

REMEMBERING OUR FALLEN FIRE FIGHTERS

by Scott Mellott, Retired

About 6 months ago, I asked Reneé Jahnke, wife of deceased Fire Fighter Steve Jahnke, to write about her husband in this column. I thought it was appropriate to feature him in the month of August, the second anniversary of this great man's passing.

★ ★ ★

I kissed him good-bye for the last time. He was gone. There was no pain now. I knew he was meeting his dad, his uncles and other relatives that he hadn't seen in many years. I knew he must have been having a very sweet reunion.

The first paragraph written here is part of a story I've been writing about my husband, Steve Jahnke. I want my children to never forget and I want my grandchildren to know all about this good man and who he was and still is. I hope the young Fire Fighters that are in the department now will understand the legacy that has been left for them by so many wonderful families. I hope they will continue that legacy, make their own names, and remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

It's been difficult for me since October 31, 2006, when Steve was diagnosed with Stage IV Melanoma, and even more difficult since August 15, 2007, when I lost my best friend. I know it's temporary, but when you've been with someone you've loved since you were 14 years old, it's hard to make new memories when the old ones are so strong.

As many of you know, Steve was a District Chief and served HFD for over 35 years. He was part of the second generation of Fire Fighters in the Jahnke family. His father, Chief "Roe", his uncles, Chief "Claude", Chief "Duke", Chief "Val", and Chief Franklin, were the original 5. In history, though, to be completely accurate, Uncle Val's wife, Louise Little Jahnke, had the "original" family in the department. You see her father, John S. Little, Sr., was a Houston Fire Fighter. He was killed in the line-of-duty back in July of 1929. Her brother, John S. Little, Jr., was the Fire Chief in Houston from 1974-1976. It was 1940 that the first Jahnke, Val, started working for HFD. Three other brothers (out of the 12 brothers and sisters in the Jahnke family) joined as soon as they could. "Roe" joined in 1947, Claude in 1953 and "Duke" in 1955. Lonnie Franklin, their brother-in-law, who had married Catherine Jahnke, and was more of a brother than a brother-in-law, joined in 1950. That's the real beginning of this wonderful history.

When I started dating Steve, I knew nothing about the fire department, but I started learning. I didn't know the difference between a pumper and a ladder truck. I didn't know a pipeman, from a chauffeur, junior captain, senior captain or chief. I didn't care about their rank. I was just in awe at the selfless service these men gave. I admired them in their uniforms and was proud every time I saw any of them slide down a pole, quickly grab their gear, and jump on the back of a pumper, one hand on the bar while trying to put their coats and helmets on with the other. I can remember seeing the District Chief's going out to their cars with their chauffeur's

grabbing the information on where they were going and being ready to leave within seconds. No one dawdled. No one complained about another "run". They just did their jobs.

I remember being at old Station 1 on Bagby during my brother-in-law's (Sr. Capt. Ed Hauck) graduation from fire school in 1969 and having the alarm go off. Right in the middle of that graduation, everything stopped. The Fire Fighter speaking started counting off the seconds. It seemed to me that within 5-7 seconds, the Chief was gone, and within 7-10 seconds, the pumper was gone. "Casper" was the chauffeur at the time and he had a reputation for leaving Fire Fighters behind (at least, that was the story). When the engine on the pumper started, he expected you to be on board, day or night. Needless to say, they moved rather quickly. No one wanted to be left.

I remember the credit union being on the second or third floor of old Station 1. I think there were 4 floors. It was always busy with Fire Fighters and civilians taking care of business. Fire Department Headquarters was there, too. People were constantly in and out of that building. This was a very friendly place. This was just family and family business. They took care of their own.

Steve started fire school with HFD in 1971. That's when his part of the story begins. I have always been proud of the job Steve did. I was so proud when he graduated from fire school. He was president of his class and gave the graduating "speech". His first assignment was at old Station 2 off W. Dallas. I was excited for him when he made his first fire. He came home totally covered in soot and grime. He smelled awful! His shirt was black all over, but especially around the waist from where the smoke and his belt and pants met. For hours, it seemed like, he coughed up and blew out all this horrible, black 'stuff'. He talked for hours about that fire and gave me every detail! If he made a run during the night, and could see the orange 'glow' in the sky, he was pumped even more. With each fire came more knowledge and a determination on doing his job, doing it well, and taking care of his fellow brothers.

I watched him work hard, sometimes 3 and 4 jobs at a time, during his career. I supported him while he studied for promotional exams. I watched the frustration in his eyes as one of those exams was cancelled a day and half before he was supposed to take it. I watched as one of the promotional lists expired before he got promoted, and I believe he came out in the top 10 or 12. It was a one-year list. The two-year list didn't exist during his promotional days. And yet, he never gave up. He just became more determined. I thought my proudest moment came when Steve passed his District Chief's test, three months after his father unexpectedly passed away, and I think he came out number 11. I knew he was under a great deal of stress from losing his dad, and I knew he would pass and do well, but I would have understood completely if he hadn't. He knew he had a job to do and he did it.

I watched Steve work tirelessly for Houston Community College for many years. He was, at one time, the Department Chair for the Fire Technology Program. (I won't tell you how many were in his department!) I watched him spend hours preparing classes, teaching classes and counseling students on getting their college education. He never wanted anyone to take a fire technology class thinking it would give him or her an "in" on getting into the fire department. He wanted them to focus on their 'basics' first. If and when they got into the department, great! Then, he would encourage them to start

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Remembering To Never Forget

VINCENT EARL O'LEARY

Served HFD 1963 to 1991

Died July 2, 2009

SEYMORE WILLIS

Served HFD 1951 to 1977

Died June 16, 2009

BRIAN ELLIS RHONE

Served HFD 1998 to 2009

Died May 25, 2009

LASKAR ANDREW "PAT" MULLENS

Served HFD 1953 to 1974

Died May 7, 2009

CLAUDE HARMON HARRIS

Served HFD 1950 to 1974

Died May 6, 2009

COHNWAY MATTHEW JOHNSON

Served HFD 2009 to 2009

Died May 2, 2009

ANTHONY WAYNE FOSTER, SR.

Served HFD 1982 to 2005

Died April 26, 2009

LEORY EDWARD WARD, JR.

Served HFD 1959 to 1984

Died April 23, 2009

KYLE QUINCEY RANEY

Served HFD 1973 to 2008

Died April 16, 2009

DAMION JON HOBBS

Served HFD March 7, 2009 to April 12, 2009

Died April 12, 2009 - Line-of-Duty Death

JAMES ARTHUR HARLOW

Served HFD 1979 to 2009

Died April 12, 2009- Line-of-Duty Death

ALTON LAMAR KLUTTS

Served HFD 1950 to 1986

Died April 12, 2009

JERRY JOE HUBENAK

Served HFD 1958 to 1983

Died April 11, 2009

JAMES DONALD "J.D." ROBINSON

Served HFD 1941 to 1970

Died April 8, 2009

ARNOLD IVY BAKER

Served HFD 1952 to 1977

Died April 6, 2009

WILLIAM JAMES CLEMONS

Served HFD 1963 to 1987

Died March 26, 2009

RONALD WAYNE GUNNELS

Served HFD 1964 to 2001

Died March 11, 2009

PHILLIP STEVEN "STEVIE" SCHULTZ

Served HFD 1967 to 2002

Died March 5, 2009

BOBBY DEE CARRAWAY

Served HFD 1968 to 2004

Died February 18, 2009

PHILLIP LEE HUDGENS

Served HFD 1977 to 2005

Died February 1, 2009

RODNEY DALE WATERS

Served HFD 1985 to 2009

Died January 31, 2009

THEODORE GREGORY HILL

Served HFD 1970 to 1990

Died January 21, 2009

GEORGE HARLAN CONWAY

Served HFD 1952 to 1977

Died January 13, 2009

TRACY BIRKELBACH

Served HFD 1961 to 1991

Died January 1, 2009

*Total from January 1, 2009 to
present - 24 Deaths*

*Total for the Year 2008 -
39 Deaths*

LINE-OF-DUTY DEATH ANNIVERSARIES FOR THE MONTH OF AUGUST

August 4, 1923

J. A. "BOB" BOYD

Assistant Fire Chief, Central Station

August 6, 1941

HORRACE OSCAR GASSOWAY

Fire Fighter, Station 10

August 19, 1926

CLAUDE W. "RED" EDMONDS

Captain, Central Station

August 21, 1938

ALFORD HENRY SCHUTZE

District Chief, Station 7

August 22, 1934

ESKER J. ROGERS

Fire Fighter, Station 17

ATTENTION!

Please visit my **Memorial Website** which contains information on current Houston Fire Fighter deaths, obits, line-of-duty deaths and many other items. If you do not have access to the website or you have any questions about my memorial endeavors, please call or email me.

www.houstonfirememorial.org

(713) 729-6536 or scottmel@juno.com

Thanks – Scott Mellott.

The Faces of Local 341

1932 to 2009

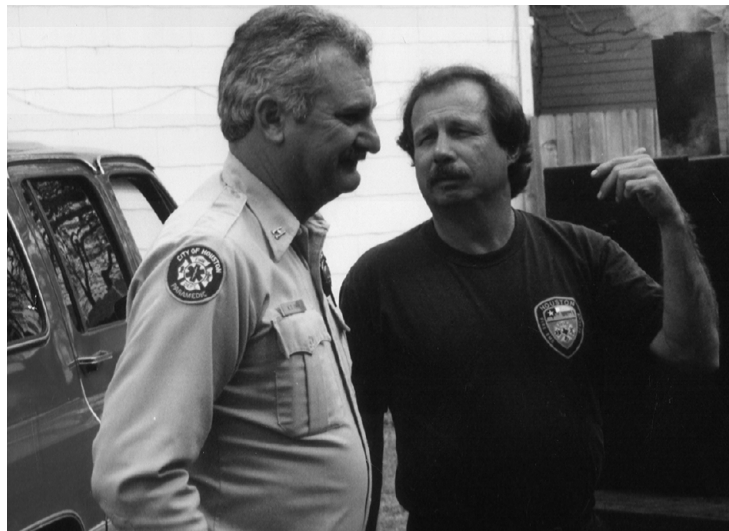
Houston Professional Fire Fighter's Association

Photos on this page submitted by Scott Mellott (Retired)



Sam Schillici and V. E. Rogers - 1980's

Photo Provided by Local 341



***Captain Mike Owin and Captain Jim Wheeler
Station 15 - February 1992***

Photo Provided by Joe Delgadillo



Fire Station 5 - 2020 Hollister - 1982

(Top row) Kenny Cook, Phil Borskie, John Fryer, Robert Willis, Lonnie Bernhart, Jerry Hunter

(Bottom row) Dan Dillard, Alton Fisher, Darrell Dornak

Photo Provided by Dan Dillard

The Faces of Local 341

1932 to 2009

Houston Professional Fire Fighter's Association

Photos on this page submitted by Scott Mellott (Retired)



Bobby Deiss, Retired 2004 - on the way to Balad, Iraq

Photo Provided by J. J. Reneau



Station 49/D Shift - June 2, 2009

***(l/r) Eddie Guttirez-FF, Shane Theroit-FF,
Captain Lee Delortz, Steve Wingate-E/O***

Photo Provided by Scott Mellott



Station 29 - 4831 Galveston Road - B/Shift - May 29, 2009

***(l/r) Capt. James Trimble, Megan Hurl-FF, Tony Levo-FF, Jorge Montes-FF, Eleazar Aguilar-E/O, Capt. Larry Schulin,
James Wick-FF, Kirby Leufroy-E/O, Eric Rosalessorto-FF, Ed Sanchez-FF, Keith Schoenberg-FF***

Photo Provided by Scott Mellott

Remembering - *continued from page 10*

taking his classes. This wasn't looked at as 'wise' counsel from some, because it took students away from his department instead of growing his department. But, I think because Steve had a love for education and for the students, and their best interest, the Fire Technology Department at HCC continued to grow. He was pleased when he knew that one of his students had gotten their Associate's Degree or their Bachelor's Degree. He never failed a student either. He just couldn't. He would counsel them to withdraw or give them an incomplete, but he would never fail them.

I said earlier that I thought my proudest moment was when Steve passed his District Chief's test, three months after his father passed away. At the time, it probably was. Now, I can tell you that I have had several more proud moments. Steve was asked to speak at the HFD graduation ceremony of our son-in-law, Jaron Black, on November 16, 2006, just 2 weeks after he was diagnosed with Cancer. (Jaron was in the third generation of family to be in the department.) Steve had to tell Chief Boriskie what was going on and that he would be admitted into MD Anderson Hospital on that day. He wanted to speak but he wasn't sure what would happen and didn't know if the doctor would give him permission to leave. Chief Boriskie said he would be prepared just in case Steve didn't make it. (I will always be grateful to him for his support.) I think the doctor could see how important it was to Steve to be at that graduation, so he gave his permission. We left the hospital at 6 p.m., went to the graduation, came back at 10 p.m., and Steve started Chemotherapy 45 minutes later. He was in a lot of pain during the graduation, but, as usual, he knew he had a job to do and he did it. I don't know how

he did it, but he did. He was very proud of Jaron and his decision to become a Fire Fighter. I cannot tell you how proud I was of Steve (and Jaron) that night! He never spoke of his cancer or any of the trials that he would be facing. He gave a memorable talk. He got a standing ovation.

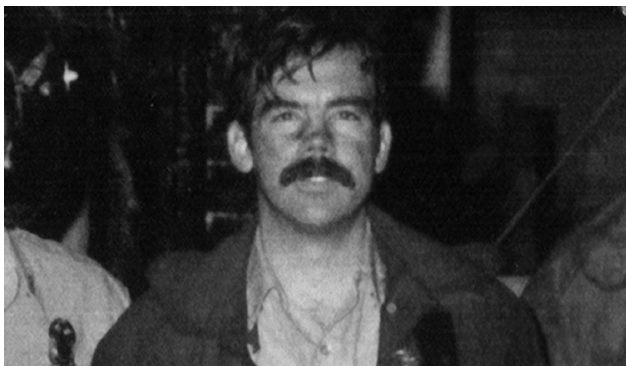
Steve's career with HFD officially ended August 15, 2007, but he has continued to make me proud of him. He has left a legacy for his family. He has set the example for them. He has raised the bar. He has never left our side. He has continued to guide each of us.

After Steve passed away, our youngest son, Greg, decided that he had to get into the department. He graduated from fire school in January 2009. He, and his cousin Chris, began the third generation of the 'Jahnke' name. I know this must have been a very proud moment for Steve. I know it was for me.

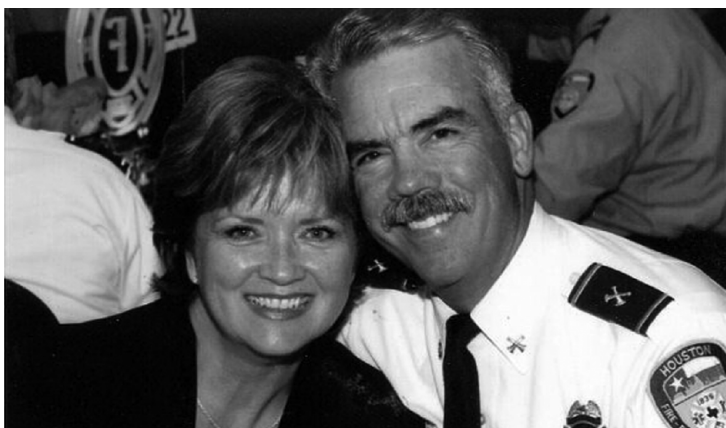
I have thought back on Steve's career (and I've had a lot of time to think!) and I am grateful for the service he rendered and the job he performed. I am grateful for the name he honored and the name he made for himself. I am grateful for the Brothers and Sisters he worked with. I am grateful for the example he was as a leader and an officer. I am grateful for his sacrifice.

I am also grateful for my family in the Houston Fire Department. I am grateful for those Brothers and Sisters in the department who still care for me, who love me, who still call me, and who still talk about Steve.

I wonder how many times we reflect back on the history of this great organization and the people who came before us. I wonder if we take for granted the service and sacrifice given by so many. I wonder if we have said thank you often enough. I know I haven't. So, to my Fire Fighter family I say ... "Thank You!"



Sr. Captain - 1981



Steve and Renee - 2006 Fire Fighters Foundation



*Steve at the 2007 Memorial Service
carrying his cousin Jay's helmet.*