept busy just doing different things—committees, department secretary—fire department secretary—just to keep active in the department and familiar with what was going on. That type of

thing. Training officer. Just kept up on firematics and trends and things like that.

Q: Having been a rookie and then a Captain and then a Chief, what would you say makes a good firefighter versus a really—a bad firefighter? What are the—what makes the difference?

PJZ: Well, I define a bad firefighter as someone who just joins to—for the social activities. Okay. And make no mistake about it, it's a social organization. You depend on the guy next to you. You may depend on him saving your life someday, so you want to know that man, or that woman, and you want to make sure he knows you. And socialization is part of that. It's a big part of it. So there are one or two members who have said to me over the years, "I just joined to go to the parties and the things like that." And I said, "Well, then, you shouldn't be here." You know, that's not what it's about. A good firefighter is one that, you know, does go to fires a lot. He goes to a lot of fires, is active in the department or the company. He is on committees. He's always trying to learn new things. And that's hard sometimes. I'm not saying that anybody who doesn't do that is a bad firefighter, but, especially now, with having to work two jobs and so many other things out in the world to do in your spare time ...

Q: So how do you integrate your—you know, your paying, your career job with your volunteer career job? How do you integrate the two, I mean, in terms of time allocation. And can you just get up from your job when you hear that fire siren and leave?

PJZ: Well, I'm very fortunate. And Port Washington is very fortunate that I work for one of the special districts. The Port Washington Water Pollution District. I'm the Director.

Q: Well, tell us about that. What is the—what is that, exactly?

PJZ: It's a sewer district.

Q: But does it control pollution, or does it ...

PJZ: It treats—collects and treats—sewage. When you flush your toilet, it goes down to the treatment plant. It's treated to an acceptable level, and then discharged.

Q: And you are now the ...

PJZ: I'm the Director.

Q: ... Director of that.

PJZ: Uh huh, yeah. I've worked there for thirty-three years. And, as I say, Port Washington's very fortunate. They have districts like the Sewer District and the Water District. Many of their—many of their employees are volunteer firefighters as well. So they allow them,

within limits, to respond to fires during the day.

Q: And what are the limits?

PJZ: Well, if they're involved in, you know, really involved in something that you can't stop, you know, at work. I mean, you can't just say, "I'll be back later and I'll finish this," you know. You're talking about health and safety and things like that.

Q: So when you do hear the sirens, explain to us what those sirens are, because many of us are not familiar with what they mean. The numbers that they ...

PJZ: Well, let me start by saying the original—original, when I became a member and as far back as I can remember—the horns and sirens are the initial way of notifying the firefighters that there was a call of some sort. You'd have three horns—three blasts of the horns would signify an ambulance call. Four blasts signify a still alarm or, in the years past, a brush fire. Now, they have codes for this type of thing. A signal eight—it's called a signal eight—which is a minor fire, if you can say a fire is minor. But maybe a car fire or a brush fire or an overheated oil burner, or, you know, something like that. Something—not a building. Let's put it that way. Then, you have, it used to be eight blasts of the horn—I'm not sure if it's that many anymore—for what we call a general alarm. Which is usually a building fire or a major disaster, major catastrophe of some sort. I guess in the '60s, late '60s, they started using radio receivers to notify members. I

don't know what kind of—some kind of a signal would come over just to tell you to listen up. Something's coming up. And then the dispatcher from, at that time, Police Headquarters, and now from the Nassau County Fire Service Academy—excuse me, Nassau County Fire [Communications Center]—would give you the type of alarm and location of the alarm, as well as sounding the horns. That's kind of—that's the—the major alerting method now is the radios.

Q: So what happens when you get that signal and you go? Where do you go? And tell us what you do.

PJZ: Okay. That requires a little explanation. The department—fire department—is made up of four separate companies, separately incorporated companies, which have evolved over the years from 1800s to now. There's Atlantic Hook and Ladder, Protection Engine Company, Flower Hill Hose Company, Fire Medic Company. Each has its own equipment. Each has its own firehouse or houses, which have evolved over the years. And it used to be that you would go to the closest house, or you would go to your firehouse and get your truck out. But now, because of the dwindling manpower and the fact that you may only have one or two people going to a certain firehouse, they have come up with a policy that everyone will respond to Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company on Carlton Avenue to make sure a fully manned truck, at least, gets out to the fire. You don't have just one truck with one person. You don't have another truck from up here with two people. So we get a full complement of people out of one house guaranteed.

Hopefully guaranteed.

Q: And what happens if you don't have a full house respond?

PJZ: Well, if the fire is bad enough, we have mutual aid agreements with surrounding fire departments.

Q: And you call Manhasset, or you call ...

PJZ: Yeah.

Q: ... whoever?

PJZ: Yeah, whoever we feel is necessary. Manhasset, Great Neck, Roslyn.

Q: Actually, is that what happened when the—I think you were Chief when the Avianca disaster happened at Oyster Bay.

PJZ: Uh huh. Yes, I was.

Q: And that was a very difficult rescue operation. And I don't—I believe Atlantic was called in on that. Is that correct? Or was Port Washington ...

PJZ: Well, the Fire Medic Company actually responded, later on in the incident. It was—it was a Thursday night. Do you want me to recount that?

Q: Yes. And it was January 25th, 1990, wasn't it?

PJZ: Yeah. And Thursday nights is the night that, oh, the companies usually—not all the companies. Most of the companies have what they call a work night where that's when the people, the members are supposed to show up and maintain the equipment and maybe some training, that type of thing. As Chiefs—there's a Chief and two Assistant Chiefs—we would always go to the Fire Department Headquarters and take care of administrative business and, if we had to, make calls to the different companies and speak to the Captains and what-not. And I can recall coming from Headquarters down to Protection's firehouse and hearing the dispatcher come over the car radio saying—not our dispatcher, but the county dispatcher—talking about a plane crash in Cove Neck. And I said, "Well, we must be having a drill." Because they have, from time to time, they have drills. They don't tell you about it. Just to see how you react and then critique it later. Got down to the firehouse and talking to the guys, and still heard more about this airplane crash and calling different departments in. And I said, "This has got to be real," you know. And then it turned out to be Avianca airplane ran out of fuel and crashed in Cove Neck. Very difficult operation, because it was—picture Sands Point with these one lane roads going down to Hempstead Harbor. That's what it was like. The kind of terrain it was. So you

had a dead end town—Oyster Bay. You had all these departments being called in for help. And, plus all the lookie-lous wanting to go down there to see. "Oh, well, let's go see what we can see." And it was difficult.

Q: But we did take part in that in some way.

PJZ: We took part in some way. Yeah, if I recall, later that evening, they called for an ambulance to stand by. Maybe a light truck. I'm not really sure. I don't remember that well. But at least an ambulance, I remember.

Q: And you were Chief at the time.

PJZ: Uh huh.

Q: So, did you do any counseling for that crash in any way?

PJZ: I got involved with the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team for Nassau County. We had, after Bobby Dayton died, it's a recognized fact in emergency services, and I guess now in life in general since then, that the stress that you are exposed to in critical incidents can really affect your health and your life. So, after Bobby Dayton died, we had a counselor come in from Nassau County. Ray Shelton was his name. And counseled people as a group, or individually, if they felt they needed it. Just, more or less



to say, "Listen. This wasn't anybody's fault. You know, you did what you could do. You shouldn't—you know, don't take it personally. This happens." That type of thing. So, after that, a number of us from the Department got involved with that organization. And this was the first opportunity, if you want to call it an opportunity, to actually help other firefighters after the Avianca incident. So, we went over to Oyster Bay one evening, and Locust Valley another evening, and just sat with the group and listened to them. And, because we had been through Bobby Dayton's death at a fire, we were able to relate our experiences with them and hopefully help in some way.

Q: So how—was it helpful then for the Twin Towers? Did our company, in any way, help with the New York Fire Department?

PJZ: The whole department was—the department got a request to send personnel into the scene. Actually, the day of the—when the buildings collapsed, there was a general call for assistance, and there was a command post—I should say, staging area—set up at Belmont Park, so that any, all departments responding from Nassau County were supposed to respond to Belmont Park. And as they were needed, they would be called, so everybody didn't go flooding into the scene and just make a big mess, a bigger mess. Many departments, and I think mostly from Suffolk County, just took it upon themselves to get on the Expressway and freelancing, went right in there and ...

Q: And what happened?

PJZ: It was one of the criticisms after everything was over and it was critiqued, that was one of the criticism that there were some departments that just took it upon themselves to go in there. Because there's no control that way, you know, if they just go in and do what they want to do. The Incident Commander who was in charge of this is supposed to know, and has to know to manage the scene effectively, who they have, you know. Where they are, what their capabilities are. And that just screws up the whole thing.

Q: Which brings me then to how do you critique your department as a Chief after each incident? Do you go over how things were handled and if they were—if someone has made a mistake, how—how is that dealt with in the Fire Department?

PJZ: Well, if it's a major fire, we will go out, we'll have a formal critique or actually have a department-wide meeting, and we'll have mock-ups of the building and where the actual equipment was set up and, you know, what we saw that may have, could have been done better, so the next time we do it better. On a routine small call, if we see something, maybe we'll go right to, you know, say a person did something without being told to do it and he was freelancing again—that term freelancing—just talk to the person or talk to his captain, his or her captain, and ask them to make sure that he understands it. You know. There's a system here that has to be followed.

Q: So teamwork is stressed.

PJZ: It's very important. Very, very important. You have to have somebody in command. It's a paramilitary organization. You have to have discipline, especially at a fire scene.

When you're going into a building to put out a fire, if you have a hose line going into the front of the building and somebody decides on his own he's going to start through the back with a hose line, he's going to blow the fire right onto the team coming in the front. You can't have that. [That's dangerous]. So, to have people going off and doing their own thing, so to speak, you can't have that on a fire scene.

Q: So how do you instill discipline in your group? How do they adhere to discipline?

PJZ: Well, in the training, it's stressed.

Q: And are they given ...

PJZ: You mean, is there any—is there any discipline meted out to anybody?

Q: Yes. Yeah.

PJZ: Sometimes, if it's necessary.

Q: And what type of discipline would that be?

PJZ: Suspension.

Q: But what does that mean, if you're a volunteer fireman. It doesn't—you're not—your pay isn't cut.

PJZ: You're right. To people who don't care, you know, to members who maybe don't care, it doesn't mean a thing. But to guys who are really into it, who look at it as an avocation and not just something to do when they're not doing anything else, it means a lot. You know, it's—you are questioning somebody's abilities, perhaps. They may feel slighted. I would take it—I always look at, you know, if I did something wrong and I was questioned or told about it, I'd take it as a learning experience, you know. "Okay, thank you. I won't do that again." Or I know why I shouldn't have done it. That type of deal. Hopefully I would learn from that. But all different reactions, I guess.

Q: What is the most unusual non-fire call that you've had to deal with, in terms of people just fooling around.

PJZ: Well, it involved another firefighter who actually died, to tell you—to be honest with you.

Q: So it turned out tragically.

PJZ: Tragically. And it was so unusual, though. It was Joe Teta who was one of the first Captains of Fire Medic Company. And he owned a home. And in the basement, there was this gigantic boulder in the basement. I guess it was too big to move when they built the house, so they just built the foundation around it. So, he took it upon himself to dig around the boulder on one side, and the idea was to dig a hole deep enough that the boulder would fall into the hole and he would just bury the boulder and he'd have more room. Well, unfortunately, the boulder fell on him. I mean, it wasn't a rock. It was a boulder. Something you would see in the Hudson—up in the Catskill Mountains or something like that.

Q: That is terrible!

PJZ: And he was alive when we got there. But the only reason he was alive is because the boulder, the weight of the boulder, was keeping the blood from rushing out of his body. So, as soon as that boulder was moved, all the blood rushed out of his body and he died. That was very—it was so unusual, and it was so tragic too, because he was a nice guy. Young guy, young family. And that was most unusual. I never heard of that before.

Q: That is a very tragic ending to ...

PJZ: Yeah.

Q: And how did you all deal with this? How do you deal with when you see these things, when you're on the scene?

PJZ: I'd never heard of "Critical Incident Stress" until Bobby Dayton died. I never thought about it. I never thought about, because I never knew anything about it. But at that fire, I guess, not at that fire, but emergency call, I guess I was probably Captain or Lieutenant or something. And there's this one guy outside, wasn't in the fire department, but he had a—he was a big mouth. He was known around town. And he was walking around outside saying, "You guys killed him." Yeah, yeah. You know, it was "Shut your mouth," and the cops were trying to get him away from me, you know. And ...

Q: So ...

PJZ: ... I didn't realize until Dayton died and we went through this "critical incident stress", how much that ...

Q: Affected you. So how has—how has this affected—how has being a firefighter affected you physically. What ... [INAUDIBLE] ... did you feel? And there's obviously emotional, there's obviously physical. And mental.

PJZ: Well, when you're younger, it doesn't bother you, because you're young and strong and

full of—full of it. And, as you get older, though, it's a young man's job. There's no doubt about it. I would think nothing of ... many of us ... I don't know if they still do it or not. You would set your clothes out next to your bed at night. You wouldn't take your shoes off and put them in one place and take your pants off and hang them up. You'd sit on your bed, take your shoes off, take your socks off and roll them up and put them in your shoes. Stand up, take your pants off and just let them lay on top of your shoes, so if there was a fire at night, you'd just put your feet over the end of the bed, pull your pants up, your socks are on, your shoes are on, and you're out of the door. And your car was always backed into the garage ...

Q: So you're conditioned. You're almost conditioned ...

PJZ: But when you're young, you can get up at three o'clock in the morning and fight a fire for two hours, and go to work the next day and be back at the firehouse the next night at seven o'clock to clean up. But as you get older, you know, three o'clock is a—and staying up for two hours and then going to work, you just about make it through the day type of thing. Body aches a little more.

Q: So, do you then go to—do you go to counseling in terms of outside counseling?

PJZ: No. No.

Q: You talk with each other, and that is your relief.

PJZ: Yeah, yeah. Specifically, in those two incidents I just related to you, you know, everybody's going through the same thing and you talk about it and, you know, you can't—if you're going to be in, I call it—it's not a business, but if you're going to be a firefighter, whether it's a career firefighter or a volunteer, you can't let things really eat at you. You make jokes about things just as a defense mechanism. Seeing two or three people who've been burned to death is just looks like a piece of charcoal in the fetal position. You know, that's the defense mechanism. It's not pleasant to look at, but, you know, you try to—you make—you do, you make stupid jokes about it just as a defense mechanism to keep your mind off of it, I guess.

Q: That makes sense. The relief through black humor.

PJZ: I guess so. Yeah. I mean, you don't really don't mean anything to be disrespectful, but, you know, just to keep you on the right track. I'm sure if a family member heard it, it would seem disrespectful, and certainly out of—it shouldn't be said. But, you know, we don't say it in front of other people.

Q: Let's turn now to the other second important fire. That was in 1990. It was the Shields fire, before we close the more tragic end and go to the lighter aspects of firefighting. Were you a Chief at the Shields ...



PJZ: I was Chief, and I happened to be at a critical incident stress debriefing in Locust Valley that night talking to a group of guys from over there who had responded to the Avianca fire.

Q: Yes, they happened within months of each other, I believe.

PJZ: Yes. Yep. And I had just finished up my session, and there were two other. I think Tom Tobin who was the chaplain of the fire department here, was with me. His wife, Maureen Tobin who was on the debriefing team, and I think—can't remember the third person, but there was another member there. Carol Swiacki. She's a member of Fire Medic Company. But I had finished my session, and they were still involved in theirs, and they were sitting around passing the time with the guys, talking to them, and their radio—I heard their radio come over with a general alarm. Shields ... Hardware ... at Port Washington. Well, I couldn't go, because I had to wait for the other people. I couldn't say, you know, "Stop this debriefing stuff. I have a fire I want to go to." But, one of the assistant chiefs, John Salerno, was in charge of the fire. And by the time I got herein fact, when they first got there, it was out of control. By the time I got here, it was well under—well out of control. More out of control. Let's put it that way. Because of the type of business it was. A lot of chemicals and paints and that type of thing.

Q: Was there loss of life?

PJZ: No loss of life. No. No. And we did a good job containing the fire to just that one building. I mean, there are buildings looking down Main Street now as we're sitting at the Library, and there were buildings right next door to it, and they're still standing.

Q: Which meant that you did an excellent job?

PJZ: Made a good stop, as they say. Made a good stop.

Q: So, other than those major fires that we've discussed, are there any others that were memorable in your ...

PJZ: Well, there was a—memorable just because of the, and from an explosion point of view, there were—we had a fire down across from Mill Pond Road. There used to be a marina there. There's now a village park, I believe. And there was a boat fire. Boat fires are difficult on docks because there's no water supply. You have to stretch your own water supply. No hydrants out there, of course. We have a procedure for stretching a large diameter hose part-way down and then reducing it down to smaller, more maneuverable lines. And we were down there fighting it, and there was a large propane tank on it that took off like a rocket. You know, it was in heat. And it heated up, heated up into boom! Probably went thirty, forty feet up in the air. And luckily, nobody was hurt. But if it had exploded outward, it could have taken some people with it and knocked them in the

water, at least.

Q: Interestingly enough, you were talking about the water source, how does—you would never—would you get water from the Harbor? It has salt. So would this then contaminate the hydrant? How do you work—how do you work your water system when you're fighting these fires?

PJZ: Well, years ago, they used to routinely draft. What's called drafting, where you would put a hard suction hose into the bay or a pond or whatever. That would be connected to the pumper, the engine. And when you rev the engine up, the pump up, it causes a suction and sucks the water out of the pump—out of the pond or the bay or whatever and then into the hose lines. So you're not connected to both the hydrants and we're not drafting at the same time. It's one or the other. So there's no contamination to be concerned about.

Q: So is that when you have blowing—what happens when you blow the hydrants? That's what? That's when rocks come through?

PJZ: Oh, no. They—well, before you—before we connect to the hydrant and start flowing water into the engines, the trucks, we're supposed to bleed the hydrant. Because sometimes kids will come by and they'll take the cap off, put rocks down there or something. And you just open one of the valves on the hydrant and let the water blow

out so anything that is in there blows out into the street, not into the truck and damages the pump.

Q: So, the conventional red hydrant system throughout the city is what you normally use.

PJZ: Correct.

Q: But you can also use the hoses attached to a pond or the bay?

PJZ: The bay. Sure. The hoses are on the trucks, that you would use. They're called a hard suction, it's going to be a hard black hose. It's probably about four inches in diameter. And that's what you would put into the bay. That is then connected to the truck. It's actually connected to the truck first. And then when you rev the pump up, it causes a suction which sucks the water out of the bay.

Q: Okay. I wasn't quite sure, you know, whether you could use both systems, but obviously you ...

PJZ: Not together. I mean, one—you could, you know, with the water supply now being so good and the pressure and the volume of water and all of that tapping ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: Peter, what goes on inside of a fire station? What are the hours that—you no longer sleep over in the fire station as you once did, as I understand it?

PJZ: As far as I know, no one ever slept there full time. They weren't supposed to anyway. Maybe during World War II, they had periods where they were manning the station twenty-four hours a day. But—and if there was a snow storm or a hurricane that type of thing—we'd have people standing by at the firehouses. But ...

Q: But that old image of firefighters sliding down a pole was never part of Port?

PJZ: No, that's more of a career, paid fire department, where they, you know, get paid to stay there twenty-four hours a day and they actually sleep in the firehouse.

Q: I see. So was our fire department then very different from others on Long Island in terms of volunteer?

PJZ: No, not at all. No.

Q: Others are also all volunteer?

PJZ: There are two career fire departments. Paid fire departments are called in the terminology, career fire departments. Garden City Park and Long Beach, City of Long

Beach has paid members. Now, I'm not sure whether they're totally paid or they have some paid members and other volunteer members.

Q: How do you think Port Washington, since you're having difficulty getting volunteers, what is the direction that Port is headed for, do you believe?

PJZ: I think it's inevitable that we're going to at least have some type of paid members, whether they be drivers who are able to, you know, drive the trucks as long as they're manned, or there's going to have to be drivers and paid firefighters. I think that we're headed that way. Not only Port Washington. I think all of Long Island is headed that way.

Q: What makes our fire department unique? Is there anything that makes it unique compared to the other?

PJZ: I think that, because we have four, separately run fire companies that have their own elected officers and really administer their own budgets, the fact that we have that but we still get along so well and we still respond as one unit to fires, and there's no fighting amongst the company. There is disagreement, of course. But once you get at a fire scene, there's no fighting. Everybody works as a unit. A captain from Protection Engine Company tells a firefighter from Flower Hill Hose Company to do something, he does it. He doesn't say, "Well, you're not my captain. I can't do that." That doesn't happen. I

think that's unique. I really do.

Q: Now, when you're in the firehouse, you don't sleep over, so you actually don't have the rituals, then, of cleaning or making beds or anything.

PJZ: Not making beds. But cleaning, like I said, every Thursday night, there's what's called work night.

Q: But cooking. You don't have the cooking rituals in your firehouse?

PJZ: We have—there's a monthly meeting where they do cook. There's a committee. Four, five, six, seven guys cook.

Q: Once a month.

PJZ: Once a month. They're very special occasions.

Q: Was this always the case, back in the old days?

PJZ: Oh, sure. Sure.

Q: Once a month?

PJZ: More so in the old days.

Q: Really?

PJZ: Yeah. More so in the old days. The Fire Department used to be *the* social thing for a lot of people. There wasn't anything much to do in Port Washington. Saturday nights, you know, maybe there was a dance. And then go way, way back, the early 1900s, they would have minstrel shows. No, you know, the Department. I don't think the Department had them, but they would rent their hall out for minstrel shows at the time. They used to play basketball in the top floor of Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company and have plays at the Department. I've seen advertisements where the Department would put on plays to raise money. The Ladies Auxiliary would put on bake sales and things like that to raise money. So it was really up until, I would say up until the '70s, late '70s, that the Fire Department was, you know, for the people who were members, it was the thing they chose to do. And there were a lot of people who chose to do that. So, that's why there's just a lot of the sociability came in, getting to know one another better.

Q: And did you have the people do these parties who were excellent cooks, or did they have their own special recipes or ...

PJZ: Excellent cooks in their own right. I mean, maybe they weren't professional, but, even



today, John Salerno and Joe Pennetti, they'd out-cook anybody.

Q: And what do they cook? What would they generally cook? Were there ethnic dishes or ...

PJZ: I'm trying to think here. They have a lot of clam chowder. Stuff like a lot of ...

Q: Seafood.

PJZ: ... seafood. Because they would go out and they would clam in the bay.

Q: And it was safe to eat the clams?

PJZ: Yep. Harry Hooper in particular. Tom Kaelin, who you may have—I'm sure he's done the oral history on the bay. He was a bayman in Port Washington, and he was a member of Protection Engine Company. Go out and dig the clams in the morning, come back in the afternoon. Clams on the half-shell or steamers or, you know, clam chowder. That type of thing. Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company, a lot of good cooks. Danny Cella loves to cook. If they had a party and they did the cooking, you'd make sure you'd go to it, because, you know, the food is just fantastic.

Q: And what's your favorite dish?

PJZ: I'm not a great connoisseur, so I like the little hot dogs in the ...

Q: Oh, the little tiny ones.

PJZ: Appetizers, yeah (laughs). I get kidded, because, you know, when you're Chief, they have the installation dinner. And most chiefs, you know, I mean, want shrimp cocktail or something.

Q: So they made sure you got ...

PJZ: And I said, "Make sure you get those little hot dogs in those little rolls.

Q: Those are the pigs in the blanket.

PJZ: Pigs in the blanket. Yeah. I'm easy to get along with (laughs).

Q: How are the captains viewed by the rank, and how are the chiefs viewed by the rank?

PJZ: I have to say it depends on who the person doing the viewing (laughs).

Q: There isn't—is there—there must not be any animosity, because you'd have to get along.

PJZ: Animosity, no. But there is competition. Maybe just like in life, you may not like somebody, you know. A lot of, especially years ago, you would run for a position. Even that you do now, but years ago, there was always somebody wanting to be captain or lieutenant or engineer, and there could be a situation where two or three guys didn't like the guy running so they'd put somebody else up against him, regardless of whether he was qualified or not.

Q: And how did the voting go on this? I mean ...

PJZ: Depends on if everybody else liked him or not (laughs). That's not so much now, but ...

Q: And is it—you'd have like closed ballots you put in a box?

PJZ: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Is that how you do it or ...

PJZ: Yes, yes. Yes. Yep. Uh huh. Yeah, a sheet with the names on it, and you'd check the name off, put it in the ballot box.

Q: Now, you have great teams, I understand. You have the, what? the Runts, the Rowdies,

and there's another one.

PJZ: The Rangers.

Q: The Rangers.

PJZ: And then the Road Runners.

Q: When did all this take place? I mean, when did they—when were they organized, and how seriously do the—do the firefighter take these teams?

PJZ: They were—these are what are called drill teams, or racing teams. Years ago, each company had their own team, and they would—they would participate in tournaments, usually on Saturdays, with other departments from Long Island. Nassau, Suffolk County. And then, as we said just a little while ago, Protection had their team; it was called the Rangers. Atlantic's was called the Rowdies. Flower Hill were called the Runts. And then some time in the '60s or '70s when numbers started to dwindle and companies kind of gave up their teams, all three companies joined together to form the Road Runners. So, instead of three separate teams, now there was one department, one team encompassing the three companies, which I think was a good move. How serious? Well, first of all, it started in the early 1900s. We have pictures of sixty year members back when they were twenty years old, racing. But back then, they used to use the same trucks

that they used to go to fires in. You know, they didn't have specialized equipment, which they have now. There are special trucks that they use for the racing. Again, it was the thing, it was the social thing. You know, that's what they did. That was their going camping, or that was their going to ball games. They raced. And then, on Saturday, and then on Sunday, they probably played softball together, you know. And during the week, maybe they were at the firehouse together. So, it was a very ...

Q: It's a brotherhood. It's really a brotherhood.

PJZ: Yeah. Yep.

Q: And how did the families—how do the families work into this? Do they feel anyhow do they feel about it?

PJZ: Oh, I'm sure—I'm sure there were families where the husband was really active, that the wives had a problem with that person. I don't know individuals specifically, but I hear of people, heard of people that the wives were really annoyed that, you know, "You spend more time at the firehouse than you do here," type of thing. And my wife happens to be one of those (laughs).

Q: (Laughs).

PJZ: But, it's very important to have a supportive wife, especially if you're going to be an officer, especially if you're going to be a chief, because—and my wife is number one.

Q: That's great.

PJZ: I think when I was Chief—and there's a first assistant, second assistant chief, and then Chief of Department. So, there's six years in there. Two years, each position. I would estimate I spent over forty hours a week doing Fire Department stuff besides my regular job. So it's just, you know, you go home, you eat, and "See you tomorrow, hon," you know, that type of thing.

Q: So, basically, you would put forty hours in at the Water Pollution [District] and another forty ...

PJZ: Uh huh.

Q: ... at the firehouse.

PJZ: Yep. Between after work and weekends. Absolutely. To do it right, the way I want to do it.

Q: Obviously. That's why you're a respected chief because you do put in the time.

PJZ: When I was chief, first assistant, I had very, very good assistant chiefs in that I worked with Charlie Lang was Chief at Flower Hill. Myself as first assistant from Protection, and John Salerno from Atlantic. All with strong family histories in the Department. And we worked together so well. I mean, it was like he was thinking one thing and a split second later I was on the same wavelength with him and John and Charlie. We had a really, a good group. And then after Charlie went out, Geoff Cole from Flower Hill moved in to the position and worked as well together. So, we're very, very lucky. It makes a big difference when you have people working with you that share your same beliefs and your same visions, that type of thing.

Q: Not only that. Your life depends on them.

PJZ: Absolutely. Yeah.

Q: Now, you served as Chief of the Department ...

PJZ: '89 to '91.

Q: And the offices you held in your company, other than Chief, would you like to tell us how you—what, you know, how you came up the rank here?

PJZ: Sure. Well, I was elected to membership in 1969. So, I was nineteen. And almost right away, I knew I wanted to do more than just being a firefighter. So in 1971, I became a second assistant engineer. There are, I think, four levels of engineer. And engineers take care of the equipment, the trucks. They pump the trucks. They teach people to pump the trucks, that type of thing.

Q: Can we digress for one moment?

PJZ: Sure.

Q: When you said you took care of the trucks, what was the difference. Because you've been in, you know, from '69 to the present. What has changed in the equipment that has made it better? safer?

PJZ: Well, when I came in, they still had trucks that didn't have any cabs. They had open cabs. To show you how they've changed. Smaller pumps that couldn't pump as much water as we can today.

Q: You can pump today, what? Five hundred gallon ...

PJZ: Oh, no.



Q: ... no, fifteen hundred gallons ...

PJZ: Fifteen hundred gallons a minute.

Q: ... a minute?

PJZ: Yeah. As opposed to maybe five hundred gallons a minute. The hose. Back then, the hose was like plywood with hinges on it to try to fold it, because you had to fold it to get it into the hose beds. It's not rolled up.

Q: Oh, but you fold them flat instead of rolling.

PJZ: That's right. Correct.

Q: And the couplings were brass instead of plastic today. So ...

PJZ: Heavy.

Q: ... how—how did that impact your work?

PJZ: Very heavy. Well, it was very heavy. Very physical to—you get to a fire, and there's a hydrant on the way in. You would stop at the hydrant, wrap the—what we call wrap the

hydrant with the hose, and then continue down and flake out the hose as you go down to the fire scene. Which is all well and good. You hook it up to the hydrant, and the water goes to the fire, to the truck. Then, you have to pick all this stuff up at the end of the fire. It's not over when the fire is out; it's just starting. So you had to pack the truck ... [return this] ...

Q: And now it's wet.

PJZ: It's wet, and it's heavy to begin with. The brass couplings—this is going back now, not today—and they were so stiff. They were material was a heavy rubber at the time and the jacket around the hose was a heavy, I guess it was cotton or something. I don't know. But it was heavy, heavy, heavy. And, in order to bend that hose to fit it into, say, an eight-foot long hose bed, each section of hose is fifty feet long. So you had to fold it several times to get it into the hose bed and then connect the next link and do the same thing.

Q: So you had to be pretty young and strong.

PJZ: Young, strong, and stupid (laughs), I guess. You get smarter and you let the young the younger guys ...do these things.

Q: So did you—were you ever, I mean, physically injured, like you had a hernia or

something from doing these things?

PJZ: Not—I can remember getting cut at a fire. From packing the truck or something like that?

Q: Yeah.

PJZ: No, not really. Maybe, probably, but not that I remember. It probably happened a lot, but not that I can recall. I mean, it's a dangerous, dangerous thing to do anyway, you know. I can remember windows blowing out and getting cut on the hand and, you know, sprained ankles and sore backs, and walking around with the air tank on your back for two hours.

Q: How much does that weight, that air tank?

PJZ: Probably starts off about fifteen pounds, and after two hours it feels like a hundred and fifteen pounds, you know.

Q: And what does the air pack actually do for you?

PJZ: Well, it carries air, clean air.

Q: And you have a mask on so you can breathe.

PJZ: Yeah, you have a mask on. Yeah, you breathe. And, so you can go into a smokey fire or into a smoky fire or into a confined space.

Q: Have you ever had carbon monoxide ...

PJZ: No, I don't think I have. No. I wouldn't remember that, but ...

Q: But smoke ...

PJZ: Smoke, sure. Sure. I mean, you take your mask off when the fire is out, but there's still a lot of smoke from the—before you get into overhaul. You know, you put the fire out, but that's not the end of it. You have the—what they call overhaul. You may have to pull the walls down, make sure there's no fire extension in the walls, and wet down the smoldering embers, and that type of thing. So, while you're doing that, to do all that physical work and still have the mask on is, that's twice as tiring. So you take your mask off, and you're breathing the smoke then. And, I'm sure at one point or another ...

Q: You had it. Yeah. Now, compared to now, is it—the equipment is what? Better? Lighter?

PJZ: Lighter. Holds more air. Keeps more smoke out of your mask, because it now has a, it's called positive pressure, where you have pressure pushing out from the around the mask so smoke won't come into the mask.

Q: It doesn't seep in from the sides.

PJZ: Exactly. Yep, exactly. So, much better. Before, they used to sit up way up on your shoulders, so your back would hurt. Now, they're down on your hips more, so your hips take the weight of the air packs. More comfortable.

Q: How much does one of these—the gear that you wear cost ...

PJZ: Thousands of dollars.

Q: ... per person?

PJZ: Thousands of dollars. I don't know. When I was Chief—I don't know what it is now. Probably, even it's more than when I was Chief, I'm sure. But the air pack alone would cost two—twenty-five hundred bucks. I want to say that the turn-out coat, turn-out pants, helmet, boots—probably two thousand dollars.

Q: And the fire truck itself would cost what?

PJZ: Hundreds of thousands. An aerial truck costs probably seven or eight hundred thousand dollars. That pumper, probably two to three hundred thousand dollars.

Q: And this is all paid for by our tax base?

PJZ: That's correct.

Q: This came into effect sometime after ...

PJZ: Sometime—I don't know the exact date, but in the beginning of the fire companies, back in the late 1800s, 1890s. They would raise their money through fund raisers. So, like I said, they might hold a play or something at the firehouse. Sell baked goods. And, at some point, the law was changed that you could raise money through taxes. I'm not sure when that was. '30s. '20s, '30s, something like that.

Q: And that is adequate? The tax base is adequate to cover these equipment, all this equipment? Or do we still ...

PJZ: Well, it covers it. Whether it's adequate or not, I'm sure the taxpayers ... [would] ... disagree with you.

Q: No, I mean, but—oh, you mean, the equipment is adequate.

PJZ: Oh, we have the most modern equipment. Sure. And we owe it to our members who risk their lives to have the best and the most modern.

Q: Right, right.

PJZ: It's getting expen—it's very expensive, though.

Q: And how do you maintain them? Do you have people that have to polish the trucks, clean the trucks? Every what? How often?

PJZ: Well, as I said before, we have work nights on Thursday nights. And, up until the last couple of years, it was just the members on Thursday nights. They would wash, wax, re-pack the hose, check all the air packs to make sure they're operating correctly. Do routine maintenance, wash the floors, wash the windows. Whatever had to be done, they did it. But, with the dwindling manpower, the Department has hired a couple of maintenance people in the last few years, who do a lot of that now. They wash the trucks, refill the air tanks when they need to be refilled. Check them. As a result of Bobby Dayton's death, we had to institute many—some new safety policies and procedures. And one of those was better record-keeping as far as checking the air packs. We've always checked them. We've always made sure they work right. But now you

have to actually have a piece of paper, initialing that you checked them and what you checked.

Q: Someone's accountable.

PJZ: Yes, exactly.

Q: And if something happens, that person is called to the carpet.

PJZ: Yep, yep. That's one of the things I'm most proud of, being Chief, is I'm very safety conscious. And probably to a point where people say, "Oh, not him again." You know, that type of thing. And the hardest thing to do is to get people to do things that are going to make them safe. You know, sometimes it really is a pain in the neck. "Put this on." "Put that on." "I'm only going ..." "Put it on anyway." That kind of thing. I was very conscious about that and imposed a lot of policies that have to do with safety of the firefighters, which, I'm happy to say, are still in effect. So ...

Q: Now that's for the firemen. Now, what would you go one step beyond that to people who have homes that have fires. What would you—what would be the one thing you would say to them for fire safety in their homes?

PJZ: To prevent a fire?



Q: Yes.

PJZ: Smoke detectors. Definitely. Make sure you have it and have an operable battery in it. You know, change it twice a year. Very, very important. Because most people who've died in fires die from smoke inhalation, not from the fire. And the smoke detectors are going to detect a fire in its early stages. So that's very important. Another thing would be get rid of the clutter in houses. One thing we get to do as firefighters, you get to go into a lot of different houses. And it's amazing. This beautiful house on the outside, and I'm not passing judgements on who lives in there. But you go in there and it's—you ever hear of Collier's Mansion from way, way back in the '30s where these two brothers, the Colliers, live in this mansion in New York. And I guess they died. And when they went in to find their bodies, they actually had doorways—they had stacks and stacks of newspapers, and you had to crawl through little passageways around these newspapers. It was just clutter. And if you had to get into a place like that to save somebody, you can't. And you—and just like Bobby Dayton got lost in that maze. You know, somebody's life is going to be lost. Not only the person in the house, but maybe the firefighter going in to try to save him. So ...

Q: Very interesting.

PJZ: My wife's going to say, "You're talking about clutter?" (laughs). "Get rid of that stuff,"

she says.

Q: I've got clutter, too. I think I've asked some of the major questions, but do you have anything you want to talk about? I'm going to go through a couple of questions here. Who were the other chief officers that you worked with when you were ...

PJZ: Well, coming up the line, like when I was a young member and a Captain, maybe not in the order that I worked with them, but John Edmundson, John Duncan. Burt Monfort who, I think, was the first modern Chief. At least the first Chief that had modern ideas about firefighting.

Q: What do you mean by modern ideas?

PJZ: Well, he tried to do different things that were out of the ...

Q: Usual?

PJZ: ... usual or traditional things, and probably got—did it even though he was going to get criticized for it. That type of thing. But he had the foresight to try to change things for the better. Al Wyant. My brother Bill Zwerlein. Tom Murray, Joe Fico. Let's see. Donald DeBari. Charlie Lang, Johnny Salerno, Geoff Cole. Curley[Jess], Curley Salerno. John Salerno's father was also a Chief Curley Salerno. There are probably

more, but I just, at the moment, I can't think of any.

Q: Were there any major advances in your department that you championed?

PJZ: Well, as I said, I was most proud of the safety—the safety aspect. I also, along with the other Chiefs I worked with. I surely am not going to take all the credit for it. But looked more at how we operate as a unit and tried to promulgate policies or procedures where everybody would speak the same language. For instance, if you're looking at a building and you're standing in the front of the building and you say "Go to the back of the building," well, you may say that over a radio, and somebody's standing at another side of the building, and what's the back to him? Or what's North or South? Do you know where North or South is? Do you know where front and back is. It could be confusing. So we instituted a ...

Q: Language.

PJZ: ... procedure, which is routine in the city in the Fire Department and routine in other departments, but to number the sides of the building. So, no matter where you're standing, if you say "Go to side one," or side two, you would know where to go. It doesn't matter your orientation, it doesn't matter. You know where that is. Which is very important, especially if you're in a building with smoke and you're disoriented to begin with. So, things like that, I think, helped a lot. The Incident Command System, which

came out off—or us, that came out of the Avianca crash. Just setting up a command post. Because the Chief, or whoever the incident commander who's in charge of the fire, he can't see everything and he can't be in charge of everything. His span of control, as it's called, is limited. So the incident command system sets up different sectors, so there may be someone in the back of the building who's in charge of that area. There may be somebody in charge of the press. There may be—the media, if you have a big enough fire. Maybe somebody in charge of the group, sort of, because this one guy standing in front of the building can't see everything and do everything. So it breaks up the responsibility more, and that's important.

Q: And of course, that's your major contribution. What other contributions? I'm sure you've made others, as well.

PJZ: Again, out of the Avianca crash, looking at Port Washington or Glen Cove or Oyster Bay. It's a dead-end peninsula. Avianca—Oyster Bay had a problem. They had a major disaster over there when the plane crashed, and they called for help, and people just came screaming in, blocked the roads, so other emergency equipment couldn't come in. So it's important to have what they call staging areas, where you can say "Respond to ..." for instance, if there's a fire, bad fire, and we had one where we used the system at Sands Point Nursing Home where we had to evacuate people up to Weber School. We had to call other departments for ambulances to help. And they were told to stage at St. Peter's School. "Don't come right down to the scene, because you're just going to block it up.

Stay up there or stay behind the shopping center on Port Boulevard by the Post Office. We'll call you when we need you, one at a time," so you don't have fifty ambulances all bottled up in one area. You can't even turn around. So that's an important part. So we developed a map, actually, divided the peninsula up into quadrants. And within those quadrants, we actually went around town and said, well this would be a good staging area. That would be a good staging area. There's probably about fifty different staging areas. So, depending on where we have an incident, we can block off that quadrant, just by blocking off certain intersections, so nobody can get in or out. And also, we have prearranged staging areas where incoming help can go to, and then we know they're there. We know who they are, what their capabilities are, and call them in as needed. And that's important.

Q: Have you fine-tuned this since 9/11?

PJZ: I don't know. They may have; I don't know. I haven't been involved in an intimate way in that. But I have been involved with, since I've gotten out as Chief, which is another thing, I'm a big proponent of just trying to consolidate the operations of the companies and the Department. As I said, we're four separate companies with four separate bylaws, four separate operating rules, four separate budgets. And things can be done more economically as one group. Do we need all the firehouses we have around town? Or do we only have them because there are four companies who want to have their own building? Do we need all the equipment? These are some of the things that should be

looked at, and I think by consolidating, you could save money.

Q: But doesn't everyone want to save their own turf?

PJZ: I think that's the underlying problem in trying to get it done.

Q: It's more like the armed services type of thing ... trying to save money.

PJZ: I've seen a lot of movement in the last couple of years at least, that people are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. They know that, either we're going to do something on our own, or somebody else is going to do something.

Q: And who would that other somebody be?

PJZ: Could be—it could be government. It could be the taxpayers. Could be, you know it's not hard to see that you could save money by consolidating.

Q: How do you believe that Port Washington Fire Department is perceived by the public?

PJZ: I think it depends on how long you've lived in Port Washington. And if you know a firefighter. One of the—one of the reasons, I think, we're not getting as many people—there are many reasons, as I said before.

Q: What are the reasons, by the way?

PJZ: A lot more leisure time things to do. You have your choice. It's not only, you know, let's go play some softball at the firehouse. Let's go camping, let's go skiing, or whatever. More and more people have to work two jobs, okay? So there's a lot of training, OSHA-required training now that you have to do, which we didn't have to do in the past.

Q: That is more stringent?

PJZ: More stringent training. Absolutely, yeah. And the safety. The, you know, safety aspect. We have a higher economic strata in Port Washington now, where they have a lot of money. They may not have grown up on Long Island where there's always been a volunteer fire department. They've grown up in an area that had a paid fire department, and they don't know what a volunteer fire department is. I can't tell you how many people, when it's brought to their attention that we're volunteers say, "Oh, I thought you were paid," you know. I'm sure it's because they didn't—they grew up in that atmosphere. So I think that's one of the—three of the major problems. Three of the major problems.

Q: It's, the affluence of a whole generation that have not experienced either depression or a war ...

PJZ: Absolutely. Absolutely. That has a lot to do with it.

Q: ... which have no commitment to community.

PJZ: Commitment. That's a good word. Even—even the people—not all the people, but a lot—some of the people I've seen who have joined and, to their credit, they've tried, as I say ...

Q: You say credit?

PJZ: ... we're a paramilitary organization, and there has to be some discipline, you know. When we tell you to do something, there's a reason for it. It has to be done. There's no second guessing.

Q: And how do the young people ...

PJZ: And, you know ... [how to] ... deal with it.

Q: ... from high school take this when they come in?

PJZ: You know, the guys and the girls that have joined are very good. Very good. That's



because they want to join. It's not a funny ulterior motive. They probably—they probably think it's exciting, you know. I think, like I said before, I don't think it's because they're serving their community or anything like that. It's exciting. And their friends, some of their friends join, and they want to be with their friends. And once they get in there and they see what it is, and some who see what it is say, "I'm not doing that." You have to work (laughs). A lot of—there are people who say, "I'm a volunteer. I don't have to do that." Well, your volunteering stopped when you raised your hand and took the oath, you know. You can't just—firefighting isn't something you say, "Well, I'm going to do it. I'll do it today, but I'm not going to do it tomorrow," or "It's not convenient for me, right now." You have to do it when you have to do it. And you can't run an organization like that. So, not to put anybody down, but it's not the Historical Society or something where if you don't show up for a meeting, or you don't show up to pack your stuff away in the attic, it's not a big deal. You just do it another day. Things have to be done when they have to be done.

Q: So, do you go to the high schools and talk to these people, as a Chief?

PJZ: There's a recruiting committee in the Fire Department. I'm not sure who's in charge of it. But there are members who go to a lot of schools with the equipment. Especially the elementary schools. And I think, over the years, probably we've, you know, instilled in some of the younger kids' minds that this looks like something I'd like to try, or at least at that age, it's fun or, you know, exciting.

Q: So how many have you recruited just this year from ...

PJZ: I don't know. I don't know how many. It was probably fifteen or twenty high school kids, I would say. I wouldn't bet my life that that's the number. But from what I've seen, seeing the younger guys.

Q: Have you received any awards for the actions that you may have taken?

PJZ: Yeah, I have. Back in 1977, I think I was a Lieutenant. There was a fire up in the Highland Avenue 82 Highland Avenue. And it was on New Year's Day. Very early in the morning. Early. Six, seven o'clock, something like that, I think. And ...

Q: And what is the award called?

PJZ: Oh, it's just a recognition of outstanding service, which I'm looking at right now. And myself and some other—two or three other guys—searched the building that was on fire.

Q: This was in 1977.

PJZ: '77, yeah. And found the occupant laying at the door to a closet, unconscious.

Q: From the smoke?

PJZ: From the smoke. And, I guess, he was just trying to get out any way he could. It was smokey and dark, and even though it was his own house, he was disoriented, and he found the door and it was a closet. So, we got him out. He lived. He's, I guess, to this day he's fine. But ...

Q: And how has the—how does the public thank you? Like, did this man come to you afterwards?

PJZ: I think the family wrote a letter. There was a letter in the paper type of thing. It's nice to hear. I mean, I don't expect anything, you know.

Q: It's nice to hear (laughs).

PJZ: ... [INAUDIBLE] ... But it's nice to hear.

Q: To hear them say thank you. Would you do it again? Be a Chief?

PJZ: I would. I would be more likely to do it again if I did it right after I went out as the Chief of the Department. Geoff Cole did that. He went through twice. Because I found, after you're out a little while and not involved in the day to day things, that you lose a little

touch, especially with the newer techniques or newer ...

Q: Are there certain years only that you can be? I mean ...

PJZ: No, no, no. I mean, in order to become a Chief you have to have been a captain of your company. So there's ...

Q: Yeah, but can you be Chief like for ten years or fifteen years, or however long you want, or is there a period that you can only be ...

PJZ: There is first assistant Chief, second assistant Chief, and Chief of Department.

Q: And when you hit that Chief ...

PJZ: Right, that's ...

Q: ... can you be there forever, if you want?

PJZ: Not as the Chief. Then, you can run again as first assistant ...

Q: Oh, I see.

PJZ: ... second assistant, Chief.

Q: You have to keep running ...

PJZ: Rotating it.

Q: ... with the rotation.

PJZ: Each company rotates. So there's—when I was Chief, the first assistant was from Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company, and the second assistant was from Flower Hill Hose Company. So, after I went out, the first assistant Chief was elected Chief, so he's from Atlantic. Second assistant was from Flower Hill, and then someone from my company was elected as first assistant Chief, or second assistant.

Q: So, in other words, then, if you make the rotation, continually, it's a far easier ... transition.

PJZ: Yeah, because you're involved. You know, if I were to—I went out as Chief, let's say, and I didn't run for first—second assistant again. Someone else from my company ran, then I guess I could have run against him. But, you know, he's been looking. He was qualified. He was looking forward to it as much as I was when I started. So I wouldn't do that. Then he has six years to work the line. So that's six years, if you do that, before

you can run again.

Q: And by that time ...

PJZ: By that time, it's six years later, and you've got other interests, perhaps. You started, you know, you started to see your wife every day instead of once a week when you were Chief. You're living. You're living your normal life again, and to start all that again, it's hard. It's very hard. But if you were to do it, just keep doing it, I think, would be easier to do.

Q: And have many people done that?

PJZ: Just ...

Q: Keep doing it?

PJZ: ... just Geoff Cole.

Q: Just Geoff Cole.

PJZ: Just Geoff. That was the only one. I can see it happening more frequently, because there are fewer members and fewer what I call qualified, only because they don't have the

experience, when I say qualified. But it's getting more and more difficult, the time constraints. The legal restraints.

Q: Have you ever been sued for anything?

PJZ: Personally, no. But the Department, I think, has been sued.

Q: As a volunteer fire department, you can sue? For what?

PJZ: I'm trying to remember. I think there was an accident or something. I'm trying to remember. Yeah, I don't know what the incident was, but yeah, we were sued. The insurance company sued us and then somebody tried to collect from the insurance company and then did. So then, the insurance company came after us.

Q: And did you prevail, or did ...

PJZ: I don't—I don't remember.

Q: You don't know.

PJZ: I know we've been sued. Like I said, the chief can be legally responsible if something goes wrong. That's why it's hard. That's why there has to be some rules.

Q: You could be sued personally?

PJZ: Personally, yeah. I mean, the Department's insurance would cover you, but still you're being sued. You're going to court. You're taking time away from your job for something you're doing for the community, even though you like what you're doing (laughs). That's ... [when you say you're working for the community] ... And I do. I like doing it for the community.

Q: Well, I can see that sparkle in your eye ...

PJZ: But that wasn't my main reason.

Q: ... that you love doing it. It's wonderful.

PJZ: So, but there are a lot more ... [INAUDIBLE] ...

Q: What's the most difficult part of your being the Chief?

PJZ: The most difficult part, I would have to say, was knowing there were things you should be doing, as far as procedures and the way things are managed or run, but because of the way we're set up, you didn't necessarily have that authority to just say, "Well this is the



way it's going to be done." You know, you had to more or less sell to four companies changes.

Q: And change is the most difficult thing.

PJZ: Yeah. And to the [fire] company's credit, I think most of the things that I proposed and explained—once you explain it to people, you know, and explain it's not going to affect them adversely; it's a good thing—they accept it, but it takes a lot of time (laughs). It takes a lot of time.

Q: What do you think the future of Port Washington Fire Department ...

PJZ: I think, at the very least, there will be paid people to respond to fires during the daytime. Whether we do that voluntarily, or somebody makes us do that. If we do it voluntarily, I think they'll still have a group of volunteers available at night and to help during the day. If we're told to do that, I think a lot of the volunteers will say, "Thanks, but no thanks," you know, because it's like a slap in the face.

Q: Now, who would tell you to do it? The county? The city? The—who?

PJZ: Well, could be either. It could be the town. It could be the town of North Hempstead saying we don't want to pay these individual volunteer fire departments anymore, so

we're going to—we're going to start our own fire department. They could. Perfectly within their rights to do that. The villages certainly have a right to have their own fire department. Economically, I don't think it would be smart. But, you know, if everybody banded together as an area, I think it could be done. But, you know, for normal fires, most of our calls are automatic alarms that are false alarms. And that's ...

Q: ...What are the silly calls?

PJZ: That's a big problem, because it's like crying "Wolf!"

Q: Yes.

PJZ: After a while, the guys say, "I have to paint my house. I have to cut my grass. I have to cut my toenails. That's only a false alarm. I'm not going to go." And Bobby Dayton died in an automatic alarm fire. So, you never know. You never know. But ninety-nine percent of them are false alarms.

Q: And what does that cost the company?

PJZ: Well, every time you run in your equipment, it's, you know, equipment gets used just, at least going back and forth to the fire. It costs them in people not wanting to respond to those kind of calls because you know it's probably going to be a false alarm. That type of

thing. But, so that's a big problem.

Q: And how do you punish people who do this? Or do you fine them?

PJZ: Well, that's the problem. There is not much being done to fine them. There should be some hefty fines. You know, after the second or third time, you fine them a couple of hundred bucks. That may get their attention. I mean, they're not doing it on purpose. What they are doing on purpose is not getting the alarm company to fix the problem, if it keeps on going off and off and off.

Q: Well, does this go off because there's an electrical ...

PJZ: Could be. Or it could be ...

Q: ... or is it because somebody is setting this ...

PJZ: No, it's—they're not setting it. It's, you know, the alarm here in the ceiling, for whatever reason, maybe a short circuit or something, or a power surge. And it sets off the alarm.

Q: I'm talking about mischief, you know. Teenagers doing this or ...

PJZ: Yeah, trying to set it off. That hasn't been happening.

Q: That has not been a big ...

PJZ: That goes in stages, you know. There are dumpster fires, which we don't have that many anymore. But we used to have dumpster fires all the time. You know, kids throwing a match in a dumpster and, you know, that would happen for two or three months at a time, and then it wouldn't happen again for a year. Type of thing.

Q: Has anyone ever been injured on a false alarm? ... [Call?] ...

PJZ: Like did they fall off a truck, or something like that?

Q: Yes, uh huh.

PJZ: At one time, somebody fell off a truck before I was in the department, like in the '40s, I think. I don't know if there was a false alarm or not. But I can't recall anybody being injured.

Q: Can you remember, I believe it was—is it Janet Kimmerly who was the first woman to go on a fire truck ... [END OF RECORDING] ...