

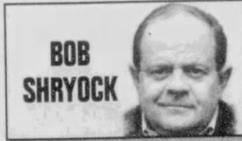
From disaster, a renewed respect

Four-year-old son Rob wandered away from home the day we moved to Wenonah in 1965, a normal occurrence for him, but was found in short order by members of the town's fire department who hauled out the pumper for the rescue mission. Grateful, I went to the firehouse to shake hands.

"You're welcome," said volunteer Ken Noddin, smiling, "but now you're obligated to join us."

And that's precisely how I became a volunteer for the Wenonah Fire Company. How can one say no after that?

Over 10 years I hardly distinguished myself as a firefighter. Partly because of acute mechanical ineptitude, I wasn't allowed around the trucks, except to pack hose or spit-polish them for parades. I wasn't allowed anywhere near burning buildings and wasn't permitted to climb ladders. I didn't enjoy the discomfort caused by spending an entire night training hose on the spectacular Belber Trunk fire in Woodbury three decades



BOB SHRYOCK

ago — coldest night of my life. Others laughingly accused me of shaving before responding to a 2 a.m. fire at the Wenonah pill factory, because of poor response time. My token tangible contribution was serving as the company's secretary, unless you include dancing on tables at housings.

But I'll tell you this: I'm damn proud of having been named an honorary lifetime member of the company. It's on my résumé.

I marveled at the enthusiasm of Wenonah's fire-fighting volunteers in the '60s and '70s. Drill nights weren't beer-guzzling Tuesday nights out. Under the whip of dead-serious chief Jim Hain, trusty assistant Jack Hart and conscientious line officers, drill nights were well-planned exercises that prepared the

all-volunteer company for any potential crisis in town. If you messed up you ran the risk of being sharply criticized so you wouldn't make the same mistake again. Sure, there was plenty of time for company-related social activities. But with Hain, Hart & Co., it was business first. There were a lot of guys in that company who were exceptional firemen. They're in their 60s and 70s now. They had great pride in their work.

There also were a lot of us on the rolls, probably three times as many as today. Volunteer fire companies across the country now face a common dilemma: Too few volunteers. In New Jersey, part of the reason is tougher requirements just to join. And we seem to be having a problem in the United States getting young men and women to volunteer for anything. Just check the ages of those who make up the service club rosters.

My years as a volunteer fireman didn't mean as much to me before Sept. 11 as they do now.

I'm stunned by the overwhelming loss of life among fire, police and other emergency personnel who were called to the World Trade Center twin towers. They came to save lives but over 400 of them lost theirs, an unthinkable number on America's darkest day.

These great people, rest their souls, have become the country's true unsung heroes. We took them as much for granted before this as we have those who work in 1,000 less perilous professions, but now, through a great tragedy, we have a much greater appreciation of their talent and dedication. It's almost incomprehensible so many public servants died in one noble cause in such a short period of time.

I recall answering middle-of-night alarms in Wenonah 30 years ago, from the spectacular pill factory blaze to an occasional house fire to accidents on Woodbury-Glassboro Road, some of them with fatalities. You never really considered the possibility you were putting your life on the line for your town and your

neighbors and friends when you put on that Scot Air-Pak and entered a burning building, but you were. And if you died in the line of duty as a volunteer fireman in the '60s, the state benefit was a mere \$1,000, not enough for your family to bury you.

But you served because you felt strongly, passionately, that you needed to do something important for your community and this was the best way you could do it.

As inept as I may have been, I'm damn proud of those 10 years as a volunteer fireman. And I have cried, with all of you, at the loss of so many firemen and others in the rescue brigade in the grotesque senselessness of Sept. 11.

After Sunday night's county candlelight vigil at Gloucester County College, a man walked up to one of the Deptford fire volunteers, extended his right hand, and said, simply, "thanks."

They don't hear that enough.

They should now. And for them, it's reward enough.

Bob Shryock, volunteer fireman, 9/11 thoughts, pill factory fire

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