

MEMORIES OF A PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTER

RETIRED



WASHINGTON
D.C.FIRE /EMS DEPARTMENT

I was appointed to the DC Fire Department on December 18, 1952, in the morning and told to report to the Old Soldiers Home in Northwest Washington to the fire department headquarters. When I arrived at headquarters, I was met by a Lieutenant Verallo, who was the liaison officer. He took me and three other new recruits into his office and conducted a swearing in ceremony then he took us into Fire Chief Millard Sutton's office. He was a very nice old gentleman who came up through the ranks of the fire department. He welcomed us to the fire department in the nation's capital. After a short speech he told us to go to our jobs.

We went back out in the office and met Lieutenant Verallo. He gave us the rest of our papers for that day. We had to report to the Fire Department Property Yard Uniform Board to get our gear. We were given our khaki work clothes, our dress blue uniforms, our running gear and running boots. We were told to report to our new fire department home. Mine was Engine Company 29 at MacArthur Boulevard and Reservoir Road, NW.

Upon arrival at 29 Engine, I was met by a lieutenant, who showed me where to put my gear, what locker to use, where my bed was, and other important things. Then he told me to go home and come back by six o'clock that night, which was when Platoon Number One took over their shift from six in the evening to eight in the morning. I immediately went home and came back at six o'clock in the evening. I then met Captain McFarlane, who was the house captain. He welcomed me and told me to come sit down so he could talk with me. We went up to the Watch Desk, and he explained my duties. He had a broken leg and was in the process of healing. He walked with one crutch and got along very slowly. He explained the Watch Desk and told me that the desk was manned 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This required careful, constant attention. On the Watch Desk was a tickertape and a large vocal alarm speaker. When a box came in, it came in on the

tickertape and you had to count the punches in the tape. The box number was then announced over the vocal alarm. Then you had to look in the big book on the left-hand side of the Watch Desk and locate the box number, which would tell you what companies were to respond. Above the Watch Desk, was a turnout board that had all the company numbers on it and they were white. You took a stick and turned out the companies that were to respond and their number automatically became red. Next you looked back into the big book to see who would respond on a second alarm. If a second alarm was called, you then turned out the numbered companies that would be responding on the second alarm. If you got confused as to who was out responding, all you had to do was pick up the telephone to headquarters and say “give me the board, please.” They would give you all the companies that were out on the fire and you would check the board to see if you were right.

After our talk at the board, Captain McFarlane told me he had a bit of advice for me. He said, “Boy, on your way home tomorrow morning stop at the grocery store and buy a sponge just like the one your wife uses to wash dishes. Bring it back to me tomorrow night.” Being just a rookie, I did not question the captain and did what I was told. The next night I gave him the sponge and he went to the sink, opened the sponge, held in under the faucet, filled it with water and wrung it out. He said, “Boy put this in your running coat pocket.” And I did.

About three nights later, at two o'clock in the morning, we had a mattress fire in an apartment building on MacArthur Boulevard. First an explanation on the how a company responds to a fire. We had two pieces of apparatus responding, a hose wagon and a pumper. On the hose wagon, were the driver and the captain in the front seat. On the back step was the small line man and the layout man. The layout man was always the newest member. The hose wagon would slow down at the hydrant, and the officer would

stand up and holler “lay out!” Then the layout man would come off the back step with an arm full of hose, and hook up to the discharge of the pumper. Then would proceed to the hose wagon, checking the hose on the way making sure there were no kinks. When he got to the hose wagon, if the wagon driver did not need any help, he was then told to go wherever the fire was. That was the operation of a company responding to a fire.

After arriving at the apartment fire, I found the captain standing outside the door in the hallway of the building in the thick smoke, smoking a pipe. He said to me “Boy, do you have that sponge?” I said yes sir. “Put it in your mouth and breathe through your mouth, not your nose.” Believe it or not, it really works. I could breathe fairly well. That was my first experience with the DC Fire Department on a fire ground and that was my first experience with a gas mask in smoke. Believe me, what a lifesaver that sponge was.

After each response rain or shine we had to wash the fire apparatus even under the fenders this was done by every company in the fire department.

The next night the captain introduced me to the rookie’s bible, the Probation Book, which consisted of about forty pages. It lists the apparatus you have in the fire house and lists all the appliances on the apparatus and how it is used and where it is located on the apparatus. It also lists one hundred fire boxes in your first alarm district and the four closest fire hydrants to each box, the route to each box and all short streets and alleys in your first alarm area. This must be memorized by heart from cover to cover in one year with no mistakes when reciting it. You have to go in front of the deputy fire chief at the end of a year to recite the book. Most of the chiefs are not too hard on you. He will call your captain, to report whether you passed or failed. What a relief it is to get this

out of the way.

Engine 29 had a wagon and pumper made by Ward Lafrance. They had big cabs and were bulky terrible things to drive. I made out and had lots of fun and lots of hard work for one year. I then transferred to Engine 23.

Engine 23 was located on G Street NW in the middle of George Washington University. The big difference with Engine 29 was we had fires every day and night. We worked our butts off most days. One morning about three o'clock we had a fire and gas leak in a restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue. We went down into the basement which was filled with terrible, thick smoke. When I got back outside, I passed out on the sidewalk. When I came to, I was laying in the emergency room of Emergency Hospital. The doctor told me that I had been overcome by smoke. He told me, before I could go back to work in a couple of days, I needed to rest. The ambulance aid man got my car and drove it my apartment and gave the keys and my shoes to my wife. She always said she got my shoes before she got me. That was the first experience I had at Engine 23. I had many more. It was great place to work.

Raymond Berry was the captain at Engine 23. At the time, my daughter, Linda, was just a little girl. When I was off on long Saturday, I would always take her to the fire house. She would wait for Captain Berry to take her upstairs to slide down the pole. She thought sliding down the pole was the greatest thing on earth. She always called the captain "Captain Video." How and where she ever got that name, I'll never know.

I was at Engine 23 for two years before I was sent to the academy. Because of the shortage of personnel due to the war, I did not go to the academy when I first started. It was in February and it was either raining, snowing or sleeting. We would have to go out to the

drill tower and chop the ice off of the windowsills so we could pompier up the six floors. The pompier ladder is an eight foot ladder with a large gooseneck hook on top and a single pole with rungs all the way up. You had to climb up to the next landing, stand in the window and raise your ladder up to the next floor and hook into that window. You proceeded up six floors in that manner. We had to do that every day. Captain Galotto was my instructor at the academy.

After the academy, I went back to Engine 23 for approximately one year. I was transferred to Truck 2. Real nice bunch of guys at Truck 2. We were housed with the second battalion fire chief and Ambulance No. 9. In a shed next door was the water tower. It had solid tires on it and a long mask with a nozzle on top and it was used on big fires only. You hooked a hose to it to use it as a big ladder pipe. That was something to see.

The second time I was injured was at a State Department fire, when I stepped off the truck onto a pipe or something that rolled. My ankle felt terrible and I could not move. I was taken to the hospital, and my ankle was x-rayed. The ankle was very badly sprained. They put a cast on my ankle to relieve the pain, and sent me home for approximately four weeks. To this day, it still bothers me in certain weather.

At Truck 2 we ran most fires at Foggy Bottom, main Georgetown, and down F Street. I was at the fire the night Captain Flarety of Engine 1 was killed. He was trapped in the building under debris. I will never forget Captain Flarety being carried out of the building. Dr. Claudio was there with a long needle and he stuck it in the captain's chest to his heart, but it was too late. That was a very bad night that I will never forget. The next night I was detailed to Engine 1 for one night. That was a very sorrowful night. Those men were really in shock at the death of the captain.

A few days later, I was at Truck 2. The Big Swede was the tiller man and Murphy was the truck driver. The Swede was going to the store to get lunch for all of us. He asked me to catch the tiller if we got a run. I said okay. About ten minutes later we got a run. Chief Berry was the second battalion fire chief at that time and his buggy would not start. So, he jumped on the side of the truck and I jumped up beside him. Murphy took off out the door not realizing that he had no tiller man, which was supposed to be me. When we turned left on New Hampshire, the truck turned but the tiller went straight with no driver. It hit a parked car with the tiller wheels in the car's trunk and driving it up into the gas station. When the police came, they gave the car owner a ticket for parking in cross walk! They took Murphy off of driving the truck for the rest of that day for having an accident. Guess who they put driving the truck? Me!

Chief Stein was the acting fire chief one day and it started snowing. He called headquarters and told them he had a message to all fire companies. "Due to the copious accumulation of frozen precipitation, put on your chains." Then Chief Sutton called and I answered the phone. He said "I want to talk Chief Stein right now." Chief Stein has a real deep belly laugh. When he answered the phone, Chief Sutton asked him "who the hell put out that message, and what did it mean." Chief Stein rolled with laughter and hung up and said to us "the old fella didn't understand what I meant."

It was decided that a new fire house would be built for Engine 1, Truck 2, Chief 2, Ambulance 9 and the light wagon. We used to stand in front door and watch the new fire house being built up the street. On October 21, 1962, we moved up to the new fire house.

When President Kennedy was inaugurated, I was appointed to the Presidential security detail. I was called to the Presidential

Inaugural Breakfast at Paul Young's restaurant. I was stationed to the lobby overlooking the eating area and watched President Kennedy, who was a table hopper. The Secret Service was going crazy keeping up with him. I noticed a big potted plant base was smoking. I stopped a man carrying a tray full of water pitchers and poured it on the smoldering fire. When I looked up, President Kennedy was watching me. He immediately came up the steps and shook hands with me and said "Thank you Mr. Fireman for not hollering fire because we would have had a stampede," and he chuckled. I was so startled. The only thing I could say was "Thank you, Mr. President."

The night Martin Luther King was killed and the riots in DC began, we had transferred to Truck 9 to cover them when they were out on a call. On our way back to our fire house that night, all the liquor store alarm bells were ringing. We didn't know why. When we got back, we were told about Martin Luther King and that things were happening. We all got relieved and went home. About one o'clock in the afternoon, I went out on my front porch and looked toward DC and all I could see was a long column of smoke all across the city. I told my wife I had to go to work. I got in my car and headed for the city down the George Washington Parkway to the Roosevelt Bridge. It was like pictures you see of war time, when people were vacating their cities. They were leaving with trunks and suitcases, everything they could carry. The bridges were solid with people scared and leaving the city, carrying anything they could carry.

Shortley after that I was promoter to truck driver of my shift and held that position until I was retired

Because of the riots, the Eighth Airborne was sent to Engine 1 and Truck 2. They set up their cots between our bunks and they rode on the side of my truck with hand grenades, their gas masks and all

their equipment. They had fixed bayonets and rifles. They took their equipment with us to the fire grounds when we got a call. When we got within a block of the fire grounds, we stopped and they would unload their equipment and no one was allowed in or out of that block. They repeated this every time we went out on alarm. This went on until the riots were over. We all got relieved after three days and four nights. When I got home, I took off all my clothes in the bedroom, got in the shower, and then crawled into bed and fell asleep. I was dead tired. When I got up my wife was crying, both of my children were crying. We tried to find out what was going on. My wife finally said, "What did you do with your clothes?" I told her I laid them in the bedroom. She said go get them and put them outside. They are full of tear gas. That was why everyone was crying.

The one thing I really remember about the riots, was when we were sent to the Peerless warehouse fire. The warehouse was four floors full of televisions. In order to get to the rear of the building there was so much smoke that my officer got off with a big flashlight in front of my truck and guided me up the alley. It was one big explosion after another when we were running over these new television sets. We got up next to the building as close as we could. They wanted us to put out ladder pipe in service and we did. We used it very effectively until the building collapsed. After the fire was out at the warehouse, we went back in service and returned to the truck house. Later that night, we got a message from headquarters that we were getting mutual aid. When mutual aid arrived, they backed in our house and I discovered it was Company 1 from Fairfax County in McLean Virginia, a company I was a member of since before World War II. What a surprise! My friend, Jack Akre, was driving their hose wagon. We had one run that night while they were with us. It was real nice to have the help.

One morning I was coming home from work and I saw tracks

going off the parkway, but did not see any evidence of anything being towed back up from the overhang. I went over to the edge and called out. I got a response "Please help me." I went down the steep bank about seventy or eighty feet and found a car that had rolled down over and over and its nose was in the river. A lady was in the driver seat, hanging upside down in her seat belt. She said she was unable to get her seat belt undone. I released the seat belt and she rolled out. She said she did not think she was hurt, just scared. I helped her back up the bank to my van and I could not get anyone to stop to help. I got her into the back of my van without any seats and laid her on the floor. I took her to the McLean fire house and they transported her to the hospital. The only thing I could find out was that she had a back and leg injury. I found out later that my sergeant from Truck 2 had stopped at the fire house, seeing all the commotion and made a report to the DC Fire Chief. The city council of Washington, DC, presented me with a meritorious award for my deed. I still have it hanging on my wall today.

After the riots were over, everything was fairly quiet in the city for a while. After getting injured during the riots, the fire department finally retired me after 20 years of service.

In 2003, I came into my home and my wife told me that the Fire Chief's secretary was on the phone and the Chief wanted to talk to me. When I answered, this voice said "Hello, Poole. I am glad I got you. I am Adrian Thompson and I am the new fire chief. I was confirmed last week, and I have a favor I would like to ask you. You don't remember me so let me tell you what happened in 1967 when I was appointed to DCFD. I was struggling to get all my equipment into the fire house. You were the only person who came out to help me. You showed me where all our fire fighting equipment was kept. Then you showed me where my locker was located, where my bed was located and how to make my bed. You

gave me a tour of the fire house. I never forgot what you did. They say what goes around comes around. Well, please believe it. After that day, I lost track of you. We were on different shifts and never crossed again. Now that I am the chief, I want an Ambassador of Good Will, and I would like you to take the job. Help me out please.” I said let me talk it over with my wife first. I asked him what my duties would be. He told me I would travel a lot all over the world and have meetings with fire chiefs about their operations and ours. I said I would like to join his team. He said, “Good. I want you to go to the uniform board and draw out all your equipment as soon as possible. I will call them and tell them you are coming.” I went to the uniform board and got all my gear, including all the firefighting equipment. After the uniforms were fitted, I went to his office and had a great meeting.

During my time as Ambassador of Good Will, I went to Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Australia and then to Hawaii where I met Don Ho and we became good friends. I went to Hawaii twenty times because they have so many islands and each island has three or four chiefs per island. On Waikiki Beach, they sent a female lieutenant as my escort. She told me the chief is at a funeral and would like for me to join him. When we got to the church overlooking Pearl Harbor, the chief lined me up with his assistant chiefs and then we went into the church where he gave his speech. After the service, the chief asked me to meet with the deceased commissioner’s family and I agreed. When I told them that our nation’s capital had sent me to his funeral, they were really surprised and happy. After leaving the church, the chief thanked me for going along with what he had planned. We then visited fire companies and I was surprised when we went to a truck company and they had a surfboard on the side of their truck to use during water rescues. That night, I went to the Don Ho show, which I did every time I went to Hawaii. On one of the trips, my fire chief asked me to present Don Ho with a shirt and hat, making

him an honorary fire fighter in the nation's capital. He was so happy that he left the stage, leaving me sitting by myself on a stool not being able to see anything because of the bright lights. I didn't know what to say so I said "it was shame that we had to have a catastrophe in our country for the public to realize what firefighters and the police do, and I got a standing ovation. About that time, Don came back out on the stage with his fire department shirt and hat on and whispered in my ear "you bitch, I was going to say that." After the show he signed autographs and then we visited for while.

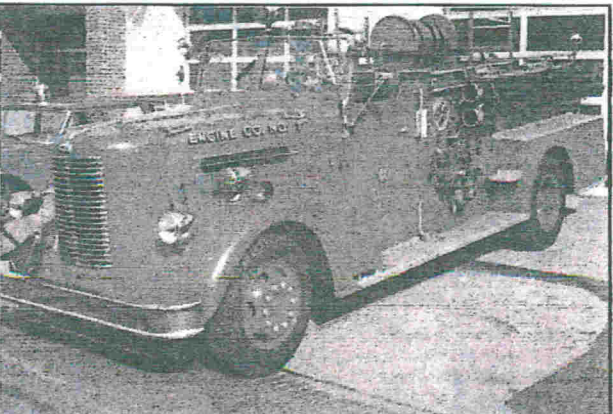
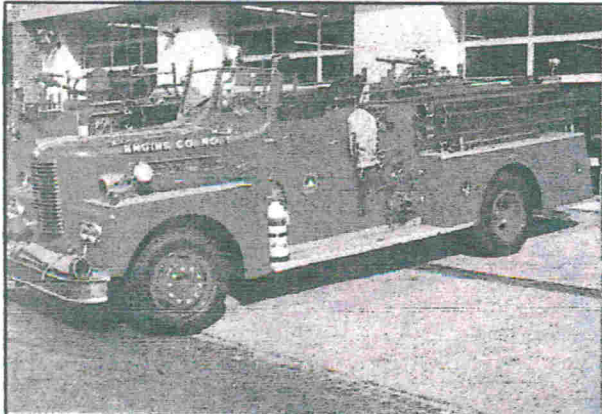
I had a very full career with the DC Fire Department which I will always remember.

Retired Assistant fire chief
Irvin (Leroy) Poole



FIREFIGHTERS PRAYER

When I am called to duty, God, when-
Ever flames may rage, give me strength
To save some life, whatever be its age.
Help me embrace a little child before it
Is to late, or save an older person from
The horror of that fate. Enable me to be
Alert and hear the weakest shout, and
Quickly and efficiently to put the fire out.
I want to fill my calling, and to give the
Best in me, to guard my every neighbor
And protect his property. And if,
According to my fate, I am to lose
My life, please bless with your protecting
Hand, my famil', friends and wife.





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Two-Alarm Fire Damages Cafeteria, Fireman Hurt

One fireman was overcome by smoke early today in a two-alarm fire which caused extensive damage to Cecil's Cafeteria, 1924 Pennsylvania avenue N.W. He was Pvt. Irving Pooler, 26, of 2411 Pimmit drive, Falls Church, a member of Engine Company 23. He was released from Emergency Hospital today and is to report to the clinic for further examination.

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Fireman Overcome in Cafe Blaze

Fireman Irving Pooler, 25, of 2411 Pimmit Drive, Falls Church, was overcome by smoke early today at a two-alarm fire which heavily damaged Cecil's Cafeteria at 1924 Pennsylvania av nw and spread to an adjoining apparel shop before firemen got it under control. Pvt. Pooler, of Engine Company 23, was admitted to Emergency Hospital.

• The News Sells More for Less.



Hawaii May 11, 2003

John

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Mac

John