



# REMEMBERING OUR FALLEN FIRE FIGHTERS

by Scott Mellott, 15/A

This month, I will be sharing with you a story about a Fire Fighter that I met when I was assigned to Station 8 fresh out of the academy back on March 17th, 1975.

The Fire Fighter's name is James Donald "JD" Winters. He was the Captain on Engine 8, or 208 as it was called back in 1975. Upon graduating from fire school, I was assigned to the B shift and was a little disappointed. I was originally slated for the A shift and right before I graduated, a Fire Fighter that had resigned from HFD a couple years before returned to the fire department and got his old slot back on the A shift. The disappointment did not last long though, because Station 8 on the B shift was not a bad place to go.

Captain Winters, by virtue of being assigned to the engine, was in charge of many things including the orientation and safe keeping of any and all rookies. I soon realized that I was very fortunate to have drawn such a fine officer. I was eager to learn my new job and I knew that by being at 8's and having Captain Winters showing me the ropes, I would get a great start on my new career.

In 1975, the fire department worked a shift we called 3, 3 and 3. On this shift we would work three 10 hours days, then three 14-hour night shifts (all in a row), and then we were off for 3 days. My fire academy class graduated on Friday night and I was lucky enough to start a fresh tour of duty with my new crew on Monday. My first three day shifts were pretty much uneventful. I was shown the proper way to mop floors and the correct way to wash a fire truck. Both of these tasks were very new to me. My last job had been a railroad clerk and cleaning stuff was not a requirement. I also was introduced to a great eating place that I was sent to on first breakfast run. That would be the famous "Champ Burger."

Then came the night shifts. Thursday was about the same, uneventful except I learned how to wind a fire alarm box during some false alarm runs. Captain Winters soon realized that with me being left-handed I could slip my left hand in the box to rewind the mechanism rather easily. After a couple times of me rewinding the pull boxes without re-tripping the alarm (which would embarrass the whole station) Captain Winters appointed me as the official pull box "re-winder."

Friday came and I went to work for my 5th time and I was very excited. A friend had told me that my first fire would probably be at night. On the days I had worked prior to Friday, I spent a lot of my time wondering if I would remember all the things our instructors at the academy "drilled" into our heads. They told us that upon our arrival at our first fire, we would be lucky if we even remembered our name!

I arrived at 8's on Friday afternoon about 1500 hours and relieved my man, then put my gear on Engine 8. A little while later the cook handed me a grocery list and told me to go to the store and buy groceries for supper. On the way out the door Captain Winters said "get it right rookie", I said "yes sir I will" and I headed off to the store. A couple hours later I was sitting in the lounge when the "booper" went off and the whole station emptied out and headed north on Polk Avenue. I knew it was a fire in a hotel and the Fire Fighter riding on the back with me was helping me with my gear. In a very short time I knew we were getting close because I could smell

the smoke. Boy was I excited! Upon arrival, I looked up and saw a large column of fire jumping out of a window. I also saw a man in the window next to the fire waving franticly for help. I don't think I could even recall my name at that point. We got off the engine. Captain Winters looked at me to make sure that I was dressed properly and then we headed off to the lobby of the De George Hotel. I will always remember how calm Captain Winters was when we entered the building and began climbing the 10 flights of stairs with dozens of resident traveling down past us to safety.

I made it to my third month of my probationary period and that morning during clean up it was "let's see how wet we can get that rookie" day. I stayed pretty much wet all the time. One morning they made me so mad that I was almost unable to contain my urge to kill a whole crew of Fire Fighters. As a standard practice, I would always place my shoes by the middle overhead door while I was wearing my fire boots. When I was not looking, "they" filled my shoes with water. Captain Winters knew that it had happened because he would always sit in the watch office and watch the crew aggravate the rookie from his high safe perch. When I found my soggy shoes, I went off like a bottle rocket and managed to get at least three of them wet. Captain Winters came down from his perch only after I was "disarmed". He walked up to me and said "Rookie, I was wondering when they would finally make you mad, but I did not think it would take three months!"

Now, many years later, I am proud to say that I had the privilege to work with Captain Winters for the first year of my career. I moved on after that first year and Captain Winters was promoted and transferred to Station 2 near downtown. After we parted ways, I had a chance to see him from time to time through the years and when I did I was always glad to visit with him. I always will remember what a great influence he had on me and I will always be thankful that he was one of my first officers.

When I went to 8's, JD had one daughter, Toni Leann. While I was working with him, his family was blessed with a second daughter, Lisa Michelle. During the last several years of JD's life the Winters family luck turned harsh, especially during the month of November. On November 21, 1988 JD's oldest daughter, Toni, tragically died at the young age of 18. In November of 1989 JD was accidentally shot during a hunting trip. He was off from work for almost a year before he could return to his crew at Fire Station 4.

On November 7, 1991 JD and his wife Donna were trailering three horses while in route to their home in Cleveland, Texas. JD was driving and was behind an 18 wheeler. A car in front of the 18 wheeler slowed to turn left. The driver swerved to avoid the car and jackknifed the truck. The pickup truck driven by JD collided with the cab section of the 18 wheeler. JD and the three horses were killed. His wife Donna survived the accident, but was severely injured and was hospitalized almost two months.

In closing, I will never forget Captain James Donald "JD" Winters and the impact that he had on my career as a Houston Fire Fighter. I know that he will forever remain in the hearts of all those who crossed his path.

