

THE FIRE LINE

SEMPER PIUS

Oswego Fire Protection District

April, 2011



Fire Chief Brad Smith Retires ~45 Years of Service

(Written by an Oswego Firefighter)



Fire Chief Brad Smith retires after 45 years of dedicated service to the community. I set out to write a simple article for a special edition of the Fire Line newsletter, one that would represent in a nut shell the accomplishments of a sincere and experienced man. I was thinking about two paragraphs should do it. I called Chief Smith and asked him to come in so that I could talk to him to get the facts. He agreed and came to the station in the early afternoon. What happened during the meeting would change me forever and the way I look at the fire service and who we are. The following is a detailed account of what occurred on April 14, 2011.

Before the interview I did a little research to find out just exactly what was going on in the world in 1966, the year Chief Smith started his distinguished fire service career. I must admit I found myself smiling and laughing inside when I learned that the average income per year was \$6,900 and a new car was \$2,650. A gallon of gas was 32 cents and a new home would set you back about \$14,200. The president of the United States was Lyndon B. Johnson and we had roughly 500,000 troops in Vietnam. This was the year of course that Pampers created the first disposable diaper and color television sets became all the rage. This was also the year that Chief Smith began his journey- a journey that would last a lifetime. A lifetime of seeing and being a part of an organization that represents the best that man has to offer- the life of a Firefighter!

The Chief came into my office and smiled as he walked in. I had the window open and the wind came in and blew his grey hair around as he sat in the chair across from me. I shook his hand as I had done many times before. I have had the pleasure of working with the Chief for almost nine years. I saw his smile and knew this time was going to be different. This conversation was going to be difficult for him and, to my surprise: it was going to be difficult for me. I could see the sadness in his eyes that this journey for him was over. For forty-five years the Chief has been responding to emergencies and seeing things that most people go their entire lives without seeing, smelling, feeling or hearing. I looked at him and couldn't help but think about all the wonderful endings that he has experienced after a tragedy, and I was haunted by the thought of calls that ended in devastation for someone. Yet here he sits, in front of me- a man that has dedicated his life to helping others and has asked for nothing in return.





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The Chief said that he started his career in 1966 after he was asked to be a part of the fire department. He lived and worked in downtown Oswego and was nearby when the local Ford dealership caught fire. He was on the scene and began helping local volunteers and immediately caught the bug. Smith was asked to be a part of the organization by the chief at that time, Forrest Wooley. When Chief Smith came on there was no formal training. He was given a black coat, a leather helmet, and $\frac{3}{4}$ bunker boots. They didn't have air packs, and common practice was to ride the tail boards of the vehicles to the scenes. Smith recalled that in those days the fire department allotted \$24.00 per call that came in. The volunteers that showed up for the call would split the money evenly. I smiled and couldn't believe it. He added that when he bought his first home he used the money he earned from fire calls to pay the yearly taxes on his home. At that time the department ran about 150 calls per year. Some of that money he would use at Scotty's and get himself a basket of chicken for 69 cents on Rt 34. We had started on a trip down memory lane and I began to ask specific questions. Some I knew would be tough on him. Questions that on any other day he would have been happy to tell you about. On this day, Chief Smith's voice inflection had a more serious tone in his answers. Our conversation began to get more serious.

I inquired about a memory that he was fond of that would make him smile. He immediately brought up a memory from the late 60's when he would ride along with Snorkel One in downtown Chicago. He added that it was fun and the guys treated him like one of their own. He learned a lot while he was there and brought that big-city knowledge back to the small town he called home- Oswego. He already knew that I was going to follow that question up with a question about what call stands out. Surely over forty-five years he had a call that really stands out. When I asked the question, I could tell it really hit home. I had struck a nerve, a nerve that perhaps has not been struck in a decade. You see Chief Smith is a firefighter, he is supposed to be able to control his emotions and suppress those horrible events that he has witnessed. Here I sat with the gall to ask him about something so dear to him. I felt like, "Who am I and what makes me qualified to peck at this man's brain?" and ask him to tell me about these things. When I asked him, I noted a slight drop in his shoulders, his appearance changed, I suddenly saw a young man- a man that had a heart and a soul- a man that was vulnerable after all. He told me of a call that he was on many years ago that involved a young boy that had drowned. He recalled pulling the lifeless body from the frozen water. He started to describe the boy and how he was wearing a stocking cap. I saw his eyes begin to water. I knew that he remembered everything about this boy. I am sure that we could have talked about that one call for hours, but I knew that it was a hurtful memory for him as the young boy did not survive the accident. I knew how he felt, because I have felt that same feeling in my career, just as thousands of firefighters before me and the countless firefighters that come after me will feel. I quickly changed the subject and moved on.





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I began to focus my questioning on his career. When did you make Lieutenant, Captain and so on? He perked up a bit and began discussing his promotions throughout the years. First came the promotion to Lieutenant. Then he made Captain, and in 1988 he was appointed to Assistant Chief and finally appointed Fire Chief in 1992. Chief Smith has been a Chief longer than I have been in the fire service total. The Chief added that this is one thing that he is most proud of. The fact that he was promoted through the ranks of his own department and then given the opportunity to lead that department for 19 plus years. I noticed a little hitch in his giddy up as they say, when he began telling me about his career. His smile returned and his shoulders reared back. I noticed a change in his voice and the watery eyes seemed to have gone for now, so I thought I would hit him with another tough one. "Any regrets?" I said and he said, "No" without missing a beat. We discussed things further and there are things that he might have done differently but, without hesitation, he had no regrets. I knew that he meant it and he was speaking from the heart. My mom always told me that when someone speaks from the heart, you will know. Today, it hit me like a freight train. What my mom had taught me, was true. I could feel the sincerity coming from the Chief. I could see it in his disposition. I knew there was no doubt, the Chief had no regrets. I wondered how a man could go 45 years in this line of work and not have any regrets. I would soon find out.

We moved on to another topic and I was searching for what he would miss the most, knowing full well that I will be seeing him on a regular basis. This department is his life and means the world to him. I knew that he wasn't really going anywhere. He once again began to get misty eyed and said,

"Drinking coffee in the morning with the guys". He indicated that the countless community activities that the fire department has participated in over the years were important to him. He made mention of watching young firefighters grow mentally and physically into experienced seasoned veterans. Chief Smith will miss the camaraderie. He has seen many firefighters come and many go over the years and yet I knew he would miss everyone. He would miss the good and the bad- the ups and the downs. He would miss what we call the brotherhood. We sometimes forget in our day-to-day activities the brotherhood that we belong to. What it means. We bicker, argue, and generally have some bitter disputes like a true brother or sister in a family would. Once in a while something happens that makes us realize what it means to be a firefighter. For me it was today.





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Our conversation was quickly approaching the forty-minute mark. I found myself literally on the edge of my seat wanting to know more. I wanted to hear everything. I had time for one more significant question and I was going to throw it at him ready or not. I considered this to be a deep question and I wasn't really sure what he would say. I asked him, "If there is one thing that you would say to past, present and all the future firefighters, what would it be?" He sat back in the chair, looked me square in the eye and said, "It is an honor being a fireman". There was silence for a moment. The misty eyes returned again. I instantly felt a connection with him that I had never felt before. We are both a part of the brotherhood. It was so simple! Honor! He could have said so many things like, "stay safe" or "train hard" or a million other phrases that we throw around like a football everyday. He opted to say it was, is, and always will be, an honor to be fireman. Honor! Earlier, I said that I wondered how a man can go 45 years in this business and not have any regrets. The answer is simply honor. He is an honorable man and has given the majority of his life this profession. I started out with the idea of writing a paragraph or two for a special edition to our newsletter. The forty-minute conversation changed me and I felt compelled to try to re create what I felt for those forty minutes to share with you.

The conversation ended and I shook his hand and said, "thank you" for your service. He walked out of the room and held his head high. I sat back in my chair and thought about what he said. Honor? The man has officially put in his retirement papers and he is still teaching us young bucks about life. I say, "Thanks for the lesson Chief!" It is an honor to be a firefighter, it is not our right, and we should be thankful, humble and fortunate. We are firefighters; we represent the best of what mankind has to offer. Chief Smith has proven that he is honorable. He has taught us over the years to be honorable. Maybe if we are lucky, we can have a long successful career and will be able to say that we have no regrets. Chief Smith, thank you for your service and may God bless you for all the good you have done!

Your home was, is and always be the Oswego Fire Protection District. We are your family and you will always be welcome here and we would expect to see you often for those morning coffees in the bay.



The OFPD salutes you and
thanks you for your
service!

