

Henderson Firefighter Dies on Duty After Accidental Gunshot - November 7, 1970

Reader Randy Newman passes along the tale of another unusual firefighter fatality, which we've supplemented with documentation after a quick trip to the local library. Lt. Joseph Morris Hicks, 59, of the Henderson Fire Department died of an accidental gunshot wound on Saturday, November 7, 1970. The eleven-year veteran of the department was at the fire station, when he bent over to get a Coke from a vending machine. He was carrying a pistol which fell from its holster, struck the floor, and discharged.

Reported the next day's *News & Observer*, "the bullet struck him just above the bridge of the nose, almost exactly between his eyebrows." The shot penetrated his skull. Lt. Hicks was transported to Duke Hospital in Durham, where he was pronounced dead at 12:10 p.m. His death certificate lists the cause as "cerebral anoxia" and "cerebral laceration," from the gunshot wound.

Lt. Hicks was buried at Sunset Gardens in Henderson on November 9, 1970. His obituary lists that he was survived by his wife Mary C. Hicks, and his son Jimmy Hicks.

Civil Unrest

Regarding the weapon he was carrying, this was a period of civil unrest in the Vance County town. Tempers had been rising and protests becoming more heated over integration of the town's schools, the dismissal of a black teacher in late September, and the arrests of blacks involved in school walkouts. Also in the mix were reactions from a shooting death in Oxford in May, when a black man was shot by a white man.

On Friday, November 7, the violence started after police used tear gas on people protesting the school controversy. Later, a tobacco warehouse "in the black section" burned and the firefighters were met with sniper fire. The blaze was blamed on arson, which spread and destroyed several nearby frame home.

The National Guard was dispatched by the Governor, with some 300 troops arriving on Saturday afternoon. Calm conditions were reported that night, and the town manager continued a curfew which had been first ordered on Friday.

Hicks and other firefighters had also armed themselves on Friday, after being fired upon while answering fire calls. After Hicks was shot, the others stopped carrying their weapons on the advice of the police chief. After the guard members arrived, they turned their weapons in.

(The threat of violent affected nearby fire departments as well. Recalled an old-timer with the Bear Pond FD, during my recent visit to town, they carried a rifle on their original pumper, stored in the hard suction!)

Calm was reported again on Sunday, November 9, though both guard members and state troopers continued patrolling the town. As the story goes, however, riot shot guns were carried on the engines during this time, and for many years later.

Thanks again, Randy. We'll forward this information to both the state and national fallen firefighter foundations.

Sources

- *News & Observer*, November 7-9, 1970
- Joseph Morris Hicks death certificate.
- Oral histories.

<http://www.legeros.com/ralwake/photos/weblog/pivot/entry.php?id=6017>

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