

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

William C. 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: ... 28th, 2004. I'm interviewing William C. Zwerlein. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Library.

Can you please say your name?

Bill Zwerlein: William C. Zwerlein.

Q: And which company—which fire company are you a member of?

BZ: Protection Engine Company—Fire Engine Company #1.

Q: First, what was it like for you growing up in Port Washington?

BZ: Well, I tell you, the place was beautiful at that time, and it sure has changed now. Not for the better, I could say. Might be in some ways, with the new buildings and all that stuff. But knocks the pants off the town, I guess you might say. You used to be able to walk down Main Street and say hello to this person and that person. It's not that way anymore. You're lucky if you see anybody you know anywhere in town. Terrible.

Q: And what do you think accounts for that?

BZ: Progress. What are you going to say? You can't fight it.

Q: Well, what was it like when you were a boy here?

BZ: Oh, we had plenty of open spaces and plenty of stuff to do. We didn't have TV, of course. We didn't need it. And I'd get out in them woods there every weekend. Get up, five o'clock in the morning, get my German shepherd, take off for the woods, and spend the day in the woods. Come school days, I couldn't get out of bed (laughs) to go to school, but on weekends, you get up five in the morning and put them heavy, high boots on, get the dog, and just take off. Wonderful times. The kids don't have it like that anymore, really.

Q: Which woods did you go into?

BZ: Oh, we had the whole Crescent Sand Banks, they called it at that time. You know, Johnny Wagner's Farm, off of Cow Neck Road at Cow Neck Road, and then all the new housing developments went in down there, quite a number, a few years ... by now they've been in there. But it was all woods in there, and Manorhaven was a house here and a house there; house here, house there. I used to deliver newspapers there when I was a kid. Stuff like that. I worked for Western Union, delivering telegrams by bicycle. Rain, snow, heat, cold; they had to go. But here I am eighty-five years old now, and that's the way it goes.

Q: Did anything special happen in your childhood that made you want to become a firefighter?

BZ: Well, what can I tell you? Everybody—I think every kid has that in the back of his mind to be a firefighter. Of course, my brother was in there at that time. They started—well, my father really started the chain over at Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company many years ago. Then, my brother started in Protection. There's next. And my three sons were firemen. Two of them were ex-Chiefs. One was killed in Vietnam in '67. They were all firemen, and I'm sure the third one that was killed would have made Chief, too somewhere along the line. Me, I had the Tastee Freez at that time, and I couldn't find the time to devote to it if I was, by any chance, elected to the office at that time. So I wouldn't even be nominated, because I just didn't have the time. I would have liked to. Believe me. And the two sons who are Chiefs now, and they're still active. That's good. Very good.

Q: How old were you when you joined?

BZ: Oh, maybe twenty-two. Twenty-two.

Q: And what made you pick Protection Engine Company?

BZ: What do you mean? (laughs) How'd I pick Protection Company? I had all my relatives in

there and all that stuff, like that. It was just normal to go to Protection.

Q: Do you remember who the captain was when you ...

BZ: Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, now you're asking something. Oh, boy! Think about that one for a minute. Who was ... I think it was Walter Smith, if I'm not mistaken. I could be wrong there. I could be wrong.

Q: And what about the Chief of the Department? Do you remember who that was?

BZ: Old Man McCarthy. Old Bill McCarthy.

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

BZ: We had a big fire down in back of the Port Washington Sewer District there. Coils of rope and brush and everything else was burning. When you first get in, you're waiting for that first call to come in, and it takes (laughs) three weeks before the—every little noise you hear, you think "Oh, there goes the horn." And it goes on, and it was just—it was in-bred in you once you got in. You know, you just went in for that. It was a pretty big fire. Coils of rope and everything else burning, as I said, and I remember it well.

Q: What specifically do you remember about it?

BZ: The excitement. It was the first (laughs)—the first time I'm using the hose, and manning the hose, the lines. It's a lot of work. A lot of pleasure, too. Never regret it. Still active with the Fire Police.

Q: Were there any ...

BZ: Fifty-eight years.

Q: Fifty-eight years. Were there any people injured in that fire?

BZ: No. No, no. No, we—that's one thing in the Department, you know, we all look out for—you know, they take good care of the men. Be sure that they're safe. As far as they can, you know. Any new safety measures come out, we're apprised of them, so we can take advantage of the knowledge of these big higher-ups that know what they're doing. That's what they're there for, to tell us what's up.

Q: What do you remember about the training?

BZ: Well, we had fire schools. Stuff like that. We also had the tournaments, which is something that you had to see to really tell what it's all about. They each have maybe eight or ten tournaments in the season, summer. I think all the companies, the

departments on the Island [Long Island]. And compete against each other for trophies. And we have a pile of trophies around the firehouse there from umpty-ump years ago. And it was a lot of fun. We used to laugh, take our families to the tournaments on the weekends, and a lot of them kept the babies around with you. It was really, really enjoyable. You're all in the same boat. After that—just after the War. And all come home to join the Fire Department, which I wish we had now, somebody to go, though, because we're really short of help. There's a lot more today they have to do than we had to do in them days insofar as attending fire schools and stuff like that. Takes a lot of their time. I can see their points, and they can't—a lot of them, they can't, most of them, can't afford to live in town, at that age bracket when you expect them to come in. But, they move out of town, and they go somewhere else. That's progress.

Q: When did that start to be a problem? You know, recruiting volunteers?

BZ: Oh, well, I'd say after the Vietnam War, probably around that time there. Time of the Korean War. Things started to get tight. Then, they kept getting progressively worse till the place now where we're really hurting. And there's parents realized they're having trouble with the kids—the best thing for them to do, to join the Department. So we had no—that I have seen in my fifty-eight years, dope problems with any of the members that have come to meetings or to fires, or what have you, with that unmistakable odor of dope on their breath or whatever you have it, you know. The only way I know is from the ball games. You can sit next to these people at a ball game, they're all smoking dope

(laughs). No thank you. I'll have no part of that. Never did. I don't think—I don't know of anyone in this Department, truthfully, that has—has used anything like that.

Q: Do you ever go into the high school yourself to try to interest the students in joining?

BZ: No, but we do have a crew that does that. It's handled by the Fire Marshal's Department. They, once in a while. Naturally, the real young kids, just we have groups of them come to the firehouse at times, and we show them where all the stuff is. They're real young; they love it. You know, we hope to instill in them that someday they will join.

Q: Did you have a special nickname in the Department?

BZ: No, no. Just Bill.

Q: Yeah. Besides that first fire, can you tell me about a couple of your most memorable experiences?

BZ: Yes. A big estate down at Sands Point one time, we had a small—a small sort of truck station not too far from where I lived. The first one down there couldn't do much; the thing was really involved. It was—I still got—my ears are still cold from burning them, getting burned that time. Now when I think about, it was kind of silly pulling that little hose out there, just one line alone (laughs) before anybody else got there. We were the

first ones on the scene. And that thing really went there, the old Condé Nast estate down at Sands Point. It really went. We had quite a few big ones down there.

Q: Do you remember when that was?

BZ: Oh, God no. I couldn't tell you just how long ago it was.

Q: So you got your ears burned? You weren't wearing ...

BZ: Well, I had the helmet on and stuff like that, but that thing was really, really honking when we got there. What you do is wait till you get the big stuff there to fight that kind of a fire. Well, we lost it. It was too far involved. Smoke was coming up through a roof when we got there, just with one little truck, you know. That's one of my most memorable ones. Then the one with the three kids that were killed up here on North Maryland Avenue. That was terrible. Terrible.

Q: That was just a couple of years ago, wasn't it?

BZ: No, more than a couple. Maybe, let me see, it was before '67. I know that. It was a long time ago. I don't know just when it was. But we lost three kids in that one. That fire.

Q: And you were at that fire?

BZ: Oh, yes. It was an icy night, let me tell you. And it was cold. I remember that. I ran from Mill Pond Road all the way up to the firehouse that night, middle of the night. Couldn't get a ride, I made the truck, the last truck [c. early 1960s]

Q: At what point did you realize that there were people in there?

BZ: Well, as soon as you get there. The first ones, there's neighbors already by then, usually tell you if there's anyone inside of the—you rely on that mostly for your first line of information for the first firemen that get there. The first thing they ask, “Is anybody inside? Is everybody out?” And take it from there. If they're in there, you try to get in to get them out. Sometimes it's late, too late as it was in this case. Couldn't do nothing about it. You lose one here and one there; it can't be helped.

Q: Were you able to save anyone in that fire?

BZ: Well, the mother and the father were saved. They were out on the roof. I don't know why they didn't think of getting the kids out of there. Look out for their own lives, I guess. I can see that, yep.

Q: Have you rescued people yourself?

BZ: No. No, I usually was a driver of the truck. Pump operator, or driver. Mostly. Because I was in close proximity to the firehouse, and I was usually there. Maybe first or second one there ...

Q: What would go through your mind as you were driving to a fire? You know, especially if you could tell by the alarms that it was going to be a big fire.

BZ: Well, to get there safely in the first place. If you had an accident, what good is the truck if you're sitting on the side of the road there, you have an accident, like that. But nowadays, people have their radios and stuff on so loud in the car, they can't even hear a siren ... ["sireen"] ... when you approach them. It got to be that point. So I got to stop driving. Well, at sixty-five is the cut-off level for driving. So ...

Q: In the Department, you mean?

BZ: Yeah, yeah. Oh, God yes. (laughs) Yeah, so other than that, you go as long as you, and after that, the rules of the Department say after sixty-five, you're kaput (laughs) if you got to drive anywhere.

Q: So what's your role in the Department now?

BZ: Right now, I'm just a fire policeman now. Direct traffic at fires. Stuff like that. And

head of our Grave Committee at our company. Actually, last night we spent four hours putting flowers and the flag on graves of the people that have---our members, from back when. We do that every year.

Q: Do you have one particular cemetery where the ...

BZ: No. We start here and go to Roslyn, Holyrood, Hempstead, Elmont, Mount St. Mary's, Lutheran Cemetery, Cedar Grove Cemetery, and then, like last night we spent four hours up till dark in the cemetery up here. We've got over a hundred members, deceased members there that we honor every year.

Q: So, how many graves did you decorate last night?

BZ: Ninety---ninety-six, ninety---about a hundred and four.

Q: What are you proudest of in your firefighting career?

BZ: My two sons being chiefs. Naturally. Every parent feels that way. It's a great feeling.

Q: And in---but in your own experience in what you did with the ...

BZ: What I did. Well, I don't know. Only thing I could say is so many---so many good ones,

you know (laughs).

Q: Okay. Well, what were some of your best days as a firefighter?

BZ: As I mentioned, the tournaments we used to go to with our families. It was a whole big family affair. We were all out of the service the, having children right and left (laughs), and stuff like that there, which was wonderful. Great times. And, I don't know what else to say--- I can't say I enjoyed any of the fires we went to—that would be a silly thing to say. Put in a lot of extra time on our own. Because, as I say, I'm chairman of the Grave Committee, and it takes a lot of time. Picking up the flowers, storing them, and delivering them to graves. There we go again (laughs) [refers to thumping on table].

Q: Well, what were some of you—what were some of your worst days on the job?

BZ: Worst days. One morning not too many years ago--it wasn't long enough though, three o'clock in the morning we had a car fire in Sands Point. I was the first one at the firehouse, took the truck out. Nobody else showed up. And I took the truck to the fire, rolled the hose out, put the fire out, rolled the hose back up, and put the rig back in the barn all by myself. No help. That's—that's when you know that things are getting tough. Like it's around zero at night, two or three o'clock in the morning, and nobody shows up. No. That's the way it goes.

Q: So what do you think the future is for the volunteer Fire Department?

BZ: It don't look good. It really don't look good. What it's going to be, I don't know.

Whether the county's going to take over, make one big county-wide department. I don't know just what's going to go on there. Take it day by day. The way I look at it.

People—I'm sure other people have different thoughts on it. But it's going to be a rough kick tax-wise to the taxpayers in town, if we have to go that road.

Q: Have you ever won any awards for your firefighting work?

BZ: Myself? No, no I haven't. No, no. My sons have.

Q: Have you ever dreamed about fires?

BZ: No. No, not that I recall.

Q: Was there anything special you did for good luck?

BZ: No. Thanked God once we got home. (laughs) That was the main thing. I'm sure I'm not the only one felt that way about it.

Q: When did you first become a member of the Fire Police?

BZ: Well, I would say, '68, oh, God, I—let's see, I stopped driving, I couldn't go into—be an inside firefighter because I was getting too old.

Q: Is there a cut-off date for that too?

BZ: Yes.

Q: What is that?

BZ: Well, it's around the sixty-five age. And some longer, some shorter. It's all according to the person themselves. They don't say when—the company says when you stop being an inside firefighter, for your own benefit and your own good. Because we have to have an annual check-up from the doctors. And stuff like that, they say, “Well, you're fit enough to fight the fires”, or you're not fit enough to fight. It's up to the doctors.

Q: And, so your role in the Fire Police, can you explain it again, what you do?

BZ: Well, you get to the fire, you direct the traffic away from the scene of the fire, so no one gets hurt, and you don't get hurt by getting hit by a car, something like that. It's very possible. A lot of them got killed, getting hit by cars. One at Oceanside just last year was killed. But one—one job, I guess, is as dangerous as the other.

Q: Do the police officers come to take over from you?

BZ: I think that works out with the Chief of the Fire Department. He's the head man at the fires. He can tell them to ...

Q: What kind of liaison do you have with the Police Department?

BZ: We're very close. Very close. We work together.

Q: I've been reading in New York City that there seems to be some rivalry ...

BZ: Well, that's ...

Q: ... Have—do you have ...

BZ: ... that's ...

Q: ... have you had that here at all?

BZ: No, not that I know of. No. No. I got a grandson, he's on the police force, and he seems to be happy with the way things are.

Q: And you also served as recording secretary for a while, right? What were your duties ...

BZ: Take the minutes of the—minutes of the meeting. Make the minutes up to be read at the next meeting from the previous meeting, which is Roberts Rules of Order. You have things to do like that. Send letters out. Notes of thank you and all stuff like that.

Q: Are there any controversial issues that you had to deal with at some of those meetings?

BZ: No, thank God, the controversy didn't start till I had gotten out of the office of recording secretary.

Q: What kind of controversy?

BZ: Well, with the race thing, that thing came up...

Q: What happened? I mean, what was it ...

BZ: Nothing. I was out of it by then. I didn't have nothing to do with it. But the mucky-mucks did. That was it. I had no control over that. And as recording secretary, I would have had no control over it either.

Q: And what were your responsibilities as Second Engineer?

BZ: Maintaining the equipment. Trucks, the pumps. Make sure the hose is sufficient, in good shape. And with the masks, of course, which are very important for going into the fires. I had to maintain them, and they were a very important part of the equipment on the trucks. All equipment on the trucks [had to be maintained].

Q: Did you have special training ...

BZ: Well, we had class ...

Q: ... in equipment mechanics, or in equipment care?

BZ: You know, we had classes, yeah. We had classes that they taught all that stuff. Now, they really go into it big because we have the Fire Academy at Bethpage, we go out there quite often, the younger guys will, once they're on, go out there. They spend hours and it's a lot of time out there, learning the ropes, as the case may be. Even how to tie knots and little stuff like that (laughs). Yes, learning the ropes. Yeah.

Q: And what did you do with the New York State Volunteer Fire Department?

BZ: The ...

Q: The Southern—I'm sorry, Southern New York. Southern New York.

BZ: I was a delegate from here. We had—they have delegates from each department to go there and you vote on the order of things that have to be done with them, too. Same things. Same with Nassau County. Same with—same with here. Same with the New York State Firemen's Association. You go to all them things to have a voice and see what—what goes on in the association.

Q: And so you held a lot of different positions in the Department. Did you find it very demanding in terms of time and energy?

BZ: Well, I put in what time I could put in. And naturally, my family came first. That's normal. If anybody tells you different, they're a lot of baloney (laughs). That's what—then, you had to put in a lot of time maintaining the stuff, as I say, when you're an engineer. It worked out pretty good. We made allowances for this and allowances for that, so everything gelled and we kept up our end of the bargain by being engineer or whatever position you could help. It's up to you to see that things was done and kept in order as you went on.

Q: Can you tell me about your family? Your father was a firefighter, right?

BZ: Uh huh.

Q: What was his name?

BZ: Charles [W.] Zwerlein.

Q: And what did he tell you about the work?

BZ: Not much. But he was—I used to see him get in. We were out of the house by then, as far as that went, as I remember. And naturally, I, being getting a little older, I wanted my sons to go in. They all went in, which I'm proud of (laughs).

Q: Before we leave your father, did he tell you any stories ...

BZ: No.

Q: ... that you remember as ...

BZ: No.

Q: ... you know, as a boy?

BZ: No, no. I can't recall, at that time, ever discussing the Fire Department with him, really.

Q: Did he urge you to join the company?

BZ: He didn't say join or not to join. I mean, I was old enough then to know, by then, but even just thinking when I was a kid, I don't think so. I don't think we ever discussed it.

Q: And how about with your sons? Did you talk about the firefighting ... [INAUDIBLE] ...

BZ: Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, as soon as they could walk, they were at the firehouse most of the time when I was there during the day, you know. So, they were gung-ho about it from the word go. They really were.

Q: At what ages did they join?

BZ: Eighteen. That was the cut-off age then. Now, it's seventeen, I think. Trying to draw more people in.

Q: And your eldest son ...

BZ: Bill [William G. Zwerlein].

Q: Bill. And the next one?

BZ: Peter [Peter J. Zwerlein]. Well, the next one was Bobby [Robert L. Zwerlein]. He was killed in Vietnam. And then there's Peter. He was—you know Peter, I think, don't you?

Q: Yes, yes. Yes, he's the impetus behind this ...

BZ: Yes. Oh, yeah, he goes after something, he goes after it.

Q: So how has being a firefighter and having your sons in the Department impacted your family life?

BZ: Well, you say you're doing this, or you make plans to do that, and the horn goes, you go. You know, a lot of—a lot of meals were spoiled by going to fires, and a lot of times, they were short ones. Most of the times, they were short ones, thank God. And never a complaint from the Missus. She was in the Auxiliary, too.

Q: Oh, she was. Your wife. What's her name?

BZ: Ruth [Zwerlein]. She was in the Auxiliary. She was the President of that for a term. And she was as bad as me, as far as being gung-ho. We went a lot with the firematics ... line.

Q: Oh, the Fire Medics?

BZ: The firematics.

Q: Oh, the firematics?

BZ: The firematics. Firematically. Let's put it that way.

Q: Oh, okay. What did she do with the Ladies' Auxiliary?

BZ: Oh, they had their meetings, as the firemen did. And if there's a big fire, or during the night a big fire, they come out, make coffee, and make sure they got donuts or something from one of the stores in town to feed the guys, keep our stomachs full. We were fighting the fires, and coffee helped keep us warm, of course, which was very good. They done a lot of good. In the real old days, they used to hold affairs. Barn dances and stuff like that in town. That was the real old days. Raised money, donated it to the fire--the company itself could buy their new equipment. In them days, equipment was short.

Q: And why did they stop doing that?

BZ: Oh, like everything else, it died out. Just died out. As I say, young guys, they get

married, they, even if they are in the Department, they can't afford to live in town anymore, so they move out, and the girls go and everything else. Everything suffers right down the line. It's a shame it has to be that way, but taxes really driving people wild.

Q: So, if somebody has been in the Department as a volunteer and then moves to a nearby community, they don't remain in the volunteer service anymore?

BZ: No. They can join in the new—the new residents. The new town where they're living. They can join there. The chief from there writes a letter here and asks for references, recommendations, you know, “do you recommend them?”, and all that stuff. Letter of recommendation from the Chief, yeah. That's the way they used to work that.

Q: What kind of bonding have you developed with other firefighters?

BZ: Oh, I have many very true friends. Many. We always looked after each other and nobody got in trouble. I can't ever remember a brawl between the firemen themselves. I imagine there probably was out of four companies somewhere along the line, but not that I ever heard of.

Q: So, who have been some of your closest friends in the Department?

BZ: Oh, gee. There's so many of them. There's so many of them, I couldn't start to tell you.

When they come in, they're a friend right away. That's the way it feels like, you know. First-name basis and all that stuff, after you get to know them. But, I don't know, there's something that's just not the same as it was years ago. That's progress too, you know, really. Things change. We've got to change with it. Unfortunately for some of it; some of it's good, and some of it isn't good.

Q: Would you see your friends from the Department socially outside of ...

BZ: Oh, yeah, sure. We'd have barbecues and stuff like that. Get together. I'd always see them at the company and Department picnics. Stuff there, it's like old home week. You see the oldtimers turn out for that.

Q: Do you still have those picnics?

BZ: Oh yeah. Decoration Day. Then we have one in August. Then we have the annual dinners for each company and the annual dinner for the Department every year.

Q: Will you be marching in the Memorial Day parade?

BZ: I don't march anymore. I drive one of the Chief's cars from a lot of years back (laughs). Twenty years now.

Q: But you will be in the parade?

BZ: Oh, yes.

Q: Yes.

BZ: My wife will be in it as a gold star mother. Yep. I can't remember—I can remember when I was a kid, the first parades we used to have here. I don't think I ever missed a one. I haven't missed a one since I've been in the Department for the fifty-eight years, for sure, at all. Let's say it was a good life. I enjoyed it. Still enjoy it. Look forward to meetings and stuff like that, so, as I say, see the old guys who show up, the few that do show up.

Q: Do you wear your uniform at the parade?

BZ: Oh, sure. Oh, absolutely!

Q: And, your Fire Department uniform?

BZ: Yeah.

Q: Yes. And do you wear anything relating to your experience in the military?

BZ: No, just this [points to a hat which says "USS Forrestal"]. My son was killed on that ship in Vietnam.

Q: Can you say the name of the ship?

BZ: Yeah. USS Forrestal. They had a fire and explosion in 1967. He was Senator John McCain's plane captain at the time of the fire. He was one of the first ones that was hit. Burned over eighty percent of his body. We got his body back, thank God. He was buried up here in the cemetery. Yes, that was rough. That was one of the rough spots. The only rough spot, I think, in sixty-four years of marriage.

Q: What about your own military experience?

BZ: I put three years in the Navy. That was in the '40s. 1940s. World War II.

Q: And how do you think that influenced your work as a firefighter?

BZ: Oh, I don't think it had any connection with that at all, to tell you the truth. I was stationed in New York for the whole time I was in. I was lucky. One of the lucky ones. Yeah. Yeah, I was lucky.

Q: What did you do in the Navy?

BZ: I was—started off as a senior foreman general mechanic. Then they offered me a second class machinist rating to sign up in the Navy itself to stay and train at the station where I was in the maintenance department. The company I worked for before that, we put a big what we called a conveyor system in for radio and cable censorship, and they offered me this rating to stay on. Not being a dope, I took it (laughs).

Q: You mean to stay on after the War was over?

BZ: No. No. To stay at this station to maintain this equipment. I figured it might as well be me as somebody else. Besides, who wanted to be away from home all the time (laughs)?
Yeah.

Q: Were you ever injured in connection with your firefighting work?

BZ: No, just these burned ears. I never did report them. They're ice—they're cold now. They're still cold in this kind of weather. Really, but they didn't blister or anything like that. But it was just enough heat to kill some of the cells in there, I guess, or something. I don't know. I never had them checked out.

Q: When did you realize that you had, you know, lasting symptoms from ...

BZ: Well, when my ears kept on being cold all the time, I knew that something wasn't right there. But I never did report it. I should have. I really didn't.

Q: Have you ever saved objects from a burning house? Photographs or anything else?

BZ: Well, I carried a lot of stuff out, but I don't—I don't recall now just what they were, you know. No, I don't. I just—no, not that I can think of that I did. I know I did, but what they were, I don't know.

Q: And what kind of responses did you get from the people whose homes you went to?

BZ: Oh, most of them have been positive responses. Of course, there's a few that didn't think too much of what we were doing. They don't realize that what you're doing, you're doing it for a purpose, you know. Not there to destroy your house. If you got to open it up, you got to open it up to let the smoke and the flame out so we can get at the fire. And people don't realize. They say, "Oh, look at the firemen breaking the windows," and doing this and doing that. Yeah. My wife used to stand at some of the fires there and hear people cursing remarks. She used to get livid (laughs) Gosh! The last fire, she came home, she's just raving. That's the way it went. People never can see, or they don't know what they're talking about. You know how that stuff goes, I guess. Yep.

Q: What—what kind of appreciation, or specific experience of appreciation do you remember?

BZ: Well, people writing to the papers saying, you know, thanking us for doing a good job and all that. I've never seen a bad response, so we must have been doing something right along the line there somewhere. And in our last meeting, we had quite a big fire down at Sands Point here not too long ago. A guy sent a big ...

Q: Where? Where was that fire?

BZ: Sands Point. Huge basket of fruit to our meeting. And we enjoyed that all right. That was one of the firsts. That's the first time that ever happened in all the years I was in, fifty-eight years. But that was really nice. Nice of him. Nice thought, you know. Really appreciated it. Yep.

Q: On the tournaments. Do you still go to them?

BZ: No, no. Can't stand, you know, out in the sun anymore (laughs) at this stage, you know. That's another thing that's past. But it was fun. We still keep up to see how they're doing, you know. We ask the next day how they'd done, take a kind of interest you would call it, but a passing, I guess, now at this stage of the game. But they're still racing every year and bringing cups home. Trophies, stuff like that.

Q: Have you taken part in any other community activities, like going to schools and talking to the children about ...

BZ: No, no.

Q: ... you know, fire avoidance?

BZ: No, I could have, but I didn't. Fire prevention is the word. Fire prevention. No.

Q: And if you could give one most important piece of advice to people for avoiding home fires, what would you say?

BZ: First, the thing is to have a plan of action for evacuating the building when something comes—comes up. Know what you're going to do, where you're going to meet your people outside to make sure everybody's out. That is the most important thing, saving a life. There. I think that would be about it. Then, you can worry about saving...you know, your possessions and stuff like that, you know, that's in the house and all. The lives are the most important thing. But as far as if people are concerned and as far as the firemen themselves fighting the fire are concerned.

Q: How good would you say the Port Washington Fire Department is compared to the other

nearby fire companies?

BZ: Well, we were all—all great departments. We have all great departments. Really do.

Q: Excuse me. I have to turn—turn over the tape.

BZ: Oh, okay. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: Did you ever think about becoming a paid firefighter?

BZ: No. No, never. No. Volunteer, you volunteer. The way I look at it---I may be silly and stupid, but that's the way I looked at it.

Q: What kind of paying work have you done over the years?

BZ: Oh, I've been a steamfitter, a millwright. Most of my life is oil burners for Lewis [Oil] Company.

Q: So, what does a steamfitter do?

BZ: Steamfitter puts pipes together. And I worked on these vacuum systems they have in department stores where you pay your money, they put in a little thing and put it through

a pipe, you know. It goes up there. The steamfitter works on that. Millwright, before the conveyors, for the millwright work, stuff like that there. Iron work. And the—I put in fifteen years with the Tastee Freez Ice Cream Store on Shore Road. Then I went back to heating after that for a while. I retired early.

Q: What was it like running the ice cream store here in town?

BZ: It was fine. Good. Made a lot of friends there, too. Yeah.

Q: And how—how did being a volunteer firefighter work out with your paid work?

BZ: Well, being in the store when the kids were there working, I could go. Couldn't make them all. But what I could make, I made. When you volunteer, if you can make them, you make them. That's the way that went. As far as working for Lewis, if I was around and could sneak off the job to go to a fire, I would do so (laughs).

Q: How did your supervisors feel about that?

BZ: At Lewis's? Oh, they were—all the owners at Lewis, they were firemen too. They were all good firemen. Never got too much flak. I remember hearing the horn blow from Great Neck one time, coming all the way over here from Great Neck and go to the fire ... nothing was ever said about it.

Q: Wait. You were in Great Neck and you heard the Port Washington horn?

BZ: Yeah. Sure. I happened to be on the Shore Road in Great Neck. Yeah, we could hear it coming across the water plain as day. Yeah. That's the way it went. Did what you could.

Q: What do you think was the most important lesson that you learned in the Fire Department?

BZ: Well, the one thing I could really think was wonderful about it was the fellows looked out for each other. It was, a lot of people think, you know, a lot of drunks. That was a lot of baloney. Of course, we had parties. Everybody has a party once in a while, right? (laughs) But they figure you just go to the firehouse to drink beer, stuff like that. That's a lot of bull. And we'd look out for each other, as I say. That's the main thing.

Q: So you never had a problem with drinking ...

BZ: No. God, no. Nope. What they done in their home, that was their own business, right?

Q: Now, you were in the Department when the first woman joined ...

BZ: M-hm...

Q: ... were you? And what effect did that have?

BZ: Some of the guys just wouldn't acknowledge it. Others said progress, again. What are you going to do. You just had a woman member join up. She was a volunteer up around Rochester, New York. She moved down here. She's a nurse at St. Francis now. She signed up. She didn't sign up with Fire Medic. She signed up with Protection. She wanted to be a fighter, firefighter instead of using her nursing thing with the Medics. She wanted to be a fireman. But she's working out all right.

Q: How long has she been with the company?

BZ: Two months. Working out all right. You can tell she's really gung-ho.

Q: Is she the first woman in Protection?

BZ: No, no. No, no. No, no. She's the third one. Third one. One, two, yeah, three. They don't last, though. They haven't so far. The first two didn't last.

Q: How long did they stay?

BZ: Oh, I don't know. First thing you know, you don't see them anymore. Then they put their resignation in.

Q: Do you know why?

BZ: No.

Q: Do they give reasons?

BZ: No. I always treat them with respect. That's all I cared about. A lot of guys didn't care what they mouthed off about. That's not good. Not good at all. That's again progress. Don't forget that word. It's a bane. Yeah, I think we got another woman waiting on our list now to—being processed and join up. I heard that by the grapevine the other day. Yeah.

Q: Who do you think you most influenced in your firefighting career?

BZ: Oh, my kids.

Q: And besides them?

BZ: Oh, a lot of guys here that I talked them into joining up. Most of them have turned out

pretty good firemen, I think. One didn't turn out too good. So, I'd say "Resign." That's all. That's the way that one went.

Q: Well, when you would talk somebody into it, what would you say to them to ...

BZ: Oh, I'd tell them, oh, it had bad parts, you know, and like getting out of bed at night and all that stuff. Of course, they would think about it. They were all gung-ho doing that. Then all of a sudden they would taper off too, and you wouldn't see them at night fires anymore. We, years ago, we used to, night fires, when you couldn't get enough for one of the trucks for the guys, we'd always stop for ham and eggs on the way back from the fire at the diner. We got to look forward to that. So they were some of the good times (laughs).

Q: How did you get over your fear of fire?

BZ: You don't think about it. You know ... [laughs] –unless it gets too hot.

Q: Not even at the beginning? I mean ...

BZ: No, not really. No, with that hose in your hand, I think you feel you're invincible. That's a lot of baloney, too. Because it don't work that way. But I always looked at it if your number is up, it's up.

Q: Have you ever been at a fire where you lost one of your fellow firefighters?

BZ: Oh, we had—oh ... I was in Florida, when these guys were killed up here [Bob] Dayton. That was a few years back. Number one fire—the fireman got to the fire and then dropped dead from a heart attack. He wasn't burned or anything like that. He pulled up to the fire and was hooking the hose up and he keeled over and died.

Q: Do you remember any funny moments in the Department?

BZ: Oh, God. There's so many of them (laughs). So many of them, I couldn't even start to ...

Q: Are there any practical jokes that ...

BZ: Oh, a lot of them. A lot of them.

Q: Do you remember any in particular?

BZ: No, I don't. I wish I did now.

Q: And were there any kind of silly calls that you were called out on?

BZ: Oh, no doubt. No doubt about it. You would get silly calls. Especially now, there's this new automatic alarm system that will run you ragged with that. That's the silliest thing. Worst thing. It's good for the people, but bad for us.

Q: Now what kind of automatic alarm?

BZ: Well, the—like here you have the little automatic alarms. Smoke alarms. Carbon monoxide alarms. Them calls come in. Nine out of ten of them is nothing. Some misfunction in the equipment in the house. And they call you out all times of the day and the night. And you got to go. You can't say to hell with it, but that's what's happening. There's so many of the alarms that are nothing that the guys lose interest after a while. I guess it's normal. I don't know. But I stopped running to them kinds of alarms a long time ago (laughs). Yeah.

Q: How would you like to be remembered?

BZ: Well, who knows. Who knows. I think I done my best. Done my share. Yeah. Outside of my home life, I think that came—firematics always came second. I would say that.

Q: If you had to do it all over again, are there any things that you would have done differently?

BZ: No. Absolutely not. Absolutely not.

Q: Did you ever keep a personal diary?

BZ: No. No. No, I did not. Now, when you think back , it might have been nice to have, but I didn't do it.

Q: Is there any aspect of your career in firefighting that we haven't talked about that you'd— that you think is important?

BZ: I don't think so. You got one thing I think is important is wanting to do it. Like in everything, I guess. The same thing. You have to want to do it. For the sake of the community, for one thing. And what else can I say?

Q: What would you say to—you said you had a grandson in the company now, in the Department? Didn't you? No?

BZ: No, he's a fireman—a policeman.

Q: Oh, right, right.

BZ: Police Department, yeah.

Q: So, but if you did have a grandson or granddaughter who was interested, what would you say to them?

BZ: Well, I'll tell you. When my first grandson was born, I had an application and everything ready for him (laughs) to sign up. But it just didn't work out that way. He saw things different, and neither one of the two grandsons have followed it. One's in Colorado now, and the other's local, of course. But they got to put a lot of time in, too. More time than we had to put in. They have the fire schools.

Q: In the police?

BZ: No, the—being a fireman now.

Q: Oh, today.

BZ: They've got to put a lot of time in. Then, they get a small stipend now, which is very small, as far as that goes, for what you have to put in for it. It's rough on them. Rough on them.

Q: So their stipend, that's from the time they sign up and go through training?

BZ: After you get to be—after you get to be sixty-five, I think it kicks in. They get so much money. I didn't put in for it. I said if I'm going to be a volunteer, I'm a volunteer. Period.

Q: Oh, but you don't get it before sixty-five?

BZ: No. So I didn't file on that at all. That may have been foolish, but I just—as I say, I want to be a volunteer, I'm a volunteer. That's it. Yep. Nobody ever told me I was foolish for doing it that way or that I'm not foolish for doing it that way. I don't know. But that's the way it goes. That feeling in my heart, that's the way I want it; that's the way I done it. That's all.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

BZ: You're very welcome, I'm sure. I hope I helped you out. ... [INTERRUPTION] ...

Q: How do you feel about this whole project?

BZ: The oral history?

Q: The oral history, yes.

BZ: I think it's a good thing. It'll be nice for maybe somebody to be interested and to understand what it was like in the old days as far as we—as far back as we can remember, you know. The old memory don't click in all the time (laughs) when you get to be eighty-five.

Q: Well, your son Peter has certainly been very active ...

BZ: Oh, yeah. Yeah, he loves all that stuff. Yeah. He's our genealogist of the family. Trying to follow up on the tree, the family tree and all that stuff. Yeah, he's a good boy. They all are.

Q: And one other person you influenced is Frank Pavlak.

BZ: Pavlak. Yes. Very much so. Yep. Wonderful boy. Wonderful boy. Can't say enough about him. Puts in a lot of time as a trustee of Protection Engine Company. Yeah. Nice guy.

Q: So you have a lot to be proud of.

BZ: Oh, yes. I am really proud. Really, really proud of it.

Q: That's great. Thank you.

BZ: You're very welcome.